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How to Make a Queer: The Erotics of Begging; or, Down and Out in the Great Depression

Abstract Across the fiction and poetry of the Great Depression, when the focus turns to men on the down and out, unable to find work and not knowing where they will find their next meal or place to sleep, a series of representative scenes reappears from one now often-forgotten story, novel, and poem to another. Collectively such scenes, recurring across the literature of the 1930s, offer something like a cousinly alternative, on a far smaller scale, to the 1930s ascendency of documentary and the 1920s and 1930s movement for a proletarian literature. Stories of begging for money or food, for example, took a variety of forms, and they also took on erotic connotations. This article reads the erotics of begging in little-known literature from the Great Depression, especially Tom Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing* (1935), and argues that when a man on the down and out "makes" a queer, in effect also queering himself, he queers as well the masses of down-and-out unemployed men whose unloosed gender stirred up a national anxiety about precarious masculinity.

Keywords poverty, 1930s, Tom Kromer, hobos

The Poetics of the Stiff

The Great Depression turned many thousands of people into beggars. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," the runaway popular song recorded by Bing Crosby in 1932, tells the story of a hardworking veteran who builds railroads and skyscrapers—icons of US prosperity and can-do adaptability—but then finds himself reduced to begging for dimes and "standing in line just waiting for bread." In the 1930s, the mass unemployment, hunger, and homelessness that helped make "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" the nation's most popular song (Crosby 1932; Giddins 2001, 305) transformed—or seemed to transform—many working men into walking dead bodies trapped in

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hopeless paralysis as they begged for food and shelter. Across the fiction and poetry of the Great Depression, when the focus turns to men on the down and out, unable to find work and not knowing where they will find their next meal or place to sleep, a series of representative scenes reappears from one now often-forgotten story, novel, and poem to another. Tom Kromer's 1935 novel, *Waiting for Nothing*, calls these down-and-out men *stiffs*. Collectively, such scenes evoke what I will call the poetics of the stiff. The poetics of the stiff includes scenes of begging for money (Brother—or Buddy—can you spare a dime?); begging for food at a restaurant, bakery, or butcher shop; standing in a breadline or soup line; staring through a restaurant window at hearty eaters who do not see or pretend not to see the staring stiffs; sleeping in a flophouse or an evangelical mission; hopping a freight car in the hope of finding things better somewhere else; and so on.

Such scenes, recurring across the literature of the 1930s, offer something like a cousinly alternative, on a far smaller scale, to the 1930s ascendency of documentary and the 1920s and 1930s movement for a proletarian literature. In a way that I have not seen writers or critics remark, the Depression stuck a stick in the spokes of the call, led by Mike Gold, for proletarian fiction and poetry, for writing that concentrates on workers and their work.[1] Stiffs were not workers. They wanted to work, but they could not find work. As Gavin Jones notes (2008, esp. 8), the two categories of "workers" and "the poor" are not the same. Jones argues that thinking of them as the same has led literary critics to pay too little attention to the literature of poverty. Many stiffs were ex-workers, but many of them had fallen from a bourgeois past. If they found work, it led to regular meals and a reliable place to sleep, meaning that, so long as the work lasted, they were no longer stiffs. For that reason, a novel, story, or poem about stiffs could not live up to the calls to ground literature in portraits of workers and their work. It had to do something else.

Stories of begging for money or food, a core scene in the poetics of the stiff, took a variety of forms, and they also took on erotic connotations. This article reads the erotics of begging in little-known literature from the Great Depression, especially Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing*, and argues that life on the down and out leads down a zigzagging path that outs queerness.[2] The outed queerness challenges conventional models of straightness, making it impossible to continue any charade that might convincingly deny or suppress queerness. When a

culture tries to make heterosexuality and masculinity define each other, while trying as well to define both of them through work, and then takes away the work, it pressures its models of masculinity and heterosexuality to make visible the polymorphous possibilities that they have often suppressed about themselves. But it does not necessarily make queerness, masculinity, or heterosexuality finite, controllable, and readable. It may even expose them as unreadable. The literature of unreadable masculinity then outs heterosexuality and masculinity as more than one fused-together side of a supposedly binary opposition to "homosexuality" and femininity, as more capacious than one singular model of heterosexuality or masculinity.

Making a Queer: Male-to-Male Exchange and the Confusion of Categories

In the poetics of the encounter between the stiff and the nonstiff, begging for money is characteristically, though not always, a male-to-male exchange, as in the refrain and title of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" In 1934–35, 97 percent of unattached transients in the United States were male.[3] But women driven to prostitution or sex work by the Depression also approached men and asked for money. In *Waiting for Nothing*, when Tom—the representative hungry and ragged stiff with no money, nothing to eat, and no place to sleep—meets a starving prostitute, he thinks, "I can see that she is the same as me" (Kromer 1986b, 78). As one woman tells a stiff in another stiff novel, Edward Anderson's *Hungry Men*, "a down-and-out man begs and a woman sells" (1935, 131).[4]

Women's exchange of money for sex colors the exchange between the male stiff and his potential benefactor. In another scene oft repeated in Depression literature, a scene that can overlap with the can-you-spare-a-dime scene, the stiff asks for a place to sleep. The plea for a place to sleep reenacts the threatening though inviting atmosphere of potential sexuality in the plea for a dime. This time, instead of the metaphor of money figuring sex, the place to sleep—a bed—figures metonymically as the setting of sex. And in still another variant on the scene of begging, a man who is not a stiff offers a stiff a place to eat and sleep, coding the invitation as a queer proposition, which turns the male stiff into a prostitute. The potential for such a scene between men, and the more frequent exchange between a man and a female prostitute, colors even supposedly asexual scenes of men begging from other men.

A stiff, reduced to waiting for nothing, needs to make something out of nothing. Here the word *make* has many meanings. Tom describes prostitutes as women "on the make" (Kromer 1986b, 18). Each night, all over again, Tom needs "to make a flop" (20), meaning find a place to sleep, or needs to beg for money to pay for a place to sleep. When Tom combines forces with a would-be prostitute "on the make" (78) and they try to parlay her last four bits (fifty cents) into a few meals, he describes the two of them as "on the make for a beef stew" (79). Once, he remembers, he "made the restaurants" well enough to eat "for a week on three cents" (81). When he succeeds at hopping a dangerously fast train, he thinks, "I made this drag" (106). In chapter 4 of *Waiting for Nothing*, Tom sits on a park bench in the evening, implicitly preparing to spend the night there, as he has spent so many nights on park benches before. Like many other parks, this one is crowded with hungry stiffs as desperate as Tom. But as the evening darkens, this park also attracts queer men who are not stiffs. "For every queer," Tom thinks, "there is a hundred stiffs to make him" (46).

What, then, does it mean to "make" a queer?

