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"The Road is My Home:" Reflections on Vandwelling Culture in the United States

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**“THE ROAD IS MY HOME:” REFLECTIONS ON VANDWELLING CULTURE IN
THE UNITED STATES**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By

Heather Michelle Harris

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in American Studies

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Introduction

We pulled into the mostly deserted parking lot of Ocean Beach Pier in San Diego around 11pm on a Sunday night in June. Ashley instructed us to park next to his beat up 1991 VW Rabbit that also served as his bedroom at the far corner of the lot next to a group of five or so vehicles that Ashley said belonged to fishermen at the Pier. We parked in the shadows a few spaces away from a small trailer brightly lit by white street-lights. The temperature outside was actually quite mild, completely unlike the humid Southern Junes I was accustomed to back home. A nice ocean breeze flowed through the daisy print sundress I had been wearing for three days as we sat on a concrete wall at the front of the parking lot overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I aimlessly strummed a few chords on Ashley's guitar as he explained that this was the spot where he created and sold his two-handed paintings and played music during the day for money. While he talked he packed his pipe right there in public and lit it. "You want a hit?" he asked. "Nah," I said, "makes me too paranoid." He held it out to me as if not satisfied with my completely honest answer and as he stared at me, trying to convince me that I did indeed want it, I saw two cop cars pull in behind us and park next to the well-lit trailer. Even though I wasn't doing anything, I reacted in the exact opposite way you should when doing something you aren't supposed to: I quickly jumped up, as if to say "I'm not a part of this right now." It was just a reflex. "Whoa whoa, chill, chill," Ashley said. He calmly turned his back to the trailer and lit the pipe again. "I know these fuckin' pigs out here, man. I spend all day watchin' them," he said while inhaling. He blew out a cloud of smoke. "They look for kids trying to hide what they're doing. You just gotta be cool, act like you're not doing anything wrong... 'cuz you ain't." I nodded, thinking that

over. “Is that why we’re gonna sleep in a parking lot outside of a police trailer?” I asked after a few moments. “Fuckin’ exactly! We gotta hide in plain sight!” he said.

“Hiding in plain sight” was Ashley’s strategy for living out of his car in California for the last six years. He’d been up and down the California coast a handful of times, staying wherever he could for free and spending a few months at a time in San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco, though San Diego was his “home base.” I’d known Ashley before I got to San Diego and he was one of many people I talked to on the west coast living similarly. By the time I got to California, I was two weeks into an eight-week road trip. My partner and I loaded up our van with our dog and far too much stuff and left Atlanta for Albuquerque, New Mexico in mid-May. From Albuquerque we’d head to the Grand Canyon, through southern Utah and Nevada to San Diego, up California’s Pacific Coast Highway on through to Portland and Seattle, then southeast through Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado, ending the trip with a twenty-one-hour drive straight east to Atlanta from Denver. I’d always wanted to go on a long road trip, but had always lacked the money, time, or guts to do it. I knew there was no way I could afford travel if I stayed in hotels every night and that wasn’t the type of trip I wanted to go on anyway, so my partner turned our minivan into a small camper by adding a bed platform for us to sleep on in the back. After months of saving, I left with what I considered very little money for an eight-week trip; however, while on the road I encountered a completely new-to-me subculture of full-time travelers living out of their vehicles, getting by on significantly less money and claiming they felt more free than they ever had. In San Diego, we slept parked on the street for three nights, going to work painting windows with Ashley in the morning and

living in the park in the afternoon. We grilled cheap sausages and ate boiled eggs for four days in a row but never felt poor.

My relatively short time experiencing a mobile way of life made me interested to learn more about the people living it on a full-time or semi full-time basis. I am most interested in why people choose the lifestyle and whether it is a viable option for those wishing to live outside of normative society. By most of society's standards, people like Ashley are homeless, though he contends that he chooses to live in his car. There are many homeless individuals who are forced to live in their vehicles, however, those identifying as travelers distinguish themselves because they have chosen the lifestyle, saying they "are houseless not homeless." There may be some overlap, as travelers may dip in and out of it being a choice or they may be stationary in one place for periods of time. Some full-timers get by on very little, while others are quite wealthy, living off of retirement in expensive motorhomes, and these differences within the group surely affect people's perception of who is and is not actually homeless. Though there are class differences amongst full-timers, the reasons they cite for choosing the lifestyle are very similar, frequently focusing on the sense of freedom travel gives them.

Life on the road is extremely freeing in many respects. Most days I made my own schedule and I didn't have anywhere specific that I needed to be. Every day I could experience a new place, always surrounded by a changing landscape that ensured life on the road was always fresh, a novelty, though it is not without its own struggles. The day-to-day routine of mobile life is organized around different tasks than when stationary or "housed up": How are we going to keep our food cold? Where did I pack the salt? Where can we get wood for warmth and cooking? And most importantly, where are we going to sleep tonight? I soon found that finding

a free place to sleep was going to be a daily challenge that created a significant amount of stress, but it was also part of the freedom of traveling; we could go anywhere as long as we had the gas. A good portion of each day was spent driving while simultaneously searching websites and forums for details on possible free camping sites along that day's route. Camping in National Forests was typically free, but sites were often located in remote, unmarked, and/or difficult to access areas of wilderness. Sleeping in cities was even more difficult, as laws regarding sleeping in a vehicle vary depending on the city or county. Cities that are popular for full-time travelers or that have large populations of the involuntarily homeless living in their vehicles, such as San Diego, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, have passed laws that ban sleeping or living in a vehicle, though LA's law was overturned in June 2014 by a federal appeals court for being discriminatory towards the poor.¹ Many tourist areas and National Parks restrict lodging to either hotels or official campgrounds that are often expensive or full. Navigating around these laws in order to save money and continue the trip made me consider notions of public space, the criminalization of the homeless, and the regulation of mobility. It seems that just because you can afford to get somewhere doesn't mean you're allowed to stay. Your car can be parked in town overnight, you just can't be asleep inside of it. Travel is a privilege, and it is becoming more and more difficult to travel outside of the predefined lines.

Though there are no official statistics on the number of full-time travelers, estimates suggest a very large nomadic subculture exists in North America. Dorothy Ayers Counts and David Counts estimated in their 1996 study that there could be as many as three million

¹ Maura Dolan and Gale Holland, "U.S. Appeals Court Overturns L.A. Ban on Homeless Living in Vehicles," *LA Times*, June 19, 2014.

full-timers living in their RVs, and that does not include those living in vans or cars.² Deane Simpson argues that such a large population of full-timers has given rise to an “alternate spatial model” that he terms *nomadic urbanism*.³ The full-time travelling community, then, is worthy of a study because it represents a large population of individuals that have decided to reject aspects of normative American society, such as homeownership, consumerism, and the need for stability, and have instead created new communities based in alternative values. This is particularly interesting to me as an individual who is both personally and academically interested in resistance strategies, as many full-time travelers consider themselves “drop outs” that have found the prescribed American Dream unfulfilling or not an option for them and have attempted to create an alternative. This seems to especially be the case in the vandwelling and “rubber tramp” communities, as they travel in smaller, cheaper vans or older model, beat up RVs and often recognize their lifestyle as a rejection of “the system.” This contrasts with the senior RV community, often called snowbirds because they migrate South in the winter and North in the summer, that are often retirees who spent their former lives working in successful and respectable professions to be able to travel this way in retirement. As most of the research on full-time vehicle travelers has focused on the senior RV community, this study will consider the rubber tramp community as a whole with a focus on vandwellers. This study seeks to uncover the motivations of vandwellers, how they view themselves and their lifestyle, whether they choose the lifestyle for economic or political reasons, and how the lifestyle may relate to resistance, the policing of mobility, and the concept of public space. By exploring these

² Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996)

³ Deane Simpson, “Nomadic Urbanism: The Senior Full-Time Recreational Vehicle Community.” *Interstices*, Vol 9 (2008)

concepts, I hope to better understand how individuals and communities reject the normative American society that often champions home ownership, careerism, and materialism in favor of alternative ways of life grounded in nature, simple living, and minimalism.

To answer these questions, I will conduct approximately two months of field research, primarily participant observation and interviews, between May and July while travelling the United States in a Chevy Astro van that I have converted into a camper over the last year. A participatory approach that includes travelling to multiple locations as a vandweller is best for this project for a number of reasons. First, travelling out of the southeast is important because vandwelling culture is concentrated on the west coast. There are more opportunities for participant observation in areas with established vandwelling communities, such as San Diego and San Francisco. The west coast is also a popular place for vandwelling due to the large amount of federal land, national forest, and national park areas that offer free camping. Being an active participant will also be helpful because it establishes rapport with the community, allowing more genuine and natural interactions. Because of the lifestyle's relationship to the environment and nature, I believe it will be represented well in a visual format, therefore the final project will be a documentary. I will be using a DSLR camera and a digital recorder for recording video, still images, and audio to be used in the final product. In addition to reviewing literature on travel culture, I will also review scholarship on fieldwork and documentary film to help complete this project.

Literature Review

In the introduction to his popular memoir about vandwelling, *Walden on Wheels: On The Road from Debt to Freedom*, Ken Ilgunas defines a vandweller as “America’s modern-day vagabond; the twenty-first century’s tramp and hobo, drifter and gypsy.”⁴ While the terms *hobo*, *tramp*, *vagabond*, and *gypsy* all denote a mobile identity, it is important to understand the distinctions between these terms and how these cultures inform the vandwelling community. Mark Wyman’s *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* provides a history of migrant workers and the development of the American west, helping to define some of these terms. Wyman consults scholarly literature focusing on migration, labor, agriculture, the American West, and the history and culture of hobos, as well as primary sources such as newspaper articles, government documents, census data, and hobo memoirs. He divides his analysis by crop/region, tracing the conditions, labor relations, and organizing of hoboes in each region. Wyman focuses on the expansion of the railroad between the 1870s and 1920s, recognizing the essential role it played in the development of the west, but argues the importance of the railroad often overshadows the centrality of migrant workers to the development of the region. The railroad opened up a new frontier for agriculture, as it connected western farms to distant markets in the midwest and east. Due to the absence of nearby cities, these large scale farms lacked laborers to harvest the crop, threatening disaster for farmers whose crops rotted in the fields due to lack of help. Because the region was isolated and sparsely populated, farmers brought in transient workers from the east and midwest, as well as immigrants from Mexico, Japan, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, to do the work, using the railroad to transport them. Often called hoboes, bindlestiffs, and fruit tramps, these ethnically diverse migrant workers were

⁴ Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels: On the Road from Debt to Freedom*. (New York:Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), xvii.

essential to the success of western farms. Farmers preferred a migratory labor force, as labor could be cast off when it was no longer needed after the harvesting season.⁵ This created a labor force with little options, constantly “beating their way” on freight trains in search of work. Considered an “uneasy and unreliable class of people,” hoboes were frequently run out of town or arrested for vagrancy once the harvest season was over.⁶ Wyman details the mistreatment hobos faced, often purposely over-recruited and in need of work or criminalized for refusing work during labor shortages when farmers were desperate for workers.

