

Puns, Politics, and Pork Chops: The ‘insignificant magnitude’ of T-Bone Slim

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Abstract

Hobos have been idealised for their supposed freedom from social restraints. A notable exception to this romantic tendency was the work of the Finnish-American anarchist newspaper columnist, songwriter and member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), T-Bone Slim (Matt Valentine Huhta). T Bone Slim’s writings were radical interventions in debates around class, labour and exploitation in 1920s and 1930s America. His work was deeply satirical, with a scathing wit reminiscent of Mark Twain. Focussing on his representation of food, fame, and the body, this article argues that Slim’s work represents a challenge to the idealistic portrayal of the hobo that appears in many contemporary autobiographies and in later academic scholarship.

Keywords

T-Bone Slim, Matti Valentinepoika Huhta, hobo, tramp, Industrial Workers of the World, homelessness, working class literature, food, fame, the body, hunger, labour, satire

‘Who was T-Bone Slim and whence came his name?’ (‘Dr. John’ 1999) ¹

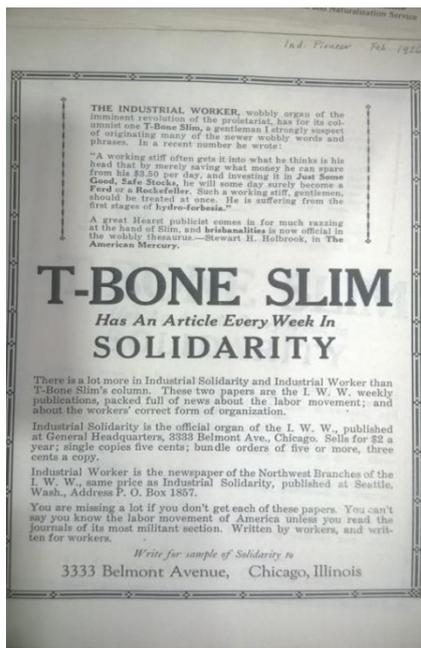


Figure 1 – advert for the *Industrial Pioneer*. ²

On the 15th of May 1942, a corpse was pulled from Pier 9 on New York City's East River. The body was that of 60-year-old Matti Valentinepoika Huhta, a second-generation Finnish-American who had been working for the New York Trap Rock Corporation as the captain of the river barge *Casey*. A committed member of the anarcho-syndicalist union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or 'Wobblies', Huhta was better known under his pen-name T-Bone Slim. From the early 1920s until his death, Slim wrote hundreds of articles for radical newspapers, most commonly *Industrial Worker*, a weekly paper with a circulation of approximately 12, 000 (Anderson 1923 p.191).³ He penned several songs and wrote two longer pamphlets, *The Power of These Two*

¹ This question, which no-one was able to answer, was posted on the 'Traditional Music and Folklore' message board *Mudcat*. The author does not appear to be the well-known singer of the same name.

² *Industrial Pioneer*, February 1926. This image is from the Newberry Library's Franklin Rosemont - T-Bone Slim Research Collection, Box 2, folder 28.

³ Slim also wrote original articles for *Industrial Solidarity* and *One Big Union Monthly*, and his articles were occasionally reprinted in the monthly *Industrial Pioneer* and in the Finnish-language IWW paper *Industrialisti*.

Hands (1922) and *Starving Amidst Too Much* (1923). He was the most famous Wobbly writer in this period: the IWW printed adverts which proudly asserted that ‘T-Bone Slim Has An Article Every Week in *Solidarity*’. So prominent was he that the IWW felt a need to assure readers that ‘There is a lot more in *Industrial Solidarity* and *Industrial Worker* than T-Bone Slim’s columns’ [Figure 1]. According to former IWW member Carl Cowl, ‘people used to buy the *Industrial Worker* [just] to read’ Slim’s columns, which were particularly popular among hobos: ‘You used to hear in the jungles the latest remarks that T-Bone Slim said’ (Cowl 1992 p.21).⁴ His songs were sung in hobo jungles, having being picked up from copies of the *Industrial Worker* or the IWW’s Little Red Songbook.⁵ Labour activist Stan Weir claimed that hobos would write Slim’s phrases onto boxcars, giving his words a physical circulation as those boxcars made their way around the United States (Weir 1992 p.21). Little wonder, then, that fellow Wobbly Harvey O’ Connor referred to Slim as ‘the laureate of the logging camps’ (O’ Connor 2009 p.67).

In 1932, an anonymous poet wrote a dedication that expressed a belief that Slim would be remembered ‘When boxcars are forgotten/As things men live without’ (Anon 14 June 1932). Despite such hopes, Slim’s death went largely unnoticed and his reputation vanished without a trace. It took the *Industrial Worker* a full five months to print an obituary (Anon 24 October 1942).⁶ In the following three quarters of a century, Slim’s name has been forgotten outside of his three most famous songs, ‘The Popular Wobbly’, ‘Mysteries of a Hobo’s Life’, and ‘The Lumber Jack’s Prayer’, though of these only ‘The Popular Wobbly’ has maintained a presence in popular culture, having been recorded by, among others, Pete Seeger (1963), and Candie Carawan, who in 1960 updated the song with Civil Rights-era lyrics. No photograph of Slim has ever been made public, and for 75 years no image of him was thought to exist. Indeed, the current article is the first time that his photographs have been published (see below). This cultural and academic neglect would not have surprised Slim, who wrote frequently about the ideological nature of fame. As this article will show, a lack of traditional literary success was inherent to his political project.

There is no academic scholarship on Slim. As Franklin Rosemont put it, ‘T-Bone Slim won for himself a total exclusion from academic histories and textbooks of American literature, a distinction legions of lesser writers, before or since, have found it nearly impossible to obtain’ (Rosemont 1992 p.7). This is in part the political exclusion of a radical who aimed at nothing less than the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement with the democratic management of the workplace. Such radicalism has often been seen as anathema to art. Critics have agreed with the hobo sociologist Nels Anderson’s comment that ‘Among all these

⁴ Wobbly Frank Lovell recalls that sailors exchanged Slim’s sayings amongst each other. Frank Lovell to Franklin Rosemont, 7 March 1991, Newberry Library, Franklin Rosemont - T-Bone Slim Research Collection, Box 2 Folder 31.