Stiffs on the make, queer or not, had a charged relation to queer men on the make for stiffs. The Depression vastly increased the number of stiffs, but the charged relation between stiffs and queers began before the Depression. George Chauncey's (1994) magisterial history of gay New York from 1890 to 1940 describes a widespread pattern, especially among the working class, of effeminate men known as "fairies" who sought or welcomed sex from conventionally masculine men, sometimes through prostitution, so that the men who paid for sex with fairies were known as "trade." The trade understood themselves as heterosexual. Sometimes the trade sought out fairies, and other times they were more or less indifferent about whether they had sex with women or with fairies, so long as their partners acted in ways conventionally understood as feminine (Chauncey 1994, esp. ch. 2 and 3).

In 1928, not long before the stock market crashed, Iowan Raymond Kresensky published "50-Cent Flop," a poem about stiffs and queer men. It may call to mind Robert Frost's uncharacteristically urban "Acquainted with the Night," which opens and closes with the suggestive line, "I have been one acquainted with the night" (Frost 1979, 255), similar to Kresensky's opening and closing line, "I have walked

the streets where men like shadows go" (1928, 18). But Frost's poem came out in October 1928 (Frost 1979, 554), four months after Kresensky's poem.

Kresensky's first stanza places the stiff in a flophouse—a term for an inexpensive, typically rundown lodging house frequented by homeless men:

> I have walked the streets where men like shadows go
> Up rickety stairs to second story rooms.
> And I have gone too, hiding in gray piles
> Of musty rags that they call sheets, and watched
> The red lights blink and men in terrible dreams
> Toss themselves and cry like children in their sleep. (1928, 18)

In 1928, before traffic lights, the red lights tell us—figuratively if not literally—that the rundown flophouse, with its "rickety stairs," lies in a red-light district. The shared neighborhood implies connections between the culture of the flophouse and the culture of sex work. After all, like the johns and the prostitutes, the stiffs walk the streets. All three groups, in their own ways, search for a bed. We might think, though, that unlike the johns and the prostitutes, the impoverished stiffs do not walk the streets at night in search of sex. But soon the poem begins to worry about the difficulty of keeping sex out of the flophouse. Because in the flophouse, says the stiff who speaks the poem,

> I have passed rooms where queers have beckoned me
> And then ashamed hid in the gray dim light.
> I have paid my fifty cents; nor found the rest
> That I had asked; nor touched the warmth of flesh.

As the stiff tells of his shame for sleeping where queers beckon him, he hedges defensively by making it sound, at first, as if the queers feel the shame, leading this reader, at least, to need to reread the lines to sort out the ghostly difference between queers as other and stiff as self. It seems unlikely that queers would beckon him only to hide in shame a moment later, so the shame must be the speaking stiff's. He feels shame for attracting queer desire and implicitly for the possibility that the queer men's desire for him signals a displaced reflection of his own desire for the queer men.

In his self-consciousness, he almost makes it sound as if the fifty cents he pays for his flop represents a payment for sex with other men

in the flophouse. The low price may make that reading implausible but not impossible. After all, fifty cents is enough to buy a desperate man a rundown flop and so perhaps not too little for a queer stiff to charge, especially to charge a clientele whom the queer stiff can hardly expect to have more than that to pay. A 1936 sociological study of stiffs in Chicago shelters reports that the price they paid prostitutes ranged from twenty-five cents to $1.75 (Sutherland and Locke 1936, 130). Still, the beckoning queers may have other motives for sex besides getting paid. Since the poem presents the flophouse queers in the plural, they could at least as likely find sex in each other's arms as in the arms of the next random stiff to join them in the flophouse. But they could want as much to tease and challenge a straight stiff's fear as to find or out another queer stiff. In these contexts, when the speaking stiff follows by saying that he did not touch "the warmth of flesh," he exposes a dual desire: one, to lament his loneliness, and two, to reassure us, and his nervously self-conscious self, that he did not beckon back to the beckoning queers.

But he cannot get away from the topsy-turvy confusion of categories that makes him find the nearness of queer men so irresistible a fascination, as the next lines re-testify: "There is an end tonight, but day is night / And night is day beside the sagging cot." As the speaker worries that he can no longer tell day from night, he then goes on to protect himself from needing to differentiate queer men from straight men by referring to the other stiffs in the flophouse, straight or queer, in an undifferentiated plural. There is one exception, when soon after the puzzled conflation of day with night, he describes "the thin-skinned boy, pretty and called a 'she,' / Whose bed was made by men with blood afire." When men—and here I use the word *men* deliberately—*make* the fairy, or his bed, with their "blood afire," and the stiff who speaks the poem describes the fairy with the feminine, or effeminate, adjective *pretty*, he steps, however slightly, across the ghostly boundary he has labored to tell us he has not crossed. And yet his opposition between *men* and the *boy* "called a 'she'" sustains a place, in the world described by Chauncey (1994), for conventionally masculine men who have sex with effeminate men, with fairies, to continue to see themselves as heterosexual. But as Chauncey also describes, by the 1920s and 1930s that world was giving way to a more insistent binary opposition between queer and heterosexual desires and identities. Each of the works I discuss here offers a snapshot of that contested transition in process. They each dramatize the

vulnerability of stiffs—and of queer men, stiffs or not—amid precarious sexual and gender boundaries. Those boundaries rested on the capacity for paid labor to establish a conventional masculinity that then came under increasing threat when the Great Depression threw millions of men, like the representative man in "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," into the unchosen plight of the stiff.

Queer Attractions and Straight Fears: A Constellation of Examples

The few critics who even mention *Waiting for Nothing* sometimes group it with any of five other moderately better-known novels about the most down-and-out transients published and set during or just before the Depression: Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* from 1929, Jack Conroy's 1933 *The Disinherited*, Edward Newhouse's 1934 *You Can't Sleep Here*, Edward Anderson's 1935 *Hungry Men*, and Nelson Algren's 1935 *Somebody in Boots*. Much as the characters in these novels, like Tom in *Waiting for Nothing*, suffer and struggle, begging for spare change and food and searching for a place to sleep, they fare far better at each of those tasks than Tom fares.[5] And four of these five novels—all but *You Can't Sleep Here*—have more or less sexual encounters, briefer and more circumspect than *Waiting for Nothing*'s, between queer men and ostensibly straight stiffs.

When Lorry Lewis, the hobo protagonist of Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs*, arrives in San Francisco, we get a long list of the sights he sees, beginning with a "parade of sailors on Market street" (1929, 204). (Throughout, I quote Dahlberg's idiosyncratic writing as in the original.) Then, "Standing in front of the sailor's and army men's hotel which overlooked the shipping docks, he walked a half block up and down to keep warm; waiting for a tar or khakishirt to come out, he felt like a rundown whore who did her soliciting on dark streets." He heads to a "boozingjoint and dancehall," where he finds "everything wide open." He pushes through "swingingdoors" and sees sailors "strutting close up to their partners; one couldn't dodge them." The "niggerjazz band was at their pop." Uneasy, he steps outside but finds it "cold at the corner, he couldn't bunk there, it looked too cheap and down-and-out to hope to panhandle a few coppers for a bed." So "he swung thru the door again and . . . stood looking at one customer. . . . Finally, he halfnudged him, speaking low . . . 'Mister, I'm flat, could you help me out.'" The customer, a Swede, buys him food and drink.