Wyman also discusses the differences between the terms *hobo*, *tramp*, and *bum*, quoting Dr. Ben Reitman, anarchist and “hobo doctor,” who stated, “the hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and bum drinks and wanders.”⁷ Another worker at the Chicago Hobo College stated, “the hobo is a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory non worker. A bum is a stationary non worker.”⁸ Wyman notes that attempts to distinguish between *hoboes* and *tramps* were often complicated, as one often moved back and forth between the groups by choice or out of necessity, stating, “a hobo might tire of looking for work; a tramp might decide that he had to work to survive.”⁹

Wyman also discusses how the automobile changed hobo life. He argues the arrival of the automobile into the world of the hobo and fruit tramp in the mid-1920s drastically altered the traditional western labor market and represented the end of the “second frontier” era marked by the expansion of the railroad and agriculture into the West.¹⁰ Because of the increasing use of

⁵ Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 23.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, 36.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

automobiles, it was becoming rare to see large numbers of men waiting around town after a job was finished. Instead, migrant workers could leave the farm as soon as the harvest was complete and move on to the next job. A Kansas Department of Labor Agent estimated in 1926 that at least 65% of migrant workers travelled by automobile, just a few years after the trains had been filled each summer with hobos heading to the fields. Often called “gasoline tramps,” “automobile floaters,” or “flivver harvesters,” these migrants, often made up of entire families or groups of men that went in on the automobile together, represented a new era for western labor. Wyman argues that though the automobile may have increased migrants’ comfort on the road, this new era was in some ways worse for migrant workers, as the 1920s were marked by the abandonment of Progressive-Era protections for workers and the increased mobility the automobile afforded to migrants made labor organizing more difficult.¹¹

Wyman’s in depth look at hobo life illustrates how the “romantic notions of hoboes as simply wanting a free and easy life” are inaccurate, demonstrating the desperation, “the whip of economic necessity,” that kept them on the road and subject to the mistreatment they frequently experienced. As vandwellers and the full-time traveling community often appeal to hobo culture and romantic images of travel as inspirations for their lifestyle, one must consider in what ways the vandweller lifestyle truly relates to hobo experiences similar to those that Wyman describes, or if these citations rely on inaccurate and romantic images of hobo life. Wyman’s work introduces new ways for me to consider vandwellers and their motivations for choosing the lifestyle. Do vandwellers consider themselves migrant workers? Are they called to the road for

¹¹ *ibid.*, 254.

economic reasons? Are vandwellers subjected to similar treatment in terms of being considered suspicious and undesirable because of their lack of a permanent home?

Ken Ilgunas gives insight into some of these questions in his memoir, *Walden on Wheels*, which documents his experiences travelling the United States after graduating college with thirty-two thousand dollars in student debt. Unable to obtain a career with his liberal arts degree, Ilgunas quits his part-time job at Home Depot to live a wandering life hitchhiking while working to pay off his student loans. He takes a job cleaning at a motel in Alaska, clears debris in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and works as a park ranger in Mississippi. By living an extremely frugal life and taking jobs that provided room and board, Ilgunas is able to pay off his student loans in under three years. Ilgunas then begins a graduate program at Duke University and is determined to get his degree without going back into debt. To do this, he decides to buy a van and live in it full time while parked in the campus parking lot.

Ilgunas is first inspired to travel because he wants both adventure and a way to quickly make money, and the maintenance man and tour guide job at the Alaskan motel allows him to do both. Though he expresses ample amounts of negativity about his “crappy” jobs, he also discusses the satisfaction he has working with his hands, being closer to nature, and not being tied down by a career. Ilgunas attempts to relate his life to that of Thoreau, preaching simplicity and self-reliance as important values of this lifestyle. His determination to get out of debt is the main factor driving his lifestyle choice and the book, though he unnecessarily harps on this to a point that his obsession with debt seems put-on for the sake of the book. Though it is billed as a book about vandwelling, very little of it is about vandwelling culture or his experiences in the van. Two-thirds of the book is devoted to paying off his student loans by working in Alaska and

Mississippi. Though he tells some enjoyable travel stories, too much of the book is preachy and judgmental of people that do not agree with his lifestyle. There are moments that give insight into his motivations, however, and these can be helpful for further study of vandwellers. Ilgunas portrays vandwelling as a simple lifestyle defined by a commitment to frugal living and anti-consumerism, citing economic reasons for his lifestyle choice. Though he spends some time discussing travel and his experiences hitchhiking, it is all within the context of travelling for work in order to pay his debt. For Ilgunas, the decision to travel and then move into a van is more about living a rent-free lifestyle that allows him to save the money he makes and apply it to his student debt. This is in line with other “how-to” vandwelling websites that I’ve encountered, such as the popular online community cheaprvliving.com, that frame vandwelling and vehicle living as a way to save on all the living expenses associated with living in a home, such as rent/mortgages, utility bills, property taxes, maintenance, etc. For Ilgunas, vandwelling is an experiment in frugal living, the vandwelling chapters clearly inspired by the “Economy” chapter in *Walden*, as Ilgunas includes tables of all the materials he purchased to make the van into a home and how much his yearly living expenses were in the van.

Though I have been unable to find academic studies that focus at length on vandwellers specifically, subgroups of the larger travelling community, such as the senior RV community, overlap with vandwelling culture by discussing many of the same themes, and offer another point of comparison for the travelers in my study. Though there are differences between these subgroups of full-time travelers, particularly along age and class lines, both groups travel full-time and I hypothesize that there are many similarities between senior RVers and

vandwellers in regards to their motivations for choosing the lifestyle and some of their experiences of life on the road.

The most comprehensive study of full time RVing Seniors is Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts' book *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. Counts and Counts conducted field research with RVers for six months in 1990 and one year in 1993-1994, gathering qualitative data through participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires. They travelled extensively during their 1990 research, only staying in the same place for more than a week [one time]. They found participants at the variety of locations they visited: boondocking sites, public parks, private parks, membership parks, and snowbird parks. Their second round of fieldwork in 1993-1994 was "more focused," as they had affiliated with the Escapees RV Club and spent more time in each official Escapees park they visited.¹²

Counts and Counts first analyze the senior RVing community in relation to ideas about ageing, retirement, and community. They argue that in over the last century, the United States and Canada have "assumed a demographic shape new to human history," due to the fact that more people than ever before are living longer in reasonably good health.¹³ The senior community has emerged as a target audience, market demographic, and special interest group. At the same time, negative stereotypes surrounding the senior community and ageing have also become prevalent. Seniors are often considered frail, depressed, and dependent. Retirement can also be a stressful time in life if one's identity is closely tied to her career. Counts and Counts argue that RVing seniors challenge these stereotypes, continuing to live independent,

¹² Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

meaningful, and fulfilling lives in retirement. Senior RVers believe the lifestyle promotes self-reliance, independence, community, and the ability to determine one's surroundings. Counts and Counts then argue RVing may offer a more fulfilling retirement alternative, pointing to studies that have found that seniors that have control over their life and environment and are involved in a network of meaningful social relationships live longer and age more successfully.

Counts and Counts also analyze images of RVers in terms of how they see themselves and how outsiders see them, relating the community to the images of pioneers and gypsies. They state that outsiders often stereotype "people who live on wheels" as "homeless, dishonest, untrustworthy, tax-avoiding trailer-trash," while RVers see themselves as pioneers that have created a new "internal frontier."¹⁴ The negative stereotypes associated with RVers criticize them for being "gypsy-like." In this construction, RVers challenge the mainstream values of "rootedness, permanence, and land ownership," and are often considered cheap, homeless people who reject community and family values, lack a work ethic, and are "slobs."¹⁵ In addition to being criticized for being "too poor," many locals resent them "because they seem too rich."¹⁶ In the eyes of these critics, RVers live a life of leisure and take valuable resources from communities without paying taxes. RVers, however, see similarities between their lifestyles and the life of pioneers, as both value independence, self-reliance, community and mutual assistance.¹⁷ RVers contend that they are pioneers of a new frontier because they are creating new communities in the uninhabited deserts and public lands of the United States. RVers celebrate

¹⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53, 61.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

minimalism and consider their rejection of the consumer ethic to be a virtue and a form of freedom, claiming that they are no longer “possessed by their possessions.”¹⁸

It is important to point out the differences between how senior RVers and vandwellers see themselves and each other. Counts and Counts quote one participant who is resentful of the negative stereotypes waged at senior RVers, stating,

The word *transient* echoes in their minds with contempt as they picture a “hippie” van on which all sorts of belongings are tied to the roof and the back bumper. Inside are people who are undependable, dishonest, and lazy...it doesn’t matter that the full-time RVer is none of those things. It doesn’t matter that modern RVs are luxurious homes with every convenience. Tags and labels are part of the society we live in.¹⁹

In this RVer’s mind, vandwellers are untrustworthy and lazy “hippies,” while RVers are respectable individuals that live with the same conveniences as the average middle-class American. These “conveniences” are a point of contention within and across the Senior RVing and vandwelling communities, however, as those with “luxurious motorhomes” often look down on vandwellers and RV boondockers (those that live without any amenities or hookups to water or electricity), while these communities claim that those with expensive RVs betray the values of freedom, minimalism, and anti-consumerism that they consider essential to their lifestyle. These oppositions reveal differences between groups regarding their motivations for choosing the lifestyle, suggesting that wealthy Senior RVers may see their lifestyle as more of a resistance to typical approaches to aging rather than a rejection of normative society as a whole, as they are still concerned with keeping a respectable self-image and maintaining socioeconomic status.

¹⁸ Ibid., 74.

¹⁹ Ibid., 54.

