Illicit Mobility

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Drift Dialectics

This is a book about drift and drifters in their many forms—a book about the ways in which dislocation and disorientation can become phenomena in their own right. In it I sketch at least something of drift's long history, while also situating contemporary drift within the particular economic, social, and cultural dynamics of the present day. In this I also try to show that drift is today a global phenomenon—perhaps even the defining trajectory of a globalized world. Throughout, I explore the contested politics of drift—both the ways in which legal and political authorities work to control drift and drifters and the ways in which drifters and those who embrace drift create their own slippery strategies of resistance. I also trace the use of drift as a conceptual orientation within sociology, criminology, and other disciplines, and I propose that we can bring these and other disciplines into closer engagement with the contemporary world by learning the theoretical and methodological lessons offered by those adrift.

For all that, though, there's something I must admit; you'll see it soon enough in this first chapter anyway. This is the fact that, despite my best efforts to maintain a broad, global perspective on drift, I'm drawn to one particular sort of drift: that undertaken historically by the North American hobo, and in contemporary times by the hobo's bastard descendant, the train-hopping gutter punk. There are a number of reasons for this. First, as has been my habit in other research projects (Ferrell 1996, 2001, 2006), I prefer to do research as independently and

immersively as possible and with as few resources as I can manage—and, based as I am in the United States, it was certainly more feasible to undertake research with North American drifters than it was with, say, Syrian war refugees in Turkey or North Africans crossing the Mediterranean to southern Europe. As will become clear throughout the book, drifting also tends to be highly uncertain and distinctly episodic, so this too necessitated a lengthy, loose research strategy more readily undertaken from my home turf. But really, as long as I'm being honest, it's more than that. It's that the music and culture of hobos, High Plains drifters, blues travelers, and gutter punks are part of who I am and were so long before I began to understand the shadowy links between them. It's the fact that this book was written late in the North American night, with the rumbling thuds and booming train horns of the nearby rail yard echoing through my windows, reminding me of the train hoppers and gutter punks out there rolling through the darkness. Most of all, as I'll explain in chapters 5 and 6, it's because I stumbled into my research with gutter punks and contemporary hobos right in the middle of writing this more general book on drift and drifters. Unintended and unplanned, this accidental association led me to all sorts of historical and contemporary insights regarding drift; it took me beyond my own expectations, to places I otherwise couldn't have found or imagined.

And if that's not drift, I don't know what is.

UNCERTAIN TRAJECTORIES

For those caught up in them, particular historical moments trace distinctly different trajectories across the arc of prospects and perception. Among certain adherents to the mythology of Western modernity, one moment after another has often seemed connected along a straight and ascending line to a better future—a future fulfilled by the insights of science, the convenience of technology, and the satisfactions of material prosperity. Within and against this modernist ascension, fundamentalists have often sought to reverse its trajectory, to return the social order to the past principles of founding fathers and founding documents. Reactionaries all, they push back against what they see as prevailing myths of progress, afraid that, if left unchecked, the social order will move only toward accumulating moral decay. Political revolutionaries often see, or long for, a trajectory that resembles that of a rocket launch—a new social order, blasting free from the old, taking flight, roaring upward toward a firmament of previously unimagined possibility. When,

on the other hand, a social order fails of its own accord, from inside its own rotting contradictions, some find themselves caught in an opposite trajectory, descending quickly and deeply into economic ruin and existential despair; others ride a sad social spiral, a process of circling back time and again on recurring problems, each time a bit farther from their solution; and some, Durkheimians especially, sense a dispersal out from the middle, a centrifugal failure of social bonds and cultural cohesion. From the view of certain non-Western religious and cultural traditions, of course, it might be added that all these trajectories are soundly inconsequential, if not entirely illusory, subsumed as they are within an endless, circling trajectory of time and space reincarnated.

In any case, all such trajectories remain entangled in the messy course of human history and likewise remain contested and compromised in the practice of everyday social life. Because of this, the notion of a historical moment's trajectory is probably most useful when thought of not as some sort of teleological determinism but as a narrative device by which certain stories can be told, or perhaps an analytic metaphor by which certain historical tendencies can be understood. Adopting this more modest sense, I argue here that the present historical moment is tracing a trajectory that is, oddly enough, defined largely by its insistent lack of definition. This is the trajectory of drift. Drift follows neither the straight-line, forward motion of progress nor the stern reversals of fundamentalism. It neither ascends nor descends, and it remains too uncertain a motion to maintain even the circling arc of a spiral. Sometimes drift comes close to the unraveling trajectory of a failed Durkheimian social order—but even here it is uncertain in its uncertainty, since as we shall see, drifters sometimes consider their unsettled circumstances a new sort of social and moral map. Likewise, drift is often the trajectory of the disengaged and the dispossessed—but disengaged from what, dispossessed of what, and on whose terms? Certainly drift suggests some sort of disruption, some degree of spatial and temporal dislocation—yet this in turn implies some degree of certainty, some coordinates of time and space, against which to measure drift's disruptions.

"Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps," C. Wright Mills (1959, 3) said a half century ago, catching as he did something of modern society's overwhelming intrusion into the everyday spheres of lived experience. Today we might say that more and more women and men feel that their lives are an accumulation of radical uncertainties, sensing as they do that they are left to negotiate a world that seems less a series of traps than a series of slippages (Cooper

2014; J. Young 2007). If for Mills and others the defining critical metaphor was the trap, and with it personal trajectories that were stalled out, stuck in the stasis of unexamined assumptions and social inequality, the more useful metaphor today is drift, and with it a scattershot trajectory through assumptions that seem always in the process of fading away, with or without examination. Sometimes the streets are too dead for dreaming; other times there are no sure streets on which to dream, no signposts and no destination, no paths to anywhere. Sometimes you stand still, waiting for your education or your next job or the revolution, but waiting at least for something; sometimes, as Tom Kromer (1935) wrote of his life adrift as an impoverished hobo during the Great Depression, you wander for no reason, on the way to nowhere, while waiting for nothing.