⁵ Slim’s songs were so well known among workers that in 1933 he resisted, like many songwriters after him, performing his greatest hit on stage: ‘Hoping to capitalize on lingering IWW sentiment among seaman, [Al] Lannon set up an open-air meeting at Thames and Broadway featuring T-Bone Slim. Lannon gave the singer a big introduction, expecting the singer to open with his well-known ‘Popular Wobbly.’ T-Bone Slim began yelling at the crowd about ‘those fuckin’ bastards down in Alabama’ who had framed the Scottsboro Boys. An embarrassed Lannon hustled the living legend away from the microphone.’ (Lannon 1999 pp.45-46). Slim’s anger at the racial injustice of the Scottsboro case is notable at a time when many white hobo writers subscribed to ideas of racial supremacy.

⁶ The most likely reason for the delay is that his comrades were accustomed to Slim disappearing, as many transient workers would, for months on end, only to reappear some time later. This article revealed Slim’s real name in public for the first time. Slim’s obituary also appeared in the Hungarian-American IWW paper *Bèrmunkas* on 31 October 1942: see Newberry Library, Franklin Rosemont - T-Bone Slim Research Collection, Box 1, folder 27.

contributors to the radical publications, there are few who might produce literature...They prefer to ride a hobby and repeat familiar formulas' (Anderson 1923 p.193). Scholars often exclude explicitly politicised writing from the canon by categorising it as propaganda. However, this does not fully explain Slim's academic neglect, since other political writers, such as John Steinbeck, have made it into the canon of American Literature, while the IWW's Joe Hill is remembered as a canonical political songwriter. Here I propose three further reasons for his neglect. First, Slim's reputation suffered because of his association with the IWW during a period of decline between the 1920s and 1940s. This phase of Wobbly history, one of government repression, internal splits over the Russian Revolution, and falling membership, is less romantic than the pre-WWI heyday, which contained notable victories such as the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike (known as the 'Bread and Roses' strike) and the 1913 Patterson Silk Strike. Second, Slim died an obscure and probably accidental death, unlike Joe Hill's famous martyrdom, which became a cause célèbre for the IWW and the Left more generally. Third, Slim's prose writings have not been reprinted in full since they were first published as newspaper columns, and his largest archive of notes covering the period 1934-1942 was in private hands until very recently.

During his years of obscurity, Slim's torch was kept alive through the efforts of the surrealist poet Franklin Rosemont, who produced a selected edition entitled *Juice is Stranger Than Friction* (1992), and whose introduction to that book represents the only published biography of Slim. In 1962, along with his wife and fellow poet Penelope Rosemont, Franklin came into possession of Slim's notebooks.⁷ He reproduced some of these writings in *Juice*, although significant portions remain unpublished. In 2016, Penelope alerted me to the fact that the archive, which includes the notebooks, newspaper articles and photographs, was up for sale, and I in turn alerted the Newberry Library, which made the purchase and then digitised Slim's notebooks. Following this I was contacted by the musician John Westmoreland, Slim's Great Grandnephew, whose family possesses a second archive of manuscript notes, letters and photographs.⁸ Since more of Slim's writings are now coming to light, there is an opportunity for a rediscovery and re-evaluation of the 'laureate of the logging camps'.⁹ The current article is the first attempt by any scholar to do so. It is my hope that this piece will spark interest in one of America's most talented and overlooked writers, and that Slim can finally take his place in American literary history.

The details of Slim's life are sketchy. A quiet and apparently shy man, he kept a low profile and only occasionally revealed his identity as T-Bone Slim to friends and fellow workers, many of whom knew him as Matt Huhta.¹⁰ His columns reveal someone who had been a transient worker and who was familiar with manual jobs including lumberjack, gandydancer¹¹, and barge captain, as well as riding freight trains and performing harvest labour in the American West and Mid-West. Before Slim adopted this hobo life he had lived for 10 years with his wife, Rosa,

⁷ Slim left these notebooks with Walter Westmann at the IWW headquarters in Chicago. It is likely that this was during the 1920s, a period in which Slim lived in Chicago for some time. My thanks to Penelope Rosemont for explaining the notebooks' provenance.

⁸ John and Cherie Westmoreland are also conducting research into Slim's life, family connections, and songs. I am deeply grateful to them for their insight and generosity (and pie). John will soon produce an album featuring many of Slim's unrecorded songs. For more, see: <https://www.johnwestmorelandmusic.com/t-bone-slim>.

⁹ The Manuscript Notes cited in this article are from the Newberry collection, but the Westmoreland archive has provided invaluable and previously unknown information, including Slim's age at the time of his death, which is stated in print for the first time at the opening of this article.

¹⁰ He was friends with the prominent black Wobbly Ben Fletcher. According to Anatole Dolgoff, the pair 'loved 'to chew the fat' at the Old Hall on Coenties Slip' in New York's docklands (Dolgoff 2016 p.237).

¹¹ A slang term for a railroad worker.

whom he married in 1902 and with whom he had four children. He left his family in 1912 for a life on the road, and was divorced in 1915. While Rosemont claims that Slim did not see his family again (*Juice* p.7-33), material in the Westmoreland archive shows that he continued to write to his family, sent and asked for money, and occasionally visited them in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Unjustly neglected, Slim's work challenged the mainstream stereotype of hobos and tramps as brutish through wit and a verbal dexterity that assumed intelligence in his transient audience. As this article will demonstrate, he used puns, neologisms and dynamic wordplay as an alternative to bourgeois language that he saw as providing cover for class exploitation by encouraging reader and worker passivity. Slim's style asked readers to be active participants; his prose embodied a literary anarchism that encouraged the individual to play an active role in the process of making meaning. In addition, he cultivated a persona that played with established notions of fame, power and success, in order to undermine the individualistic concept of greatness. Finally, Slim's persona was unlike that of other literary celebrities in that he repeatedly brought his body — and the bodies of his readers — into his work, particularly through his representation of hunger. He portrayed the class struggle as a conflict over care for the body, especially in terms of who gets to eat the best food.