Counts and Counts' research is important for my study because it demonstrates that a subculture of full time travelers exists on a large scale. Counts and Counts' main argument is that though many may perceive that life on the road is a lonely way of life, the full time RVing community is actually very tight-knit and this sense of community itself is a key motivation for many that choose the lifestyle. They also explore the self-images of senior RVers and how they see themselves in relation to other subcultures of travelers, such as the "hippie" vandwelling community, demonstrating how these cultures can be at odds with one another in regards to socioeconomic status, respectability, and authenticity. Counts and Counts' research introduces more questions for my research on vandwellers, such as how they see themselves in relation to the RV community and whether they feel a similar sense of community with other vandwellers.

Deane Simpson's article on senior RVers, "Nomadic Urbanism: The Senior Full-Time Recreational Vehicle Community," explores the "spatial practices" of the full-time senior RV community (SFTRVC), arguing that their level of scale, sophistication, and connectivity is unprecedented among nomadic communities.²⁰ Though Simpson focuses specifically on the senior RV community, many of his findings are relevant to my research on vandwellers as these communities often overlap and engage in similar cultural and organizational practices, though the SFTRVC makes up the largest portion of the broader full time vehicle travelling community. Simpson's research is primarily based on field investigations undertaken in RV, involving interviews, membership in clubs, and on-site aerial photography. He also consults literature on theoretical approaches on nomadism, space, and mobility. Simpson's conversation on nomadism and its potential for resistance to the "sedentary state apparatus" is particularly relevant to my

²⁰ Deane Simpson, "Nomadic Urbanism: The Senior Full-Time Recreational Vehicle Community." *Interstices*, Vol 9 (2008), 34.

research on vandwellers, as I am most interested in how their form of nomadism is related to resistance and alternative living.

Simpson contrasts the SFTRVC with conventional nomadic societies in two ways, first, the SFTRVC embraces nomadism as a leisure activity rather than one practiced for survival, and secondly, the SFTRVC operates with “a high level of instantaneous and spontaneous communication and connectivity not previously typical of nomadic societies.”²¹ Simpson argues that conventional nomadic societies have traditionally been “structurally defined as anti-urban, representing a mobile ‘other’ functioning outside of the hierarchical construction of sedentary urban society and the state apparatus,” however, the SFTRV community calls these assumptions into question in a number of ways.²² The spatial practices of the SFTRVC challenge typical anti-urban nomadism by “operating as a physically spread, but densely connected social field.”²³ SFTRVC constructs urbanity “through an urbanism of infrastructure consisting of two overlaid networks, one non-physical and one physical.”²⁴ The non-physical infrastructure refers to the online communication system the SFTRVC uses, which instantaneously connects members socially to each other through social networking and blog sites related to the community. The physical infrastructure consists of two main elements: the road and highway system and parking/camping sites. Camping and parking sites may be informal (boondocking sites) or formal (official campgrounds and membership parks). The combination of infrastructure allows members to communicate and coordinate their movements in order to camp together. Their parked vehicles “cluster” to create temporary communities that can be the size of large cities. An

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 35

example of this clustering on a large scale is the informal boondocking site outside of the small town of Quartzsite, Arizona, where the permanent population of 3,500 expands to include between 300,000 and one million RVers and vandwellers in the winter months.²⁵ Simpson argues this clustering exemplifies how the SFTRVC produces urbanity from “almost entirely bottom-up forces without top-down planning.” He uses on-site aerial photography to demonstrate the large scale and spatial organization of this constructed urban environment, in which smaller communities of 10-15 vehicles often cluster in a circle together within the larger camping site.

Simpson also discusses a phenomenon referred to as *destination boondocking*, in which “informal parking sites are embedded within the existing urban fabric, operating on an unwritten ‘timeshare’ basis.”²⁶ Camping at the well-established network of Walmart stores allowing overnight parking for the travelling community is an example of this practice. Simpson argues, “the possibility for the transient RV occupation of existing urban environments is supported by the fact that these practices are relatively indistinguishable from regular parking.”²⁷ These practices would normally be considered illegal squatting and, therefore, they “skirt and challenge the logic of accepted spatial and legal behavior of the striated sedentary environment.”²⁸ Similar to the RVers discussed in *Counts and Counts*, Simpson found that RVers frequently self-identified themselves as pioneers. Simpson argues that pioneering is demonstrated through their “spatial expansionism” that produces urbanity in areas where it is not yet present, such as through desert boondocking. The frontier is further expanded through the transient occupation of existing cities, which is important “in the way it contests the legal and social frontiers of urban

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁸ Ibid., 42.

space.”²⁹ These observations are particularly relevant to my interest in vandwelling as a form of resistance living, as Simpson affirms that these practices on such a large scale have radical implications in their rejection of sedentary society.

Where vandwellers differ from the SFTRVC limits the usefulness of Simpson’s article for my research. Though vandwellers also differ from traditional nomadic societies, I hypothesize that vandwellers do not consider their lifestyle a “leisure activity” in the way Simpson characterizes the SFTRVC. I know from my own experience and research in online communities that many vandwellers work online from their vehicles, find short term work in cities, do farm work seasonally, and find other means of generating income, while others barter, dumpster dive, spange, or busk for money, food, and/or gas. The most relevant aspect of this article is the questions it raises regarding mobility, space, and shifting concepts of urbanism. Simpson poses new questions regarding how urban environments are constructed, demonstrating the possibly radical implications of a subculture that creates urbanity from the bottom-up.

Randall Amster’s article “Ethnography at the Margins: Vagabonds, Transients, and the Specter of Resistance” examines transients, vagrants, and vagabonds in a southwestern U.S. college town, analyzing these subjects using an epistemological framework that includes “identity and cultural studies, resistance strategies and forms of living, utopian social movements, and various resistance strategies to the dominant Western paradigm that is characterized by market economies, private property, and centralized state authority.”³⁰ Included in this study is a discussion of ethnographic methods and the possibility for anarchist

²⁹ Ibid., 43

³⁰ Randall Amster, “Ethnography at the Margins: Vagabonds, Transients, and the Specter of Resistance.” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1999), pp. 121-155. 122.

methodologies. Amster aims to “maintain a correspondence between the *methodologies* employed and the particular *subject* under investigation,”³¹ arguing that methods used to study anarchic, marginal settings, such as the street scene or transient groups, must be “fluid, spontaneous, and open-ended in order to cohere with the life-ways of the individuals and groups being studied.”³² In developing an anarchist methodology appropriate for studying vagabonds and transients, Amster relies on a combination of “interpretive paradigms” including “feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and cultural studies.” Though these paradigms do not reference anarchism specifically, Amster argues they have common features of an anarchist methodology, including “a praxis-oriented approach that emphasizes lived experiences, a critical posture, and the promotion of emancipatory aims.”³³ Adhering to established theoretical approaches to qualitative methodologies that recognize research as a “social activity,” an anarchist methodology likewise recognizes that “research is both descriptive *and* constitutive of the social world and the nature of ‘reality’ itself.”³⁴ Anarchist methodologies are also informed by principles of symbolic interactionism, which “views truth as subjective, relative, and susceptible of no absolutely correct or privileged interpretation.”³⁵ Researchers in anarchist settings, then, favor more holistic, inclusive, and egalitarian approaches that blur the lines between the observer and the observed and establish rapport with the community.³⁶

After describing his methodology, Amster goes on to discuss four encounters he had with different transients and vagabonds in a southwestern United States college town. He explains

³¹Ibid., italics in original.

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Ibid., 134.

³⁶ Ibid.

that the town is a frequent stop for the traveling community “because of its mild climate, crossroads location, and health food co-op and ‘Free Store.’” He describes an encounter he had outside of the co-op with a group of four “neo-hippie” Rainbow nomads traveling and living in their van. These vandwellers were part of the ‘Rainbow Family of Living Light,’ a “self-styled nomadic *tribal anarchy* and *utopian movement*” that conducts “gatherings” in National Forest Land throughout the United States.³⁷ Amster explains that despite the flux of attendees at gatherings, there is common cultural identity amongst Rainbow nomads that is grounded in “appearance, demeanor, and aura, as well as an ideological identity based on a minimalist lifestyle, and a relationship with nature.”³⁸ Amster also explores the self-images of the transients he meets and whether they relate their lifestyle to forms of resistance. Blossom, “a self-described artist and nomad” lives by a philosophy of “survivalism and anti-competition” that promotes living a simple existence.³⁹ Blossom sees his lifestyle as a preservation of a hunter-gatherer ethic that he believes “must be preserved in order for a new society to grow” after the current society is destroyed.

Amster also examines a community of urban squatters in relation to the decline of public space, arguing their attempt to maintain a transient identity in the face of a “burgeoning global mono-culture” that pushes for privatization and the corporate control of space raises questions regarding the viability of resistance and utopian social movements. As subcultures that exist almost entirely in public, squatters, vandwellers, street kids, and other “urban nomads” face frequent attempts to legislate away their presence on city streets through various city ordinances,

³⁷ Ibid., 138, emphasis in original.

³⁸ Ibid., 141.

³⁹ Ibid., 142.

such as sitting, urban camping, and panhandling bans. Amster asserts that the transient community is a particularly interesting community for ethnographic study because of the intentionality of their decision to opt out of the dominant culture of private property ownership. Amster considers the words of Shadow, an urban nomad interviewed in the Berkeley, California newspaper *Street Spirit*,

I will not subscribe to their paradise of plastic and infrastructure...We live simply. We live relatively free. We are the faces of an idea: using what is there instead of perpetuating more waste, and not falling for the subjugation of self the capitalist mentality thrives upon, the loss of sense, the bereavement of mind. We attempt to sustain an economic system outside of 'the system.' To travel and build a viable community for ourselves...It may all sound somewhat idealistic-it may not. But we try.⁴⁰

Amster interprets Shadow's lifestyle as an intentional challenge to popular conceptions of what constitutes the "good life."⁴¹ He concludes that these "sketches" of transients and vagrants demonstrate that their lifestyles, in their "unboundedness, immediatism, minimalism, and fluidity represent a utopian social [dis]order built on a rejection of domination."⁴² Amster argues transient "drop out" identities are important sites for research in an increasingly globalized world in which notions of public space are diminishing in favor of the corporate and state control of public space.⁴³ As dropouts, these individuals "help preserve a discursive space that often exists beyond the reach of hegemonic forces of social control."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 149.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 148.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

While Simpson's and Counts & Counts' research both focus on the Senior RV community, Amster examines a community of travelers more in line with my research questions regarding full-time travelling as a possible resistance strategy to normative society. In the conversations Amster conducts, travelers cite definite political reasons for their decision to live a transient lifestyle. Rather than self-identifying as pioneers or explorers, this subculture of travelers sees the lifestyle as a rejection of consumerism, waste, careers, and aspects of capitalist society. Amster uses anarchist scholarship, such as Hakim Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, to draw connections between transient lifestyles and radical politics and ways of living. Amster's article provides a look into the lifestyles of transients, and though his informal conversations with only a few groups cannot be considered representative of the vandwelling community as a whole, his observations are useful because they provide information regarding some possible motivations for those living transient lifestyles that I can use to inform some of my own interview questions.

