



## REDISCOVERING HOMELESSNESS

In the wee hours of April 25, 1982, two journalists from the *Sacramento Bee* climbed aboard a northbound freight train in search of “the new class of hobo and street person” created by the worst economic recession since the 1930s. Sensing that “something big was happening to America,” reporter Dale Maharidge and photographer Michael Williamson spent the next several months crisscrossing the nation’s industrial heartland as participant observers of the “new underclass.” They traveled by rail, by bus, and by foot. They ate in soup kitchens and, on occasion, from Dumpsters. Like hoboes of old, they took shelter in missions and abandoned buildings, improvising jungle camps when caught between cities. All along the road, they heard hard-luck stories of lost jobs, broken families, and dashed dreams. “The next decade or more seems to be the time of the Out Generation,” the journalists concluded. “It’s the era of the disenfranchised worker, left out of jobs, left out of the system, forgotten.”<sup>1</sup>

Their homes repossessed and workplaces shuttered, the forgotten men and women that Maharidge and Williamson encountered on their journey bore living witness to the betrayals and broken promises of corporate liberalism. The great class bargain of the 1940s, which delivered homeownership and job security to the white working class, lay shattered amidst the declining wages, plant closings, and capital flight of the 1970s and 1980s. While Maharidge and Williamson were gathering their first impressions of a darkening job front, America awoke to a crisis of homelessness unparalleled since the days of the Great Depression. Old skid row refugees, displaced by urban renewal and gentrification, suddenly found themselves outnumbered by legions of newcomers: men, women, and even children pushed to the streets by the lack of affordable housing. By the time the two hoboing journalists landed back home and began col-

lecting their notes, the word "homelessness" had once again entered the nation's lexicon, signifying a problem separate and distinct from that of poverty in general. Indeed, the rediscovery of homelessness in the 1980s did not simply reflect the stunning growth of poverty and the declining fortunes of the American working class since the heyday of the family-wage pact. Rather, the discourse of homelessness was itself part of a larger struggle to represent the new economic and social realities of the era, to cast such abstract problems as faltering economic growth, labor market restructuring, and increased class stratification as the dramatic loss of home.

Not surprisingly, much of the new reporting and commentary on homelessness—and on the alarming developments for which homelessness served as a compelling metonym—drew heavily upon the symbols, icons, rhetoric, and conventions of depression-era social documentary. Maharidge and Williamson's own *Journey to Nowhere*, a gripping account of their time on the road, expressly acknowledges its debt "to all the Farm Security Administration photographers who documented the last depression so well." Recalling Dorothea Lange's portraits of western migrants and the proletarian memoirs of Edward Dahlberg, Tom Kromer, and Woody Guthrie, *Journey to Nowhere* makes frequent allusions to the 1930s in order to highlight the severity of the contemporary crisis, referred to in the book as "the 1980s Depression." The revival of the documentarian idiom also allows Maharidge and Williamson to depict their subjects as faultless victims of economic disaster. Driven to the road by the Rust Bowl of deindustrialization, the forgotten men and women of *Journey to Nowhere* virtually cry out for the kind of state activism that had granted secure jobs, stable homes, and family wages to a previous generation of depression survivors.<sup>2</sup>

To reinforce this message, the book opens in Youngstown, Ohio, where the collapse of the steel industry has transformed a once-vibrant and prosperous community into a combination ghost town and ghetto. Their local host, Joe Marshall, epitomizes the kind of Forgotten Man whom the New Deal order successfully recovered from poverty. Having entered the steel mills at age fifteen, Marshall survived perilous working conditions, bloody labor battles, and combat on the beaches of Normandy in 1944. Upon his discharge from the army, he returned to the mills and built a good life for himself and his family in Youngstown.

The good life, however, eludes Joe Marshall's son, Joe Jr., who followed his father into the mill after graduating from high school. Unemployed since the plant closed three years earlier, young Joe tours the rubble of his former workplace as if in a daze. When Dale Maharidge asks Joe Jr. if he

someday wants a home and family like his father had at his age, the disenfranchised son responds with barely suppressed anger:

"Hell yeah!" he says sharply, leaning forward on a mound of bricks that he punches with his fist, his muscular frame outlined by the jagged Briet Hill Works. "I want that."<sup>3</sup>

In this passage Joe Jr.'s desire for a normative home life, along with his rugged muscularity, testify to his membership among the entitled poor. Unlike the "common tramps," "hobohemians," and "disaffiliated bums" of previous eras, the "new poor" of the 1980s, Maharidge and Williamson suggest, are not wayward, deviant, or subversive. Rather, they merely want to go home.