Lives adrift, folks waiting for nothing or on the way to nowhere known—these circumstances circle the world today. A global crisis that interweaves economic inequality and ecological decay with conflicts over immigration, development, and consumption has set these circumstances in motion. Within this crisis drift has come to pervade everyday experience, incorporating both normative and spatial dislocation, resulting from both economic development and economic collapse, and flourishing precisely in those situations meant to contain it. Ongoing civil and transnational warfare continues to spawn swelling refugee populations. Repressive governmental regimes engage in the forced expulsion of dissidents and minority groups—and when these regimes are confronted, even successfully, further dislocation often results. Within China, across Europe, and around the globe, economic migrants wander in search of work, or are simply moved en masse from one work locale to another as economic demands change. In the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, the corporate criminality of the past decade's mortgage/banking crisis, the ongoing destruction of low-cost housing as part of urban redevelopment schemes, and the proliferation of part-time and low-wage service work all conspire to preclude certainties of home, shelter, or destination. Moving from house to house or country to country, sleeping in cars or temporary encampments, haunting streets and train stations, those cut loose from certainty find little in the way of spatial or social stability.

In this world, impoverished Central Americans—many of them unaccompanied minors—risk assault, extortion, and police apprehension to hitch rides through Mexico atop a US-bound freight train, variously known as La Bestia—the Beast—or El Tren de la Muerte—the Death

Train (see Nazario 2006). Sometimes they make it to within sight of the US border but no farther, holing up indefinitely in drainage canals or river beds; other times they drown in the Rio Grande or end up in emergency shelters or US migrant detention centers that mostly resemble jails, waiting to be sent back. Cubans traverse eight Central American countries in their attempts to get to the United States, "in an exodus that some officials have likened to a stampede"; a group of Haitians, part of "an extraordinary wave of Haitian migrants streaming to the U.S.," crosses nine countries, only to find the final border closed (Robles 2016, 8; Semple 2016 A1). Trafficked children and migratory sex workers around the world subsist as perpetual "new arrivals," dislocated both from home communities and new areas of residence; in Italy, nuns intercede on their behalf. Migrants from rural areas pour into sprawling encampments outside Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, and Ulan Bator or find themselves shuttled between one country and the next by political and economic upheaval. Young Arabs find a failure of opportunity and dream of moving abroad. Millions of battered Syrian refugees, remnants of Syria's "lost generation," flood across Europe, some by way of a Norwegian border outpost 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle. African refugees in search of work or safety brave the lawlessness of Libya to crowd rickety boats across the Mediterranean, only to find themselves bounced back and forth between southern European borders—if they are lucky enough to survive the sea crossing in the first place. Other African refugees—a half million, mostly Somalis—languish in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, said to be the world's largest.

In southern Europe, a native-born generation finds that today, even advanced degrees leave them lost between dead-end jobs and unemployment—and so they sleep in their cars, when they are not considering driving them into a wall. Young Portuguese professionals look to relocate to Brazil or Mozambique. In Spain, home evictions leave people on the streets and hungry, so they dig in urban trash bins for food; in the countryside battles erupt over the gleaning of harvest leftovers. Migrants meanwhile storm Spain's North African city of Melilla, desperate to reach a migration center. Italian authorities try to intercept migrant ships that were on a course for Italy and then abandoned by traffickers. Sicilian towns care for arriving migrants and bury those who don't survive—though the Identification and Expulsion Center outside Rome is described as an inhumane prison. In Greece young migrants camp in an abandoned furniture factory, looking to move on toward Northern Europe.

But Northern Europe harbors instabilities of its own. In Germany, a "shadow labor market" of poorly paid temporary workers is now seen as essential to the country's global standing. And as regards refugees, the country confronts an ongoing problem after a recent terrorist attack—"a vexing problem, common in Europe: how to handle hundreds of thousands of virtually stateless wanderers who are either unwilling or unable to return home" (Smale, Gall, and Pianigiani 2016, A1). France puts its own citizens on trial for assisting refugees, and eventually razes the sprawling migrant camp at Calais, from which migrants sought entry into the United Kingdom; evicted Calais migrants now relocate to camps in Paris instead. Meanwhile, even well-educated young people find themselves jobless: French undercover journalist Florence Aubenas (2011) writes *The Night Cleaner,* a bestseller about the existential and social costs of pervasive part-time work. Also in this context the eclectic, unstructured *Nuit Debout* (Night, Standing Up) movement emerges against labor market inequities, and inequities in general.

In Japan—even before the 2011 tsunami and nuclear crisis—almost half of the country's young workers are consigned to temporary, "irregular" jobs amidst a collapsing career structure. Chinese officials announce a plan to move 250 million rural residents into Chinese cities and smaller, newly built towns; some 330,000 "ecological migrants," victims of global warming and other environmental problems, have been moved to fabricated "villages." Already, rural migrant workers make up a third of Beijing's population, and with no place to live, occupy abandoned air-defense tunnels underneath the city. In Beijing and other East Asian cities, other homeless people shelter inside McDonald's restaurants, in the process earning the nickname "McRefugees"; elsewhere in China, gangs of grifters lure isolated, impoverished men into mining work, then murder them so as to collect compensation from mining companies. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group, are confined to governmental camps in Myanmar. Those who manage to leave find themselves abandoned at sea, held for ransom, often unable to find a country that will accept them as refugees. When 3,000 do make it to Malaysia, they find themselves "lost in time"—"our lives are just waiting," says one (quoted in Buckley and Ramzy 2015, A1). Waiting also afflicts the thousands of refugees Australia holds in off-shore island detention centers—as does sexual abuse, ill health, and pervasive despair. Onshore, homeless "gypsy kids" camp illegally near the resort town of Byron Bay, dodging police and hoping to avoid fines for public drinking.