"After that they went out together, the swede's arm about him, Lorry uncomfortable, and wanting to ditch him at the streetcorner." The Swede "said he'd put him up for the nite; he had a clean room and a bed big enuf for two." Once they reach the room, Lorry wishes "he had beat it, but . . . turned out the lite and undressed." He gets as "near the edge of the bed as possible, heaping up stealthily in a sort of mound between them the bedspread so that he could get off by himself." But in an echo of Ishmael and Queequeg from *Moby-Dick*, "the dockhand kept backing up against him, as tho to get warm." Lorry "really wanted to get out," but he finds the bed too comfortable to leave. "Suddenly, he started up, the feel of something against him, his body in a sluice of sweat; the dockhand was whining after him, as he jumped into a pair of pants" and ran out the door "like a streak," only to realize that he has put on the Swede's pants instead of his own. "For a moment he thought of going back; but he couldn't put himself in for that" (205–8).

In the context of the cruisey language about sailors, including sailors and soldiers Lorry apparently tries to pick up to share their room for the night, Lorry hesitates before pushing back and forth through the swinging doors to a sexual, racial, and musical borderland, where each anticonventional interest jacks up and metonymically figures the other. There, he thinks that he cannot "dodge" sailors, which tips us off that he wants to dodge them and, finally, at the same time, does not want to dodge them. Nor, since he feels "like a . . . whore," can he resist more or less "soliciting" the dockhand (and hinting at cockhand and dickhand). He stares down the dockhand and then, extending his mixture of desire and hesitation, comes on to him in a coded and hence deniable pickup line, deniable perhaps to himself as well as potentially to readers. After all, Lorry can tell himself, he is just asking for a place to sleep that night. But Lorry can fool himself only so far. He at least half if not wholly knows what he is getting into when he goes off to share the Swede's bed. He may not entirely like all that he seeks and finds there, but he likes fearing what he fears and having it to fear and to refuse. Between Lorry and the dockhand, we can hardly tell who comes out to and solicits whom, until, when Lorry loses his pants and gains the other man's pants in their place, he figuratively exchanges sexualities and becomes what he also runs from. Part of him, therefore, wants the dockhand sexually, while at the same time part of him wants to "beat it" and "get off by himself." The point here

is not the readability of the dockhand's same-sex desire so much as the partly defensive and partly exploratory unreadability of Lorry's desire, both to himself and to readers.

In this 1929 novel, less lies at stake in such a scene than will lie at stake in similar scenes in later works from the middle of the Depression. In *Bottom Dogs*, there is no Depression to throw Lorry out of work. Instead, he quits his job so that he can "boe" and tramp in search of freedom and adventure, and his boeing takes up less than half the novel. He is more akin to the traveling tramps of hobo autobiographies like Jim Tully's once-celebrated but now mostly forgotten *Beggars of Life* (1924) than to the novels of Depression stiffs.[6] Tully, like Lorry, travels through some of the same scenes that populate the poetics of the stiff but with a sense of romance or hard luck rather than a sense of desperation. The pre-Depression hobo traveled by choice, versus the Depression stiff, whose desperate travels represent the unchosen catastrophe of an entire generation.

In the 1925 essay "The Mind of the Hobo," leading sociologist Robert E. Park, drawing on Nels Anderson's study *The Hobo* (1923), saw "the hobo" as a romantically willful creature of wanderlust, enjoying his "artistic temperament" (Park 1925, 160) at the cost of an irresponsible individualism. Park saw hobo life as a choice emerging from a particular temperament, not as something imposed on transients by social conditions that constrained choice. While Park's essay includes valuable insights, the Depression that hit a few years later made it harder to sustain the idea that desperate unemployed transients chose their misery. The portrayal of stiffs in *Waiting for Nothing* and other Depression writings, whatever else it does, offers in effect an argument that the life of the Depression stiff was imposed on stiffs, not chosen by them.

Like the pre-Depression hobos described by Anderson and Park, Dahlberg's Lorry has little difficulty finding jobs as he travels. Even as a hoboing bum, Lorry—like Tully—meets kind responses on a scale far beyond anything the more beleaguered Tom finds in *Waiting for Nothing*. Lorry's hobo vulnerability, such as it is, represents the vulnerability of ostensibly straight hobos as a class and not, like the desperate stiffs in the works I will discuss from the Depression, the vulnerability of a fallen everyman cast to represent, at the least, all ostensibly straight men across class.

In *The Disinherited*, *Hungry Men*, and *Somebody in Boots*, the ostensibly straight stiffs reject overtures from queer men, most circumspectly and briefly in *Hungry Men*. Newly arrived after midnight in another in a series of cities, Acel Stecker, Anderson's stiff in *Hungry Men*, walks the streets looking for the city flophouse. Suddenly, he sees a "youth" "pushing himself erect from the lamppost." "You got a match?" the youth asks. Acel gives him a pack of cigarettes and asks if he knows where the flophouse is. "The cigarette clung to the moist lips of the other and bobbed as he spoke. 'You want to go with me?'" Acel responds, "Go to hell," and there the scene ends (1935, 173).

The youth could merely be offering to lead Acel to the flophouse. But Acel's harsh response tips us off that, rightly or wrongly, Acel reads the offer as a queer proposition, and he takes the proposition as threatening. In that light, the potentially neutral term *youth* emerges, at least in Acel's focalizing mind, as code. The pushing erectness, the eagerly moist lips, the lamppost, and the cigarette and its suggestive bobbing—again in Acel's mind or in the reading of Acel's mind that the book forwards—emerge as phallically suggestive signifiers of queer male desire, and the coding itself comes off as part of the flirting and the come-on. As in *Bottom Dogs*, the information we get and the focalized way the narrative offers it give us less to interpret the interpreted, desiring queer and more to interpret the focalizing interpreter, the fearful but intrigued, ostensibly straight stiff.

After all, "You got a match?" can simply ask for a match, but it is also a classic pickup line. The mooching for a match and Acel's gift of the cigarettes evoke an erotically, phallically charged exchange, as in the famous scene between Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart in the 1944 film version of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. As Lorry swaps pants with the other man, swaps erotically charged metonymies of their desire, so here in *Hungry Men* Acel takes what goes in his own hungry man's mouth and offers it as a gift for the mouth of the sexually hungry other man. By giving the other man his cigarettes he acknowledges the otherness of the man—a man here actually called "the other"—and at the same time he signals his own potential to participate in that otherness. He signals his potential queerness, that is, until, like Lorry's queerness, it looms so closely and recognizably that his fear of it drives him to expel it from his definition of himself. And so Acel speaks the repudiation—"Go to hell"—that reassures him of his separateness from what he now recognizes in the other and, incipiently, in himself.