Richard Grant's travelogue *American Nomads: Travels With Lost Conquistadors, Mountain Men, Cowboys, Indians, Hoboes, Truckers, and Bullriders*, does a good job of drawing connections between these different traveling subcultures. Drawing from his own travels as well as primary and secondary source material, Grant examines the nomads of the Western United States, arguing that the unifying belief between them is that "real freedom is impossible within sedentary society and that the only true freedom is the freedom to roam across the land."⁴⁵ Grant contends that nomadic subcultures are drawn to the American West because of its landscape and history. This is especially the case in the southwest, where the lack of water creates open spaces

⁴⁵ Richard Grant, *American Nomads: Travels with Lost Conquistadors, Mountain Men, Cowboys, Indians, Hoboes, Truckers, And Bullriders*. (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 12.

that cannot be settled, inviting “a certain type of human that will always be compelled to wander across them.”⁴⁶ Grant argues this desire to wander is quintessentially American, going back to European settlers that for the first time encountered the wide open spaces of the continent as well as the nomadic indigenous peoples that wandered it.⁴⁷ These are interesting arguments to consider as I explore the motivations of vandwellers and why they seem to be more concentrated in the Western United States.

The most relevant aspects of Grant’s work for my research are his experiences interacting with Rainbow nomads, vandwellers, and senior RVers, demonstrating the similarities, differences, interactions, and conflicts between these subcultures of full-time travelers. Though the Rainbow family is a nomadic commune that conducts gatherings all over the country, only a portion of individual Rainbows are full-time travelers. Those that do travel full-time typically identify as vandwellers and rubbertramps and Grant’s conversations with them highlight conflicts between groups. One group of Rainbow vandwellers claimed RVers look down on them and treat them as outsiders at the yearly winter RV and van gatherings in Quartzsite, Arizona. Grant’s conversations with vandwellers indicate some tensions between groups, with vandwellers claiming they are the “true nomads,” because they are completely self-reliant and willing to pick up and go at any moment, while RVers are much more stable stating, “these RVers are traveling with a safety net. Take away their social security checks and the RV rolls to a halt. They are not truly free.” These generalizations suggest class and ideological tensions between groups that are worth exploring further in my conversations with vandwellers.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 297.

Folklorist Bruce Jackson's book *Fieldwork* is a how-to manual for conducting fieldwork, focusing on how fieldworkers interact with informants in the field, the tools fieldworkers use, and the ethical considerations of fieldwork. Because many of the cameras and recorders Jackson describes are outdated, the most relevant section for my research is his discussion on the fieldwork process, specifically how to conduct interviews.

Jackson disagrees with conceptions of fieldwork as a similar process to experiments in a natural science with hypotheses that can be proven or disproven. Fieldwork cannot follow a scientific method or be tested by other fieldworkers, as the observations and information gathered during fieldwork are specific to a point in time and space between the fieldworker and the informant.⁴⁹ Jackson argues fieldworkers must therefore consider their role within the fieldwork process and how it affects the information being gathered. The interpersonal relationship between the two as well as the context of their experiences together affect what information is given and how stories are told. Keeping these facts in mind, Jackson puts forth important guidelines for meeting and observing informants and conducting interviews that will be valuable while conducting my own fieldwork. According to Jackson, the goal of folklorist fieldwork is to observe normal behaviors in a particular environment, however, the folklorist's presence is "an intruding and disruptive force or element" that inevitably alters the "normal" state of what she is studying. Jackson therefore argues that rather than attempt to control the environment, the folklorist must aim to contaminate it as little as possible.⁵⁰ Jackson's guidelines for conducting interviews provides specific examples from his own fieldwork that demonstrate

⁴⁹ Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

how to achieve this goal. Jackson stresses that though it is important to act natural during an interview, the fieldworker is not a conversational participant. Jackson states,

Everything you do while in the collection situation signals the informants: the expressions on your face, the questions you ask, the attention you pay to your recording machine. You're constantly cueing them about what matters to you and what doesn't.⁵¹

Because the point of the interview is to find information the fieldworker does not already know, it is important for her to “keep the information flowing freely” by letting the informant lead the conversation as much as possible.⁵² Interrupting the informant, talking too much, moving on to the next interview question too quickly, only using recording equipment when something seems important, and being too active in the interview process signals to the informant the details the fieldworker finds important and inevitably alters the information the informant provides. The most useful lesson Jackson advances is the importance of remaining transparent during the interview process.

Jackson and Ives's collection of essays, *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, further examines fieldwork with a focus on “learning how to make connections and coming to understand how things work, what things mean, and what was really going on out there.”⁵³ The essays in this collection are not about the subjects the fieldworkers studied or the final projects they made, but about the processes, struggles, and sometimes failures of the fieldwork itself. Jackson and Ives argue that the experiences fieldworkers have in the field are frequently left out of the final product because “we assume that our thinking process is far

⁵¹ Ibid., 81.

⁵² Ibid., 82.

⁵³ Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives ed, *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), xi.

less significant than what our thinking discovered.”⁵⁴ The essays in this collection focus on the moments of realization that happen during and after fieldwork that significantly alter the fieldworker and the project itself and these personal narratives offer lessons that will be valuable to me as I begin my own fieldwork. Jackson’s “The Perfect Informant” details his experience working on a project about Vietnam veterans’ stories of coming home.⁵⁵ After planning a film project he realizes that his informant is posing as a veteran and had never been to Vietnam at all. Jackson again stresses the importance of being aware of your own location in the fieldwork and how you alter it, writing that the informant “sensed my need and gave me what I wanted.”⁵⁶ Edward D. Ives’s essay “Oral and Written Tradition” documents a missed opportunity, stating “Often enough, we don’t know what we should have been looking for or in what terms we should have been asking about it until long after it is too late to go back.”⁵⁷ Ives argues that we should not be discouraged when we realize the field data is not as clean or complete as we hoped it to be, citing Jackson who states, “No one collects everything that might be collected, and no one publishes every fact recorded and every observation made” and these missed opportunities may raise questions for future investigations.⁵⁸ Nancy Kalow’s “Living Dolls” documents her experiences filming runaway street kids in San Francisco for her documentary project, *Sadobabies*.⁵⁹ Kalow offers a particularly important lesson for me as I begin creating my

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, x.

⁵⁵ Bruce Jackson, “The Perfect Informant” in *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, ed Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996) 206.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵⁷ Edward D. Ives “Oral and Written Tradition: A Micro-View from Miramichi,” in *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, ed Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 159.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁹ Nancy Kalow, “Living Dolls,” in *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, ed Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 60.

own film, as she discusses the difficulty she had truly hearing what informants said during the interview process because she was so focused on filming.⁶⁰ She states that she did not find the central image and focus of the film until the editing process. While editing the footage, Kalow realized the runaways' sadobabies, dolls that the runaways abused and made look like them, were representations of themselves on which they reenacted their own tortured experiences with abuse. Kalow chose to edit the film in such a way that the audience came about this realization on its own, letting the stories speak for themselves. All of these lessons indicate that mistakes, failures, surprises and epiphanies are characteristic of the fieldwork process.

Nancy Kalow expands on how to shoot and edit documentary film in her book *Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary*.⁶¹ This short book is a great introductory how-to for filming low- and no-budget documentaries with personal camcorders or DSLR cameras. The *Digital Storytelling* approach focuses on technical quality and engaging storytelling by emphasizing the importance of “closeness,” “showing rather telling” and “shooting to edit.”⁶² Closeness “suggests to the viewer that you have the consent and collaboration of the person you are recording” by setting up the camera and audio recording equipment near the subject. Showing rather than telling makes the documentary primarily visual by establishing location, relationships, story transitions, and other elements visually with minimal explanatory text or narration. Kalow stresses the importance of shooting footage “that shows people *doing* things rather than *talking* about doing things.”⁶³ Shooting to edit means combining advance planning

⁶⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁶¹ Nancy Kalow, *Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary*, (Durham:Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, 2011), 4.

⁶² Ibid., 6.

⁶³ Ibid. (emphasis in original)

and improvisation in the field to ensure you record all of the shots you will need during editing process since you will not be able to recreate the field environment later. Kalow discusses technical aspects of filmmaking, such as how to frame shots, different kinds of shots (close-up, extreme close-up, extreme close-up, medium shot, wide shot, and establishing shot), camera movements (zoom, pan, tilt, tracking, and crane) and when to use each of these to enhance the story.⁶⁴ Kalow restates information from Jackson's *Fieldwork* on how to conduct interviews, but she also provides more up-to-date information about filming interviews with modern equipment, how to position the camera, and lighting techniques. Kalow's conversation regarding the ethics of documenting others will also be useful for my project. According to Kalow, documentaries that demonstrate ethical depiction of subjects display "a significant investment of time in the project, a departure from preconceived conclusions and stereotypes, and actuality over staged manipulation."⁶⁵ The filmmaker should spend time with the subjects before and after shooting and "avoid preconceptions that can limit what the piece is going to be about."⁶⁶ Relying too heavily on a script and interview questions may result in a project that doesn't offer any new information and fits into pre-fabricated conclusions, as Jackson also discusses in *Fieldwork*. These practical lessons Kalow provides will be extremely important as I develop and shoot my first short film.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 9-11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28.

Vandwellers

“A Vandweller ... somebody that lives the mobile lifestyle on their own terms. They can be living in a van, an RV, a car, just living simply. We're just a big community of different people...open-minded, sustainable, self-sufficient.”

- Corinne

“My lifestyle just changed recently. I sold my house and my wife and bought a school bus and turned it into an RV and packed up everything I owned...everything I had left at that point and I headed West. And so that's going from a 2,000 sq ft home, working 5-6 days a week, to not doing any of that and not having any bills other than fuel and insurance and food...and I'm loving that.”