I will first analyse Slim's use of language, which he represents as creating something original from the stale morass of bourgeois vocabulary. A political revolution, he implies, needs new words and phrases. Unlike the literary modernists, however, who tended to be middle-class and politically reactionary, Slim's language would be accessible to, and indeed built from, the experiences of the working class. Slim termed his innovative literary style 'coagulated verbosity' (Slim 14 March 1923).¹²

Culture and Language: T-Bone Slim's 'coagulated verbosity'

Slim represented language as a crucial element of class struggle. In contrast to a bourgeois language that sought to numb, divide and exclude workers, he fashioned a working-class form of writing that was accessible, verbally innovative, and which asked readers to participate in the project of making meaning. For example, in passages reminiscent of Ambrose Bierce's *The Cynic's Word Book* (1906), Slim provides alternative dictionary definitions of words that seem harmless but actually hold significant ideological weight:

Profit: The price ignorance pays greed for the privilege of starving in a world of plenty.
Tear gas: The most effective agent used by employers to persuade their employees that the interests of Capital and Labor are identical.
Charity: Throwing a life-preserver into a drowned man's coffin. (Slim 1992 pp.154-155)

These definitions ask readers to look again at everyday terms in order to see their true appearance as linguistic weapons in a war against the workers. Slim's defamiliarisation of profit and charity frames them, in negative terms, as part of an exploitative system that provides the working class with starvation wages and then hands them a small and ineffective salve in the form of handouts. His reference to 'ignorance' suggests that it is the false consciousness of the workers in not opposing the profit system that enables their exploitation. His pithy

¹² Aside from those reprinted from *Juice is Stranger Than Friction* (1992), all *Industrial Worker* references are taken from the Newberry Library's T-Bone Slim Research Collection.

description seeks to introduce these workers to the concept of surplus labour. In a different way, his definition of tear gas is aimed not at tear gas itself, but at the widely-accepted notion that ‘the interests of Capital and Labor are identical’. He implies that workers who refuse to accept this idea are met with violence, euphemistically termed as persuasion, and forced to submit. As the rest of this section will show, Slim used puns, neologisms, colloquialisms, and irony to encourage his audience to become active participants in the process of reading and, from there, in revolution.

Commenting on his inability to read an Argentinian newspaper, Slim remarks ‘strange, isn’t it, how words are meaningless unless given interpretation by the reader?’ (Slim 22 December 1923). This apparently innocuous rhetorical question encapsulates his literary approach: Slim seeks to make his audience into active readers through innovative wordplay and the defamiliarisation of everyday language. His most common technique to achieve this goal is by combining old words into new. Occasionally these neologisms were made for the simple pleasure of play, but more typically they had an explicit political message. For instance, he refers to the wealth created by workers as their ‘perspirety’, emphasising the sweat that labourers translate into capital and the fact that workers do not, in fact, become prosperous through their manual work (Slim 1992 p.68). Money, he states, was invented by the ‘phoneyseions’, combining ‘phoney’ and ‘phoenicians’ to indicate the fetishistic quality of money (Slim MS Notes, n.d). In one of several attacks that he makes on mainstream newspapers, Slim terms their main banner ‘*headlies*’ (Slim 1992 p.96; italics in original), while his most famous neologism, ‘brisbanality’, was a term used to describe the writings of the conservative Hearst newspaper columnist Arthur Brisbane (Slim 11 January 1928).¹³ Though many of his neologisms are funny, occasionally Slim combines words to invite pathos, as when he refers to the despair created by homelessness as ‘vagadespondia’, which is a playful rebuke to the bohemianism of the term ‘vagabondia’ as used by the writers Francis Hodgson Burnett, Bliss Carmen and Richard Hovey (Slim MS Notes n.d). Whether aimed at generating a smile or a sigh, Slim’s neologisms asked readers to combine the ideas inherent in two otherwise separate words. This technique required the active participation of his audience in order to create meaning.

In addition to the single-word neologisms that are scattered through his writings, Slim makes extended plays on words that push their meanings to the limits of logic. For example, in critiquing a mainstream newspaper’s claim that ‘abundance means prosperity’, Slim writes: Bring out your best type, Stumpy... We’ll close debate. Never has there been a shortage of abundance in these United States. Rather, it has been a case of too much abundance—and ‘too much’ is not ‘enough’. Too much is too much (just what it says) and enough is less than too much. Too much is more than enough and enough is never too much. Sufficiency isn’t too much, but it is enough, so you can see yourself, enough is enough and too much is too much. Abundance is too much and not enough: hence it is a very ambiguous quantity to monkey with. Better stick to sufficiency—be it ever so elegant. (Slim 13 October 1923).

This passage mostly consists of straightforward statements, such as ‘enough is less than too much’, that define words and phrases. However, as these statements accumulate the effect is to question their overall meaning, even while their standard denotations remain. The self-evidence of ‘Never has there been a shortage of abundance’ and the redundancy of ‘it has been a case of too much abundance’ combine to put the word ‘abundance’ through a dialectical process that

¹³ This was published under the name ‘No 198308’ which was, according to Rosemont, Slim’s IWW card number. I have not been able to verify that this was Slim’s number.

implicitly parallels Karl Marx's critique of capitalist accumulation. At the end of this process the word itself has become something new: 'Abundance is too much and not enough'. The paradox of capitalist abundance is that it simultaneously provides 'too much' for the bourgeois class and 'not enough' for the working class, meaning that it 'is a very ambiguous quantity to monkey with'. Slim translates dialectical materialism into comically absurdist language that aims to be accessible while not losing complexity. The slang phrase 'to monkey with' reminds readers of Slim's working-class background and indicates that they, too, can realise the absurdity of starving amidst too much, to adopt the title of his pamphlet on the food industry. This combination of working-class dialect and absurdist wordplay is characteristic of Slim's writing.

