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From the Vagrant to the Fugitive: Institutional Models in Nelson Algren's Somebody in Boots.

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Nelson Algren, hard-boiled chronicler and fellow traveller of skid row society, maintained a sentimental aesthetic for junkies and petty hustlers, prostitutes and losing gamblers, which both stamped his work and imprisoned him on the fringes of American letters. Whilst hoboing around the social wreckage of depression America during the early 1930s, Algren became incarcerated within the cells of Brewster County jail for a number of weeks, awaiting trial on charges relating to the theft of a typewriter. The horrific institutional experience fed into the thematic of his first novel *Somebody in Boots* [1], published in 1935, transforming the trajectories of the central protagonist from those of the would-be pioneer to the labyrinthine wilderness squatted by the vagrant and the fugitive. Drawing on the polemical fusion between the historical and the imaginative, emblematic of the so-called proletarian writing of the period, this article argues that Algren's narrative exposes the productive nature of the penal network in America and the malign rituals of hijacking and corrupting the innocence of the individual.

From the romantic conception of the open road, celebrated in the poetry of Walt Whitman and propagated by the populist aesthetic of the dime novel, to the spectacle of the destitute tramp, the practices of American penality have sustanined a synonymity between the vagrant and the villain. Thinking in terms of cultural heritage, this may have had much to do with the legacy left by the isolated settlement communities of the New World – their uneasiness with the mysterious external landscape became a guiding principle in equating the appearance of the outsider with the deviant traits associated with the outlaw. A fundamental reinforcement of this inheritance, manifested during the enduring economic and near political bankruptcies that had existed cyclically from the 1870s to the 1930s, hurling an enormous flux of unemployed migrants onto the roads and rails that had traditionally been the transient sites of the hobo worker. The underpinning contention of this article, then, is to examine how such an assigned relationship has been grounded within an institutional model – a model of exile from society – that functioned to codify a space where the conception of the vagrant is projected as the dangerous 'other',' the deviant and the criminal.

The opening of the narrative locks us into the epicentre of poverty that plagued the rural landscape in the mid-1920s. Shrouded in dust storms, the infertile nature of the West Texas wasteland encloses the McKay family, whose alienated lives spiral into states of unemployment, drunkenness, and violence, engendering "a dim feeling as of daily loss and daily defeat". (SB p.13) In order to anaesthetise this despair, the adolescent protagonist Cass McKay pursues two main trajectories within the town. The first path directs the character to the Mexican pool-hall, where he acts as a small-time pimp for local prostitutes. The second track leads to the jungle, a locus occupied by transients lodged within the demonised fringes of the town. The symbol that conceptually envelops these sites – compressing them into, and maintaining them as, peripheral spheres of both geography and deviancy – is the jailhouse, which for McKay "held a peculiar kind of dread". (SB p. 69) The claustrophobic pitch that escapes from the dungeon cell captures the gaze of the character, forging a nexus between the walls and bars and the entrapment imposed upon McKay by the mendicant family and town. As a consequence of the overt visibility of the penal institution, the protagonist is imbued with a yearning to be free, the instinctual need to elude the "oppressive heat" (SB p.69) of confinement gradually translates being on the road to the trajectories generic in being on the run.

The initial transience of the hobo represents the rite de passage tramp into an institutional paradigm. For McKay, the genesis of such a model manifests itself in the spectacle of the welfare line, which, because of its unprecedented en masse nature, symbolised a near fracture of the ideological and urban landscape of the 1930s. As the character regresses down the line, he advances into an awareness that "each man in the line ahead […] was writing his name in the book before receiving food." (SB p.44) The experienced

vagrants in the soup-line implicitly translate such practices into the institutional ritual of naming; that is, connoting the threshold of committal into a definable penal term, such as vagrant, delinquent, and deviant, which holds extensions to the numbering of the prisoner and the fingerprinting of the accused – what Tony Tanner would call "harpooning".[2] The fugitive Thomas Clancy, who imposes an array of aliases upon his identity, infuses the dynamics of elusiveness into McKay's consciousness.