Like the *National Labor Tribune* of the 1870s and the *Survey Graphic* of the 1930s, *Journey to Nowhere* depicts the experience of becoming homeless in terms of dramatic downward mobility. The book promises to explore "what causes formerly middle-class people to wind up living on the streets."<sup>4</sup> In this case, "middle class" largely means white and male, precisely those people historically empowered to claim the entitlements of full citizenship.

Despite its subtitle, *Journey to Nowhere* offers not so much "a saga of the new underclass" as a narrative of white male betrayal, a glimpse into an emerging crisis of white working-class manhood. Women and nonwhites play only supporting roles in the book, appearing as companions to the native-born white men whose struggles command the authors' primary attention. While almost always present in the missions, boxcars, and bunkhouses depicted in the book, Mexican and African Americans, for example, largely go unnamed and rarely give voice to their experiences of poverty and deprivation. Indeed, the spectacle of white men from the heartland working the fields of California's Central Valley alongside illegal immigrants only serves to augment *Journey to Nowhere's* sense of crisis. Echoing the racial populism that informed coverage of the Okie migrations in the 1930s and 1940s, Maharidge describes his subjects as "a strong breed, survivors, unchristened heroes" who are "too proud for welfare" and cling tenaciously to family breadwinning values even in their destitution (fig. 9.1).<sup>5</sup>

As *Journey to Nowhere's* familiar saga of Forgotten Manhood and entitled whiteness suggests, homelessness in the late twentieth century involved not only an economic crisis of shelter and housing, but also a cultural crisis of race, family, and gender. Like much of the commentary surrounding the "great army of tramps" in the 1870s, exposés of homelessness in the 1980s revealed as much about middle-class social anxieties

as they did about the actual experiences of the poor. Dramatic stories of downward mobility and failed breadwinning arrested the attention of a middle class gripped by the “fear of falling” and grappling with the breakdown of nuclear family life. By casting the experience of becoming poor as a tragic loss of home and a disruption of traditional gender roles, stories of homelessness reaffirmed nuclear family and breadwinning ideals and, in so doing, often won the sympathy of an anxious public.

*Journey to Nowhere*’s latter-day narrative of Forgotten Manhood, however, became harder to sustain when the economic recovery that began in 1983 reclaimed millions of laid-off workers from the unemployment rolls. Despite the recovery, the unsheltered population continued to grow through the 1980s, attracting such widespread concern that homelessness rose rapidly to the top of the nation’s social agenda. As reams of new sociological data began to pour in from streets and shelters across the nation, a new profile of the homeless emerged that differed dramatically from the one supplied by Maharidge and Williamson. Those most devastated by the deindustrialization and job migrations of the 1970s and 1980s were not, as it turns out, skilled white workers who had been propelled to affluence by the postwar family-wage pact. Rather, the hardest hit were peripheral low-wage employees and the chronically unemployed who had never enjoyed the protections of collectively bargained contracts or the privileges of suburban homeownership. Those most likely to become homeless were precisely those excluded from *Journey to Nowhere*, namely, women and nonwhites.

With their ability to arouse pity and inspire protectionist intervention, homeless women, especially those with dependent children, soon replaced Maharidge and Williamson’s Forgotten Men as the most recognizable emblems of homeless victimization. By contrast, homeless black and Hispanic men, who tended to remain on the streets far longer than their female counterparts, raised the specter of an undomesticated and “save-age” masculinity in need of stern control. This dual face of homelessness—“worthy” mothers on the one hand and “unworthy” men of color on the other—governed the most common responses to the crisis: calls for charity and government shelters and demands for police action against panhandlers and squatters.