The directness of Slim's language was a vital part of his political philosophy. Since his anarchism depended upon a vision of labourers organising society without the direction of political leaders, he had to use words that were comprehensible to the working class. This was, he felt, in contrast to socialists and communists, whose vocabulary was aimed at an educated vanguard who would lead the workers. One article picks up on a phrase used by this leftwing intelligentsia: "'Coordination of collective action,' is the big word Harvard boys hung onto the neck of the One Big Union. You've got to be almost a contortionist to say it. However, it means the same as 'Scat, capitalism'" (Slim 5 April 1941). For Slim, 'Scat, capitalism' is the superior phrase, since it requires no linguistic contortions or, presumably, an Ivy-League education to be understood. He privileges brevity and, like Oscar Wilde, utilises the aphoristic mode as the most succinct means to convey complex ideas. These include 'I don't believe there is necessity for a news censor. Editors have been very careful not to let any news get into the papers', and 'Only the poor break laws—the rich evade them' (Slim 199, pp.153-156). Having given one of his many pithy aphorisms, he remarks 'Many have strove (striven) to say that and failed—else it took a column, or half a day, or a ton of words' (Slim 21 May 1927). As well as brevity, Slim's style is characterised by colloquialisms, such as 'infernal bow-wows', 'wishing ain't ketching any fishes' and 'mebbe' (Slim 1992 p.35, p.46 & p.119). Speaking directly and in working class dialect makes Slim's work accessible, and it allows him to experiment with a variety of styles in a manner that is more typically associated with literary modernism than the radical or labour press.

In contrast to the realist style common among IWW and proletarian writers, Slim's experimentation moved beyond the bounds of realism into what Rosemont described as proto-surrealism (Rosemont 1992 pp.29-31). For example, one article consists of a dialogue between Slim and a stone in a prison wall, who tells him 'I'm in this wall until everybody gets the full product of their toil' (Slim 30 April 1924). In another column he attempts to 'yawn in print', reproducing it as 'etaoinshrdlu ?x!!oo**!?' (Slim 1992 p.106). He plays with language in fantastical ways, and shows his awareness of, and difference from, the literary modernists. In 'Don't Bomp Your Bomp', he discusses the importance of workers increasing their wages faster than the rate of inflation:

If the cost of living *yomps* every time your wages *yomp*, keep on yomping. Don't *yomp* your *yob*. Yomp your wages—and remember, the last yomp is best. He who yomps last yomps the farthest. But when you yomp, be careful not to bomp your bomp. If you bomp your bomp, it will raise a lomp on your bomp, and the bomp will thomp like a full-grown momp. You will gradually then slomp into the bomp, and the 'gomp' will notice your homp, curved like a cast-iron handle of a pomp. And you're a chomp—a dry-rot stomp in the clomp of everygreen—omp!

...(Pretty jazzy, Ed—a fist full of rhymes for the rising generation of poets.)

(Slim 13 Oct 1923)

In a manner approaching the infamous literary style of Gertrude Stein, Slim's accumulated rhymes parody the literary modernists, perhaps specifically jazz poets, whom he refers to as 'the rising generation of poets'. Yet the article also indicates Slim's similarity to this rising generation, particularly his ability to use words in ways that go beyond the utilitarianism of capitalistic managerial discourse. There is no biographical evidence that Slim read Stein or other modernists, but his awareness of modernism nevertheless seems clear. In making this brief reference to his relationship to more mainstream experimental poets, he indicates the persona that he adopted throughout his career as a writer for the radical papers. As the following section will discuss, this persona was of a writer who was, paradoxically, famous and unknown, powerful and powerless, successful and yet, in traditional terms, a failure. He positions his fame as being tied to revolution, and in doing so indicates that his greatness in the literary realm depends upon what his readership can achieve in the realm of politics.

[S]images



Figure 2 – Slim's trademark image, which appeared at the head of most of his columns.¹⁴



Figure 3 – a one-off cartoon that utilised Slim's trademark image.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Industrial Worker*, 6 February 1924.

¹⁵ *Industrial Worker*, 28 April 1922. Note the use of a T-bone that is about to be used to hang the capitalist. My thanks to Renée Ward for pointing out this important detail.



Figure 4 – a photograph of Slim in his early twenties.



Figure 5 – a photograph of Slim with Rosa Huhta, circa 1906.¹⁶

¹⁶ These photographs, which are from the Newberry Library's Rosemont Collection, were taken before Slim became a hobo. I estimate that Figure 4 was taken around 1904 and that Figure 5 dates from around 1906. They were most likely taken in a photographic studio in Erie, Pennsylvania, which is where the Huhta family were living during this period. Future research could attempt to identify this studio. My thanks to the Newberry Library for reproducing these images.

‘T-Bone The Great’: Slim’s Representation of Fame, Power and Success

Matt Huhta’s persona, encapsulated under the hobo moniker ‘T-Bone Slim’, was the Wobbly newspapers’ most successful brand. Like all brands, it had a trademark (but not trademarked) image. Slim’s articles were typically accompanied by a cartoon drawing of a man with hair sticking up at the front of his head like devil horns and eating a T-bone steak [Figures 2 and 3]. The image bears some resemblance to extant photographs of Slim, which are published here for the first time [Figures 4-5], although this resemblance is somewhat obscured by Slim’s youth.¹⁷ More importantly, the cartoon encapsulated the twin qualities of rebelliousness and hunger that were key to the Slim persona. As already noted, Slim was well known among radicals and hobos. Yet he was aware that this fame existed only within the circle of those who read Wobbly newspapers. He was well-known and obscure, a paradoxical situation that he folded into his persona through frequent comments on the nature of fame. As I will now show, he built an alternative concept of literary success that depended not only on his power as a writer but also on the ability of the working class to build a new society. Slim wedded his personal literary success to hope for a forthcoming revolution. In the absence of such a revolution, fame would not be worth having.

