



**Tobar Héctor (2020). *The Last Great Road Bum*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.  
Memento Mori and the Demise of Hitchhiking**

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The year 2020 celebrated being the 42<sup>nd</sup> year since the publication of the first book in Douglas Adams' classic four-part 'trilogy' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978). The numerology of 42 has a particular significance in hitchhiking circles, ever since Adams' absurdist international bestseller, which has since been adapted into a television series in the 1980s and a Hollywood film in 2005. The story follows one of the only humans, Arthur Dent, to have survived the destruction of Earth. He is saved by his friend Ford Prefect, who unbeknown to him, is an alien who has been updating the entries of an electronic book about travelling through the universe. As the Earth is undergoing its demolition by a Vogon Constructor Fleet in order to make room for a hyperspace bypass, Ford uses an electronic sub-ether device to generate a transference beam that hitches himself and Arthur off the doomed planet only seconds before it is disintegrated out of existence.

Now outside the fields of sci-fi literary criticism and folklore studies that deal with the western urban myth of the vanishing hitchhiker (Brunvand 1981), the activity of actually hitching a lift with real vehicles has been quite under-explored in academic circles. At least until very recently. Yet there have now been five books on hitchhiking published in as many years. One of these is a travelogue about visiting as many European countries as possible in as little time that could be achieved (Ipavec 2021). Another, my own, is a contemporary social analysis of the practice as it manages to persist in the neoliberal times of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lavolette 2020a).

Two others are history monographs, both dealing with North America. The first of these, an overview of hitchhiking in Canada, is written by a senior academic. In the eight chapters of *Thumbing a Ride*, Linda Mahood (2018) has examined the counterculture phenomenon of hitching lifts in relation to government sanctioned transport development through the modernisation of travel infrastructures and the establishment

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of youth hostel networks. The other recent historical monograph is written by a junior historian as the adaptation of his doctoral research. *Roadside Americans*, by Jack Reid (2020), is a volume with six chapters, plus introduction and epilogue which offers an historical chronology for the activity. It places the practice into the national context of mores and values of everyday 20th century Americans.

Finally we have the subject of this review, *The Last Great Road Bum*, by Hector Tobar (2020). It is a semi-fictional biography. I make no claim to either being an expert on the history of hitchhiking, nor am I especially well versed in the approaches practiced by professional biographers – though I have recently started an intellectual biography on the anthropologist Sir Raymond Firth (Lavolette 2020b).

A literary and journalism scholar working in California, Héctor Tobar is also a Pulitzer Prize winning author. As the title to his newest novel suggests, the subject of the biography, Joe Sandersen, is a Jack Kerouac like free-spirit who would never live to finalise his own great travel story. But nearly four decades after his untimely death in 1982, fighting as a resistance soldier in the El Salvadorian civil war (when he was in his late 30s), American novelist and literary journalist scholar of Guatemalan origins, would write his memoir for Sandersen. Or with him, in the sense of relying on a lot of verbatim prose from Joe's unpublished notes, letters and attempted manuscripts. Essentially, it's an account of a short Beat poet life that is largely 'unfulfilled'. Despite several attempts at novel writing, leaving several manuscript drafts of his adventures unpublished, Sandersen simply could not adequately narrate his own life. Inheriting his archives, Tobar spends 10 years with them, reading and learning how to stand-in as a surrogate, semi-fictionalised travel bum. His fingers running through the notes of someone else's wanderlust in order to scribble down a 20 year 'on the road' voyage from the early 60s until the early 1980s, when Sandersen ended up killed as a resistance fighter in Latin America, an unknown martyr of sorts to someone else's war.

The book is a masterclass in self-reflexivity, with footnotes meant to give the voice of the long dead protagonist, who repeatedly interjects into Tobar's account of his privileged, white middle-class life. There are many strengths in this narrative, such as bringing in observational comparisons with what was happening politically in Latin America during the 60s, 70s and 80s. There are certain problems too. Many chapters are unoriginal in their titles, simply listing places visited during that section of Sandersen's world tour. Tobar certainly writes well, in the page turner style of an accomplished novelist who knows what his audience wants. Yet academically there's little real point to this book. Sure, it brings in cross-cultural comparisons. But if the idea is to write the last great American travel novel, it less than partially succeeds in this less modest goal. As biography, it fares better. The issue remains, however, that this is an account of the life of a very ordinary eccentric. Sure, his daily exploits are bizarre, but he's too conservative to be memorable to anyone other than guerrilla warfare aficionados. In failing to give any justification for writing about an atypical, everyday American, this book enters into the sensationalistic realm of the schadenfreude voyeur.

So in the end, the best material from Tobar's tome is to inform us about Latin America. The question could then easily be: why not write this as his own memoir, or as a genuine biography, rather than hiding behind the mask of white American privilege? Oh, perhaps that is the intended 'subtle' idea. But then this angle is made without subtlety. In the end, one could easily be left disappointed. We're obviously meant to like this rendition because it's about micro and macro-politics. But the result is too awkward, playing obvious and not especially funny games with a ghost in the footnotes that most times leave the reader cringing. Is this what it takes to win book prizes and become a famous novelist? I guess if it works for the far-right crowd in France with Michel Houellebecq, why shouldn't such first-level 'poppy' writing work for America's left-leaning masses.

Yet it would have been much more interesting for this book to fit into true biography and then make comparisons with John Murra (Anăstăsoaie 2014). Ok this anthropologist freedom-fighter was educated, unlike the protagonist here. Is that why Tobar feels this need to narrativise for the lay reader? Perhaps. There are of course many other precedents for such a mockumentary approach. The one that springs to mind,

given the protagonist's own military training and his untimely fate through violent conflict, is the character of Panik in the film about the birth of skateboard culture in eastern Germany during the 1970s (Persiel 2012).

In terms of book's structure, there are twenty-six chapters divided into three parts. The material of most relevance for hitchhiking and travel bums can be found in the second part, especially chapter seven. And it is here that Sandersen's appetite for Latin American politics was nourished:

They sat down next to Joe, who told them he had hitchhiked across the United States and Jamaica to meet the famous Rastafarians.

“To see us? That's crazy. What for? You're wearing all that road on your face and your clothes” (p.71)

Tobar claims that he wishes to glean all that road from Sandersen's face, clothes and notes and fit them into an American travelogue fit for representing 21<sup>st</sup> century decolonial values. Not modest, but why not have such ambitions? Yet the last third of the book, some 180 pages, is much more about an anti-hero's adventures in El Salvador, who independently infiltrates a central American rebellion and acts under the nom de guerre Lucas. Surely it is here that we have the chronicling of a history, through the personage of the last great unknown resistance fighter, that offers a true contribution to how an everyday biography relates to the U.S.'s imperialism.

On the whole then, with the publication of these recent volumes one finds very different accounts of life on the road and the history of hitchhiking. If some of them seem flawed for not having as much of an intellectual range as they could have, they are nonetheless powerful critiques of the global culture of neoliberalism and imperialism. Neither on their own would be a fitting obituary if hitchhiking really was a dead activity everywhere around the world. Yet this new textual body of literature on hitchhiking certainly is more than the sum of the parts. As such, they stand as an apt memento mori for the practice of thumb travel.

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