In *The Disinherited*,

> The bums in the park stretched out on the benches and spread newspapers over their faces to keep out the sun and flies. . . .
>
> Powdered, perfumed and rouged men strolled among the benches and occasionally accosted a bum, offering to take him on a party or buy a bottle. They addressed one another as "Agnes," "Gertrude," or some other feminine name. Often the bums chased the perverts in real or simulated anger, threatening to murder them, less frequently their blandishments were successful. (Conroy 1991, 187–88)

Conroy's brief description ends with a sentence that points in competing directions. It paints the "bums" as angry or as playful, as defending against same-sex desire by trying to expel it, like Acel, or, finally, as embracing it. The harsh language of *perverts* seems free from any effort to recuperate the slur through playful irony. Instead, the harsh term exposes a fearful desire to separate the narration from the queer men it describes. Eventually, though, that fear gives up its control when the paragraph concludes, however briefly, in more receptive tones. The receptive tones defend against the harshness of threatening murder. By dangling from a comma splice (between "them" and "less") that winds the harshness of *perverts* and *murder* into their more receptive opposite at the end of the run-on sentence, the paragraph's concluding nod to accepting the queer men suspends the zeal to expel queerness in an uncategorizable awareness of its own limits.

In *Somebody in Boots*, Cass McKay watches "the unclaimed children of Chicago's tenement-town begging and selling" and hears a not necessarily ostensibly straight "young boy" try to make a queer man, "offering himself to a pervert in front of a cheap hotel" (Algren 1987, 171). Cass, by contrast, grows used to sleeping on park benches. One night in a Chicago park a man stares at him "paternally." "When he spoke Cass saw a warm small mouth; it was rouged and moved roundly; its lips were sweet berries." The man sits beside Cass and plies him with questions:

> "You want a job tonight, sonny? *I'll* give you a *nice* job. Easy. Soft. You know? Soft as sugar-titty. You like sugar-titty, sonny?"
>
> Then he laughed like a girl and gave Cass a long cigarette and moved uneasily nearer, till Cass smelled perfume on the [man's]

> coat and could see white spittle on the little red lips. Cass thought of boys who became slaves to men, and he wanted to run from this man. Yet he dared to make no move, fear wrapped him 'round. . . . About him the lake-fog came creeping alive; the man put one hand about him possessively and with his other hand stroked Cass's thigh. And as he stroked he spoke slowly, in rhythm with his hand.
>
> "Come on, kiddo, you got me now. You'll love it, honest you will. It's fun for you too, and we'll have a drink first, and we'll take a long ride." (81–82)

He waves a $20 bill, a bigger bill than Cass has ever seen. Cass stares at it for a long time, and finally the man loses patience and "abruptly" walks off, "his pearl spats atwinkle in the arc light" (82). Again we see the exchange of a cigarette, this time in the other direction, from the queer man trying to make the ostensibly straight man. Again, as well, in this more lurid scene, we see the eroticized mouth and lips, clichés that go with the cliché false paternalism of the older, twinkling man who tries to make the vulnerable younger man ("sonny"). The queer man offers sex work as a "job" with good pay but also, trying every blandishment he can think of, as pleasure: "You'll love it," he says. "It's fun for you." Meanwhile, the spittle on the man's lips and the creeping fog off Lake Michigan make unsubtle figures of the creepiness that Cass feels in the twinkling queer, and yet Cass does not repudiate the soliciting queer as Acel repudiates the youth by the lamppost. The overabundance of incentives—money, ease, softness, sugar, fun, drink, a long ride—makes it impossible to tell which attractions in the offer make Cass hesitate, impossible not only for readers to know but also for Cass to know about himself. When the queer man gives up and leaves, his departure suspends Cass in possibilities that remain unclaimed but undenied. Such an interpretation of Cass or of the other ostensibly straight characters is not about outing fictional characters. It is not about deciding that Cass, for example, is really gay. Nothing here excludes the heterosexual desire we see elsewhere in Cass. But his being and desire are not reducible to his heterosexuality. Again, the ostensibly straight man has confidence that he can read the queer man as queer, but he has less confidence in his own reading of himself. The queer man's abrupt departure, before Cass can rouse himself to respond to the man's invitation with a yes or a no, suspends Cass in queer possibility outside any knowable binary opposition between straight and gay.

Such moments thread their way through these works without turning into a dominant trend. In *Somebody in Boots* as in *The Disinherited*, the dismissive resort to the word *pervert*, in this case when the "young boy" offers "himself to a pervert in front of a cheap hotel," defends against the memory of Cass's suspended encounter with the man in the park. Three times we see Cass nervously remembering that encounter. The voices he hears as he bums across the country "all came to sound alike to him, as voices sound in rain. Their words were encrusted with a thin film of white spittle, like the spittle on the lips of the pervert in the park" (103). He worries that any of the voices he hears could come from someone whose desires repeat the desires of the man in the park. In short, the man in the park could represent any man, even Cass. Soon, when he steals money and worries over his crime, "strangely now Cass remembered a bill that a man in a park once had shown him; he thought that every one he took now was a twenty" (176). When Cass goes to prison, he watches in horror as Nubby, a tyrannical cellmate, rules over their cellblock by bullying, brutalizing, and raping teenage prisoners. Nubby dubs his prime target Creepy: "We all call him Creepy on account he's my punk" (132). When Cass sees Nubby go "into Creepy's cell," Cass "sweated in terror, remembering the man in the park in Chicago, fearing Nubby as he had feared that man" (134), the man who solicited him amid the "creeping" fog.

In the story of Nubby and his prison brutality, *Somebody in Boots* exposes a pattern of brutal abuse, but by conflating the queer man in the park with the queer and brutal Nubby, it reads queer cruising and queer desire as abusive. Algren's story of Nubby and Creepy is therefore not the queer modernist cruising that Michael Trask (2003) describes as a cross-class validation and merging of class instability and queer sexual instability. But it nevertheless evokes a straight fear of the potential that Trask describes for sexual instability,[7] both within the beleaguered class of Algren's characters and between his characters and the literacy and likely relative prosperity of his novel's readers.

"Onward Christian Soldiers," a 1934 story by Albert Maltz in *New Masses*, offers something more like cross-class cruising. In Maltz's story, which takes its ironic title from a Salvation Army band playing in the background, a prosperous queer man succeeds in picking up a starving stiff, in contrast to the beckoning queers in Kresensky's

poem or most of the queer men propositioning stiffs in *The Disinherited*, *Hungry Men*, and *Somebody in Boots*. Sixteen years later, Maltz went to prison as one of the Hollywood Ten, writers and filmmakers banished from Hollywood for not cooperating with the House Committee on Un-American Activities' investigation into Communist sympathizers in the film industry. In this story from the Depression, which so far as I have seen is not mentioned in any of the criticism about Maltz's writing,[8] Maltz's narrator describes the queer man with revulsion, calling him "the fat man" in a way that makes his fat body imply a culpable prosperity, in contrast to the starving stiff. Thus instead of the appreciation for cross-class cruising that Trask (2003, 108–41) finds in, for example, Hart Crane's impersonal engagements with hobos in *The Bridge* (1930), Maltz's story assumes a voice of working-class revulsion at queer, middle-class sexual appropriation of working-class, male, and precariously heterosexual vulnerability.