> *In an undertone the boy confided to Cass that the information he had given the counterman was false; his real name he said was not Thomas Clay but Thomas Clancy, his true age not twelve but sixteen, and the time he had spent on the road nearer four years than four months. He had run away from a reform school in Cleveland, he added, when he was twelve, and had been on the road ever since that time. (SB p. 46)*

In *Skid Row as a Way of Life*, Samuel E. Wallace argues that such an interaction represents a process of assimilation that both alienates the new vagrant from the norms of conventional society whilst educating the tramp in the deviant characteristics commonly associated with skid-row, serving to reinforce the positions of centrality and marginality that had developed into overt penal objectives for controlling the underclass.[3]

In *A School for Bums*, Mary Heaton Vorse observed the "long shuffling "passage of the bread line in New York's Lower East Side during the early 1930s.[4] The rigid pattern of movement mirrors the jarring images of the institutional lock-step, projected by the miserable march of the chain-gang's shackled internees through the streets of states like Georgia. The analogy is not that vacuous when one considers the events that could shape such correlative representations, such as the popular publication in 1932 of Robert E. Burns's *I Am A Fugitive From A Georgia Chain Gang*.[5] The spectre of the requited convict in Mervyn LeRoy's cinematic adaptation of this "document of barbarism," to borrow Walter Benjamin's phrase[6], his freshly unshackled feet still fettered within the restrictive and engendered reflex of the lock-step, instils an unconscious and analogous reading of the spectacle that the welfare line imposes upon the gaze. McKay migrates into this midst of what Vorse calls the sites of "massed misery".[7]

> *When he turned down Pedro Avenue in Navarro it was eleven o'clock – and three blocks away, unevenly scissored there from the gray mist, a soup-line seemed a thousand-humped serpent winding. Regularly and minutely the dark line jerked, was still with waiting, then wormed six convulsive inches through one narrow door. Its humps were the heads of homeless men, centipede legs were arms in rags. Its hungering mouth was a thousand mouths; even from three blocks away Cass felt that dreadful humility. (SB p.118)*

There appears a military recruitment officer alongside the soup-line, who the narrative depicts as a "tall man in khaki, in glistening black boots, with badges and buttons, with red stripes and gold braid." (SB p.43) This functions to compress the ragged individuals within cogent institutional parameters, codified by the comparable awareness of the agenda of the guards in both jails and prisons who serve to project a whole network of projected antitheses; such as the demarcation of power from non-power, and normality from deviancy. Thus, the soup-lines, like the jungles, the sprawling urban Hoovervilles, and the hustling atmospherics exuding from skid-row scapes, represent a perpetually reinforced and guarded periphery that projects the legal and panoptical surveillance of the outsider and outcast.

Having ended one section with a view of the dishevelled tramps being sentenced to sixty days in jail on a charge of vagrancy, Tom Kromer's semi-autobiographical narrative *Waiting for Nothing*,[8] published in 1935, institutes the following chapter with the stark depiction of life within a mission flop; a philanthropic site that draws queues for scant supplies of food – usually soup or bread – and a flop, that is, a place to lie down or doss. This jarring juxtaposition, accentuated by the reader's anticipation of a jail scene being replaced by an almost Orwellian pathology of the mission, constitutes a shared rationale. What Irvin Goffman refers to as the penal ceremonies of degradation[9], which, among other rituals, involves the stripping and strip-searching of the new inmate, becomes an integral feature that heralds McKay's admittance into the Jesus Saves Mission:

> *There was one other in the tiny room – the louse runner, a lank and pockmarked man of perhaps sixty years. Cass watched this delouser, and he began to feel ashamed that he would have to undress and be naked before such a man. The fellow had a shameless eye, and a searching manner. And Cass was ashamed to be naked before anyone, for he felt that others could read too much of his life in the scars of his body. (SB p.51)*