In the Philippines "informal settlers" make up a quarter of Manila's population, with thousands of them living and sleeping among the dead in Manila's North Cemetery; as part of a beautification plan ahead of a regional forum, officials round up and detain the homeless by the hundreds. In post-Soviet, free-market Russia, "the *bomzh*—a homeless person in dirty clothes, begging in the metro underpasses, at churches, lying on park benches or scavenging near train stations—has become omnipresent in Russian cities and towns" (Stephenson 2006, 113). Two hundred thousand civilians flee a Pakistani military campaign in North Waziristan; tens of thousands of Afghans are forced out of Pakistan a year later after a terrorist attack. Israel expels thousands of Sudanese and Eritrean migrants. By 2014, Lebanon has taken in over one million registered Syrian war refugees. A ship filled with five hundred migrants from Gaza sinks off the coast of Malta, after being rammed by another human trafficker's boat. Hundreds of thousands flee the economic collapse in Venezuela, some of them aboard smugglers' boats bound for Curaçao.

Meanwhile, in the United States, migrant farmworkers continue to face family disruption, limited educational opportunities, and deportation (Holmes 2013). Graduate students, part-time instructors, and non-tenure-track instructors, some of them so poor they receive food stamps, now make up three quarters of college faculty The newly homeless and unemployed drift from city to city, sleeping in flood drains beneath the streets of Las Vegas or squatting in the countless Las Vegas houses lost to foreclosure. Others sleep in New York City's Penn Station or become semipermanent residents of cheap mid-American motels (Dum 2016). US national parks fill not with recreational campers but with the down-and-out and the displaced—"Tensions Soar as Drifters Call National Parks Home," headlines the *New York Times* (Healy 2016: A9)—and retirement-age "workcampers" travel in mobile homes and old campers from seasonal job to seasonal job, looking to make late-life money. Amidst all of them drift the shell-shocked, sometimes suicidal veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,

Unsurprisingly, then, Zygmunt Bauman (2002, 343) described refugees, even fifteen years ago, as "perhaps the most rapidly swelling of all the categories of world population," and Saunders (2010, 1, 21) more recently estimated current worldwide rural-to-urban migration as involving "two or three billion humans, perhaps a third of the world's population," with China alone already producing some "150 to 200 million . . . peasants 'floating' between village and city." The United Nations in turn estimates that some sixty million people, the majority of them children,

have now been made refugees by war and other upheavals; in this context it warns of a "lost generation" of children deprived of schooling. With ongoing global warming, other reports suggest, those cast adrift will only increase in number (Chan 2015; Sengupta 2016).

FOUR DIALECTICS OF DRIFT

As suggested by this brief tour of the contemporary world, being cast adrift is no simple matter; it invokes a tangle of switchbacks and uncertainties, a sort of sideways skittering across the surfaces of social life. My attempts to make sense of drift, and to explore its underlying dynamics, have followed a similar course; appropriately enough, they've unfolded as a series of mistakes, hesitations, and reconsiderations, leading me down one wrong road and then another. Through all this intellectual wandering, my sense of drift has taken shape not in a straightforward manner but in terms of contradictions, or perhaps more accurately, dialectics. Time and again, I've discovered in drift dynamics that work against themselves, that run on tension and irony, and that undermine any effort to overcome their essential confusion. The dialectical pairings that follow, then, might be thought of as ways of thinking about a contemporary world adrift, and as an orientation—or disorientation—to the remainder of the book.

Drift Then and Again

In some ways the drift this book explores and theorizes is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon. Pervasive dislocation constitutes a new and immediate problem of astounding magnitude—one brought on by the growing inequities of globalized capital; the collapse of housing and financial markets; population shifts to urban areas; land and water crises associated with global warming; and upheavals in the Middle East, North Africa, North and South America, and elsewhere. In this sense drift is the consequence and condition of late modernity, the price to be paid for the predations of neoliberal social policy, global social inequality, and high-speed social change. "The vertigo of late modernity," Jock Young (2007) calls it—the fear of falling, the dizziness of endless cultural offerings, the sense that the solid foundations of work and community are melting into air. And carrying all this along? The literal dis-location of millions, the spatial disruption of social life, the placeless refugee camps, the migrants always on the move away from one crisis and toward the next.

And yet some scholars concerned with the uncertain dynamics of contemporary social life argue that this widespread dislocation is in fact not a recent aberration spun off from the conventional world of durable certainty. Instead, they argue, it was the period of twentieth-century Fordism—with its regulatory controls, relative stability, and social welfare state—that constituted the exception within the long and chaotic history of modern capitalist development (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Fantone 2007). From this perspective, itinerant labor, unstable career opportunity, and spatial dislocation are not simply dimensions of "late capitalism" or "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000); likewise, a vertiginous sense of disorientation is not only symptomatic of the late modern condition (J. Young 2007). Rather, they are a return to the sort of predatory uncertainty that has long defined capitalism and that was interrupted, briefly and partially, by the decades of Fordism in the United States and Europe.

Widening this view, it might be argued that modernity itself, with its corporate nation-states and perpetual war machines, has produced and continues to produce profound and ongoing dislocation—and with it an endless stream of migrants, refugees, and lost souls—as much as it has produced bureaucratic stability, rationalized labor, and regimes of political power. Certainly, if we look past the masking ideologies of social stability and social progress, there is evidence for all of this—from the aggressive dislocations of early industrial capitalism to the lost generation of World War I, from Soviet collectivized farms to Nazi death trains, from Depression-era drifters in the United States and displaced persons' camps in post–World War II Europe to homeless vets from Vietnam and Iraq. Add to this the moral and intellectual decentering brought about by modernity, and it seems that theorizing drift takes on even greater urgency, as a way of understanding both where we may be heading and where we've been.