- Redman

At the time of our meeting Redman had lived in his converted school bus for almost six months. He sold his house and business in August of 2015, believing this gave him enough money to stretch his time on the road out for a couple of years. It's his first time at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), a yearly gathering of self-identified vandwellers held every January in the public desert land outside of the tiny town of Quartzsite, Arizona. Quartzsite is known for being a ghost town in the summer, when it becomes one of the hottest places in the United States, with temperatures as high as 122 degrees, but is a popular winter destination for vandwellers and RVers, due to its mild winter weather. Redman isn't working right now and is living on savings, but he states he has come to the RTR “to figure out how everybody else is maintaining doing it further” because he would like to stretch it out even longer. His reasons for

moving into the bus are similar to those I have discussed with other vandwellers online and at gatherings: he wanted “more freedom,” he wanted “to go on a decent vacation where I can relax,” and he didn’t “want to wind up in the hospital bed thinking, “oh man, I should’ve gone out West and just stayed in the desert for a month.”

I’ve been interested in vandwelling culture for two years. In our interview Redman tells me,

I was tired of making the mortgage payment and I was tired of being in one place and so I wanted to make some changes. Initially I looked into the Tiny House Movement, that way you can hitch up your home and go wherever you wanted and work doing whatever and wherever. So that’s probably the initial inspiration was the tiny house, the house on wheels. So I looked at RVs, I looked at building a tiny house, I looked at all kinds of options and I just gravitated toward the school bus.

He’s surprised how well it is working out so far, being 10% of the size of the home that he had before. I ask him how long he usually stays in one place and he admits that he’s been moving at a fast pace.

I would say on average two or three days in one spot. I’m kind of...what’s the word when you’re antsy and you’re nervous and you want to move...I don’t know if that’s a good description of me...impatient. I don’t know, staying in the same place, looking at the same mountain for more than a few days usually...that’s a cool mountain but I wonder what’s over there. I like to wander.

Antsy and Nervous

For the past four years, I've lived in a basement. It's pretty nice as far as basements go. It has high ceilings, a full kitchen, and a private bath. The rent is cheaper than most places in the area and utilities, cable, and internet are also included. It's hard to move out and lose a location within biking distance to school and work for the price, but living underground has started to wear on me. Besides the back door and the tiny window in the kitchen (that each look out to the underside of my upstairs neighbor's deck), there are no other windows in the apartment. It always feels dark to me, even with all the lights on. I sleep into the afternoons in total darkness, without any sunlight to help rouse me. I dream that there's too much chewing gum in my mouth and I can never pull out all of it.

I spend twenty-five minutes in traffic to fight for a parking spot at Kennesaw Mountain, where everyone around here goes to be outdoors. I take a ride on the bike path near my house, enjoying especially the portions of the trail that dip into cooler temperatures alongside small creeks and tall green grass, while trying to ignore the sections that remind me I'm still Here, amongst the office parks, with cars blowing past me on a four lane main road.

I think of my Mom, who at my age had two babies and was living in her mother-in-law's basement. I remember her sitting on the floor, cleaning up our toys and crying. She hated living there and I didn't understand it. I loved living with Mimi. It was free and we had a pool and a trampoline, but we didn't have many windows. I don't feel as old now as she felt to me then. I'm glad I have a dog and not any babies. I'm thankful that I can leave the basement.

For the past two summers, I've paid the rent even though my place sat empty. Instead of staying, I've slept in my van in National Parks, in forests, at Walmarts, at rest stops. On my adventures I've met the folks that live this way and don't have a basement to go home to or a

Mom to bail them out when they run out of money in Montana. Some of them look tired and over worn. They don't seem to have or want much, and they are ready to convince you they're living the freedom lifestyle, that you too could succeed travelling forever, just check out their blog and see. It seems like an irresponsible fantasy, but the idea keeps drawing me in.

Each morning at the RTR I'd awaken shortly after the sun began warming the van with light shining in the windows. I'd make boiled eggs and coffee on the camp stove. I'd walk the dog, look for rocks, and read in the afternoons. I'd worry about my bank account and having to go home to reality. Redman told me, "so far it makes a lot of sense to just go and keep going until you get tired of going." Am I not yet tired of going? Or am I just tired of staying? I'm not so sure.

Corinne

I'm Corinne and I'm 24. I've been living full-time in my van for almost four years. I just pretty much moved straight out of my mom's house and into a van. I never paid rent a day in my life. It just doesn't appeal to me. I've been living the freedom lifestyle, able to do whatever I want, whenever I want. It has allowed me to travel the country. For the past two years, I've been travelling just on the road full-time, continuously. I started out in Florida and I've been all around the country a few times, travelled through Mexico and Canada. And yeah that's what the lifestyle means to me. It's the freedom of being able to go where you want to go with less restrictions and living on your own terms.

The way I see it, it's kind of like dropping out of society. You know, the American Dream is so much different and everyone has the desire...they aspire to live in a house, you know, pay off your mortgage and have all these boats and cars and all these possessions. They do

want to travel but it's a different type of travel. That's the American dream. Yeah so this is ... yeah kind of alternative ... just dropping out, doing something different.”

Corinne is a 24-year-old vandweller that's been living on the road for four years. She reminds me more of the dirty kids that you'd meet at punk house shows all over the country, traveling in beat up vans to shows or hopping trains to drink in New Orleans, than other vandwellers here at the RTR, most of which are older. I feel somewhat voyeuristic upon meeting her when I realize I already know who she is from her YouTube channel and blog that I have been following for some time. I'd already read about her travels and van breakdown in Mexico and I thought she seemed to be living a bit dangerously. She agrees that most of the travelers in Quartzsite are older, stating “the majority of the mobile population are the seniors, the retired folk,” and that “it's really rare to see a young person out here, in a van at least.”

I wonder about her “dropping out of society” statement and how it really relates to the vandwelling subculture I've found here in Quartzsite. When I first started researching this community, I was most interested in its radical potential, however I have developed doubts as I've observed it more. Though they espouse a philosophy of freedom and self-reliance, I'm hesitant to consider a subculture that depends upon a network of Interstates, Walmart parking lots, McDonald's, and public lands in order to maintain its existence to really be a culture of societal dropouts. Instead, I have been considering the ways members of the vandwelling subculture remake society and its rules in their own ways. I have seen at the RTR gathering as well as in the numerous vandwelling Facebook groups, Instagram communities, and online message boards that vandwelling culture is actually very social and connected. For all of the community I have witnessed in person at the RTR, I've seen just as much infighting online,

especially over the issues of authenticity and respectability. A frequent issue is how vandwellers see themselves versus how others see them and how these images relate to other transients and/or the homeless population. The rules of vandwelling and the policing of others in the community focus on keeping a respectable image in order to keep privileges (such as the ability to park overnight at Walmart stores) and to maintain the distinction they feel between themselves and the homeless population. This focus on “houseless not homeless” has always bothered me, as it seems to lack an awareness or analysis of the similar conditions (lack of living wages, affordable housing, social safety nets, etc.) that can contribute to homelessness and/or a vandweller’s decision to move into a van, while simultaneously seeming to look down on the homeless or those living in vehicles not “by choice.”

I mentioned how this bothered me one night to a woman I had been talking and having beers with for a few hours at the RTR community campfire. She’d been living in her van for a few years and was formerly a labor organizer in California. She seemed similar to me politically, so I was a little surprised when she pushed back against my comments. “These older [vandwellers,] they’re just trying to survive. They don’t want the added stress of being associated with anyone that could be...you know they don’t want to be looked down on or hassled by anyone. They still have their pride. They used to work or own their homes. So it hurts them to be treated like they’re... poor people,” she tells me. I can understand feeling hurt by mistreatment, but I’m not sure she understands my point. Shouldn’t we as people that know what it’s like to live in public be advocates for those who have no other choice?

Skanky Bitch

We've been driving for eleven hours when we pull into Walmart around 1AM. I barely have the energy to unbuckle my seatbelt. I need to go inside to buy batteries for my fan so I can fall asleep in the Missouri heat that is still suffocating, even at night. One of the biggest annoyances of living in a van is that nothing is ever where you left it. I'm too exhausted to find my shoes that have disappeared, so I slip on the closest thing I can find: Capers' house shoes that are obviously too big for me. I walk inside and get a pack of batteries and a Sprite and get in line. In front of me is a teenager and his group of girl friends. I can feel him staring at me and I'm suddenly aware of the social world that I have re-entered and all of its rules. I look and feel how you would look if you woke up in the morning and were immediately thrust into the world without any preparation, except I look worse. I've been in a hot van all day, I haven't showered in a few days, and my hair is ratty. I'm wearing house shoes that are too big, shorts, and a T-shirt with no bra. I cross my arms. The boy is still staring at me, and I can tell he's wanting to say something. I actually leave the line to wander around the store, hoping to avoid it. By the time I return he's paying and there's four or five people in line separating us.

After I pay I start my walk to the van across the parking lot. Overnight Walmart parking etiquette requires people sleeping in vehicles to park out of the way of customers' spaces up front, so we're parked on the edge of the lot far from the doors. The lot is dark a few yards beyond the neon glow of the entrance. A car pulls out of its space after I pass and I feel whoever is inside of it looking at me as it slows to a crawl beside me.

I hear laughter as the guy from the line sticks his head out of the window and yells, "Skanky bitch!" from the car as it accelerates past me. The car blasts music and speeds off as I continue my walk towards sleep. It's been a rough day and I just want to be home. We're almost

out of money. I look and feel terrible, that this isn't the real me. I wonder if it's worth it, if it should be this hard day-to-day.

Yellowstone

It's our 75th day on the road and we're just arriving in Yellowstone National Park, one of my favorite places on earth. It's the end of July, so the park is still congested with summer vacationers, each overlook parking lot packed and the campgrounds full. We're lucky enough to get a camping spot in Mammoth by arriving at the park around 7AM. The very first thing I do upon getting a site is fill two wash bins, one with soapy water and the other with clean water, because I'm determined to have some clean socks to wear. I gather all the dirty socks I can find, stuffed in bags in out of the way corners of the van, and wash them all by hand, placing them on a clothesline I hang between two trees. We laugh at the fact that none of the thirty colorful socks hanging there seem to have its mate. I think that maybe in my rushed packing for the trip I just grabbed any socks I could find, regardless of whether they matched. It seems too much of a coincidence that we would lose one half of every pair.

Our campsite overlooks Mount Everts in the distance to the east, and to the west, above us on a hill, is the famous Mammoth Hot Springs Terraces, with steam and the smell of sulfur wafting above them. Elk graze comfortably nearby, just yards from the hoards of tourists eating \$7 ice cream cones. There is a delicate balance in Yellowstone between its uncontrollably wild space and theme park atmosphere. I think maybe the excitement of being in one of the most beautiful and interesting places in the world when it's as busy as Disney World can cause people to forget they're actually in the caldera of a volcano. Just this week a man is swept away in the

Yellowstone River and can't be found and another woman is gored by a bison while trying to take a selfie with it.

