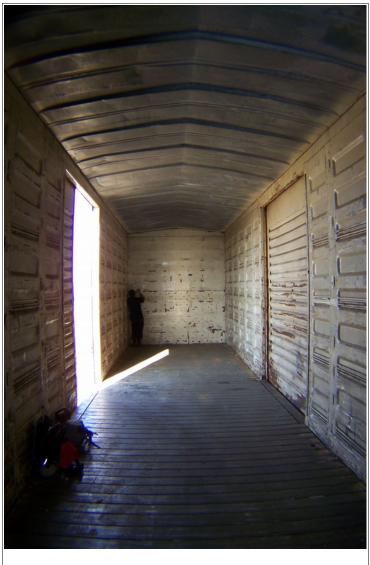# DRIFT: A CRIMINOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

JEFF FERRELL[1]

D ifferent historical periods trace different trajectories by way of prospects and perception. For those who rode the ascending wave of mid-twentieth century modernism, one moment after another often seemed connected along a straight line to a better future—a future fulfilled by the insights of science, the convenience of technology, and the satisfactions of material prosperity. Within and against this modernist ascension, fundamentalists have often sought to reverse its trajectory, to return the social order to the past principles of founding fathers and founding documents. In periods of rapid social change, political revolutionaries often see, or long to see, a trajectory that resembles that of a rocket launch—a new social order, blasting free from the old, taking flight, roaring upward toward a firmament of previously unimagined possibility. When on the other hand the social order fails of its own accord,

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[1] For the author's biography, see the endnote on page 168

rotting from inside its own contradictions, some find themselves caught in an opposite trajectory, descending quickly and deeply into economic ruin and existential despair; others ride a sad social spiral, a process of circling back time and again on the same recurring problems, yet each time a bit farther from their solution; and some sense

"Boxcar" by Jeff Ferrell.

a dispersal out from the middle, a centrifugal failure of social bonds and cultural cohesion.

Yet other times, historical periods seem to embody a trajectory that is, oddly enough, not much of a trajectory at all—or perhaps a trajectory defined by its lack of definition. This is the trajectory of drift. Drift follows neither the straight-line forward motion of progress nor the stern reversals of fundamentalism or economic failure. It neither ascends nor descends, and it remains too uncertain a motion to maintain even the circling arc of a spiral. Sometimes drift comes close to the unraveling trajectory of the failed social order—but even here it is uncertain in its uncertainty, since as we shall see, drifters may consider their unsettled circumstances a new set of social possibilities. Likewise, drift is often the trajectory of the disengaged and dispossessed—but disengaged from what, dispossessed of what, and on whose terms? Certainly drift suggests some sort of personal and social disruption, and some degree of spatial and temporal dislocation—yet even this implies some degree of prior certainty, some coordinates of time and space, against which such disruption can be measured.

In North America, for example, the period of the 1930s Great Depression was founded on systemic economic and ecological failure, and came to embody horrific economic hardship—but it also came to be experienced by many as a time of profound and unprecedented drift. The failure of crops and farm economies meant dislocation from one's land, and in many cases a wandering search for something better. Joblessness spawned not only the loss of career identity, but the necessity of drifting away from the social networks that had once supported it. One survivor of the Great Depression recalled that, 'a man had to be on the road. Had to leave his wife, had to leave his mother, leave his family just to try to get money to live on…. The shame I was feelin'. I walked out because I didn't have a job' (in

Terkel, 1970: 58). In *Waiting for Nothing*, his haunting account of hoboing through the Great Depression, Tom Kromer (1933: 52) confirms this. "When a guy loses his job in his hometown, he has to go on the fritz," says Kromer. "He has to grab himself a drag out of town. A guy can't be dinging back doors for hand-outs and flopping behind signboards when his girl lives in the next block." Once out of town and on the road, the dislocation only redoubled. Continuing the tradition of hoboing and hopping freight trains which had begun with the westward expansion of the railways after the U.S. Civil War, millions hoboed their way across the continent looking for work. Yet even the small stabilities of a hobo camp were subject to the brutal disruptions of the "bulls," or railroad police. Hoboes "huddle around their fires in the night," Kromer (1933: 114) reported. 'Tomorrow they will huddle around their fires, and the next night, and the next. It will not be here. The bulls will not let a stiff stay in one place long.' Others wandered in rickety automobiles or trucks, most famously in the lyrics of Woody Guthrie songs like *Hard Travellin'* and *I Ain't Got No Home*, and in the pages of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. As Dorethea Lange and Paul Taylor (1939: 108) documented in their pioneering photo-ethnography of these wanderers, their experience of perpetual drift mirrored that of the hobos. 'People has got to stop somewhere. Even a bird has got to rest,' reported one of those interviewed in the book. 'What bothers us travellin' people the most is we cain't got no place to stay still.' Like the Great Depression itself, this sweeping dislocation transcended the boundaries of North America as well. Some of the unemployed youths who hoboed across Canada, for example, found that their rough wandering eventually led them to—and prepared them for— the physical pain and radical politics of participation in Spain's anti-fascist Civil War (Kish, 1975). Cut loose from any certain trajectory, they and millions others had be-