The fat man walks the reluctant, crying stiff, "a nice-looking boy" (Maltz 1934, 23), back to the fat man's apartment, promising "stuff to drink," nice clothes, and all he can eat, implicitly in payment for sex (24). Signs loom across the story that the fat man offers his charity only as a way of *making* the stiff. For example, he gives no context for his charity, and he offers the stiff a bath (a coded invitation to take off his clothes in the fat man's apartment). In cynical rather than appreciatively campy tones, we also get such cliché tipoffs of queerness (which signify collectively more than they do individually) as the fat man's "fancy gold-headed cane," "silver cigarette case," and freshly shaved face in the evening. Then we see the disgust of the narrator and his friend Ed, and even the fat man's scorn for the only woman in the story, who is indeed presented as vile. She yells at the fat man, "I know what the hell you're after." Then she pats her breasts and leers and laughs at him, taunting him for his lack of sexual interest in women (23).

At the end of the story, when the fat man and the starving stiff walk off together, the narrator tells us, "I looked at Ed and he looked back at me. I felt like hell. I felt like running out on the streets and committing a murder" (24). In his revulsion at the queer exchange that he has secretly listened to and watched like an obsessed voyeur, the narrator wants to separate himself from queerness by bashing, even murdering, the cruising gay man, a defensive reaction that ends up exposing the fascination with queerness that it tries to deny. He retreats to

the safety of a supposedly asexual stare into the eyes of his buddy Ed, trying to reassure himself that his own same-sex intimacy has no sex in it. He wants to believe that his friendship with Ed offers a bulwark and proof against complicity in sexuality between men.

In a screeching case of mixed signals, *New Masses* published a poem by the lesbian poet Elsa Gidlow immediately beneath Maltz's queer-fearing story. Perhaps an editor, resenting the homophobia in Maltz's story, tried to sabotage it by publishing Gidlow. (Or perhaps an editor tried to sabotage Gidlow by putting her poem next to Maltz's homophobic story.) Gidlow's *On a Grey Thread* from 1923 "may well have been," according to Kenneth Rexroth (1978), "the first book published for general circulation in the United States which contained love poems of woman to women," but this poem, titled "Breadline" (Gidlow 1934), is an eloquent plea for readers to recognize the humanity of starving stiffs, hungry men whose "eyes will haunt" whoever sees them.

For one reader, nevertheless, the lack of a happily straight ending meant that the queer phobia in Maltz's story was not queer-phobic enough. *New Masses* published an outraged letter to the editor by one Barney Conal (1934), who protested not that Maltz's story portrayed a gay man making a straight man, but instead that the narrator and Ed do not rescue the starving stiff from the "rich pervert," since the stiff "is obviously unwilling to take to the fat pederast." Of more relevance, perhaps, Conal insists on the plausibility of such a rescue because, he says, it is "what even any two young street-corner bums will do, if there's a scrap of decency left in them," and he has "seen it done, even by half-drunks" (24). In short, Conal, despite his disturbing letter, testifies to the frequency of two scenes: the scene of queer men and ostensibly straight stiffs making—picking up—each other, and as in *Bottom Dogs*, *The Disinherited*, *Hungry Men*, and *Somebody in Boots*, the reactionary scene of other straight men recoiling from the pickup scene in horror.

Precarious Masculinity and Wanting It Both Ways

All these possibilities come together dramatically in chapter 4 of *Waiting for Nothing*, at least in the US edition. For the English edition, after printing the book the publisher, Constable, went to the extraordinary length of slicing out chapter 4 and replacing it with a note—on blue paper—explaining that the publisher suppressed it for fear of

prosecution. But the note never said what the chapter portrayed that might lead to prosecution. It left readers to suppose that it must be something by definition unspeakable, perhaps "the Love that dare not speak its name," to use the famous phrase from the poem by Lord Alfred Douglas (1896) that was widely understood as a euphemism for gay love. "We have cut out Chapter IV entirely—cut it out with reluctance and with shame." Constable feared it might be "guilty of corrupting youth" if it "left it in," and "that is why *Waiting for Nothing* appears in England in an emasculated form" (Constable and Co. 1986, 274). In effect, Constable confessed that it felt compelled, by some will it claimed was not entirely its own, to castrate the novel.

In the dangerous chapter, Tom sits on a park bench and thinks, as we have seen, "For every queer there is a hundred stiffs to make him" (Kromer 1986b, 46). What then, again, does it mean to "make" a queer? Partly, it has to do with arithmetic. The hundred-to-one ratio of stiffs in the park to queers in the park suggests competition, which implies that making a queer represents a much-desired goal and a considerable accomplishment. The concept of making a queer suggests agency in the maker, as if the queer were not a queer until someone makes him so. But it also suggests the opposite, namely, that someone is selected to be made, to be propositioned, picked up, or seduced, in part because he is already queer. In yet another permutation, it can suggest that the nonqueer who makes the queer actively invites the queer to proposition, pick up, or seduce the maker, which shifts some of the agency to the queer. In that case, the maker is also made and, hence, also made queer. What goes around comes around.

The reversibility makes the arithmetic tricky. "Every other guy," Tom says, "is a queer. The other guy is trying to make her" (47). Every other guy could mean all the other guys. Or it could mean every second guy and thus 50 percent of the guys. But if we follow, or try to follow, the middle-class convention, now wobbling but still familiar, that guys come in two and only two flavors, queer or straight, and if half the guys are queer and the other half are trying to make the queer half, then that makes the other guys queer too, since they actively seek sex with a man. In other words, if we draw a binary opposition between queer and straight, then the straight half, at least as Tom describes it, is trying to make the queer half, but trying to make the queer half makes the straight half queer too. Fifty percent plus 50 percent equals 100 percent, leaving no one left to be straight.[9] And yet

if we follow the older convention that Chauncey (1994) describes, the working-class way that allows for stereotypically masculine men who identify as heterosexual to retain that identification even as they have sex with fairies, then a straight 50 percent can try to make a queer 50 percent without compromising their identity as straight. Tom's peculiar formula, therefore—every other guy is a queer, and the other guy is trying to make her—offers a playfully arithmetical rhetorical figure that captures the pleasure, from one side, and the threat, from another side, of a cultural moment and space where the threat and the pleasure, the queer and the straight, merge and exchange places.