It's a privilege to be here for the second summer in a row. People that are much more responsible than me spend their whole lives wishing they could afford a trip like this and we've just been making it up as we go along. Both years the stop in Yellowstone has been the punctuation mark of our 15,000-mile west coast road trips and so interestingly this unforgivingly wild place is all tied up in my anxiety of surviving in the "real world," as both years we've been basically out of money by the time we arrive here. I'm not really sure how we'll get the gas home or what we'll do for money until our jobs start back up in the fall.

I sit on a bench at Artist's Point, overlooking the Lower Falls and Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, the layers of brittle rock turned shades of yellow, pink, and orange by iron deposits and exposed by thousands of years of erosion. On the edge of this cliff, looking down into the canyon, my anxiety fades away. I am small and I'm comforted by my own insignificance.

Colorado

Walking away from the edge of the cliff is difficult. I'd rather stay wild and selfish here, but we've gotten a job installing laminate flooring in Denver from a guy on craigslist. It'll be an easy way to make \$700 over a couple days. We leave Yellowstone that afternoon and begin a marathon drive through Wyoming to Denver, arriving the next day. We sleep at a Walmart a few miles from the guy's house and begin work the next morning.

I enjoy the work for the first few hours and feel proud to make something with my

hands. Capers has been a carpenter for years, so he's used to the work, but for me it's still a novelty, a test of my abilities to pick up a skill I've never done before. As with other areas of our relationship, I find that Capers and I make a great team, easily falling into a rhythm together as he takes the measurements and cuts the flooring pieces into the proper sizes while I fit them together, lining up the tongue and groove edges and banging them into place. We work like an assembly line without stopping for the first few hours until the repetitive nature of the work starts to grate on my nerves. By the end of the two days I think I'll go crazy at the sound of the tapping block and hammer clanging around as I pound the flooring into place.

I'm happy with our work once we're paid and ready to finally head home after over two months on the road. I'm encouraged by the fact we were able to make \$700 in a couple days and I'm feeling that maybe this whole van lifestyle is possible, maybe you really can just pick up work when you need it and keep going. I'm also relieved to avoid needing to beg for money to get home. I'm lucky to have such understanding parents that always trust and support me, even when they don't understand me or my decisions, and that will do their best to help me if I need it, but they can't really afford it and I wouldn't feel right about it. Now we'll have plenty to get home and then some, hopefully stretching the money long enough to get by before another job comes along at home.

I settle in for a long ride east. I forget how quickly the drive through Colorado becomes intolerably boring, driving east from Denver along 1-70. The reality of the miles hits as we descend from the Rocky Mountains into the flat farm lands and fields of tall yellow grass that make up eastern Colorado and will continue on through Kansas and probably Missouri, where entire towns smell of manure for miles. I get tired of looking out the window on rides like this,

where everything is flat and the drive seems endless. The last time we made this same drive, Capers insisted on driving all the way to Chattanooga in one twenty-one hour go, so I'm trying to accept how the day is going to end up.

We've barely driven 150 of the 1400-miles home when the familiar thumping sound of a flat tire puts us on the side of the interstate.

"Shit," Capers says as he pulls onto the shoulder. I'm also irritated but I try to appear unfazed. It was bound to happen on such a long trip and we're lucky it isn't something worse than a flat tire.

I know that the fear of breaking down is a significant stress for vandwellers living on very fixed incomes. If they break down and don't have the money to fix it, where do they go when their vehicle is their home? Without money for a hotel or a way to move their vehicle, they can quickly become homeless. Redman explained vandwellers' fears of breakdowns when I asked him about his scariest moment on the road: "I tell you I was in Utah and my water pump went out. I'm driving down the road and my water pump went out and there's water everywhere. So I had a \$2,000 towing bill. But yeah something like that ... I'm in a position that it should not have frightened me so much but someone else ... two grand just to get me to the tow shop? You know, that could have wrecked their life."

I don't think the flat tire is going to wreck my life, but when Capers comes back to the front and tells me the spare is also flat I know that it's not going to be such a simple fix. He calls roadside assistance and they say it'll be about an hour before a tow truck can come get us. The nearest exit with anything on it is about twenty miles away and I again realize how different it can be out here than back home. Every town I ever lived in was just a few miles from a major

interstate, even in the more rural areas. I've never really felt "out there" along the miles of I-75 where there's an exit with at least something on it every couple of miles. Even so, I figure the wait time and the whole ordeal is a minor setback of just a couple hours and we'll be back on the road soon.

When the tow truck arrives and the driver starts talking I realize just how out here we are. The backs of my knees are sweaty and sticking to the vinyl seats of the truck as the driver explains, "Yeah, I can drop you off at the tire shop in town, but I think it closes at 3 today on account of the county fair. Most of the stores in town close for it." I glance at the clock on the dashboard as this starts to sink in. It's 2:56 on a Wednesday afternoon and the only tire shop is closing at three o'clock.

"Is there a Walmart nearby or another place we could go?" Capers asks.

"Closest Walmart is fifty miles," the driver says. The twenty-mile tow alone is going to cost \$200, so that's out. We're quiet for the rest of the drive to Burlington, Colorado.

The driver drops us off at the closed shop and gives us an after-hours number to call, but no one is available to help us out. We resign ourselves to spending the night in town.

"Well what about sleeping here in the parking lot in the van, think that'll be alright?" Capers asks the driver.

"Well, I don't think the police would like it much if they found out about it," is all he says, so it looks like we're staying in a motel. We pay the driver the \$100 tow bill since our roadside assistance will only pay for the first \$100 and start looking up cheap motels in the area. The main strip of the town, if you can call it that, is about a mile away from the shop, so we get our backpacks and our dog, Waffles, and begin walking. We decide on the Chaparral Motor Inn

at \$70 a night for a pet friendly room. It's a pretty standard, cheap motel, but I know I'll be sleeping on top of the comforter. Once we get settled in, we walk across the street to eat dinner at an old school Pizza Hut straight out of 1992. It's packed with families eating from the pizza bar and refilling their glasses from their own pitchers of Coke. The scene reminds me of how my hometown used to be in the nineties, before the strip malls, chain restaurants, and big box stores took over. Everyone seems happy discussing the fair and I start to lighten up about the shop being closed so early in the day. It's kind of nice that the town has something like that that's so important to them. It feels good to slow down for a minute.

The next morning, Capers walks back to the shop and gets two new tires and an oil change, which costs \$220. Along with the \$100 tow, \$70 motel and dinner, a simple flat tire ends up costing us almost \$400. We'd be in a miserable situation had we not made the money in Denver, but we're just about back where we started now. Gas and food will eat up most of the remaining \$300 and we'll return home with nothing. I admit I feel a bit dejected. Not at being broke when we get home—I know we'll make it through once we're there—but because it has me questioning the viability of the vandwelling lifestyle. Of course, most vandwellers wouldn't make the mistake of having a flat spare tire, but what about the major repairs that seem inevitable for a vehicle you're driving hard all over the country? I've loved traveling with Capers the last few years and the whole time the possibility of this lifestyle has been in the back of my mind as something I'd give a try for a year or so, but having experienced so many ups and downs and things that can go wrong, would I really risk it? I know that right now I just want to be home, and I think I'd have a pretty bad outlook if I had no home to return to. I also know that in a few weeks, I'll want to leave again. I'm starting to think that the problem is not my environment, but

me.

Winter in Arizona

We awake to frozen windows and the white glow of snow on the ground. I can barely bring myself to move my hand out from under the blankets to wipe the condensation from the glass. By the looks of the sun low in the sky I'm guessing it's around 7:30 in the morning. My brother, Steven, is pressed up against the window on his side of the tiny bench bed, while Capers is snoring below us on the floor of the van, his head between the front seats and the rest of him jammed underneath the bed. When we'd invited Steven on this three-week trip we may have underestimated how crowded the van would be or just how cold we would get. It's December 29th and we're parked at the Flagstaff, Arizona Walmart. The low last night was 12°.

I've had to pee since my third and final beer last night around midnight, but by that time it was too cold to venture inside the store to use the bathroom. Since I slept in my clothes and my coat, all I need to find is my boots and I'll be ready to head inside for relief. I step over Capers and attempt to quietly open the sliding door, but it creaks due to the cold and the guys begin to stir.

By the time I return, they're both awake and Capers is looking miserable, shivering in his bathrobe while walking Waffles around the parking lot. I notice the lot is almost empty except for a few customers and I don't see the usual RVs or vans parked in the back. There were two RVs parked near us last night, but I saw them leave in the middle of the night, making me nervous that someone would notice us and tell us to leave. Despite the "No Overnight Parking" signs displayed prominently around the lot, this Walmart has looked more like an RV park than a

store the last two summers we've visited Flagstaff, leading me to believe the rule isn't aggressively enforced. We're lucky we've never been woken up in the night and told to leave, something that seems to happen to all vandwellers, eventually.

We begin the morning routine of straightening up the van to make it more livable, folding the bed back into a seat and stacking the blankets and pillows so they're out of the way. I'm more aware of how little space there is when the van is cluttered, which increases tension between everyone, so every day begins with this cleaning session. When everything is back in place, we begin our drive for the day. We're just an hour's drive from the Grand Canyon, which is good because we had a long day of driving yesterday and the van could use a break. This will be my third time visiting the canyon, but it's my brother's first time and I'm excited for him to see it. We already know of a free camping spot in the Kaibab National Forest right outside of the main gate. I've spent a total of a week and a half camping there, but everything about that spot of forest is etched into my memory. The breakfasts of boiled eggs and grits, the sound of helicopter tours flying directly over us in the afternoons, the nights spent by the stone fire-pit made by campers before us. It's our familiar home at the Grand Canyon.