The exposure of 'naming' and 'stripping,' I would argue, pivots on the same principle of penal logic, which, according to Robert Woods in the late 1800s, defined the "dangerous types" as the "confirmed pauper,

the confirmed prostitute, and confirmed drunked".[10] This is not that surprising when one considers that as late as 1895 in states such as Minnesota, both the mission and jail were regulated by the State Board of Corrections and Charities.[11] In this light, the two sites function to produce the vagrant model that is intrinsically associated with what Woods calls the "habitual criminal act".[12] The eventual experience of both spaces hurls McKay through a perpetual series of entrances and exits, a process that would remind James P. Spradley, in his survey of destitute areas within the American City, of the trapped figure in the revolving door.[13] This enforced recidivism categorises both the vagrant as a named jailbird and the jailbird as a named vagrant, until the journey through the missions and jails becomes almost an inevitable determinant of skid-row acculturation, as McKay eventually comes to realise: "Going to jail was all a part of this life; no one escaped it for very long and he'd been pretty lucky for a long time now." (SB p 138)

Unlike the penitentiary, the unwritten rationale of the jail possesses no fear of the innocent individual, compressing the accused awaiting trial and the convicted serving sentences within the same publicly labelled deviant space, overcrowded with "the sounds of human trouble".[14] This has much to do with the historical premise of the penitentiary, which seeks to destroy the external world in order to impose modes of reform upon the inmate, which, by the 1930s became couched in medical terminology that categorised the convict as the patient and criminality as the disease. But if criminality was a disease, a virus that seeps into and determines the motivations of the individual, then the jail had always existed as its carrier. As late as 1935, only five years after its formation, the Federal Prison Bureau published a report that recommended the closure of nearly half of American jails. Of the three thousand jails visited by the Bureau, nearly thirteen hundred were observed to be unfit for human habitation. [In the 1950s that figure rose to eighty percent]. The report concluded by stating that such "deplorable conditions" often influenced those awaiting trial to admit to a crime "whether he committed it or not."[15]

Algren articulates the productiveness that underpins such transference from innocence to guilt through the protagonist Nubby o'Neill, who is the only experienced criminal imprisoned within the jail. The fact that o'Neill has only one arm, the other being torn off whilst working as a child on a production line in a reform school, tentatively lends itself to Michel Foucault's coupling of the institutional lobotomy of identity and the "amputation of nature,"[16] which marked the genesis of the character's deviant state. The inclement patterns of behaviour ordains o'Neill as the hub of inmate society, serving to perpetuate the dangerous delinquent sensibility that had become a marginalising generic term encapsulating peripheral groups, such as vagrants and prisoners, strikers and communists, during economic and 'Red Scare' social crises. Such an enclave of deviancy, captures the reader's means of surveillance within the spectacle of the monstrous, as the young jailbirds become engendered by the debris resulting from the implosion of violent behavioural patterns within the jail. The gestures of characters such as Creepy – the glance away, the vacuous stare into space - are motivated by the fear of brutalities and the sexual molestation that o'Neill represents. The most immediate manifestation of this fear, serving to accentuate what Gresham Sykes calls "the pains of imprisonment"[17] becomes imposed on the consciousness of McKay by an inmate run body known as the kangaroo court, which represents a mirror of the external judicial apparatus that encloses them. Earlier accounts, such as Joseph F. Fishman's statement in 1923 that the conditions endemic to the jail system manufactured high levels of criminality,[18] prompted the ex-Deputy of Corrections Joseph Fulling to investigate the problem in 1934, the findings of which suggested that internal groups permeated inmate life in more that sixty percent of the nation's jails.[19] The effects of such an intense form of confinement, leads McKay to a level of institutionalisation that represents a divorce with all the traits of a childhood past – what the imprisoned Robert Lowell would later extend into the prison writer's aesthetic of "lost connections".[20] In this sense, the isolated figure displays almost a premonitory conception of the model being assigned to him:

> *Sometimes Cass fancied that he would never get out of jail, that something would happen to him and he would never see sun and daylight again. After three weeks in the place he could no longer imagine himself as being free, so strange a thing did liberty seem. […] he would grow old in this jail, and would never be free again. (SB p.160)*

A register of this "nuance of damage",[21] to borrow W.H. Auden's phrase, on the institutionalised individual can be gleamed from the levels of recidivism, that is, the amount of prisoners who perpetually re-offend and become subject to re-imprisonment. By 1931, President Franklin Roosevelt was in despair at the thought of the high levels of such recidivism, which had reached as much as sixty percent in the penitentiary circuit. But the jail, with its constant influx of transients, drug-addicts, alcoholics, and ex-mental patients – an anathema to the concept of a classless America – possessed habitual rates escalating towards eighty percent of those released. Algren plays with the anticipated consequences of such a cyclical experience that Roosevelt, along with many penologists of the period, was eventually forced to admit codified a school for criminals.[22]

So far, I have established a framework where the character's motivation to teach and learn legally defined terms of deviant behaviour can be partly understood by drawing upon the underlying forces that writers like Foucault and Mike Fitzgerald perceive as the primary function of the penal institution.[23] Once released, both o'Neill and McKay embark on a felonius caper that leaves an intervening uniformed figure dead, resulting in the absolute fugitation of trajectories:

> *As [Cass] stood in the darkness up front next to the motorman he heard the long wail of the police siren rising to the west. It rose in a shrill, wild warning, then died to a whisper […]. He left the car and ran in a half-slouch beneath the shadow of the Lake Street L. (SB p.216)*

The intense experience of institutional restriction in the form of the jail, and, by extension, the rituals endemic to the mission and welfare line, has served to mould McKay within a network of furtive actions unprecedented in his life before hitting the road. Together with his apprenticed side-kick, the ex-skid row prostitute Norah Egan, McKay embarks on a chain of night-time 'hold-ups' that result in the fleeting movements across the dim-lit underworld sprawl of 1930's Chicago:

> *Before that morning had passed, they moved. Just walked out and didn't come back. Took the first clean apartment they found […].*
> *Then they moved again. Norah didn't have to sit up half the night feeding him whiskey the second time; that time they moved the minute they got in. (SB p.217)*

The ephemeral nature of such experience submerges the duo inside a perpetual cycle of creating and destroying aliases, which resemble the characteristics of other 1930's outlaws like Bonnie Parker and Clyde 'Champion' Barrow, and the Barrow gang. The protean traits associated with the shadowy essence of the fleeting and ephemeral work to forge the seeds of an identity, from Algren's notion of the character being a "walker in search of something to belong to in order to belong to himself" (SB p.9) towards the fugitive's sudden realisation of being wanted, dead or alive. Although McKay had been infused by the adrenaline of transience whilst hoboing the freight trains, the relationship between the desperado and the posse, the escapee and the pursuant – together with the flurried procedure involved in the stick-up - forms a typical Clyde Barrow identity grounded in the rush of acceleration; the very antithesis, and reaction to, lock-step restrictions:

> *His train rolled up, its broad doors opened wide, he was inside its brightness, he was going swiftly. He picked up a copy of the Herald-Examiner from a seat and hid his face behind comic-strips all the way down to the Loop. Not until he was back in the heart of the Loop did courage desert him. He was mingling with an after-theatre crowd on Michigan when he realised, in one sudden moment, that he had escaped, and when he realised this fully the reaction took him.*
> *He wanted to run – he could scarcely suppress the desire to race wildly, screaming, to go zigzagging aimlessly down the boulevard, to run shouting up the staircase to the room, to get away – to get away. (SB P.217)*

In this light, and in comparison to Mervyn LeRoy's once innocent figure fading into the fugitive realms of darkness and anonymity, in the film *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang*, with the words "I steal," Algren envelops the trajectories of McKay in what he calls the "aura of the supernatural".[24]