In this light it's worth noting that when C. Wright Mills began to develop his metaphor of the trap a half century ago, the trap had already begun to take on an atmosphere of drift. "In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change?" asked Mills (1959, 4). "The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. . . . Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?" Here, at the very historical and geographic apex of Fordist stability,

Mills's sociological seismograph was picking up "earthquakes of change" and echoes of profound moral uncertainty. Likewise, as I will discuss in chapter 2, Gresham Sykes and David Matza ([1957] 2003) began to sense during this same Fordist period that the seemingly stable social order carried within itself the everyday seeds of its own illegitimacy—seeds that could spawn drift and sprout into crime and delinquency. If we understand drift to embody both spatial and normative disorientation, then in normative terms, at least, even Fordism provided at best only a flawed stability, hiding underneath its unifying myths deep currents of uncertainty and unrest. Mills's clangingly gendered language offers another hint as well: however ambiguous and contradictory was the normative order for "men," the trap of uncertainty was worse for women, ethnic minorities, and others excluded from most forms of sanctioned stability.

Thinking in this way about drift as both a historical and a contemporary phenomenon, I've come to reconsider the very dynamics of social order and social disorder, and I've come to realize something else: drift and dislocation constitute a kind of secret history (Marcus 1989) underlying some of North America's most distinctive and evocative cultural forms. For a time, cowboys, trappers, and Native Americans battled over the American frontier, but they shared something, too: a dedication to nomadic living in often violent opposition to settlers of all sorts. "An undertold story in American history," Richard Grant (2003, 126) calls it—this panoply of cowboys, hunters, trappers, and runaways who "went native" by embracing the nomadic ways of Native Americans, and often Native American communities themselves. The historian John Mack Faragher argues that, "the Americans and Indians who lived in these backwoods hunting communities shared a set of general social values," including geographic mobility and "personal freedom and independence"—not to mention a strong dislike for settlers (quoted in Grant 2003, 124). When the residues of this life found their way into music, distinctively American musical forms like country and country blues took shape with the likes of Jimmie Rodgers—the Traveling Brakeman, who sang of leaving, loss, and life a thousand miles from home—and Hank Williams and His Drifting Cowboys. And speaking of distinctively American musical forms: when the Mississippi Delta blues migrated with African Americans up Highway 61 to Chicago, it exploded into an electrified and electrifying sound that would, among other things, lay the sonic foundation for rock and roll. Then there's Route 66, flowing west with displaced Okies and the ghost of Tom

Joad, following the lonesome soundtrack laid down by Woody Guthrie; the Beats, rolling high and lonesome back and forth across the continent; the Hell's Angels, the Comanche nomads of post–World War II America; American film noir, which emerged awash in shadowy currents of moral ambiguity and a vertiginous sense of fate. And all this is not to mention the hobos, an enduring subculture and cultural exemplar of American drift, if ever there was one, and a subculture that will appear, disappear, and reappear throughout this book.

This list offers a couple of clues for thinking about drift as both historical thread and contemporary phenomenon. The first is the way in which drift accelerates as part of one crisis or another. The unfolding conquest of the American frontier, the cataclysms of the American Civil War and the Great Depression, the desperation and disorientation spawned in Europe during and after World War II, the economic and ecological calamities of the present day—such historical moments mix moral and spatial upheavals into earthquakes of change that leave millions refugees from their own past and present. In this sense drift constitutes the consequence, the collateral damage, of historical crisis—but drift also constitutes the lived experience of such crisis, the manner in which people suffer from it but also suffuse it with their own meanings and motivations. And here then is the second clue: in the low moans of the American blues and the lonesome yodels of Jimmie Rodgers, in the dark beauty of film noir and the hardscrabble literature of the Great Depression, we can catch the ways in which drift forces open new ways of thinking and being and forms a fluid countercurrent to the crisis that produces it.

Drift as Dependency and Autonomy

Attending to the music, literature, and cinema of drift—or for that matter simply listening to the accounts of those who wander—two contradictory portraits of drift and drifters emerge. In the first, drifters have forfeited, or been forced to forfeit, the most basic elements of human agency: control of their own bodies, control of the times and spaces they occupy, control even of their own decisions and desires. Cut loose from stabilities of place or community, their victimization surpasses even that of others who suffer discrimination or disempowerment; they are not only dependent on the wills of others but made to be dependent time and again, to abandon even the certainty of their own sad circumstances as they drift from situation to situation. "Looking back at it, it seems to me that I was blown here and there like a dead leaf whipped

about by the autumn winds till at last it finds lodgment in some cozy fence corner," remembered the old hobo and road thief Jack Black ([1926] 2000, 17) in his book *You Can't Win.* And indeed Black and other wanderers couldn't win; they could only lose and then move on from one fence corner or the next to lose once more. In the equation between the individual and society, drifters are in this sense among those individuals most overwhelmed by, and beholden to, the social order of which they are nominally a part; when they survive at all, they survive at the whim of strangers—and lacking stable community or spatial foundation, drifters will assuredly meet only strangers. "Wandering," said the sociologist Georg Simmel ([1908] 1971, 143), could be "considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space." We might say that wanderers are likewise detached from, and serially dependent on, every given social arrangement.