Which takes us to the queer exchange when a "guy" approaches Tom in the park:

> He twists and wiggles with mincing steps. His eyelashes are mascara'd, and his cheeks are rouged. His lips are flaming red with lipstick. He sits down on this bench beside me. He is perfumed plenty, and he smells pretty good.
>
> "Oho," I think, "this guy is queer, and he doesn't care who knows it." (Kromer 1986b, 43)

Again, the queer man approaching the ostensibly straight man opens with the familiar pickup line. "Got a match, deary?" (43), he asks, with "deary" transforming the hard-boiled opener into something campier. Again, as in Maltz's story, he takes out a cigarette case, this time gold instead of silver. And again, he offers the stiff—Tom—a bath at his apartment, adding that his bath has "'mauve tile.' . . . His eyes sparkle when he mentions the bath. He licks his lips." He tests Tom out: "'Sometimes two fellows can have a pretty good time together,' he says. 'Did you ever go out with any fellows?'" (45). He checks a mirror to straighten his lipstick and then says, "Gracious me, . . . I am a total wreck." When they part, after he gives Tom four bits for dinner and they set up a date for later that evening, this man whom Tom refers to as a queer, a fairy, and a pansy says, "Toodle-doo until tonight" (46). In short, from the get-go, Tom knows that he is trade, knows that he is negotiating with a queer man to trade sex for food, a bed, and clothes. Still more, he (and the novelist who shares his name) wants his readers to know that he knows. As Rexroth (1968) put it in a review of *Waiting for Nothing*, Tom is "playing the queers." For Rexroth "playing" ostensibly means taking advantage of, exploiting, "the" queers, playing queer men for food and shelter. But it also blurs into meaning

playacting: pretending to be queer. And pretending to be queer, in turn, can suggest a self-deception, a mask of acting queer and telling yourself that you are straight to cover over being queer and pretending not to be queer. Whichever way or ways we read it, Rexroth takes playing—or making—the queers as a familiar scene in the life of the Depression down-and-out.

When Tom heads to a hash house to spend his four bits on a beef stew, another stiff asks him a question:

> "Did you make her?" this skinny stiff next to me at the counter says.
>
> "Make who?" I say.
>
> "Mrs. Carter," he says. "I see you talkin' to her in the park."
>
> "So her name is Mrs. Carter?" I say. "Sure, I made her for four bits. I got a date for tonight." (Kromer 1986b, 46)

Here again, as in Maltz's story, an unseen bystander watches the queer-straight transaction, spotlighting it as a spectacle of intense interest. But this time the watcher speaks up and models a more approving response. "You are a lucky stiff making Mrs. Carter," he says. "There are plenty of stiffs in this town would give their eye teeth to make Mrs. Carter" (46). By recognizing what he saw and by providing a conventionally feminine name for the gay man, the skinny stiff also defines what he watched as a variation on making a queer. He sees the exchange between a fairy and a conventionally masculine stiff not as an exception, but as routine and even enviable.

Tom recognizes the routine, the ritualized "game" (43, 45) of playing or making a queer man, but he also fears it. "These pansies give me the willies," he thinks, "but I have got to get myself a feed" (44). When they walk off to Mrs. Carter's apartment, he thinks, "It is misery for me to walk on the street with this queer" (48). Once they reach Mrs. Carter's bedroom and she touches his neck, he pulls away. "I am ashamed of all this. I am sick in the stomach, I am so ashamed of all this. What can I do? What I am doing is all I can do. A stiff has got to live" (51). He feels caught between the changing models that Chauncey (1994) describes. On the one hand, as a veteran stiff, he recognizes the working-class model that routinizes sex between conventionally masculine men who identify as heterosexual and conventionally feminine men known as fairies. Following that model, he chooses to go with Mrs. Carter. On the other hand, Tom, who several

times in other chapters remembers with perplexity his middle-class upbringing and education, also seems to believe that his identity as a heterosexual rules out or at least makes revolting the prospect of sex with Mrs. Carter. Indeed, their rendezvous partly follows and partly expands Chauncey's model, since neither of them is working class.

Mrs. Carter sharpens Tom's perplexity by trying to establish him as heterosexual even as she tries to draw him to her bed. "Did you ever have a girl?" Mrs. Carter asks him (44). Tom explains, "You have to have dough to get a girl. . . . If you haven't got any dough, you haven't got any girl" (44). Through dialogue like this, their negotiation slaloms through a series of double entendres. In one sense, Mrs. Carter wants Tom to have had a girl, because she desires him as trade, as a heterosexual man who desires women, and can therefore desire her as a woman. Thus when she says, "A good-looking fellow like you ought to get a girl without any money," she immediately follows by flirtatiously pinching his leg, telling him, in effect, that she is one girl who, unlike most of the other girls, he can get without money (44). In another sense, she does not want him to have or to have had a girl, because she wants him to desire her as a him or as a him who is a her. And in still another sense, all these meanings merge simultaneously despite their supposed contradictions. Implicitly, the contradictions boost the attraction, at least for Mrs. Carter.

And so when she asks him, "Did you ever go out with any fellows?" he responds, "I never did," and then he thinks, "I am lying, but if this queer wants a virgin, that's what he gets" (45). Tom's thoughts imply that he has sold himself to "fellows"—to fairies—before. And in the context of the "willies" he gets from the possibility of selling himself again, his thoughts also tell us that he continues to see himself as a heterosexual who would not ordinarily have sex with men. In that sense, the straight men who have sex with queer men in these works engage, or at least like to think that they engage, in so-called situational homosexuality.

In situational homosexuality (a subset of so-called acquired homosexuality), people who see themselves as straight and find themselves in a same-sex world, such as a prison, a same-sex school, a ship at sea, or arguably the mostly male world of stiffs on the down and out during the Depression, may have sex with someone of their own sex as a way of adapting to unusual limits without changing their supposedly true heterosexual identities.[10] As George Orwell explains in *Down*

and Out in Paris and London (1933), after another desperate man on the down and out "began making homosexual attempts upon me—a nasty experience in a locked, pitch-dark cell," the man "had been so long away from women that he" turned to homosexuality not out of identity but instead out of desperation. "Homosexuality," the man explained to Orwell, "is general among tramps of long standing" (199). Such a man, after "he takes to the road . . . is absolutely without hope of getting a wife, a mistress, or any kind of woman except—very rarely . . .—a prostitute," and therefore, Orwell concludes, "the results of this must be: homosexuality" (276). By calling on the concept of situational homosexuality, we risk too easily propping up a trembling binary opposition between overly separate concepts of straight and queer. We risk denying the overlap or blending of sexualities that depend on each other even when, and perhaps especially when, they see themselves as separate.

On the other hand, to go beyond Chauncey's (1994) model by describing the ostensibly straight stiffs who have sex with other men as engaging in situational homosexuality can help bring out how these stories and poems do far more to portray straight anxieties than to portray queer life or queer characters. They differ, for example, from Hart Crane's poems, as we have seen, and from Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's 1933 novel *The Young and the Evil*, where a wide array of queer characters delight in their queerness, often through stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse that takes readers inside queer characters' thinking.