Within this finale of heists, McKay becomes re-arrested and committed once again to jail. This is the orbit that codifies the hallmark of Algren's corpus, in this case serving to invest our attention into the awareness of the protagonist's two points of entry into the jail: the first as an innocent vagrant, the second as a convicted felon. Through such a process, the narrative implicitly points to the unwritten raison d'être of penality, perhaps compelling us to confront the question, which Sykes – in a study of a typical house of correction – articulates: "If an individual does commit a crime after being punished has punishment exercised a harmful influence or no influence at all ?"[25]

The acute pains of exile that haunt the jailbird serves to direct the surveillance of the reader to the grave nature of what J.M. Moynahan refers to as the "house of darkness,"[26] as the spectral nuance of the fugitive erodes into the deathly pall of the habitual prisoner. Despite attempts at reform, the demise of the American individual remained as an integral rationale of penal statutes during the depression:

> *673 CIVIL RIGHTS OF CONVICT SUSPENDED*
> *A sentence of imprisonment in a state prison for any term less than for life suspends all the civil rights of the person so sentenced, and forfeits all public offices and all private trusts, authority, or power during such imprisonment.*
> *674 CIVIL DEATH*
> *A person sentenced to imprisonment in the state prison for life is thereafter deemed civilly dead.*[27]

A symphysis with tombs and a denial of light shroud the space of the dungeon cell in "perpetual night," (SB p.243) within which McKay awakes "strangling for breath". (SB p.241) The jail is possessed by the process of demise, reinforced by the constant audible presence of the expiring inmate, entombed opposite McKay's cell, representing a mirror of the penal state enfolding all: "Cass had never heard a voice in deeper pain. It was the voice of something tortured in sleep and unable to waken. The voice of something lost in darkness." (SB p.242) Like the vagrant's addiction to canned-heat, the gas that became the driving force of many despairing inhabitants of skid-row tenements during the depression, the cyclical journeys to and from the jail, submerged within an institutional model of incorrigibility, remains enclosed by the throws of civil death. For penologists like John Irwin and Sean McConville[28], such states invested the so called undeserving poor with a delinquent sensibility en masse. Within the growing anti-Communist paranoia, integral to what Joseph Freeman testifies is "the catastrophe of capitalist economy"[29] during the Great Depression, this translates into the zero-tolerance of the potentially dangerous classes.

According to an anonymous inmate interviewed by John Irwin: "For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, you have to be an inmate. By the time you are released this role will be part of you."[30] The institutional marker that codifies the vagrant as the both the deviant and – potentially – dangerous individual becomes fixed in the narrative by the spectacle of the trampish stranger: "Ten months in County leaves a man with a pallor like a gray talcum sprinkled across his face." (SB p.253) This deathly discoloration works with the tattered garb and facial scar branded onto the body of McKay that has historically forged a connection between the transient alien and the outlaw, the stranger and the fugitive. In the context of the Chicago World Fair in 1933, its captivating banners paying homage to the dynamics of the American Way, whilst shadowing the sprawl of Hoovervilles, skid-rows, and overcrowded jails, the focus of the narrative briefly pans to the migration of a new vagrant into the city, and the rite de passage immersion within an institutional archetype: "One Sam Phillips […] was in Chicago only two days when he got picked up on South Prarie Avenue by Sergeant M____ of the South Park Police. Sure the boy looked suspicious – he was in rags, and had no place to sleep". (SB p268)

In the book *Nonconformity: Writing on Writing*,[31] Algren writes:

> *The Caves of the country are the acres and acres of furnished rooms as well as the railroad hotels of the small-town slums; […]; in the chicken-wire flops as in the all-steel cells with the solid doors; backroom brothels as in back street bars; in the courts and the wards and the charity hospitals; in all the dens and all the dives wherein we see and touch the bone and flesh out of which our time is forged.*

The means of fulfilling Whitman's injunction to "vivify the contemporary fact"[32] engaged Algren with an experience of the transient passage into an institutional model. This article has been concerned with the ways in which the fulcrum of this model, locked into the heart of *Somebody in Boots*, hurls the character through the trajectories assigned to the fugitive, exposing the terminal process that establishes a track from vagrancy to criminality. Out of a context of strikers being hauled into concentration camps, the massacres of pickets protesting over the loss of jobs and the cut in wages, and, especially, the sight of the homeless immured within the endless quagmire of soup-lines and jails, Algren steps into an aesthetic for losers, the absconders and derelicts that walk the underside of the American way.

