The usefulness (of geography) is of various kinds, in respect both of the actions of politicians and commanders and of the knowledge of the heavens and the things on land and sea, animals and plants and fruits and everything else that can be seen in each, and indicates that the geographer is a philosopher, one who is concerned with the art of life and happiness.

-Strabo
Defining Freedom: An Ethnographic Study with American Vanlifers

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Geography

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Faculty of Social Sciences, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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For my Nana, Sarah Carleton Davies.

April 15th, 1936—May 8th, 2011

You always believed that I’d accomplish this…I only wish you’d lived long enough to see it.
Abstract

Moving alongside the “snowbirds” and grey nomads that have been discussed in the academic literature, there is a group of nomads that appears to have escaped scholarly attention. United under the “vanlife” and “buslife” hashtags, these individuals belong to a community of nomads who convert ordinary (and sometimes, extraordinary) vehicles into living spaces, and travel North America’s backroads in search of freedom and adventure. Using Cresswell’s definition of mobility as the combination of movement, representation, and practice, this thesis explores the meanings that American vanlifers assign to their mobility. Relying on participant observation and ethnographic interview data collected on the road during the summer of 2017, this thesis argues that when we deconstruct vehicle nomads’ use of the word “freedom,” it reveals important information about how they understand their mobility. By using a relational ontology and employing an epistemology of mobility rather than place, this thesis also attempts to expand the ways in which mobility can be understood by geographers. Through a detailed exploration of participants’ representations and practices, this study finds that when vanlifers used the word “freedom,” they were referring to their mobility in three specific senses: as freedom from social norms, freedom from routines and schedules, and freedom to pick up and go whenever they liked. As existing studies on RVers and British traditional nomads have already captured similar uses of the word “freedom” among their participants, this finding draws the existing research on vehicle nomadism into conversation in a productive way.

Keywords: Vanlife, Mobility, Nomadism, Automobility, RVing
Acknowledgements

The thesis you hold in your hands is the product of a (literal and figurative) journey, and I’d like to acknowledge some of the people who helped me along the way. To Dr. David Butz, my thesis supervisor, thank you so much for your guidance, patience, and support throughout the entire process; with every round of revisions, you pushed me to deliver my best, and helped me to create something I can be proud of. To Dr. Mike Ripmeester and Dr. Jeff Boggs, thank you for your thoughtful contributions and questions as members of my supervisory committee. Jeff, thanks also for the way you’ve believed in me since the 2nd year of my undergrad, and the way you continue to make me believe in myself. Kind thanks also to Dr. Peter Kabachnik for his attentiveness in providing feedback as my external examiner, and to Dr. Ebru Ustundag for being a kind and supportive presence in my life. Acknowledgement should also be given to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous funding of my research.

Mum, for your unending compassion, patience, love, and support, you deserve all of the thanks that I can offer. I’m so grateful for all of the times you listened to my stressed-out rambling while I was writing this thing, and for the burdens you shouldered in the later stages of the project so that I could focus entirely on my work. Dad and Amanda, thank you for your unending love and support, for being there for me, and for letting me crash at your place for a few months while I was getting the first draft done. Knowing you guys were rooting for me the whole time meant more than you know. To my Papa, thank you so much for your love and encouragement, and for helping me with the van build.

To my wonderful co-nomad Guber, thank you for inspiring me and for helping me to realise that nothing was holding me back from hitting the road except my own fears. To Khat, thank you so much for helping me with Lola, and for encouraging me to look after my spiritual
well-being (even when I didn’t listen). To my best friend Cheryl, there’s so much I owe you…your empathy, joyfulness, and loving support pulled me through the darkest times in my life, and taught me that a person doesn’t have to be your blood to be your family. To my best buds Nathan, David, and Rachel, thanks for all the D&D sessions that helped me to de-stress when the going got tough, and to Rachel especially, thanks for your support in the final stages of the project. Gratitude and love also go out to Bonita, Jubie, and Zhane for bringing so much joy to my life, and to Tami for being one of the most compassionate human beings I know. Sal, thank you for listening to my constant whining when I was prepping for my defense and working on my post-defense revisions. And Kristi, thanks so much for being a great and supportive friend, and for giving me a destination to hit on my first trip across Canada.