The stories about stiffs, by contrast, compress their queer characters into a string of clichés seen from the outside. We never get the fat man's worries or anxieties in Maltz's story, and we never get the worries or anxieties of the dockman who takes the straight stiff to his bed in *Bottom Dogs*, the worries and anxieties of the youth with the cigarette in *Hungry Men*, or of the queer men in the parks in *The Disinherited* and *Somebody in Boots*, though in prison Creepy's suffering face smolders with anguish. Kromer's novel goes a good distance farther, if still not all that far, in humanizing its queer characters, instead of reducing them to mere objects of opposition for its straight characters. But apart from Mrs. Carter's and her roommate Gloria's sometimes witty and sometimes worried dialogue, interiority in these works remains the psychic space of heterosexuals. For those reasons, these works are not queer literature in the usual sense of by and about so much as

they act out straight anxieties about queerness and the fragile boundaries of straightness, especially by dramatizing how the Great Depression exposes and intensifies straight and masculine vulnerability.

The straight men sensationalize same-sex desire as a threat, a curiosity, and an attraction or object of voyeuristic interest. Their confidence in the hyper-readability of the queer men as definitively queer evokes the straight men's desire to see the queer men as mirroring the straight men's own sexuality, which they try to see as just as assured and readable as they imagine the queer men's sexuality.[11] But that desire to reduce their own sexuality to its straightness indexes their failure to achieve the confidence they crave. The straight characters' confidence in their knowledge, in their ability to read and understand queerness and queer men, evokes a power they cannot sustain. And when their power slips off the rails, it takes with it their pretense of knowledge. To the extent that they begin to sense that they do not know who the queer men are, they realize that they do not know who they are themselves.

As Tom's thoughts tell us that he continues to see himself as a heterosexual who under ordinary circumstances would not have sex with men, he straddles both sides of the cultural change that Chauncey (1994) describes. He can be a heterosexual, with no interest in sex with men. At the same time, he can be heterosexual trade, a straight guy who has sex with queer guys, if only situationally, through his desperation as a starving stiff who sees no other path to a meal and a bed. Similarly, Mrs. Carter wants Tom to say he likes girls, not fellows. That would make him heterosexual, someone who would not sleep with her, because she is a man. But in another sense, she wants him to sleep with her as a heterosexual sleeping with a woman, or with a fairy, an effeminate "she." (Readers in our own time may see her as transgender, an ahistorical or presentist approach. Here I will hold, more historically, to calling her a fairy.) And in yet another sense, sleeping with her—since she is a man—takes away Tom's mask of heterosexuality and makes him queer like her.

Thus when Tom gets the lowdown on Mrs. Carter's roommate Gloria by asking the skinny stiff, "He queer, too?" the skinny stiff responds by switching pronouns: "Sure, she's queer" (Kromer 1986b, 47). For a while, at least, Tom mostly gets the message. He begins referring to Mrs. Carter as "she," though not consistently. He can still

refer to her as "this guy" who "is in the big dough, all right," and refer to Gloria as "he." But after he describes Gloria as "sprawled on a sky-blue lounge, . . . decked out in a pink negligee . . . edged in gold," crossing her shaved legs and wearing, on one ankle, "a silver bracelet" with "a pink cameo as big as an egg" (48–49), Tom shifts to "she" for both Gloria and Mrs. Carter.

Tom is the only character who appears in more than one chapter, so that we never see or even hear about Mrs. Carter in any other chapter. But the different chapters often parallel each other. Earlier in the novel, in a scene that slipped past the English censors, Tom had already run into a queer man who describes himself as a "girl," anticipating Mrs. Carter. The bulls (the police) arrest Tom for vagrancy. As he waits in jail for his trial, "this guy in the next cell" yells out, "Like your suite, deary?" Tom has no trouble reading "this guy's" sexuality: "He has a squeaky voice. I can see that his eyebrows are plucked. . . . This guy is as queer as they make them." The girlie guy complains that the police "broke up my date. A girl can't even have a decent date without the goddam cops breaking in." With a voice of experience, Tom describes—and explains—what he then sees when another

> guy lying on the bunk gets up and shoves this queer away from the bars. He is a wolf. He does not want this pansy to be talking to me. He is jealous.
>
> "For Christ sake, Florence, sit down so's I can get me some sleep," he says. (26)

Much like Dr. Louis Berg in *Revelations of a Prison Doctor* (1934b), a landmark description of wolves and punks in a New York City prison, published the year before *Waiting for Nothing*, Kromer and his narrator use the slang of hobo and prison male-to-male sexual relations and assume that the slang needs explaining for their audience. Berg not only published his landmark exposé, he also fictionalized it in two novels, *Prison Doctor* (1932) and especially *Prison Nurse* (1934a). Both novels draw on the same language and many of the same examples as *Revelations of a Prison Doctor*. Kromer's portrait matches the world and some—but not all—of the lingo reported (and lamented) by Berg.[12] In language that continues to our own day, Berg describes *punk* as a term for young men, straight or queer, drawn into male-to-male prison couples by predatory, older, tougher, and more experienced men called *wolves*. The wolves follow more conventionally

masculine roles, while the punks follow more conventionally feminine roles, although Berg also notes that many wolves are former punks. We have already seen how Nubby, the prison wolf in Algren's *Somebody in Boots*, explains that they call the boy he abuses "Creepy on account he's my punk" (1987, 132).

Across this jail scene the description of the feminine Florence and her tough-guy wolf shows Kromer's narrator recognizing the same two categories of queer men that Berg describes (and that are now perhaps more familiar to a wider audience than they were when Berg and Kromer published their books), namely, queer men who see themselves as feminine (pansies, in Tom's term) and queer men who see themselves as masculine (wolves). When he describes the wolf's jealous fear that Florence pays Tom too much attention, he signals that others might read Tom as a possible wolf, or perhaps as trade. All these recognitions should help him place Mrs. Carter.

Still, though, when Mrs. Carter gets Tom in her bedroom and begins to touch him and he pulls away, and she asks defensively, "Don't you think I'm pretty?," he says, "Sure, you're pretty. . . . You're a good-looking guy, all right." In response, "she frowns" and says, "I am not a guy," and so Tom tries to adjust. "'Well,' I say, 'you're a good-looking—you're a good-looking girl'" (Kromer 1986b, 51), but he cannot get out the word *girl* without hesitating first, as marked in print by the interrupting dash and the repetition of "you're a good-looking." Tom knows the categories and the possibilities, but he cannot quite settle on a way to make the merry-go-round of gender hold still. Even Mrs. Carter makes a gesture at trying to stabilize their relations, or stabilize the possibility of comfort with instability, by asking a second time, "Did you ever have a girl?" And when Tom repeats—even describing his words as a repetition—that he "used to have a girl. But I haven't any girl now. . . . No dough, no girl," Mrs. Carter says, "I don't want you to have a girl," and then adds, "I want you to stay here" (52). But staying there, with her, means both having a girl and not having a girl at the same time. When Tom finally pulls off his clothes and crawls into bed with Mrs. Carter, they make each other both heterosexual and queer, except to the extent that when they are both heterosexual and queer, then their queerness, by its capaciousness of definition, ends up outpacing their heterosexuality.