come what Kromer (1933: 115) said of himself: a 'restless ghost.'

THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

Today, the restless ghosts are with us again, and in growing numbers. Lives adrift, folks waiting for nothing or on the way to nowhere: these circumstances now circle the world once more. A mounting global crisis that interweaves economic inequality and ecological decay with conflicts over immigration, development, and consumption has set these circumstances in motion. Ongoing civil and transnational warfare continues to spawn swelling refugee populations. Repressive governmental regimes engage in the forced expulsion of dissidents and minority groups—and when these regimes are confronted, even successfully, further dislocation often results. Within China, across Europe and North America, and around the globe, economic migrants wander in search of work, or are simply moved en masse from one work locale to another as economic demands change. In the U.K., Europe, and North American, the corporate criminality of the mortgage/banking crisis, the ongoing destruction of low-cost housing as part of urban redevelopment schemes, and the proliferation of part-time and low-wage service work all conspire to preclude certainties of home, shelter, or destination. Moving from house to house or country to country, sleeping in cars or temporary encampments, haunting streets and train stations, those cut loose from certainty find little in the way of spatial or social stability.

In this world, impoverished Central Americans risk sexual assault and extortion to hitch rides through Mexico atop freight trains bound for North America. In North America, more and more young adults live on the streets, sometimes couch surfing or crashing with friends, other

times hitchhiking from one city to the next, uncountable and unaccounted for. The newly homeless and unemployed drift from city to city, sleep in flood drains beneath the streets of Las Vegas, or become semi-permanent residents of cheap motels. Migrant farmworkers continue to face family disruption, limited educational opportunities, and deportation; graduate students, part-time instructors, and non-tenure-track instructors now make up three quarters of college faculty; and an economist reports that, in general, 'we're in a period where uncertainty seems to be going one forever. So this period of temporary employment seems to be going on forever' (Rich, 2010: A1; Lewin, 2011: A15; Brown, 2011: 17, 21; Raymer, 2011).

In southern Europe a native-born generation finds that today, even advanced degrees leave them lost between dead-end jobs and unemployment—and so they sleep in their cars, and make plans to travel abroad in search of work. So dire is the situation in Portugal that, amidst a prison overcrowding and abuse crisis brought on by budget cuts, prisoners nonetheless refuse to apply for prison leave—since 'at least their meals are paid inside.' Says one ex-convict, who has departed for part-time work in Switzerland, 'if you come out of jail in Portugal now, you've got almost zero chance of not going straight back in. There's just nothing for you to do except sit around and stay poor and depressed' (in Minder, 2012: A12). In Spain, where unemployment stands above fifty per cent for young people, pervasive home foreclosures and evictions lead to a surge in homelessness, the squatting of buildings, and the scavenging of trash bins that is 'so pervasive… that one Spanish city has resorted to installing locks on supermarket trash bins' (Daley, 2012a, b). In the more affluent north of Europe, a German 'shadow labor market' of poorly paid temporary workers is now seen as essential to the country's 'global competiveness'. A 'floating genera-

tion' of young people likewise haunts the internships, part-time jobs, and unemployment offices of France. There, millions of young people search in vain for employment, or simply give up; and among those that do find work, eighty per cent are offered only temporary contracts. 'In our parents' generation, you had a job for life,' says one young woman, unemployed at age 25 with a master's degree in management, 'Now we constantly have to change jobs, change companies, change regions' (in Erlanger, 2012: A6). Altogether, this 'lost generation' is reported to cost Europe 153 billion Euros a year, amidst fear that it 'could lead to upheaval like the Arab spring' (Malik, 2012: 3)