Endnotes

1. Nelson Algren, *Somebody in Boots* (London: Flamingo, 1993) First published in 1935. All references will be cited within the article with the preface SB.
2. Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1971) p.22
3. Samuel E. Wallace, *Skid Row as a Way of Life* (Totowa, New Jersey: The Bedminster Press, 1965) p.160
4. Mary Heaton Vorse, 'School for Bums' in Jack Salzman, ed., *Years of Protest*: *a collection of American Writings of the 1930s* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) p.40
5. Robert E. Burns, *I Am A Fugitive From A Georgia Chain Gang* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997) First Published in 1932
6. Walter Benjamin, 'Thesis On The Philosophy Of History' in Hannah Arendt, ed., trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992) p. 248
7. Vorse, p.41
8. Tom Kromer, *Waiting for Nothing And Other Writings* (University of Georgia Press, 1986) First published in 1935
9. For a fuller examination of this see Ervin Goffman, 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions: The Inmate World' in Donald R. Cressey, ed., *The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961) pp. 15-67
10. Michael J. Dear & Jennifer R. Wolch, *Landscapes of Despair: from Deinstitutionalisation to Homelessness* (Cambridge & Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) p.37
11. See J.M. Moynahan & Earle K. Stewart, *The American Jail: Its Development and Growth* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980), p.68
12. Dear & Wolch, p.37
13. James P. Spradley, *You Owe Yourself A Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970) p.66
14. Nelson Algren, *Never Come Morning* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985) p.153. First published in 1942
15. *The New York Times*, 25 December 1935, p.6
16. Michael Foucault, 'Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison,' in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., trans. Alan Sheridan & Others, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-84*, pp 178-211. (New York & London: Routledge, 1988) p.185
17. See Chapter Four entitled 'The Pains of Imprisonment' in Gresham Sykes*, The Society of Captives: The Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958) pp. 63-83
18. Moynahan & Stewart, p.81
19. *The New York Times*, 30th December 1934, p.10
20. Robert Lowell, 'Memories of West Street and Lepke' in H. Bruce Franklin, ed., *Prison Writing in Twentieth Century America* (New York & London: Penguin, 1998) p.144
21. W.H. Auden, 'Old People's Home' in Edward Mendelson, ed., *W.H. Auden Selected Poems* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1979) p.295
22. See Samuel I. Rosenon, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Volume One: The Genesis of the New Deal 1928-32* (New York: Randome Houe, 1938) p.387 where Roosevelt talks of prison as representing a "college of crime".
23. See Michael Foucault, *Discipline And Punish: The Birth Of The Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977). See also Mike Fitzgerald, *Prisoners in Revolt* (New York: Penguin, 1977)
24. Nelson Algren, 'After The Buffalo: Bonnie And Clyde',' (pp.113-120) in Bettina Drew, ed*., The Texas Stories of Nelson Algren* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995) p. 119
25. Gresham M. Sykes, *Crime and Society* (New York: Random House, 1967) p.167
26. J.M. Moynahan & Earle K. Stewart, *The American Jail: Its Development and Growth* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980) p.73
27. Eric Cummings, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994) pp.24-25

28. Sean McConville, 'Local Justice: The Jail,' in Norval Morris & David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
29. Joseph Freeman, An American Testament: A Narrative Of Rebels And Romantics (London: Victor Gollanz, 1938) p.10
30. John Irwin, *The Jail: Managing The Underclass in American Society* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1985) p.97
31. Nelson Algren, *Nonconformity: Writing on Writing* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996) p.41
32. Quoted in Walter Susman, ed., *Culture and Commitment: 1929-45* (George Braziller, 1973) p.177