Yet this same detachment can be read in a different way: as radical self-determination, with drifters less victims of the social order than escapees from it. Here drifting becomes an ongoing exercise in autonomy; torn loose from the everyday structures and strictures of a sedentary existence, drifters take charge of their lives in ways that no settled homeowner or successful community stalwart can understand—or endure. "There's nothing nobler than to put up with a few inconveniences like snakes and dust for the sake of absolute freedom," said Jack Kerouac ([1960] 1970, 173) in his mid-twentieth-century ruminations on "the vanishing American hobo"—and for drifters, endured "inconveniences" can also include physical and sexual assault, economic exploitation, and endless exile. Kerouac was himself a sort of cultural hinge, his train hopping and hoboing during the 1940s and 1950s connecting those allegedly vanishing hobos to the Beats, who would soon enough take up the hobo habit of transcontinental wandering. For those hobos and Beats, and for other drifters before and after, their hard-earned and sometimes dangerous status as serial outsiders was understood to bring with it critical insight cut with existential independence. "Where are all these freedoms they talk about?" asks the El Paso Kid, one of the old hobos that Bill Daniel (2008, 91; 2005) came to know while hopping freight trains a couple of decades ago. "'I don't see 'em. You start criticizing and suddenly they wave the flag in your face. You're supposed to shut up. My history goes way back, being a misfit, an outcast, and outsider. 15 years old I jumped my first freight train." Robert, another of the hobos that Daniel (2008, 99; 2005) met, is even more explicit:

They want you to work 35 years then pay a price for it and then you only
got 10 more years to live. That's cold the way things is set up, man, I don't
even believe in this here. They say this country is based on hard work and
integrity and worshipping God. That's a lie. It's built on murder, man. May-
hem, slavery, oppression, lies, stealin' and killin'. That's what it's based on.
And you can't change it after it started. Just stay away from it. Try to get
away from it. Be independent of it. Cause if you try to deal in it, you become
part of it. Stay away from it, you diminish it by one. By one.

Listening to the El Paso Kid and Robert, the equation by which the
social order overwhelms hapless drifters is reversed; instead, drifters'
gritty escapes from the social order are seen to position them above and
beyond it, and to underwrite a resolutely outsider perspective on it.

The question then becomes, to whom is drift a danger? From the first
view, drift produces profound and ongoing danger for drifters them-
selves, as they are serially stripped of their own autonomy, denied their
standing in the social order, and exposed to all manner of exploitation.
Adrift, they are without control over themselves or their situations, left
always vulnerable to the emerging crises of their lives. But from the
second view, drift seems mostly a danger to the social order, and to
those individuals and institutions invested in the stability of current
arrangements—with drifters embodying in their attitudes and in their
ongoing movement a bit too *much* autonomy for the liking of the sed-
entary and their guardians. Of course this tension plays out differently
among different groups of drifters—a young woman fleeing a war zone
may escape it but in so doing engage with a very different sort of drift-
ing vulnerability than does a well-practiced male wanderer traversing a
familiar route—and much of this book attempts to explore these differ-
ences. Yet this tension regularly remains unresolved as well, animating
drift, responses to it, and perceptions of it. As later chapters will show,
for example, legal and political authorities sometimes aim to assist
drifters on the grounds that they have been victimized by their uncertain
circumstances; more often, and even at the same time, the authorities
aim to control drifters and to contain the threat they pose to social sta-
bility and orderly social change.

Part of what determines whether drifters are understood as dependent
victims or autonomous escapees, whether they are seen as unfortunate
folk much like everyone else or outsider threats to social order, is the
issue of planning. At times this is a matter of origins and intent: Did the
Syrian immigrant now confined to a Greek refugee camp plan this as
part of a strategy to enter the European Union, or did she simply find

herself desperate to escape her homeland for any new opportunity? Did the teenager living on the street plan to run away from home, or was she thrown out and thrown away by abusive parents? Of course sociologists would remind us that such questions are seldom so simple. Personal plans are made or left unmade in social situations, in interactions with others who share those situations, and as part of longer trajectories of personal life and social history. And it is just this complexity that takes us beyond the origins of drift to the day-to-day lives of those adrift.

Here I'll admit to one of my own assumptions. Before I began hanging out with drifters, and listening to and reading their accounts, I assumed that such folks were either unable or unwilling to engage in the intentionality of planning—that in fact their unplanned existence defined the nature of drift itself. The fear-swept war refugee and the proudly independent wanderer might lead vastly different lives, I thought, but they surely shared one trait: an absence of planning, whether forced or voluntary. Now, this *can* be the case—as later chapters will show, drift is sometimes embraced as a sort of unplanned politics of liberation—but what I discovered among most drifters was something significantly different. Drifters make plans all the time—but what distinguishes their planning is the unpredictable and often brief trajectory from plan to execution to revised plan. Serially disempowered, susceptible to every new contingency, drifters generally have little time between setting a course and engaging in course corrections. Pick whatever metaphor you like—the sailor constantly tacking and retacking into a strong wind, the surfer continually resetting her course across the face of a monstrous wave—but this is the life of the drifter, dependent on larger forces but intentional in response to them. If "the best laid schemes of mice and men oft go astray," as Robert Burns wrote, then the best-laid schemes of drifters almost *always* go astray—but they are schemes nonetheless, to be recalibrated and reinvented along the way. In chapter 6, a train hopper will be heard to point out, "You've got a general direction, but it doesn't have much glue on it. The plan has equal weight to every new direction that comes along." Echoing the El Paso Kid, Douglas Harper (1982, 153) likewise argues, "The tramp takes none but his own rules seriously and even those are negotiable. . . . The tramp remains free of and unrepentant to a society which he perceives as a set of pressures to conform, to take orders, and to be unadventuresome." Harper in this way links the fluid negotiability of drifters' rules and plans with their status outside conventional society, and if we reverse this link, we can think about yet another sort of dialectical question: perhaps long-term

planning is mostly the privilege and the curse of those with settled lives, stable arrangements, and bureaucratic affiliations; and perhaps for such people—which would of course include city planners, police officials, and economic investors—the necessary ephemerality of drifters' planning seems only haphazard, mindless, and dangerously unpredictable.

Drift Apart, Drift Together

Much of the mythology surrounding drift has to do with "the drifter"— the lone wanderer, isolated from others, moving episodically through one community or another but never fully part of any. You catch a bit of this in the accounts of hobos like the El Paso Kid and Robert. You see it in the title of Jack Kerouac's 1960 book *Lonesome Traveler,* and in his description there of the hobo as being "born of pride, having nothing to do with a community but with himself and other hobos and maybe a dog" (176). You notice it time and again in Jack London's (1907) now century-old recollections of his own tramping days, and his self-promotion as a lone "tramp-royal" able to best not only homeowners and police but all other tramps (see Lennon 2014). And you certainly watch it take shape in the iconography of the free-riding American cowboy and in Hollywood films like *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood 1973), with the drifter who is its lead character lacking even a name by which others might come to know him.