Across the globe, migrants from rural areas pour into sprawling encampments outside Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, and Ulan Bator, or find themselves shuttled between one country and the next by political and economic upheaval. Young Arabs argue that 'it's impossible for us to get ahead here—there are no opportunities', and dream of moving abroad; North African refugees in search of work or safety crowd rickety boats to cross the Mediterranean, only to find themselves consigned to shantytowns or bounced back and forth across national borders (Erlanger, 2011: A8). Delhi, India, is 'ruthless in its use' of impoverished immigrants and wanderers, who nonetheless launch little schemes of survival and treasure their own *azadi*—freedom—until one of the city's regular demolition and redevelopment drives destroys even these possibilities (Faleiro, 2012: 22). In Japan almost half of the country's young workers are consigned to temporary, 'irregular' jobs amidst a collapsing career structure; in China, migrant workers from rural areas now make up a third of Beijing's population, and with no place to live, occupy abandoned air-defense tunnels underneath the city (Fackler, 2011; Ewing, 2011: B6; Wong, 2011). In post-Soviet,

free-market Russia, 'the *bomzh*—a homeless person in dirty clothes, begging in the metro underpasses, at churches, lying on park benches or scavenging near train stations —has become omnipresent in Russian cities and towns' (Stephenson, 2006: 113).

These are indeed the trajectories of a world adrift. But what is the criminology of this contemporary crisis? That is, how are these drifting circumstances intertwined with issues of crime, law, and social control, and how are these issues in turn embedded in contemporary configurations of economic and political power?

Contradictions and Causes in the Criminology of Drift

Answers to these questions aren't straightforward; they're contradictory, confounded, and oddly self-reinforcing. In fact, they rest on two foundational contradictions. The first is the degree to which drift is promoted both by contemporary economic failure and by successful economic development. The second is the related dynamic by which contemporary policing strategies both target drift in an attempt to stop it, and promote further drift as a result. Of these, the relation between economic failure and drift is perhaps the most obvious. A global banking crisis evicts millions from their over-mortgaged homes, and leaves millions more unemployed or shuttling between part-time jobs. Ecological crises engendered by global warming, and by global oil and agri-business, spawn conflicts over land and water, push small farmers off their plots, force itinerant farm workers into ever-wider arcs of travel, and lure millions of rural residents towards the false economic salvation of the city. Amidst collapsing national economies and civil wars, refugees—some of them already migrants from elsewhere—leave belongings behind

to flee in crowded boats or on foot. With economic failure there arrive, all too often, the sorts of structural strain and anomic disruption so well understood by Durkheim (1984) and Merton (1938), and with them the spatial and normative experience of drift.

And yet many of the same drifting consequences today arrive with 'successful' economic development as well. Increasingly, world cities from Vancouver to Istanbul define success in terms of economies organized around consumerism, entertainment, tourism, and the large-scale service work necessary to support these endeavors. Theorists like Markusen and Schrock (2009: 345, 353) argue that this sort of new 'consumption-driven urban development…help[s] to attract skilled workers, managers, entrepreneurs, and retirees,' and they emphasize the 'significance of lifestyle preferences of skilled workers as an important determinant of economic development'. In this sense 'quality of urban life', as David Harvey (2008: 31) notes, has 'become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, [and] cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy.' But in the same way that these consumerist economies and available 'lifestyle preferences' benefit those affluent enough to consume them, they harm the far larger population of low-end retail workers left to provide them. For them, the social contract that once linked worker to employer over time, and hard work to career advancement, has been annulled. Their work lives are now defined by pervasive and low-wage service work, the vulnerability of missing medical and retirement benefits, the profound uncertainty of temporary employment and flexible scheduling, and the experience of sequential contract or freelance jobs in place of career. For every old industrial factory successfully converted into high-end lofts or attractive retail spaces there are a hun-

dred workers left to drift between unstable employment, low-wage work, and economic failure.

In addition, corporate developers, city planners, and zoning commissions regularly carve out the city spaces needed for new 'consumption-driven urban development' —'consumption spaces', as Zukin (1997) calls them— from existing low income neighborhoods and older mixed-use industrial areas. This revanchist reclaiming of urban space—what Harvey (2008: 28, 34) describes as 'the capture of valuable land from low-income populations that may have lived there for years'—further tips the balance of urban life towards privileged populations. And with this land captured, with its low-cost housing obliterated and local shops bought out, there is also the great likelihood that those dispossessed by this development will now be cut loose and cast adrift in ways that they were not before. The new boutique hotel or row of artisanal shops, built in place of an old motel or row of modest homes, signals a shift in the city's class character and the terms of its employment. It also signals that many residents of the economically 'successful' late modern city will now suffer increased instability of occupation and residence—and that this instability will now be legally encoded in imminent domain procedures, zoning laws, and no trespassing enforcement.