Slim asserted his fame in terms that were reminiscent of Walt Whitman, but unlike Whitman, Slim’s bombast was ironic. He uses a variety of self-aggrandising phrases, including ‘T-Bone The Great’ (Slim 29 July 1926), ‘the lustrous T-Bone Slim’ (Slim 22 Sept 1926), and ‘I, T-bone Slim, (elegant humorist and clean as hounds’ tooth)’ (Slim MS Notes n.d). This ironic self-aggrandising is further undercut by the context of the articles in which it appears. For example, he refers to himself as ‘I, even I, the inimitable immaculate T-Bone Slim’, in an column in which he is forced to get a job as a dishwasher — or rather, as he puts it, to ‘emancipate’ his future boss ‘from the drudgery of the sink’ (Slim 1992 p.43). The trivial everydayness of this situation contradicts the deliberate pomposity of Slim’s phrasing. Similarly, he notes that there is a movement to buy Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home, in order to preserve it for the nation, and he asks ‘Wouldn’t it be a graceful deed if the I. W. W would purchase one of Fegg Bros’ boarding cars (the home of T-Bone Slim)...as a perpetual memorial...By the way, again—I request this be done after I am hung’ (Slim 20 May 1922). The image of the IWW buying a boxcar for posterity is humorous in its incongruity. It highlights the difference between a historic and mainstream American hero, Jefferson, who lived in a mansion, and Slim, a prominent Wobbly, who has no permanent home. The reference to Slim being hanged indicates that he is aware of the fate of Wobbly heroes, which is in contrast to that of Jefferson, who was able to die peacefully in his sleep surrounded by family (and his slaves, some of whom were also family). The difference between the two men’s fates comes down to Slim’s radical, proletarian politics.

Slim makes this latter point explicit in an article in which he contemplates his lack of mainstream success. He asks ‘a man’ if he ‘knows T-Bone Slim’, to which the man replies “No thanks, I’m just after biting on one”. After some prompting, the man ‘brightens up’ and says that he does know Slim, who he describes as a “tramp lineman”, to which the author adds the sardonic comment, ‘such is fame’. Slim then imagines what would happen if he were to change his political positions:

¹⁷ The resemblance is clearer in three later photographs of Slim that are held in the Westmoreland archive.

Now, if I were to say, 'No man has the right to advocate slowing down on the job,' the *Literary Template*, the *Independent Prevaricator* and the *Miscellaneous Mandrell* would carry extra special supplements in rainbow colors, announcing to the palpitating world that 'our T-Bone Slim, 140 per cent American, once a poor boy, has now conquered the literary world (single-handed) and stands today at the peak of his profession in the full glare of the envious eyes of such great writers as H. G. Wells and H. Bell Wright.' T-Bone Slim, the giant of letters, in answer to the question, 'Well, what do you say?' replied, 'Save your syllables and the sentences will do the rest.' Yes, if I said no man should advocate slowing down, they would name their cigars and their streets after me. (Slim 1992 pp.62-3).

The passage parodies mainstream literary magazines, here given comic names, who raise authors up to the level of geniuses only if they advocate certain political positions. Slim writes in the style of one of these magazines by positioning his alternative, more mainstream self in the mould of a rags-to-riches success story, one that would fit comfortably into hegemonic understandings of the American Dream. The inanity of such magazines is clear from the generality of the reporter's question, 'Well, what do you say?', which is matched by Slim's inane reply 'Save your syllables and the sentences will do the rest', a nonsensical, Ben Franklinesque response that is given an air of profundity by its position in a literary magazine. Slim concludes the piece by refusing to advocate Taylorite work methods, concluding 'Woe is me—no rainbow supplements' (Slim 1992 p.63). Not prepared to betray his politics, he understands that mainstream literary success will always elude him. Moreover, he mistrusts fame under capitalism since, as in the example just cited, it leads to the idealisation of individuals as leaders and a consequent pacifying of the masses, who believe that their leaders are a different, more heroic type of person than they are themselves.

Slim parodied the process of idealisation by imagining himself as a great leader, satirising, for example, the Great Man theory of history by claiming to have led the 49-ers into California (Slim 12 January 1932). He grants himself enormous powers, as when he imagines arriving by plane to save a harvest crop from going rotten single-handed (Slim 13 September 1930). He repeatedly states that he is on the verge of running for the Presidency, a manifestly absurd statement given the IWW's stance against voting. He claims to stand on a political platform of 'softer seats and rubber heals' and that he will not accept the Vice-Presidency: 'it's President or nothing with me, and if it's nothing, I won't accept it' (Slim 1992 p.96 & p.158). He also states that he had intended to run for Mayor of Chicago 'but was held up on the eve of nomination by slow freights', emphasising the unlikelihood of a hobo assuming political power (Slim 1992 p.153). By making these preposterous claims, Slim parodies the system of representative democracy, and indeed the very notion of representative power itself. As an anarchist, he sees the idealisation of political leaders as leading to the anaesthetisation of the working class. Playing on his pen name, he tells his readers that 'No great big heroic T-bone Slim or Dill-Pickle Fat is going to prance into an industry and tell the children in the drill-press department, 'Hear ye, hear ye, I now organise you into the 'Yearful Earners of the Universe.''' (Slim 23 May 1931). The mock-heroic language highlights the pomposity of political leaders or union bosses ('Yearful Earners of the Universe' is a parody of the medievalism of craft union names) who assume that they can easily do for the workers what the workers have been unable to do themselves.¹⁸ Such leaders are dangerous, since they mislead their followers and have the potential to become demagogues.

¹⁸ He writes elsewhere: 'The working class has now been saved so many times in the last 4000 years that I lost count' (Slim, 23 May 1936).