There's more than a little truth to all this; as already seen, some drifters are in fact willing escapees from the confines of conventional community—lonesome travelers indeed—and even those who aren't find that drifting presents some serious impediments to sociality. The spatial instability and ongoing contingency of drift mean that people come and go, wander off, find themselves pulled away by border guards or cops or hunger. The social calculus of such a world can be maddeningly imprecise— a favor may not be returned or a social debt not repaid if the recipient is no longer around to do so—and so in anticipation of this failure, the sorts of mutual obligations that bind many groups and communities may not emerge. The immediacy of plans and their implementation often creates what seems to nondrifters to be only the barest shell of shared enterprise, all but certain to dissolve sooner than later. If we are curious about the dynamics of subcultures, or the limits of community affiliation—or for that matter the most fundamental sociological question of how individuals and groups relate—then drifters in their fluid isolation provide a distinctive sort of test case (see Goldsmith and Brewer 2015).

As before, though, the answer to the sociological question of the drifter seems more dialectical than direct; drifters embody not so much the mythic lone individual as they do a different sort of dynamic linking individual and group. In my experience, drifters do in fact come together but mostly in occasional communities—or perhaps more to the point, communities of occasion. Like drifters themselves, these communities come and go; they are social groups but decidedly unstable ones, a volatile mix of on-the-fly individuals who share spaces and agendas that can evaporate on the spot—or evaporate as the spot is itself abandoned owing to some emerging contingency. In such communities the social calculus tilts toward the individual, even toward the value of individual autonomy and isolation, but with mutual support and assistance as needed. The emotional calculus is distinctive as well, reflecting what I've come to call *intensities of ephemeral association.* After perhaps a few moments of defensive posturing—an understandable strategy among those new to each other and lacking stable markers of social identity— members of these groups seem to accelerate toward acute experiences of social bonding. The long process by which the more sedentary might establish trust and shape other mutual emotions is necessarily compacted; contingencies of time and place, uncertainties as to durability and duration, preclude leisurely negotiations.

Yet even amidst these intensely shared experiences, and as befits the nature of drift and drifters, the free-floating individual remains. Among the hallmarks of tramp life, Douglas Harper (1982, 98, 100–101) found, was a commitment to "retain a constant guard over establishing anything but immediate, uncommitted yet not unserious relationships with others. . . . One lived in the moment; one did not defer gratification; one did not base . . . happiness and satisfaction on the accomplishing of abstract goals." Harper concluded that "this produced both an intensity and a sense of relaxation." Even after many months out hoboing, Ted Conover (1984, 178) likewise found "devastating" the speed with which his relationships with other hobos fell apart, and he concluded that, even when they are together, hobos remained more "partners" than friends. These dynamics also account for a phenomenon that both Harper and Conover experienced, and that I've experienced and heard tales of countless times among drifters: the missing goodbye. A night of hardcore partying, a week of shared survival, a fortnight together in a refugee camp, a month of collective labor . . . and suddenly someone's gone, without explanation or farewell or apology, to be seen again, or not, sometime down the road. Ephemerality shadows

intensity in the lives of drifters, and the equation of individual and community is recalibrated once again.

Early on, I found this all odd, if not a bit off-putting, but then I began to think: by what standards do we measure the social strength or moral validity of community? Must a community be durable to be viable? Or could it be that durability and intensity form the twin poles of community—and more than that, that they form dialectical poles, such that an increase in one tends to decrease the other? Theater performers on tour, new-in-town street musicians, itinerant harvest workers, day laborers, temporary residents of cheap motels (Ferrell 2001; Dum 2016)—all seem particularly adept at making connections with strangers as needed, finding the joy in each other's occasional company, holing up in hotel rooms or alleyways to hit it as hard as they can, and then being on their way. "Fifteen minutes with you, oh, I wouldn't say no," sang the Smiths (Morrissey and Marr 1984)—and how many fifteen-minute moments have I shared with drifters over the past few years, on buses and in bus stations, in and around rail yards, in back-alleys, and back up under shade trees in the summer heat, many of these moments fiercely pleasurable or deeply informative, and all of them over soon enough? More to the point, how many such moments are shared among drifters of all sorts each day? In this sense the world of drift and drifters begins to seem like some loosely shifting social web, the scattered beads for a necklace that never quite gets strung, a world defined neither by isolated individuals nor by stable social groupings but by some amorphous space in between. As later chapters will show, this is of no small consequence; when political authorities or scholarly researchers mistakenly assume that their own models of sedentary stability must surely apply to drifters, problems ensue.

Later chapters will suggest something else as well: that the intense ephemerality of drifters' communities and the fluid flexibility of their planning might offer some important lessons for surviving a contemporary world that is itself increasingly adrift. Forms of human organization and collective behavior flourish or fade in particular historical circumstances; perhaps those forms developed by drifters can provide some hope for progressive change, or at least some tentative models for mutual survival, in the contemporary historical moment of part-time work, pervasive spatial dislocation, and social inequality. The forms of affiliation and intentionality favored by drifters might even provide a corrective of sorts to big data's digital police state and to a social world suffused with surveillance, where the perpetual knowability and

predictability of place and movement are now the primary dangers. Contemporary train hoppers sometimes produce their own little pamphlets and zines, and one of them is titled *Let's Get Lost*. Maybe we should, if only we can. In any case, given the dynamics of the contemporary world, the prevalence of drift doesn't seem to be in question. The only question is *how* we'll drift, and whether we'll drift apart or drift together.