Here we begin to see the second of the contradictions that underlies drift: the way in which contemporary law and law enforcement both target those set adrift and at the same time promote further drift. As a number of scholars have shown (Ferrell, 1996, 2001, 2006; Amster, 2008; MacLeod, 2002; Mitchell, 2003), the policing of new urban consumption spaces—and more broadly, the policing of late modern urban economies—often operates as aesthetic policing. That is, the goal is to guard the carefully constructed appearance and appeal of the city and its new

consumption spaces, and so to protect the city's 'quality of life' from those whose public presence would intrude on its ensemble of high-end attractions and profitability. Here policing comes to focus on perceptions as much as populations, and on minimizing risk and intrusion as much as solving crimes. During an urban revitalization campaign, for example, an economic official in the U.S. argues that panhandling is a problem precisely because 'it's part of an image issue for the city'—and an American legal scholar agrees, positing that 'the most serious of the attendant problems of homelessness is its devastating effect on a city's image' (in Ferrell, 2001: 45; in Mitchell, 2003: 201). Or as Aspden (2008: 13) concludes, commenting on how a 'corporate city of conspicuous consumption' has recently emerged from what was a decaying British industrial city, 'There seems to be no place in the new Leeds for those who disturb the rhythms of the consumer-oriented society.' Homeless populations, undocumented immigrants, seasonal workers, uprooted residents—much of contemporary urban policing focuses on these groups, and is designed to make invisible those unlucky enough to be displaced and adrift.

At times this approach is implemented with straightforward legal simplicity: existing streets, sidewalks, or parks are deeded to private developers, and so made unavailable to the displaced and the unprofitable (Amster, 2008). More generally it is enforced though a variety of popular crime control approaches. In Britain, the United States, and elsewhere, authorities employ dispersal borders, banishment orders, exclusion zones, and curfews to push undesirables away from consumerist havens. In the United States, built-environment policing programs like CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) seek to reduce crime by building social control into the spatial environment; such programs are employed, for example,

to discourage 'loitering' by the homeless and other vulnerable populations in public areas or transit stations. By removing waiting facilities, installing uncomfortable benches, and closing public toilets, authorities are indeed often able to force such populations from public parks or town squares, thereby 'cleansing' these spaces for preferred populations of tourists and short-stay retail consumers. But in doing so, of course, such programs undermine even the fragile spatial communities that emerge among the vulnerable populations that occupy such spaces, and so put these populations back on the move once again. Like the old U.S. 'move on' laws used to roust laborers and labor organizers a century ago, like the bulls busting up hobo camps in the 1930s, CPTED programs today force vulnerable populations to move on, and move on again, in search of even minimal comfort or convenience (Ferrell, 2001).

Similarly, the contemporary criminal justice embrace of the 'broken windows' model of crime prevention, with its focus on the policing of low-order street violations like begging and writing graffiti, operates to push vulnerable populations out of areas targeted for gentrification or tourism. This approach, in conjunction with parallel 'place-based' crime prevention approaches, also produces programs like the Los Angeles Safer Cities Initiative (SCI). This 'place-based policing intervention' deploys police officers to move through Skid Row areas, 'breaking up homeless encampments, issuing citations, and making arrests for violations of the law' (Berk and McDonald, 2010: 813, 817) for the purpose of dispersal. Such initiatives are designed specifically to address the alleged problem of 'spatial concentration' among the homeless—that is, spatial stability—with such initiatives to be complemented by the 'dispersal of homeless facilities' and support services throughout urban areas as well (Culhane,

2010: 853). Vitale (2010: 868, 870) argues that, due to aggressive fines and arrests, such initiatives only further entrap those targeted in homelessness. Importantly, they also force the homeless into ever more dislocated ways of living; as before, they are 'moved on' whenever and wherever they settle. Recalling the dynamics of consumption-driven urban development, Vitale in turn wonders if 'the primary goal of the SCI [is] really to reduce crime and homelessness or instead to remove a large concentration of poor people forcibly from Skid Row in hope of encouraging the subsequent gentrification of the area…. A major effort to gentrify Skid Row has been underway for years…'

Together these developments begin to suggest a multi-faceted criminology of contemporary drift. Mortgage fraud and insider trading—particularly costly forms of corporate criminality—force millions from their homes and their livelihoods, in the process dislocating them from neighborhood ties and career security. Others forfeit home and neighborhood to the revanchist spatial and legal politics of 'consumption-driven urban development', and find that hopes of life-long career have been replaced by the reality of part-time retail work. Cut loose and cast adrift, they are subsequently pushed off privatized sidewalks, excluded from public spaces, criminalized for loitering or trespass, and cited and dispersed for the crime of spatial concentration. In this way the infatuation with consumption-driven urban development spawns the very sorts of populations who are imagined to threaten it—and in this way the forms of legal control and policing designed to protect such development from transient populations at the same time serve to make such populations more transient.