We don't anticipate much competition for our camping spot in 20° weather, so we decide to check out the canyon before setting up camp. I've always heard that winter is the slow season for most National Parks, but there's a long line of cars waiting to get in the front gate and it seems to be just as crowded as our June visits. The trail leading up to the South Rim is icy and teeming with people, so we approach carefully, falling in line between groups and families on their way to the edge. I'm not as eager as I was the first time I visited, but once we reach the rim I'm just as silent. I know that the canyon is a mile deep, but that figure seems meaningless from

up here where distance and depth are difficult to grasp. The layers of red and yellow rock stretch out and down before us for an indeterminable distance, covering the entire horizon. Sunlight and shadow paint the canyon walls shades of red, blue, and purple, highlighting textures of earth carved out over millions of years. I suppress the urge to throw a pebble in, to connect myself to the land somehow by acting upon it, even in this small and insignificant way. I turn to ask Steven what he thinks, only to find he's standing about six feet behind me with a look of both awe and fear on his face. I start to laugh as he motions toward the thin sheet of ice separating us, remembering Dad's serious warning for my somewhat clumsy brother: "Don't fall in!"

We walk around the rim trail for a couple hours, stopping at overlooks every few minutes. Steven keeps a safe distance at spots with no railing. We'd planned on doing a small hike down into the canyon a little ways, but decide it's too late in the day to start. The popular overlooks and visitor centers are packed with people and we find ourselves wanting a break from the crowds. I think about the fact that we have to get Steven to the San Diego airport in ten days and I realize that I don't want to spend another day fighting the hordes of people at the Grand Canyon. The whole point of this trip was to introduce Steven to what this whole van lifestyle is about and through my travelling I've found that though the National Parks are undoubtedly amazing, some of the most beautiful things I've seen in the country I found by accident, just driving around. I pull Steven to the side at an overlook and ask, "You wanna go into Utah tonight instead of camping here?"

"Definitely," he says, and I decide to try to talk Capers into it.

I'd been trying to steer us into Northern Arizona and Utah for weeks during the planning stages of the trip, but Capers was hesitant, given our previous experiences. He says it's too

remote, that something could happen to the van out there, or it'll be too cold. All of that is probably true, but I know that though Steven wanted to see the Grand Canyon (who doesn't?), what he really wants to see is Monument Valley, the backdrop of many of his favorite classic Western films. I feel a strange prideful desire to be the one who makes it happen.

When I bring up the idea to Capers he's unsure, citing the trouble the van seemed to have yesterday climbing out of Phoenix. He wants to find a mechanic's shop back in Flagstaff before heading to California via the interstate and I want to go back out there to the same deserted highways where we made a wrong turn and got lost for hours a few years ago. "There'll be an auto shop in Page. We can camp in Monument Valley tonight and get to town by tomorrow afternoon. Then we'll stay at Lone Rock," I say, hoping the prospect of camping at our favorite spot in the country will help sway him. "And it's really no further away than Flagstaff and I-40 are."

"I'll take a look at the map," he says, and so I know we're going. I bring up the GPS on my phone, taking care to search for "Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park" instead of simply "Monument Valley," as that was my mistake last time when my GPS took us down a switchback dirt road into a canyon of powdery sand. That time, when my phone told us "you have arrived at your destination" we were driving my mom's minivan into a dried up creek bed praying we wouldn't get stuck. Then our phones lost signal and we didn't know which direction to go, so we kept driving straight. I didn't think I could stomach driving back up those switchbacks. We crept on, going only a few miles over a couple of hours, getting more anxious with every creak the van made as we drove through ditches of sand.

At one point, we were stopped by a herd of cows blocking the road, seeming to say to us

exactly what I was feeling: what the fuck are *you* doing out here? A particularly aggressive looking cow stood at the front right corner of the van with her calf standing behind her. She stomped her feet and ducked her head at us and Capers did the same by letting his foot on and off the brake, slightly inching the van towards them. I climbed in the back seat as he went for it. We lurched forward and the herd scattered to both sides of us.

That was during our first ever week on the road. I'd never gone further West than St. Louis in my 26 years and one week in I was facing down a herd of angry cows in Southern Utah. We drove on for another hour after dark, not knowing where we were going. Finally, we saw another truck driving towards us. Capers stopped the van and flashed his lights, hoping the driver would stop. The truck approached slowly and did stop, but the driver didn't roll down his window right away, as if he was sizing us up first.

"We've been lost for hours. Can you give us directions?" Capers asked when the man unrolled his window.

"Where're you heading?"

"We were trying to get to Monument Valley Park, but now I just want to get to the closest piece of asphalt."

The man told us there would be a few forks ahead and which ones to take to get back on the main highway. "If you have any trouble, just follow my tire tracks," he said.

A few minutes later, after being lost for five hours, we turned back onto the main highway, just a few miles east from where we turned off at the beginning of this ordeal. The experience was my biggest mistake navigating our travels and I quickly learned from it. Now, I always double-check GPS directions and try to have backup plans if we think we may go

out of phone service.

The correct GPS directions to Monument Valley Tribal Park say it will take three and a half hours to get there from the Grand Canyon, so we figure we can get there before dark. The ride east on Route 64 from Grand Canyon Village to Desert View is a great drive, offering views of both the canyon and the Colorado River on the left and elk in the woods to the right. We stop at the Desert View Watchtower and each have a bowl of chili at the cafe there. After about an hour of sightseeing from the tower, we resume our drive to Monument Valley.

There are three small towns between the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley and the highway in between those towns is completely desolate. We drive for a couple hours, stopping along the way in Tuba City for gas and drinks. Steven buys some maps of Navajo Nation for his map collection. I lay in the bed in the backseat, staring out at the sunset through the back window as we drive east. The sky is shades of red, orange, and purple and the glow of the red mesa on the sides of the highway make me feel as though I'm on a different planet, so foreign and far from everything I've ever known in the lush greens of the South. As it had last night, the van hesitates to shift gears correctly as we climb elevation for long stretches. I can see Capers' nervousness in the rearview mirror as he repeatedly glances down at the speedometer. He shifts out of drive into lower gears hoping it will help, but it only makes it worse. We won't make it to camp before dark, but we're just about forty-five minutes away now. The van seems to do better on flat ground so the last few minutes of the drive aren't that bad, but we're still quiet, knowing something must be wrong. We stop at a convenience store in Kayenta to get a couple cans of soup for dinner and some beer, forgetting alcohol is illegal in Navajo Nation.

"Closest place to buy is going to be a hundred miles that way," the clerk tells Capers,

pointing with her puckered lips towards the direction from which we came. We turn back onto the highway toward camp, my nerves about the van really had me feeling a drink, but I'm humbled to again realize the land is not for me. The drive north from Kayenta is just how I remember, extremely dark and getting darker as we drive further out of town. After twenty miles it's time for our turn, but we miss it in the dark. We drive on, waiting for a place to turn around and I know that if we could see the surrounding landscape we'd be amazed. The darkness gives the atmosphere a special quality, an eerie feeling brought on by the fact that we're here, but everything is too black to see. We round a curve and to my right I can just barely make out one of the buttes towering above the road, not because it's lit up by anything, but because its shape is just slightly darker than its surroundings. We turn around on a side road and struggle not to miss the road to the campground again.

We pick a campsite right at the foot of some red cliffs in the back of the campground. Capers starts the fire while I get out the canned goods and stove. For dinner, I add corn, black beans, and spicy rotel to two cans of chicken tortilla soup. I grate some cheddar and add tortilla chips to our bowls. We sit down by the fire and stare up at the stars that are brighter here than almost anywhere else I've ever been. After a few minutes of talking we're surprised when an enormous waning gibbous moon rises in the sky to our east, glowing yellow and illuminating a set of buttes in the valley. We talk excitedly about how perfect it looks and I try and fail to get a good picture. As the firewood burns down we get ready for bed. The low for tonight is 15°, so I put on my fleece onesie pajamas that I think have saved my life on this trip and climb back into the back of the van, smashed up against the window so Steven has enough room.

I roll over to the sun rising in the valley. We'd made big plans last night to see first light

from inside the park, but I hear Steven's alarm muffled under his pillow and we've obviously overslept. I decide to take my time getting up, relaxing and dozing off every few minutes instead of leaping out of bed as we've done so regularly for the last two weeks. Waffles starts to stir when he realizes I'm awake, staring at me expectantly. He does this every morning. He never wakes me up, but once he realizes I'm not asleep anymore he sits there at the foot of the bed glaring at me, forcing me to acknowledge he needs to go out.

I get up and walk him around the campground, taking in everything I couldn't see when we arrived last night. The campground is surrounded to the north and south by towering red mesa, with views of the buttes in the valley to the east. There's a small grocery and laundromat, but I'm most excited about the free showers. Back at the site I get out what will serve as breakfast: granola bars, canned pears, and sliced cheddar with crackers. The pears are so cold they hurt my teeth when I bite into them.

We snack and start getting ready for the day. It's been four days since we stayed somewhere with showers, which is way past my personal comfort level. In the summer it's easier to do without showers by finding a river or lake to jump into, but that obviously hasn't been possible in these temperatures. In the bath house, I'm relieved to find that the water is nearly scalding hot. I let the heat wash over me, thankful for these moments that make me feel more human again.

After the showers we get the site packed up and head for the park. The van starts up fine and we don't notice any problems on the drive across the street to the park. The overlook at the visitor center provides the classic view of Merrick Butte and the East and West Mitten Buttes. I take the exact same photos I took last time I was here, except this time there's a little snow on

the ground. We decide to drive down the dirt road that circles around the valley to get a closer look. The road looked fine from where we stood above it, but when we start driving down it I'm reminded of the last time we drove down a dirt road around here and I get a little nervous. At least there's plenty of people around this time. The road down from the visitor center is much steeper than I initially thought, and though the road seems well maintained, Capers still has to drive around large pot holes. We drive around for about an hour, taking pictures and just experiencing being so close to the buttes, which are much bigger than they seem looking down into the valley from the visitor center. When we decide to drive back up, I'm nervous about the steep climb out, but we make it back with no issues.

We leave Monument Valley with plenty of time to get to our next destination, Lake Powell in Page, Arizona, before dark. Page is the closest thing around here to a large town and I know Capers is anxious to get somewhere where we can get the van looked at. We've only been driving for a few minutes when the problem becomes evident again and it's the worst it's been. Capers tries to accelerate above 40mph, but it won't go any faster even though he's flooring it. Now we're just hoping to make it the 20 miles back to Kayenta, a tiny town still on the reservation. I'm thinking of last summer with the flat tire, when we spent all our remaining money breaking down in the middle of nowhere, and I figure this is going to be even worse. That was just a flat tire, whereas this could be a really serious engine or transmission issue. Once in a while, cars angrily pass us, but we finally make it back into Kayenta and we stop by the only auto-parts store in town. Capers wants to use their scanner to check the engine codes on the van's computer, hoping it will give us a clue to what's wrong, but he comes back out after just a few seconds and says they don't have one. We sit in the parking lot silently, thinking about

where to go from here. Capers was right about coming out here. It would take all the money we have left just to get towed somewhere we'd want to get it worked on, and then what? If it's a major problem, where would we get the money for a repair? How would we get Steven to San Diego on time? Would we just have to abandon our van here and get home some other way?