The struggle for working-class emancipation would not be won by leaders or luminaries like Slim: it would be won or lost by his proletarian audience. For this reason, he connects his own greatness directly to that of his readers, stating ‘No one recognizes better than T-bone Slim the insignificant magnitude of the ‘world’s greatest writer’...A man is only great as a writer, if his readers are great. Never was, is or will be a writer greater than reader’ (Slim 18 August 1923). Slim’s greatness is an ‘insignificant magnitude’ if considered on its own. Rather than a quality of individual genius, greatness is a relationship between writer and reader. Slim insists on several occasions that his audience, and working-class people in general, are more intelligent than is commonly assumed: ‘I will state right here that *I am not in the habit of associating with ignoramuses*’. (Slim 1992, p.52; italics in original). The intelligence of workers makes them worthy companions for the ‘world’s greatest writer’. Slim’s communal model of authorship empowers his audience in a way that foreshadows Roland Barthes’ concept of the writerly text. It also imposes a responsibility on readers to be great, which for Slim is a distinctly political quality. Article after article exhorts his audience to join the IWW, to take part in political action, and ultimately to overthrow capitalism and build a fairer society. If this were to occur, Slim would find himself as the leading literary figure in a worldwide revolutionary movement. If it does not happen, then his name and his literary greatness will remain hidden. Slim would most likely put his contemporary obscurity down to the continuation of capitalism.

Since he wishes to avoid being raised on a pedestal, Slim is keen to emphasise that his class experience is identical to that of his audience. The main way that he does this is by representing himself as permanently hungry. As the final section will show, for Slim the class struggle was a struggle of biological need, especially in terms of who got to eat decent food.

‘Empty Stomach is THE revolution’: Hunger as Class Struggle

For Slim, revolution was a conflict over care for the body, a healthy body being something that workers were unable to maintain due to their poverty. He emphasises that, like the majority of his readership, he is poor: ‘God knows, too much money never ruined the author of this screed’ (Slim 1992 p.40). His shoes are ‘dropping off’ due to wear and his lack of funds to buy replacements (Slim 1992 p.95). He refers, with typical gallows humour, to sleeping rough: ‘Woke up stiff all over—lumpy bed. I had inadvertently spread two sheets of newspaper in one spot’ (Slim 18 August 1923).¹⁹ But Slim does not always emphasise the comedy of his personal suffering. In *Starving*, he portrays bodily ailments in a way that aligns him, like the workers in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), with the hogs in Chicago’s famous meatpacking district. After a discussion of packingtown, in which he describes the slaughter of the pigs in minute and bloody detail, he notes ‘The other night when I got off the Harlem/Grand car, a ‘moving corral,’ my high-top Peters waterproof-shoe was full of blood, and it didn’t come from a hog either—although I’m a hog for punishment’ (*Starving* p.53). The comparison of hog and worker is, of course, not original, but the image of Slim’s shoes being full of blood as he steps off Chicago’s L train is unusual in making his vulnerable physical form a key facet of his writing. Unlike Walt Whitman’s persona, in which the body is a healthy and positive thing, for the more naturalistic Slim the body is under attack by the very labour that he must perform in order to live.

¹⁹ According to an acquaintance, Anna Shuskie, when Slim was working as a river barge captain ‘Mostly he lived right on the barge’, and ‘whenever he was in the city and not working on the barge he flopped somewhere in Skid Row’ (Anna Shuskie, 19 December 1987). See Newberry Library, Franklin Rosemont - T-Bone Slim Research Collection, Box 2 Folder 31.

The search for food is the most common theme in Slim's work; it is a deeply political search, tied to the unequal distribution of wealth. For Slim, the 'Empty Stomach is THE revolution—the only kind workers have EVER known' (Slim 2 January 1924). Noting that 'Labor has a bad habit of getting hungry' (*Juice* p.38), he says that only political change will ensure that the working class can continue what he calls the 'noble custom of eating' (Slim 1992 p.135). He makes frequent reference, in articles and unpublished notes, to 'ham and eggs'. Along with the T-bones that give him his name, this is the most commonly-cited food in his work.²⁰ Ham and eggs becomes shorthand for a simple meal that workers desire and deserve, but which they do not get. So prominent does this particular meal become that when Slim wrote a 1924 column as the parodic opening of a romance novel, he called the lead character, a well-to-do gentleman, Mr Hammond Deggs (Slim 1992 p.70). This Dickensian naming strategy literally embodies food into the person of Mr Hammond Deggs, whose name expresses the fact that as a member of the bourgeoisie he can access good food easily. This simplification of the class system down to a struggle between those who are able to eat regularly and those who are not is a continuation of IWW iconography, a tradition in which radical cartoonists typically illustrated capitalists as obese men, or occasionally pigs, in bowler hats.²¹ In those cartoons, however, the emphasis is on the obesity of the plutocrats rather than the emaciation of the workers. In contrast, and with the exception of Mr Hammond Deggs, Slim's focus is on the lack of food, and the consequent importance that it takes in the everyday life of the poor: 'meal time', as he puts it, 'is an epoch in the history of today' (Slim 13 May 1922).

The problem of food is not merely a matter of quantity but also of quality. Slim critiques the system of industrial adulteration, arguing that synthetic food does not have the nutrition required for a healthy life. His pamphlet *Starving Amidst Too Much* is an analysis of the food system; in it, he asks 'Is it a part of wisdom to preserve our food with poison? Is it a part of intelligence to squeeze the juice out of meats, and feed the pulp to workers?' (Slim 1923 p.33) He concludes that 'Under the Capitalist System of food distribution it is impossible to get pure, fresh foods for the home even, to say nothing about the hotels and restaurants' (Slim 1923 p.37). One of his most extended critiques of adulteration is his song 'The Lumber Jack's Prayer':

I pray dear Lord for Jesus' sake,
Give us this day a T-Bone steak,
Hallowed be thy holy name,
But don't forget to send the same.

Oh hear my humble cry, Oh Lord,
And send us down some decent board,
Brown gravy and some German fried,
With sliced tomatoes on the side.

Observe me on my bended legs,
I'm asking you for Ham and Eggs,
And if thou havest custard pies,
I like, dear Lord, the largest size.

²⁰ The 'ham and eggs' trope did not originate with Slim. It had already appeared in Joe Hill's songs 'There is Power in a Union' (1913) and 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!' (1914), as well as in other writings by hobo and working-class authors.