As in previous eras, homelessness in the late twentieth century marked the limits of the reigning domestic order at the same time that it challenged Americans to redefine and reaffirm the values of home, family, and community. Although the contemporary homeless differ in many respects from their hobohemian and skid row predecessors, they still largely defy the label of “disaffiliation” and, in fact, continue to forge communities

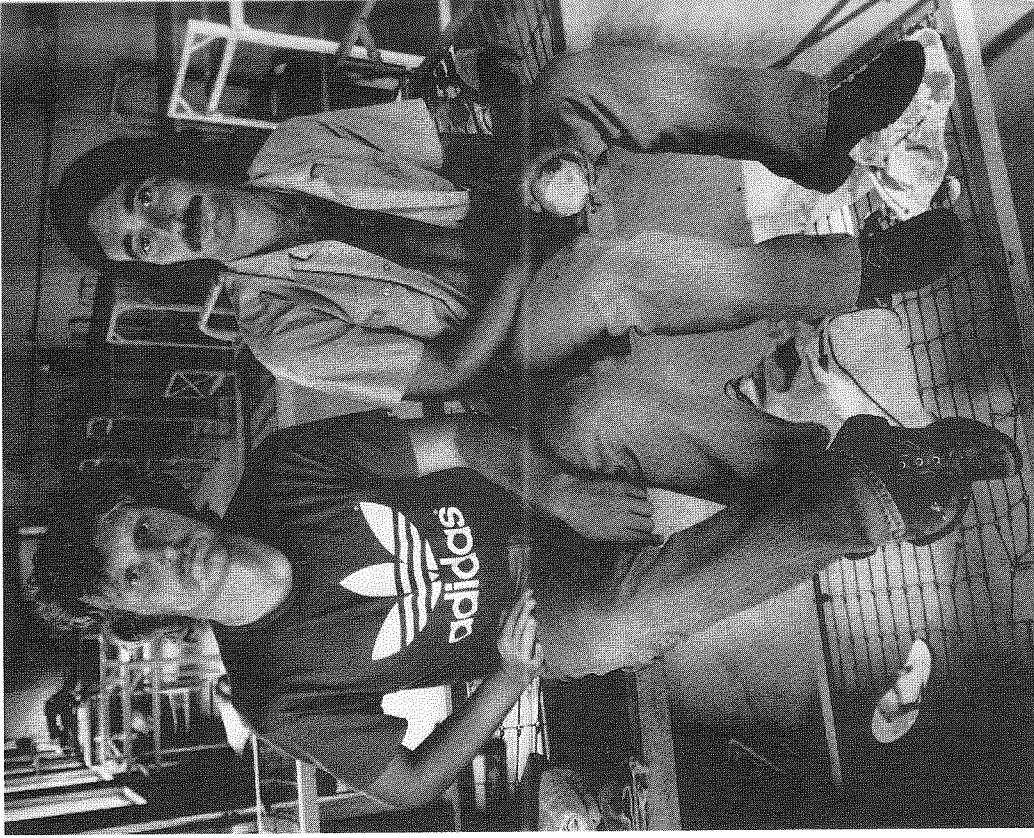


Figure 9.1: Dramatizing the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s in the liberal populist terms of depression-era documentary, Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson’s *Journey to Nowhere* revived the notion of the noble “Citizen Hobo” entitled to the dignities of a family wage. The drawbacks of such a strategy are apparent in this photograph, which foregrounds the plight of two native-born white men thrust into conditions of poverty and exploitation normally reserved for nonwhites, such as the Mexican laborers, not depicted, with whom these men shared their bunkhouse. By the time the book came into print in 1985, a far more severe crisis of homelessness had eclipsed the drama of the jobless hobo, bringing to the foreground those poor women, children, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans largely ignored in *Journey to Nowhere*. Ten years later Bruce Springsteen retold Maharidge and Williamson’s story in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, an album that, like Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* and *Bound for Glory*, stripped the hobo romance of its racial populism. Just as Guthrie refashioned John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* narrative to include the diverse array of poor migrants on the road during the depression, so, too, did Springsteen broaden *Journey to Nowhere*’s vision by foregrounding in his songs the plight of dispossessed Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants. (Used by permission of Michael Williamson.)

even in the absence of permanent shelter. Like hoboes of old, many contemporary street people embrace a counterculture opposed to ideologies of nuclear family life, masculine breadwinning, and the bourgeois work ethic. With these ideals failing to meet the needs or describe the aspirations of many nonhomeless Americans as well, it is clear that the inequalities embodied in homelessness extend far beyond the streets. Imprecise and ideologically loaded as it is, the category of homelessness therefore persists not only as the most visible symptom of larger racial, gender, and class inequalities, but also as an immanent frame of reference for their critical analysis.