A variety of global dynamics add other facets and contradictions to the criminology of drift. In China, a strict household-registration system consigns the hundreds of

millions of citizens now moving illicitly from village to city to 'an uncomfortable world that is neither urban nor rural, isolating them from their own children, [and] preventing them from becoming full members of the country's economy' (Saunders, 2010: 16). In Russia, a similar system of 'administratively organized territorial affiliations' guarantees that for homeless populations 'a lack of place also means a lack of any social recognition, employment rights or recourse to public welfare' (Stephenson, 2006: 145). As refugees and undocumented immigrants cross international borders, they are likewise often left with no legitimate place to settle; even the millions of global refugees whose journeys take them to refugee aid camps nonetheless remain adrift in many ways. As Bauman (2002: 344; 2000: 102) argues, such 'non-places' or 'nowherevilles' originate as 'a totally artificial creation located in a social void', and so incorporate an 'extra-territoriality' absent meaning or belonging for those forced to occupy them. Describing these massive collectivities as 'city-camps' (*camps-villes*), Agier (2002: 322) likewise notes that they are designed to induce 'the social and political non-existence of the recipients' of their aid.

A similar sort of legal non-existence confronts many others across the globe who migrate from rural to urban areas. Such migrant populations often first settle in the relatively unplanned, unregulated zones that surround established cities, thereby forming what Saunders (2010) calls informal 'arrival cities'. These arrival cities function as tenuous footholds for those seeking a life in the city, with migrants both arriving and at times returning home; with their fluid links to both rural areas and the city itself, they operate as ongoing, two-way conduits for subsequent generations of migrants as well. At the same time, such areas often suffer from the neglect of established urban authorities; allowed a tenuous existence, these areas nonetheless

remain outside the orbit of water and sanitation services, legal protection, and urban citizenship. In this sense arrival cities are both extra-territorial and *extra-legal*—and over time this legal and spatial marginality may itself be transformed, moving either in the direction of incorporation into the formal urban grid, or outright criminalization, demolition, and enforced exclusion from it. The arrival city, Saunders (2010: 11) concludes, is 'both populated with people in transition…and is itself a place in transition'. For the millions who settle in such cities, life remains nonetheless unsettled and uncertain.

DRIFT AS ACTIVISM AND ALTERNATIVE

Sociologists often explore the dynamic between structure and agency—that is, the way in which large, structural forces impinge on and determine human behavior, but also the ways in which individuals and groups retain their agency in responding to and making sense of such forces. For criminologists, the task is similar: to investigate powerful forces of law, policing, and social control, but also the ways in which individuals and groups respond to victimization, criminalization, and more general attempts at controlling their behavior. So far, the criminology of contemporary drift outlined here has analyzed a variety of social structural forces—global economic failure and programs of economic development, strategies of law and policing, and patterns of migration and resettlement. A fuller criminology of drift, thEough, must also account for the attitudes, experiences, and agency of those cast adrift by economic forces or targeted by legal campaigns. Turning our attention to a few of these people and groups, we not only begin to build a broader criminology of drift, but uncover a third essential contradiction that animates the contemporary politics of drift: Often, those activist groups and alternative subcultures who are victimized by eco-

nomic and legal forces don't wholly reject the drifting circumstances that result. Instead, they embrace dislocation, drift, and uncertainty on their own terms, finding in them new guides for political resistance, shared survival, or social change—but often finding themselves once again the targets of legal control.

The group Food Not Bombs, for example, salvages wasted food in urban areas and serves it to the homeless, recent immigrants, and others cut loose from the security of home or career; put differently, Food Not Bombs seeks to attend directly to those victimized by the contemporary crisis, and understands itself as intervening in a system that 'values wasteful consumption over common sense' (CrimethInc., 2004: 248). Hundreds of Food Not Bombs chapters reclaim and serve food throughout North America, Europe, Africa, and around the globe—and yet they do so not through centralized organizations, but in ways that are intentionally fluid, imprecise, and unstable. As 'an anarchist dis-organization' (Clark, 2004: 28), Food Not Bombs disavows hierarchical structures and political authority, promoting only the general principles of consensus, non-violence, and vegetarianism while emphasizing that 'the core of [its] philosophy is that each local group is autonomous' (Butler and McHenry, 2000: 73). In this way Food Not Bombs itself drifts along with others cast adrift, open to changing circumstances and emerging problems. But by doing so—by openly feeding the hungry in public urban areas, with a minimum of organization, and with neither the permission nor the assistance of legal and political authorities—Food Not Bombs itself becomes part of the problem for those invested in the sorts of consumerist economic development and attendant legal controls already noted. Legal harassment is common, as with the arrest of hundreds of Food Not Bombs food servers in San Francisco, or the more recent arrest of Orlando, Florida,