²¹ See Franklin Rosemont, 'A Short Treatise on Wobbly Cartoons' in *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr 2011 first published 1988), pp.425-443.

Oh, hear my cry, All Mighty Host,
I quite forgot the Quail on Toast,
—Let your kindly heart be stirred,
And stuff some oysters in that bird.

Dear Lord, we know your holy wish,
On Friday we must have a fish,
Our flesh is weak and spirit stale,
You better make that fish a whale.

Oh, hear me Lord, remove these ‘Dogs,’
These sausages of powder’d logs,
Your bull beef hash and bearded Snouts,
Take them to Hell or thereabouts.

With Alum bread and Pressed-Beef butts,
Dear Lord, you damn near ruin’d my guts,
Your white-wash milk and Oleorine,
I wish to Christ I’d never seen.

Oh, hear me Lord, I’m praying still,
But if you won’t, our union will,
Put pork chops on the bill of fare,
And starve no workers anywhere.

(Slim 2011, p.268).

This song, which was sold on coloured cards by the IWW, follows the tradition of Joe Hill’s ‘The Preacher and the Slave’ in parodying religion as promising ‘Pie in the Sky’ while failing to deliver in this life. It contains Slim’s most commonly desired foodstuffs, including T-bone steaks and ‘Ham and Eggs’, as well as more exotic meals such as stuffed quail on toast. Unlike Hill’s song, ‘The Lumber Jack’s Prayer’ also critiques adulterated food like hot dogs and alum bread, which are packed full of preservatives, and which the singer claims have ‘damn near ruin’d my guts’. ‘Oleorine’ is a reference to margarine, which contains oil and was originally called oleomargarine. Oil had symbolic significance for Slim, who elsewhere refers to the United States as an ‘*oleogarchy*’, a pun that brings together the qualities of oil, synthetic food and money (Slim 1992 p.131).

As ‘The Lumber Jack’s Prayer’ shows, Slim included himself in his depiction of the hungry worker. Indeed, hunger was a key facet of his persona. He claims that he got the name ‘T-Bone Slim’ from beating his old ‘strawboss’ (foreman) to a pile of T-bone steaks on a particular job (Slim M.S Notes n.d). This apocryphal story reveals that food was a key driver of and an important metaphor for his political struggles.²² The cartoon image of Slim eating a T-Bone, which headlined most of his columns, signified the outcome of a successful revolt. In his articles Slim is permanently hungry, at times breaking off from the topic at hand to indulge his

²² Former hobo Roy Brickle and the author and songwriter James Stevens independently state that Slim was a camp cook; Brickle claims that this is how T-Bone got his road name, while in his book *Brawny Man* Stevens implies it. (See Brickle 1979 p.115 & Stevens 1926 p.146). *Brawny Man* is a fictional hobo autobiography based on Stevens’ own hobo experiences.

feelings about ‘jelly rolls—u, umh!—Cookies—haa-ah!—and bread (not so good)—yum yum’ (Slim 5 April 1930). This insatiable hunger is a comic aspect of his persona, but the reason for his hunger is not funny: he wrote in his notebook that his ‘breakfast’ one morning composed of ‘several groanings in bed’ (Slim M.S Notes n.d). For him hunger was a defining class experience, dividing working-class consciousness from that of the bourgeoisie. This is why he wrote that to appreciate his humour, his audience should ‘skip a couple of meals before reading’ (Slim 1992 p.37).

For Slim, food was linked to imagination and creativity. He argues that the fact that ‘the better class’ cannot think of a superior solution to poverty and hunger than souplines demonstrates their ‘bankruptcy for ideas...their total eclipse of brains...Eat soup and you will think in terms of soup’ (Slim 19 January 1924). One problem, however, of ideas being generated by food is that the working class does not eat well enough. Slim encounters this problem himself when he claims that ‘The reader will notice how stale and flat my writing is. Cause? Sour stomach’ (Slim 16 July 1921). Food can also be a problem in the political realm: it is, he says, ‘Next to impossible to pronounce the word ‘revolutionary’ when your face is full of pie’ (Slim 11 June 1921). Taken as a figurative (as well as a comic) statement, this suggests that workers who are fed will no longer identify themselves with revolution. Too little food might mean an inability to act, while sufficient food may take away the desire: as Slim put it in *Starving*, ‘if we can get food all else pails into insignificance’ (Slim 1923 p.36). This sums up the theoretical problem of Slim’s insistence on parsing the class experience through hunger, which is ultimately a non-political or, we might say, a non-dialectical sensation. Hunger does not necessarily lead to an agreed set of interests among a group of people, an interest that would be needed for them to organise as a class. Hunger does not suggest a particular long-term political solution. Its temporary abatement might even be politically conservative, since hunger, like pain in Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘has an Element of Blank - / It cannot recollect / When it begun - or if there were / A time when it was not - / It has no Future - but itself’ (Dickinson 1959 lines 1-4). The immediacy of hunger creates an attitude of living-moment-to-moment among hobos and tramps, something that Jack Kerouac would later, and quite erroneously, portray as a zen-like attitude. Toward the end of his life Slim grew frustrated with the inability of his fellow workers to see beyond today.²³ What he did not realise is that his own concentration on the immediacy of hunger played into that emphasis on immediacy.

Conclusion

Slim is a rare figure in being a prominent proletarian author who did not become middle-class over the course of his writing career. He stayed within his original class, even though that meant working long hours, living in difficult conditions, and meeting a relatively early death aged 60. Some have speculated that Slim became an alcoholic toward the end of his life, and even that he was murdered (Pete Johnson 1979 p.282; see also Rosemont 1992 pp.16-19). While both claims are unproven, his final years were personally and politically difficult. On 24th February 1939, for example, when he was 56 years old, Matti Huhta was charged with, and pled guilty to, one count of Disorderly Conduct, a fact which may indicate a lessening of control over his

²³ His later articles are generally pessimistic about the prospects for change, and frustrated that his audience have not brought it about. In 1937, he wrote that ‘the working class surely loves punishment’ (*Juice* p.125) and the following year he claimed that the proletariat ‘is pretty helpless... Well, not pretty, but helpless. **They even have to be told to join the IWW**’ [emphasis in original] (Slim January 1938 p.32).

personal life.²⁴ In the political realm, Slim's dreams of revolution had faded as the IWW shrank to a fraction of its previous size: as he noted poignantly in 1937, 'We have the union, but no membership' (Slim 1992 p.126). In addition, and for a reason yet unknown, Slim's columns, which had run consistently in IWW newspapers since the early 1920s, suddenly failed to appear. Between July 1941 and his death in May 1942, his articles appeared in only 6 of 45 issues.