### THE NEW HOMELESS

Throughout *Journey to Nowhere's* picaresque adventures through the "new underclass," Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson make little reference to "homelessness," instead identifying their subjects as "hoboes" whose main plight is "joblessness." Indeed, at the time the two journalists hit the road, "homeless" remained merely one of many adjectives used to describe the new poverty. It was not yet a keyword in its own right, signifying a distinct condition, status, or social problem. Throughout the 1970s, for example, the *New York Times Index* did not even list homelessness as a category and instead indexed relevant articles under "vagrancy" and "housing." It was not until after the recession lifted in 1983 when "homeless" displaced "vagrancy" as a classification. Two years later the *Index* dispensed with "vagrancy" altogether. In the realm of electronic media, homelessness made its first appearance in December 1982 when ABC, CBS, and NBC each aired news packages featuring the plight of the "homeless," rather than "street people," during the holidays.<sup>6</sup>

The retrieval of this quaint-sounding Progressive Era term in the early 1980s was largely the work of advocacy groups seeking to call attention to the new experiences of poverty that had emerged during the first term of President Ronald Reagan. While not responsible for the recession that, in fact, helped to seal his election, Reagan vigorously pursued a "supply-side" economic agenda that included a massive defunding of federal social welfare and housing programs at precisely the time when poverty rates were soaring. The issue of homelessness allowed activists to focus their opposition to "Reaganomics" by challenging Reagan's narrative of self-reliant entrepreneurial success with one of declining middle- and working-class fortunes.

*Journey to Nowhere*, itself a savage indictment of Reagan's economic and social agenda, depicts the emergence of this new homeless coun-

ternarrative in its final captioned photograph. Absent throughout the rest of the book, the homeless suddenly appear in the form of three protesters lying in sleeping bags in front of a Sacramento federal building. A sign next to them declares: "2 MILLION AMERICANS HAVE BECOME LITTER ON THE STREETS.—HOMELESSNESS—A NATIONAL DISGRACE."<sup>7</sup> As recession-related stories of middle-class job loss and home foreclosure dwindled after 1983, such demonstrations thrust the burgeoning homelessness crisis into public view, giving a new frame to social anxieties resistant to sanguine forecasts of economic recovery.

Spearheading this consciousness-raising effort was the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), a group of anti-poverty activists and service providers that banded together in the very same month that Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson embarked on their "journey to nowhere." Reminiscent of the National Committee on the Care of the Transient and Homeless, an umbrella organization formed in the 1930s to publicize the transient crisis and lobby for federal action, the NCH sought to prod federal agencies into assuming some of the burdens of relief. Through high-profile demonstrations, loosely organized publicity campaigns, and hearings before Democratic-led congressional subcommittees, NCH members succeeded in propelling homelessness to the fore of public consciousness.

Challenging both old stereotypes about skid row and emerging ones about the urban "underclass," the NCH countered conservative depictions of the urban poor as "unworthy" agents of a "culture of poverty." The underclass, conservatives contended, was itself to blame for its own condition, promoting countercultural habits and values such as laziness, irresponsibility, criminality, and the rejection of family life. By contrast, homeless activists such as the famous Mitch Snyder emphasized the dignity, moral worth, and essential blamelessness of the new poor. Through a "politics of compassion," they transformed the image of deviant "street people" into that of the "homeless," ordinary people down on their luck and therefore deserving of public attention.<sup>8</sup>

In 1983 homeless activists won their first major concession from the Reagan administration, securing \$100 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to fund temporary shelters and services for the homeless. Prompted by the spate of publicity surrounding the issue, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) embarked upon a study of homelessness, releasing a controversial report in May 1984 that downplayed both the severity and size of the problem. Its hastily organized nationwide census counted only 250,000 to 350,000 persons as without shelter on any given night. Instead of laying the issue