Food Not Bombs 'food terrorists,' as the local mayor labeled them (Butler and McHenry, 2004; Ferrell, 2001, 2006; Maxwell, 2011).

Meanwhile, the ongoing economic crisis in southern Europe has generated a loosely organized 'precarity' movement among young people who are now consigned to a shifting mix of unemployment, migration in search of work, and unpredictable part-time or 'flex scheduling' conditions in what work they do find. As those involved in the movement argue, their generation has been denied the conventional social anchors of set career and spatial stability—and so has been left to drift within a life of social and economic 'precarity' (Ross 2008; De Angelis and Harvie 2009; Seligson 2011). In developing their critique of precarity, though, those associated with the movement have also begun to explore its cultural and political potential. Christina Morini (in Galetto et al 2007: 106), for example, argues that while precarity can suggest the trauma of uncertainty, 'it is at the same time also connected with the idea of re-questioning, of becoming, of the future, of possibility, concepts which together contribute to creating the idea of the nomadic subject without fixed roots…. The precarious subject has no fixed points and does not want any. He/she is always forced to seek a new sense of direction, to construct new narratives and not to take anything for granted.' Embracing this sense of nomadic drift, the feminist collective Precarias a la Deriva has undertaken to 'drift through the circuits and spaces of feminized labor' as a way of highlighting the overrepresentation of women in precarious service work. Drifting through the spaces of female domestic workers, telemarketers, and food service workers, the members of Precarias a la Deriva have been able to 'find points for commonality and alliance', and to 'find ways to turn mobility and uncertainty into strategic points of intervention' through collective gatherings,

workshops, and other techniques (Shukaitis 2009: 152-6). The recent development and growth of groups like the Canadian Freelance Union, and the Freelancers Union in the United States, suggest that this model of loose affiliation among those cut loose—'a federation of the unaffiliated', as the Freelancers Union calls itself—may be emerging more broadly.

Food Not Bombs, Precarias a la Deriva, and similar groups constitute collective attempts to assist those who have been cast adrift by contemporary economic and political forces. In their attempts, though, they do not simply reject drift; instead, they convert it into new styles of activism and resistance, and in so doing begin to craft an alternative culture of drift. These new styles are as fluid and dislocated as are the lives of those who create them; this new culture spans spaces and situations as readily as do those whose lives it reflects. Because of this, such groups can perhaps be understood less as formal organizations than as drifting 'dis-organizations'. As already seen, this term has been used to describe Food Not Bombs; it is also used by contemporary groups like Critical Mass bicycle activists and Reclaim the Streets members, who work to reclaim urban spaces from cars and capitalism. In a press release entitled 'On Disorganization', for example, Reclaim the Streets emphasized that it is 'a non-hierarchical, leaderless, openly organized public group. No individual "plans" or "masterminds" its actions and events. RTS activities are the result of voluntary, unpaid, co-operative efforts from numerous self-directed people attempting to work equally together' (Reclaim the Streets 2000). Chris Carlsson (2002), one of Critical Mass's founding activists, affirms this sort of open-ended, self-directed activism, and describes it in terms of yet another contradiction: 'assertive desertion.' Drift, uncertainty, lack of direction: these are pains imposed by the contemporary crisis, cer-

tainly, but as these groups suggest, they can also operate as assertive dis-orientations for knowing the world, for moving through it, and for crafting collective alternatives to it.