Drift as Hope and Despair

All of this suggests a final, deep-running dialectic regarding drift: its powerful interplay of hope and despair.

For many the despair is undeniable. Especially when the dislocations of drift are enforced by economic ruin or political conflict, the consequences—a sense of abandoned stability and mounting uncertainty, a fear that the future may hold little but hollow hope, a wariness of falling into one downward danger or another—coalesce into a profound sense of living lost in the world. Caught up in such situations, trapped in a refugee camp or a human smuggler's safe house or a factory full of immigrant workers, the sense of "waiting for nothing" echoes from the 1930s and into the present. For those who would cherish a little home and a stable life, then, a drudgerous slog through failure and fear; and for those dislocated from family and community, a tragic experience of emotional alienation. One of the migrant workers interviewed by Lee and Pratt (2011, 225, 232), a migrant employed as a janitor in the United States, who sent money to the children she left behind with her mother in Mexico, makes this clear from the first: "I want to start by saying that I am here, but I did not want to come here. Do you know of any mother who wants to leave their children? I could not find a job in Mexico and I could not afford to send my children to school. Or buy food for my family. My mother was getting weaker. Every day we ate so little—just beans—and that is when I knew I had to cross." And on the occasions when she is able get away from her paying job in the United States for a return visit to Mexico, the family is not restored; instead, the tragedy only deepens. "I feel panic," she says. "I want to be with them in Mexico, but I cannot help them while I am with them." For her and millions of others adrift, spatial and normative dislocation combine to deliver a double blow to one's sense of self; the dispersed geography of drift intertwines with its emotional and cultural disruptions to shape a distinctly painful sort of dislocated isolation. This is drift suffused not

with possibility and adventure but with layer upon layer of loss and sorrow.

Countless such individual and family tragedies circulate in a contemporary world awash in migrants, refugees, homeless and landless populations, and casual workers. As subsequent chapters will document, contemporary drift and its accompanying despair are at the same time tragedies, whose origins extend past the individual and the family and into global substrata of power, domination, and inequality. The damaging potency of these forces lies in their complexity; as with drift itself, they can best be understood in terms of irony and contradiction. The first of these contradictions centers on the economic circumstances of the contemporary global world. The dramatic accumulation of power and profit at the very top of this global economy means that, for more and more people below this top tier, economic insecurity and eventual economic ruin await—and with this ruin, propulsion into lives of dislocation, instability, and despair. In this sense we can outline a simple and perhaps predictable equation, and one that does indeed often apply: economic inequality and economic failure spawn drift. Yet as the following chapters will show, the deformities of the contemporary global economy are such that the opposite is true as well: what now passes for economic growth and economic success also promote drift. In fact, such "successes" are often built on it. Local models of urban revitalization, national models of economic recovery, international models of globalized development—all cast millions of people adrift as surely as economic failure and stagnation. A damnable system indeed: win or lose, the majority of its inhabitants gain mostly spatial and cultural insecurity.

A second underlying contradiction is of particular interest to a criminologist like myself; in fact, criminologists have over the years documented its maddening dynamics in a variety of historical circumstances (Becker 1963; Young 1971). This is the contradiction of law and law enforcement. On the one hand, as subsequent chapters will highlight, the law and its enforcers in Western societies have for centuries criminalized the activities and identities of drifters and vagabonds, constructing them as a social danger and undertaking to halt their alleged disruptions of the social. This is as much the case, and perhaps more the case, today; from the neighborhoods of small cities to the long fronts of international borders, legal and political authorities deploy new statutes and new enforcement strategies in aggressive attempts to halt unregulated movement and transitory occupation. Save for its technological specificities, Jack Kerouac's 1960 consideration of the legal circumstances

behind the "vanishing American hobo" could as well be written in 1880, or 2018:

> They [sheriffs] pick on the first human being they see walking. . . . They just don't know what to do with themselves . . . except pick on anything that moves in the night and in the daytime on anything that seems to be moving independently of gasoline, power, Army or police. I myself was a hobo but I had to give it up around 1956 because of increasing television stories about the abominableness of strangers with packs passing through by themselves independently. . . . There ain't a sheriff or fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you cook a little meal over some burning sticks in the tule brake or the hidden valley or anyplace any more because he has nothing to do but pick on what he sees out there in the landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station. (180–82)

On the other hand, these same sheriffs and fire wardens and border guards—and these same statutes and enforcement strategies—serve to contradict themselves quite thoroughly; as with contemporary economic forces, their apparent successes in policing drifters only cast more and more people adrift. Destabilizing communities by policing them, enforcing spatial and social exclusion along with the law, pushing people from one newly off-limits location to another, the law and its enforcers perpetuate the current generation of vagrants and vagabonds and all but ensure the next one.

Economically and legally, drift's despair doubles down. Achingly personal, existential even in its dislocation of people from their past and future, it is also evidence and consequence of the worst sorts of contemporary social arrangements. If for many people around the world contemporary drift constitutes a hard road without resting place or discernable destination, it's a road built on injustice and inequality and laid out along the lines of the contemporary global crisis.

And yet amidst these desperate circumstances, and as part of them, drift produces distinct sorts of hope, insight, and possibility. To begin with, drift is often defined as precarious and problematic in contrast with what we imagine to be its opposite: satisfying stability of occupation and career, enduring membership in institutional and community life, and long-term acquisition of status and comfort. For more and more people, of course, such stabilities have long since disappeared as viable solutions to a life adrift. But perhaps more to the point, such stabilities continue to mean for many others not satisfaction but the accumulating degradations of demeaning labor, the slow-death entrapment of bureaucratic identity, and the stultifications of traditional family and gender roles. Seen in this

way, social structures that inhibit a drifting existence can seem more like anchors around one's ankles than open avenues toward steady self-realization. Instead of drift denoting despair and social stability signaling the corrective to this despair, then, it may be that contemporary forms of drift and stability *both* spawn despair—but that the despair of drift at least holds out the possibility of changing circumstances. When the solidity of social arrangements is productive and affirming, uncertainty looms as a threat, a bad gamble against the guarantees of day-to-day life. When those arrangements are constraining, or increasingly unworkable, uncertainty can begin to take on the hue of hope.