Indeed, as determinedly as Tom denies he is queer and insists he is straight, his arithmetical formula corners him in Mrs. Carter's

bedroom. If every second guy is trying to make a queer, then—whether he succeeds at making a queer or not—his efforts bounce back to make a queer of himself. Tom wants it both ways, repeatedly denying queerness and repeatedly unable to keep himself from claiming it. As he walks with Mrs. Carter to her apartment and thinks, "It is misery for me to walk on the street with this queer," he worries about the people who see them together. He hears them laugh and tries "not to pay any attention. . . . Maybe they will think I am queer, too. I'd like to see some bastard accuse me of being queer. The first guy that calls me a pansy, it will be just too bad for that guy. That guy will never call anyone else a pansy." Even as he imagines corroborating his conventional masculinity by punishing some guy for calling him a pansy, his sarcastic crack that he'd *like* to see some bastard accuse him of being queer doubles back on him to speak opposite desires at once: he would despise being called queer, and he would like being called queer.

Here we can draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1998) concept of minoritizing models of queerness, which see queer people as a small subset of the larger population, versus universalizing models of queerness, which see queerness as something in everyone, whether recognized or not. Through his thoughts about what he fears and what he would like, Tom makes queerness other, in a minoritizing model of queerness. At the same time, he universalizes it by denying his own queerness in a form that also asserts it. In making a queer, then, Tom makes himself queer—in varying ways and degrees like the speaker in "50-Cent Flop," Lorry in *Bottom Dogs*, the "bums" in *The Disinherited*, Acel in *Hungry Men*, Cass in *Somebody in Boots*, and the starving stiff in "Onward Christian Soldiers," as well, perhaps, as the two buddies who watch him.

Perhaps the repetition across so many instances indicates a pattern characteristic of the Depression era. And where there are this many examples, there are likely more examples waiting to be noticed or remembered. On the other hand, no critic, to my knowledge, has remarked such a pattern before, and so it could have gone unnoticed for other eras as well. Nevertheless, by reading the pattern through the mass unemployment of the Depression (which would not exactly apply to Kresensky's and Dahlberg's works, from just before the Depression), we can see it as not just a matter of making a queer, or eroticizing begging, or even life on the down and out. It is a matter of

all those things together with the Depression-specific history of ramped-up anxiety about the fragility of conventional models of breadwinning, confident, unwavering, heterosexual, cisgender masculinity. And so when we read all these examples together as a collective portrait, they queer the masses of down-and-out unemployed men whose unloosed gender stirred up a national anxiety of precarious masculinity. The stiff thus emerges as an everyman whose denaturalized gender still trades on the naturalizing of masculinity that lets the "man" in everyman threaten, however presumptuously, to stand in for both men and women and so represent what might lie in wait, as the Depression goes on, for all men and all women.

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Notes

1 See Gold's 1921 "Towards Proletarian Art." Gold continued to develop his argument for proletarian art in many writings. See especially his "Notes of the Month" from 1930. Critics of diverse and often competing persuasions have had much to say about proletarian literature in the United States and elsewhere. See, for example, Murphy 1991; Rabinowitz 1991; Foley 1993; Hapke 1995; Denning 1997, esp. 64–67, 200–58; and Wald 2002. While Gold was perhaps the most persistent US polemicist in these debates, his literary critical polemics, as Murphy (1991, 64–68, 121–34) notes, were not as reflexively formulaic or consistent as many commentators have supposed. On Gold as a left literary intellectual, see especially Bloom 1992 and Wald 2002, 39–70.

2 For a broader discussion of Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing* and the overall poetics of the stiff, including the term *stiff* in comparison to such terms as *tramp*, *hobo*, and *bum*, see Parker 2018. Kromer's novel has not received extensive criticism. For the most extended discussions, see Stott 1976, 36–37, 196–98; Casciato and West 1986; Crawford 1990; Solomon 1996; and Freeman 1998. Briefer discussions include Crouse 1986, 103–8, 161; Ditsky 1988; Hapke 1995, 50–54; and Obropta 1995. See Parker 2018 for contemporary reviews, which were mostly extremely favorable. For readings of US proletarian literature and art as preoccupied with remasculinizing a heterosexual masculinity eventually made yet more vulnerable

by the mass unemployment of the Depression, ranging from Gold's writings to the public art of the New Deal, see Penner 2011, esp. 1–66; and Armengol 2013.

3 People who count such things may have overlooked female transients more often than they overlooked male transients. Even if only 3 percent of unattached transients were women, that represents a huge increase in numbers compared to before the Depression. For these statistics, see Kusmer 2002, 206–7. The literary, journalistic, and sociological writing about unattached transients in the Depression focuses heavily on men.

4 On female prostitutes in US novels from the Depression, see Hapke 1995, 50–58, although her excellent discussion conflates *Waiting for Nothing* and *Hungry Men*.

5 Indeed, Kromer harshly criticized Anderson's *Hungry Men* for making the life of a stiff look too easy. In *Hungry Men*, Kromer (1986a, 237) complained, "you find no Hungry Men."

6 On Tully, see Bauer and Dawidziak 2011. Lennon (2014, esp. 85–104) reads *Beggars of Life* as a communal portrait of hobos, part of a larger hobo resistance to capitalism.

7 For a similar reading of Trask's approach, framed as a criticism of interpreting modernism through a middle-class, consumerist desire to appropriate the lower class, see Jones 2008, 12.

8 Criticism about Maltz's writing includes helpful overviews by Salzman 1978; Robb 1991; and Wald 2007, 76–87. Salzman and Robb provide bibliographies of Maltz's writing but do not include "Onward Christian Soldiers."

9 For statistics, however unreliable, about the proportion of hobos (before the Depression) who identified as "perverts" and the proportion of stiffs (in 1935) who told sociologists that they engaged in "homosexual practices," see Sutherland and Locke 1936, 131; and Chauncey 1994, 397n56. See also Kusmer 2002, 141–43. For an extensively researched account of official and popular worries about "perversion" among hobos—and then during the Depression among unattached male transients, stiffs—see Canaday 2009, 91–134.

10 For the history of Euro-American interpretations of same-sex desire as either situational or congenital and for situational homosexuality in relation to other 1930s US literature, see Kahan 2013.

11 Here my argument about queer unreadability builds off Scott Herring's (2007) different but complementary critique of assumptions about the legibility of queer tramping.

12 For a sampling of parallel accounts of the same and related lingo in hobo or tramp slang, see Tully 1924, 130–32, 216; and Irwin 1931, 110, 151, 152, 196.

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