I think of the absolute worst case scenarios when Capers starts the van back up.

"We'll just have to get to Page even if we have to go 35 mph the whole way. We can't get it looked at here and there's no need to tow it until it won't go anymore," he says.

We pull back out onto the highway towards Page, maxing out at about 40 mph and even less on the up-hills. After a few miles of this Capers pulls back off onto the shoulder.

He hits the steering wheel a couple times. "God dammit!"

He lights a cigarette, gets out, and starts to pace around in front of the van. I'm strangely calm, already accepting the trip is over. We won't be seeing Yosemite this winter. Maybe we can just get towed, rent a car to get back home, and store the van some place until we get the money for repairs in a few weeks. Or maybe this van's life is over and it won't be cost effective to repair and we'll just sell it for parts.

I hear Capers talking on speaker-phone to his Dad while fooling around under the van. After a few minutes, he pops his head up to the window and asks for the hatchet in his nail bags. I dig it out and he uses it to bang on something near the back right tire. I figure this is some unconventional way to fix a car. After a few forceful hits that I'm surprised don't damage anything, Capers climbs back in the driver's seat.

"What was the hatchet for?" I ask as he starts the van.

"Was banging on the catalytic converter. It might be clogged," he says, pulling back onto

the highway. We start to climb uphill immediately and any hope that I had that we could fix the problem that easily disappears. We slow down so much that I'm sure the van's going to stop any moment.

Just as we reach the top of the hill and I think I'm about to start crying, a loud boom sounds from the back of the van and we shoot off like a rocket. We leave behind a black cloud of smoke.

"Holy shit!" I yell and we all instantly start screaming and laughing, the release of pressure and the difference in the van so immediately obvious that I'm confident the issue is fixed for now. We're all in a better mood right away, talking and planning out the coming days. We'll drive through Zion tomorrow and head for Yosemite via Las Vegas and SoCal after that, but tonight we'll make it to Lone Rock on Lake Powell, a place I feel connected to on some spiritual level.

We stop at the Walmart in Page to get firewood, drinks, and ingredients for chili. Lone Rock is 15 more miles out of town, right on the Arizona/Utah border, and we arrive about 30 minutes before dark. I know it's going to be cold tonight, but I'm surprised when I realize the beach that has been packed during our summer visits is completely empty. We drive a half mile down a sandy road, right to the edge of the beach facing Lone Rock, a 200-foot tall pillar that juts out of the water in the middle of this portion of the lake. The rock looks bigger than it has during our previous visits, as drought has exposed more of it. I watch as the sun sets behind us, turning the normally white and gray rock shades of orange and red. Everything I love about the Utah desert landscape is here. The way the red rocks look against a gigantic blue and pink sky, only the land is even more spectacular against the blue waters of Lake Powell. I feel a little guilt,

knowing the water shouldn't be here.

The area was formerly canyonland before the Glen Canyon Dam opened in 1966, creating the reservoir named Lake Powell. Miles of canyon and ancient Anasazi ruins are now underwater, possibly lost forever, all for a reservoir that's now less than half full and that has had negative environmental effects on the Colorado River and Grand Canyon, south of the dam. In the summer, the lake is a popular vacation destination, full of houseboats blaring music and partiers screaming. It's such a striking place that I loved it here despite the spring break atmosphere and the controversy surrounding the lake. I wonder if I would have loved it even more before the dam.

It gets cold rapidly as the sun goes down. I make a few drinks while Capers gets the fire going and Steven browns the meat for chili. We're celebrating that we've gotten this far and that we're not turning it around yet. I think of all the times in the last two years of travelling that we could have met disaster, and yet somehow we always barely come out ahead of it. And though it's wildly irresponsible and most likely unsustainable for very long, I know that somehow, this lack of security is the cornerstone of the lifestyle, that it's what is given up in order to live this way without having much money. The thrill of possible disaster keeps the lifestyle interesting.

The chili and whiskey in my stomach warm me and we sit by the fire for hours. Steven plays the Decemberists on the guitar while I sing. As the night goes on, the stars grow brighter. The Milky Way tears through the sky above us with bright silver, purple, and pink clusters of stars.

Capers points out all the constellations he taught me years ago when we first met, almost infinitely more visible out here than they are at home. Earlier I felt a little funny that I wanted to

leave the Grand Canyon, a natural world wonder, to go camp on a freezing beach on a man-made lake, but I know now that this is what I'm searching for through my travels. Here, on this beach in December, we find natural beauty, love, and solitude.

Summer at Home

It's my first July in Georgia in three years and the heat is even more oppressive than I remember. This time last year, I was trying to swim in Montana's Flathead River, but the water still felt like melted snow. My Mom asks me, "Weren't your summers in the van hotter?" but I tell her they were nothing like this. By July we would have already left the humidity of the South and the dry deserts of the Southwest for cooler temperatures in the Pacific Northwest. We would camp under the shade of Redwood trees, on the windy beaches of Oregon, or by a freezing river in Montana. If it got too hot or we didn't like where we were anymore, we would just leave. I was never constrained by a sweat-drenched bra or suffocated by suburban sprawl.

This ability to pick up and go whenever you feel like is one of the most alluring aspects of the nomadic lifestyle. Nearly all the vandwellers I've talked to cited it as the main reason they chose the lifestyle, but I can't help but wonder what they're searching for or what they're running away from. I ask myself the same questions. Every day on the road I felt so in control, deciding where to go next, seeing new places, and easily meeting new people everywhere I went. I've realized, though, that it's not only the change of scenery that I enjoy, it's the change I sense in myself. At home, I sometimes struggle to overcome anxiety around people I've known for years, but on the road, I've had intense conversations with camp neighbors I've known for only a

few minutes beside a fading fire, where it's so dark I can't even see their faces. I know them in my memories only by their voices.

Is it an automatic sense of community and shared experience that I feel with other travelers that allows me to speak candidly with them so easily? Perhaps it's also the anonymity and isolation of the road that makes things that are usually difficult for me simpler. Out there, I am just another girl, my title and career plans don't really matter, no one has to know anything about me, aside from some cool travel stories or plans about places I'd like to visit. I feel much freer to be anyone, including myself, to speak my mind and share my experiences, art, and ideas with others.

Back home in Georgia, I spend most of the summer working. As it gets hotter and hotter, I think that I can't possibly make the same five turns on the same roads to drive up to Starbucks, to work for another day editing boring videos or struggling to write, but I spend many days doing just that, lacking inspiration and feeling the pressure of impending deadlines. We get a couple remodeling jobs, which I enjoy because it pays well, breaks up the monotony, and I like transforming someone's home by making old things look new. My favorite project to work on is a custom-built, reclaimed wood dining table for Capers' Mom. For over a week, Capers teaches me how to shape one-hundred-year old barn wood into uniform pieces that we screw onto the top of the table frame we built together. The end result is a beautiful and sturdy piece of furniture that will probably outlive both of us, and I feel truly happy to have worked on it.

As this project and chapter in my life closes, I realize that for a few years now I've felt that I'm always waiting around without a sense of direction. I wait for the next job, the next semester, the next trip, deferring my happiness for something to come on down the road, but

when I'm travelling I am more in the moment, heading where I want to go instead of waiting for something to come to me. I'm more in tune with my senses and creativity, inspired by a steady stream of new landscapes and quirky characters. I live deliberately because almost everything is somewhat inconvenient and because of this I'm hardly ever idle. I appreciate little things more. My days begin with the sun and end with heavy eyelids, no longer kept awake most of the night by screen-induced insomnia. Despite all the question marks and possible things that can and will eventually go wrong, I know that I want to try living on the road seriously for at least a year and that it won't be long until I will have that chance.

So we spend the rest of the summer planning, working, and saving. How much money do we need to travel for a year and how long until we can save that much? What size van do we need to do it comfortably? How do we want our new van to be set up and for how much can we sell our current van? I avoid the tendency to think of vandwelling as some utopian dream and try to plan accordingly, budgeting for emergency funds and stashing money away with my mom for the inevitable apartment deposit we'll need when we have to come home.

It's August and we plan to sell the van we spent so much time converting last year for something bigger, when Capers calls me one day from work.

"Hey. I've got some bad news that's going to hurt ... financially," he says, sounding like someone has died.

"What is it?" I say in a panic, trying to figure out how the death of someone we know could hurt us "financially."

After a few moments of silence, "The van's been stolen."

He explains how he stopped at a Kroger near his job site to use the bathroom, was inside for 10 minutes and it vanished. My immediate reaction is disbelief. I never considered someone would steal a beat up Astro that is almost 20 years old and only worth \$2,500, at the most. Who steals a van from a Kroger parking lot in the middle of the afternoon? We only have liability insurance so we're out for the whole cost of the van. The loss does hurt, as we hoped that after we sold it and my car we could come out even on a new van, but also because we put so much work into converting it ourselves. It also had about \$400 in camping equipment inside and Capers bike was on the bike rack—another \$300 loss.

I'm pretty dejected for a couple weeks, positive that it's been stripped for parts and gone forever, but I try to stay positive and motivated. The plans are still on and it's better we learn this lesson now before we actually hit the road. The experience demonstrates the vulnerability of those living the life fulltime, without a home or stable place to return to when something goes wrong. It's difficult enough to stomach now, but what if it happened while living in it on the road? What if I were to lose everything? The fear and understanding that this is crazy and dangerous sinks in and I begin to doubt whether I really want to do this. I'm reminded of something Allie told me, "I feel like if you worry too much about being afraid, that ruins a lot of the experiences you could have and once you start to do it you realize, oh ok. It's just like getting over every fear. You just do it and then you realize: Oh, this isn't that scary." I am afraid of the what ifs, of losing my things, my home, and my respectability as a "normal" person if everything goes wrong. But I'm more afraid of not trying, of continuing an unfulfilling life that sometimes seems just as insecure as vandwelling, but without as many rewards. I think about my Nonnie who did everything right, only to pass in the night penniless, wishing she had done more. I think

of my Mom who loves her family fiercely, but has always asked herself “what if I had done things differently?” I want to try to do things differently. It may not be worth it in the end, but I’m tired of standing still.

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