To consider such matters is of course not to think only about drift and drifters but to consider the nature of contemporary society itself, and beyond that to invoke the whole intellectual history of sociology and sociological criminology. Is a stable capitalist work life a sign of occupational success or, as Karl Marx would have it, more often a marker of ongoing alienation and dehumanization? Is membership in a variety of bureaucratic organizations an essential aspect of community integration or, as for Weber, more a multiplying captivity played out in a series of iron cages? As with Merton, Sykes and Matza, and others, does deviance constitute a drifting away from the social order, or is it more an understandable response to its inherent contradictions? The remainder of the book will try to address such questions, with one theme recurring: the distance that drift puts between the drifter and the social order is often a place of deprivation and despair but also a hard-earned space for critique and imagination.

In a contemporary world suffused with consumerism and its overwhelming ecological consequences—towering landfills, ocean islands of discarded plastic, rampant deforestation, global environmental degradation—drift offers yet another hue of hope (Ferrell 2006). For centuries now, drifters of all sorts have eschewed material possessions and material comfort, learning to make do on less and to practice various forms of radical self-reliance. Again, the dynamic is dialectical: this antimaterialism has emerged as a consequence of and necessity for ongoing, uncertain mobility but also as a cultural orientation underlying and promoting such mobility. The roguish, vagabonding pícaro of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, Cresswell (2011, 243) writes, had "no faith in material possessions and consider[ed] freedom and happiness to be the product of lack of roots and attachment." Concluding his account of traveling with tramps and hobos in the 1970s and 1980s, Harper (1982, 155) likewise recalls a time that he and Carl, a

tramp with whom he was train hopping, spotted a fancy travel trailer being pulled behind a car:

> Carl spoke for all tramps when he said: "Would you like to live like that? They're afraid to sleep on the ground; they'd turn up their noses at the perfectly good food we've been eating—they live for those things and they can't live without them." This kind of independence means both the ability to live with few possessions and it means defining oneself apart from the material things people surround themselves with. . . . It may be easy to idealize or overemphasize this quality of life. But on the other hand tramps exist without most of the props we put between ourselves and our environments, and they laugh at the ends we go to maintain them. I found extremely disconcerting the realization that most of my plans and accommodations were socially constructed and could be easily left behind, and I admired the way the tramps live more directly, more immediately, and with fewer rationalizations.

The material possessions, the "props we put between ourselves and our environments," are of course today far more numerous—and from a drifter's view, far more needlessly consumed—than they were decades or centuries ago. Because of this, the need for a sociological imagination—for an understanding of how consumerist needs and wants are "socially constructed," and might be deconstructed—is ever-more critical as well. In a world pervaded by advertised images and seductive "consumption spaces," such an imagination can be hard to come by—unless, by choice or necessity, one drifts away from those seductions and learns instead the allure of less. Because of this, drifters' long-standing antimaterialist ethos may offer some contemporary environmental understandings and might even harbinger forms of floating sustainability by which the planet can yet be salvaged.

As suggested already, it seems that drift and drifters also put forth the broader possibility for alternative forms of community and epistemology. Throughout the book, this possibility will be explored: the notion that drift itself can constitute a collective common ground, and on this ground can emerge new ways of knowing the world. In the same way that drift is both a historical and contemporary phenomenon, so are its politics; as I'll show in the following chapters, drift has more than once been embraced as a fragile but resilient form of human community, deployed as a strategy for flowing around and beyond existing authority, and celebrated as a process of ongoing spatial enlightenment. Now, as millions drift though a contemporary world of growing social and spatial uncertainty, these politics have come again. Facing the inevitability of dislocation, some head off on their own; others find ways to

recalibrate the need to control and be controlled, to retune their social expectations to shifting circumstances. Left with little that endures, they manage to make situational magic out of structural malaise and so to reimagine the very nature of social order and social change. For them, drift takes shape, not as a failure of determination, but as a determination to fail, a determination to embrace a form of "assertive desertion" (Carlsson 2002) from the built-in inequities of social stability. Consequence of the contemporary crisis, drift can at the same time constitute resistance and alternative to it.

Almost a century ago, the sociologist Robert Park (1928, 882, 887–88) published an essay on migration and marginality. In it, he quoted Carl Bucher's claim that, "every advance in culture commences, so to speak, with a new period of wandering."' Park explained,

> Migration as a social phenomenon . . . may be envisaged in its subjective aspects as manifested in the changed type of personality which it produces. . . . Energies that were formerly controlled by custom and tradition are released. The individual is free for new adventures, but he is more or less without direction and control. . . . The emancipated individual invariably becomes in a certain sense and to a certain degree a cosmopolitan. He learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of the stranger. He acquires, in short, an intellectual bias.

More recently, the philosopher Costica Bradatan (2014, SR12) made a similar argument regarding "the wisdom of the exile." Compensating for the "existential earthquake" that comes with exile, Bradatan argued, is "the greatest of philosophical gifts"—"the insight that the world does not simply exist, but it is something you can dismantle and piece together again, something you can play with, construct, reconstruct and deconstruct. As an exile you learn that the world is a story that can be told in many different ways." Together, Park and Bradatan suggest a radical epistemology of drift, and one that is radically sociological as well—a comparative epistemology by which the drifter, on the move between social settings, comes to see the construction of social convention and to see past it as well. Dislocation and disruption in this way spawn not only desperation but alternative ways of understanding the world, and they produce a kind of free-floating liberation through which new worlds can be imagined and undertaken. In the following chapters I'll explore this dynamic, and I'll propose that this dynamic is both an appropriate subject matter for social inquiry and a way of revitalizing social inquiry itself.