Among such groups there is one in particular that most fully embraces this notion of assertive desertion, and with it an alternative cultural politics of drift. These are the gutter punks. Beginning in the 1970s, punk emerged as an aggressively alternative subculture that rejected cultural and political authority while embracing anarchic 'dis-organization' and do-it-yourself music and style. From the beginning, though, there was also a tension within punk, a tendency toward punk's being coopted into corporate culture or reduced to a mere stylistic affectation, and so over the years the rowdy ethos of punk has been debated, lost, reborn, and parceled out among various versions of punk culture. The gutter punks chose one way of resolving this tension—to live as punks with a militant dedication to independence and autonomy, to become punks who were punker than punk. For gutter punks, their assertive desertion from mainstream society and their radically do-it-yourself alternative lives were taken as givens, and over the past couple of decades these hallmarks of gutter punk culture have tended to play out in various ways. In place of money, and the dullingly obedient retail work required to earn it, gutter punks generally scavenge trash bins for the food and materials they may need. As the anonymous, unemployed, dumpster-diving author of the book *Evasion* put it: '"Money?" they ask, the implication being that without money our system was flawed, incomplete. When in fact our lifestyle had stripped money of its value, reduced it to an inefficient and indirect means of acquiring…' (Anonymous, 2003: 80). When a bit of money does sometime become a necessity, though, gutter punks 'fly a sign'—that is, hold up a hand-made sign on a

street corner asking for whatever donations may be avail-
able—or perhaps busk on the streets for spare change. And
when gutter punks want to be on the move—which they
generally do—they disavow car ownership or costly bus
rides in favor of hopping freight trains. Living hand-to-
mouth and on the streets, crashing in abandoned houses or
other happenstance spaces, hopping freights from one city
to another—gutter punks are drifters of the first order.

Because of this they are also, from the view of the con-
temporary legal system, a collection of serial miscreants
and career criminals. Over the past three decades the 'bro-
ken windows' policing model, with its focus on the hard-
nosed policing of low-order criminality, has spawned an
aggressive criminalization of public begging, curb-side
performances, and other autonomous forms of street-level
economic activity on which gutter punks rely (Ferrell,
2001). Likewise, with the growth of consumerist urban
economies, 'dumpster diving' and trash scavenging have
come under increasing surveillance and legal control, with
some cities now criminalizing even the unauthorized lift-
ing of a trash bin's lid (Ferrell, 2006). Hopping freight
trains is of course also soundly illegal, with those appre-
hended regularly charged with trespass, destruction of
property, or other offenses. Public consumption of alcohol
—another gutter punk pastime—constitutes yet another vi-
olation of high-end urban economies and their public aes-
thetics, and so also regularly draws an aggressive policing
response to those whose neighborhood bar is the street.
Short on cash and on respect for legal authority, gutter
punks in turn tend to let the resulting tickets go unpaid,
and so fines accumulate, warrants are issued—and the
crime of being a drifter builds on itself.

As for me, I first hung out with gutter punks and be-
came acquainted with their status as legal outsiders vis-à-
vis consumerist urban economies some fifteen years ago,

while researching and writing a book on battles over urban space (Ferrell, 2001). Recently I got reacquainted.

Out on my bicycle, doing some trash scavenging of my own (Ferrell, 2006), I came upon a young kid named Zeke with a cardboard sign, soliciting money from drivers stopped at a red light. I guessed from his black clothes and railroad tattoos that he was a gutter punk, and he confirmed it. He 'grew up riding trains and going from [punk] show to show to show by way of freight trains,' Zeke told me—and as for 'housy punks', kids with homes and money and stability, well, 'more power to them, I'm not doggin' anybody out. But that's the difference between us. I'm a gutter punk.' He also told me he was just out of jail on probation, having been convicted on an assault charge he picked up while passing through town on a freight train a few months back, and was now just hanging out down by the rail yards, homeless, waiting for his next probation hearing. 'You wake up breaking the law drinking in public, you go to sleep breaking the law sleeping in public, how are you going to do that probation time?' he asked me. I didn't have an answer, but I did figure I'd help him out. One thing led to another, and a few days later, having taken care of the probation hearing, we agreed on the spur of the moment…to hop the next freight heading west.

Outside a convenience store we hitched a ride with a couple of drunks, who dropped us off at a 'catch out' spot that Zeke knew—a hidden spot for illicitly boarding outbound freight trains as they leave the rail yard, its walls adorned with the signatures of other gutter punks and hobos who had 'signed in' on their way through. After a while Zeke noticed that a big freight was about to depart, and so we scrambled toward the train, and the moment of 'catching out', or hopping the train, was here. 'Most hobo autobiographies …refer to this moment of 'catching out' as the location of their subcultural power', John Lennon

(2007: 214, emphasis in original) writes. 'By using their physical and mental skills in life-threatening situations, they *proactively* become invisible on the moving train.' Become invisible we did, dropping down into a little sunken space at the back of a container car and staying there until we were well out of the yards. Significantly, Zeke had picked out a 'double-stack'—a mile-long train carrying big global shipping containers double-stacked on each car—and because of this, the train was also a 'hot shot', it's global supply chain content giving it priority to pass other trains that would pull over on sidings along the route to let it through.