T-Bone Slim was a gifted writer whose contribution to American Literature has been unjustly overlooked. Reminiscent of a blue-collar Mark Twain, his verbal dexterity, wit, and experimental style were unique in the radical newspapers of the early-to-mid twentieth century United States. As such, his neglect by literary scholars has been remarkable. Thoughtful and self-reflective, Slim sought to use words in a way that would undermine the stultifying effects of bourgeois language. Arguing for the high intelligence of his proletarian readers, he constructed a communal model of authorship in which literary greatness was tied to the workers' revolution. In doing so, he mocked fame and the idealisation of great figures in the realms of politics and literature. Slim's persona was of someone who eschewed individual notions of literary success in favour of a larger cause. It was also of someone who was permanently hungry. Hunger was an integral and often comic part of his brand because it tied Slim's experiences as a member of the working class to those of his audience. While his notion of hunger as a form of class struggle was to a degree simplistic, it also created an immediacy that allowed his writing to cut through many of the ideological constructs of his day.

Slim was buried on New York's Hart Island, America's largest mass grave, which at the time of writing holds a million people who were too poor to afford a private burial.²⁵ Hart Island is New York City's hidden shame. Run by the secretive Department of Correction, for most of its history the island was off-limits to the public.²⁶ During World War II, the island housed a workhouse for juvenile, elderly and infirm prisoners, the inmates of which would have been the ones to bury Slim. He and the other dead are stacked unceremoniously: coffins are placed on top of one another, from three to five deep, with up to 150 people in each pit. Today the pits are dug and the coffins unloaded by Riker's Island prisoners, disproportionately black, who receive \$1 an hour and who in some cases find the labour of burial so traumatising that they

²⁴ New York City Municipal Archives, Manhattan District 1 (Tombs), Docket 1115, 24 February 1939. Slim received a suspended sentence. Intriguingly, he gave his name as Joseph Hilger to the authorities. This pseudonym, which he also used to sign letters in the Westmoreland archive, suggests three things. First, and least surprisingly, Matt Huhta was reluctant to reveal his identity to the police, presumably because he feared persecution. Second, he wanted to adopt a name that channelled the legend of Joe Hill, which indicates that he saw himself as the spiritual successor to the IWW's most famous martyr. Third, his choice of 'Joseph Hilger' demonstrates Slim's playfulness, since it was a name that had political and personal resonance for him but was unlikely to be picked up on by the authorities. The name Joseph Hilger, in other words, mocked those who claimed power over Matti Huhta. This incident was previously unknown.

²⁵ New York City Municipal Archives, Hart Island Burial Records (microfilm). Original research by Cherie Westmoreland, John Westmoreland, and myself reveals that Slim was buried on 5th June 1942 as an 'unknown white man' in plot 161, section 1, grave 24 (death certificate 11399). He was never formally identified because, according to a letter from the Chief Medical Examiner to Slim's sister Ida Huhta Ekola dated 2nd July 1942, such an identification could only be performed in person by a family member, a task that Ida was unable to complete. He must have been informally identified, however, since the Medical Examiner's report states 'Possible name of Matt Valentine Huhta' (see New York City Medical Examiner's report M42-2690). It is probable, though not proven beyond all doubt, that Slim was the 'unknown white man'.

²⁶ In 2014, a successful lawsuit against the City enabled a limited degree of access. For further information, see the Hart Island Project website: <https://www.hartisland.net/> [accessed 12 May 2019].

ask to be replaced and taken back to their cell.²⁷ New York City's most isolated and exploited workers, the kind of people for whom Slim wrote, still labour over his bones.²⁸ Yet this story has a twist. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy caused enormous devastation across New York City, accelerating the longstanding erosion of Hart Island. In 2018, large numbers of bodies from the potter's field washed up on beaches in Long Island Sound, only a few miles from the Manhattan Waterfront where Slim worked, and which now contains some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Refusing to stay silent, New York's poor have come back to haunt the neoliberal city that tried to forget them. This also serves as a fitting metaphor for Slim himself, who after 75 years is reemerging from his cultural burial.

Future research could examine Slim's portrayals of class, race, gender, war, humour, food, optimism, pessimism, the media, and many other aspects of early-to-mid twentieth century America. Historians can uncover more details about Slim's patchy biography, helping to unravel the mysteries of this hobo's life. More might yet be discovered about his literary influences. Artists and musicians may wish to utilise his prose, poetry and song lyrics in their own work. Finally, Matt Huhta's commitment to the cause of working-class emancipation should provide an inspiration to many activists and writers who seek social justice and greater equality in our own time. As he himself put it, 'To make two blades of justice grow where none grew before—that is Beauty' (Slim 1992 p.156).

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²⁷ Video of New York City Council Meeting, 30th May 2019.

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/MeetingDetail.aspx?ID=690970&GUID=262BE200-F57E-4599-8D89-2DCF56838C5D&Options=info&Search=> [accessed 1st June 2019]

²⁸ New York City seems poised to change the jurisdiction of Hart Island from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Parks and Recreation with the aim of improving both the condition of and access to the island. See Cory Kilgannon, 'Can an Island Off the Bronx With One Million Graves Become a City Park?' in *New York Times*, 31st May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/nyregion/newyorktoday/nyc-news-hart-island-bronx-graves.html> [accessed 1st June 2019]

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