After a few hours of rocketing through the countryside, the train ground to a halt in the Abilene, Texas, rail yards. We hunkered down and waited, hid in the dark from some railroad officials checking the train, disembarked to go on a beer run, climbed back aboard as the train was pulling out, and rode on to Sweetwater, beers in hand and thunderstorm lightning flashing around us. There another beer run caused us to miss the train as it pulled out, so we had cold beans and beer for dinner, then wandered around looking for a place to sleep out of the rain, finally settling under the little metal overhang of a building near the yards. In a few hours the journey would continue, as we'd hop another train and ride on west the next day to Big Spring, Odessa, Pecos, and beyond. But it was here, stuck and drunk in the rain in the middle of the night on the edge of the Sweetwater rail yards, that I began to understand some things. To begin with, I now understood the name of the train-hopping crew of which Zeke had long been a part: Slow Drunk Krew. Beyond this, I began to understand how the radical, moving uncertainty of train hopping mixes with the independent intentionality of those caught up in it. I began to see how decision-making occurs within a larger swirl of immediate contingencies,

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vulnerability to the volatility of emerging situations, and the inevitability of eventual disorientation. Most importantly, I began to realize that being lost doesn't necessarily mean you're looking for a map—and that missteps, failures, and slow drunk detours may constitute for some fleeting signs of autonomous success.

Interestingly, gutter punks and train hoppers have their own term for this phenomenon: 'the drift'. 'For me, the drift occurs when I migrate from the linear world, neat with its processes and models, to the road, where everything happens at once,' says veteran train hopper Todd Waters. 'You've got a general direction, but it doesn't have much glue on it. The plan has equal weight to every new direction that comes along' (in O'Connell, 1998). Likewise, in the course of the train-hopping travels that she documents in her film *Train on the Brain*, Alison Murray (2000) happened to meet Wendy, a veteran gutter punk train hopper, when they discovered that they were riding a car apart on a freight train rolling across western Canada. 'Wendy's told me about "the drift,"' Murray reports in the film, 'a carefree state of mind that overtakes you on the train. I'm losing all sense of time and place.' Riding with train hoppers, a reporter for *Esquire* magazine lost it, too, writing that the 'magic of the freights', their 'sudden rush of movement,' left her with 'an incredible feeling of lightness…on the freights, time flows around you—there is no goal other than movement' (Ferguson, 1994: 74). And when a *San Francisco Weekly* reporter set out to ride freights with some veteran train hoppers, she found herself lost in the same state of mind. 'I have no idea what time it is', she says as they rest in a track-side hobo camp between rides. 'Welcome,' replies Ballast, one the group. 'Time doesn't matter after a while' (in Tudor, 2001).

In this sense gutter punks seem the very embodiment of drift: drift as historical artifact and contemporary crisis,

drift as structured social problem and active human agency, drift as assertive desertion and cultural dis-orientation. All of their essential endeavors are shaped by the dynamics of drift, by a mercurial mix of self-determination and abandon amidst situations beyond their control. Theirs is a sort of survival surfing; the ocean of global consumer society generates the wave, but they figure out how to surf it —and upon wiping out, as they always do, they figure out how to catch the next one. To dig in a trash bins or 'fly a sign' is to scavenge the remains of consumer-driven economies, to violate the legal strategies meant to protect those economies, and to create an alternative culture to them—all at once. To hop a loaded freight train is to assertively and illegally abandon the matrix of precarious work, automotive transit, and enforced timetables by which others move through life while at the same, quite literally, riding the flow of goods that will eventually circulate through those lives; to hop a fast-moving 'hot shot', as Zeke knew to do, is to understand as well the priority now given global supply chains and global capitalism over local economies. 'Hobo punks hop trains, squat abandoned buildings, collect welfare, and dumpster food,' that *Esquire* reporter wrote in summary. 'Anything, in short, to exploit and condemn the consumer culture they so despise' (Ferguson, 1994: 70). Drifting this way, they circulate among the other restless ghosts of the contemporary crisis, among displaced workers and undocumented immigrants, and they call forth past ghosts as well. That next day, after we made it out of the Sweetwater yards and on to Pecos, I couldn't resist asking Zeke what he knew about an earlier generation of hobos, about those cast adrift by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and about the culture they created. In response he started to sing. I recognized the song—it was Woody Guthrie's *Hard Travellin'*.

Photo by Jeff Ferrell

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