To Boomhauer, my deepest and most heartfelt thanks…you kept me from scrapping my van in a moment of desperation, and no words can express how grateful I am to you for that. Kind thanks also to the vanlifers and the skoolie who sat down with me to share your thoughts and opinions on vanlife as part of this research…you made this project what it is. Last but not least, thank you to all of the wonderful members of my cohort and the cohorts below us. To Chelsea, thank you for warming the grad lounge with your cheerful personality, and for getting us through those dog days in January when we were working on our proposals. Khuram, thanks for being such a good listener on those days when there was no-one in the grad lounge but us. To Claire, thank you for your strength and support in what was probably the most challenging semester of my academic career. And to Katelyn, thank you for your unending support, and for the delightfully salty humour you bring to even the direst of situations (please don’t ever change). To all those mentioned here (and to all the ones who aren’t), thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Without you, this wouldn’t have been possible.
## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: American Nomads .............................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: Matters of Representation: A Review of the Literature on Mobility, Vehicle Nomadism, and Automobility ........................................................................................................... 7

  Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 7

  Mobilities .......................................................................................................................................... 14

  Sedentarist Metaphysics in Theory ................................................................................................. 16

  Sedentarist Metaphysics in Practice ............................................................................................... 17

  “Nomadic” Metaphysics ............................................................................................................... 19

  Cresswell’s Politics of Mobility ...................................................................................................... 23

  Ontology .......................................................................................................................................... 25

  Place Matters, Movement Matters: Mobility and Geography ....................................................... 32

  Foregrounding Mobility in a Geography of Vanlife ........................................................................ 34

  Vehicle Nomadism ......................................................................................................................... 37

  Recreational Vehicle Users (RVers) ............................................................................................... 39

  Snowbirds ....................................................................................................................................... 40

  Grey Nomads ................................................................................................................................. 42

  Full-timers or Part-timers? .............................................................................................................. 43

  Boondockers .................................................................................................................................... 44

  Gaps in the Literature ..................................................................................................................... 44

  What’s in a name: A Review of the Literature about Vehicle Nomads in the British Isles ....... 46

  Making Connections ....................................................................................................................... 55

  Automobilities ............................................................................................................................... 56

  The “System” of Automobility ....................................................................................................... 57

  Automobility Theory ....................................................................................................................... 59

  The Effects of Automobility .......................................................................................................... 60

    How Automobility Shapes Landscapes ......................................................................................... 61

    Automobilized Time-Space .......................................................................................................... 62

    How Automobility Shapes Sociality ............................................................................................ 63
Cars in the Academic Literature............................................................................................................. 66
Critiques of Cars and their Effects on Urban Life .................................................................................. 67
Urban Sociology’s View of the Car and Automobility .......................................................................... 67
Political Sociology’s View of the Car and Automobility ................................................................... 68
Danger .................................................................................................................................................... 71
Other Understandings of Cars ............................................................................................................. 72
Cars and Our Emotional Bonds ........................................................................................................... 74
Car Cultures........................................................................................................................................... 75
Gaps in the Automobilities Literature .................................................................................................. 77
Conclusion............................................................................................................................................... 82
CHAPTER 3:  It takes a Village to Build a Van:  Hitting the Road as Methodology ....................... 87
Mobile Methods and their Framework ................................................................................................. 93
Finding “Lola,” and turning her into a Home on Wheels ..................................................................... 98
Buying and Converting the Van .......................................................................................................... 99
The Conversion Process ....................................................................................................................... 101
Taking Lola into the Field:  Ethics, Data Collection, and Sample Characteristics .................. 106
Participant Observation and Semi-Structured Interviews (i.e., the Part of the Chapter where I talk about Ontology and Epistemology) ........................................................... 112
From Researcher to Vanlifer:  An Important Discussion on Positionality ......................................... 114
A Few Words on Representation and How this Thesis has been Written ........................................ 122
Coding .................................................................................................................................................... 125
Potential Limitations of the Project ..................................................................................................... 127
Representations, Practices, and Freedom (and Why I’m Using these Concepts to Organize my Work) ................................................................................................................................. 130
CHAPTER 4:  Defining Freedom:  Representations of Vanlife ............................................................. 133
What is “Vanlife?” ............................................................................................................................... 136
Vanlife as Freedom ............................................................................................................................... 140
Resolving Cognitive Dissonance:  Vanlife as Freedom from Social Norms .................................. 143
Busyness, Jeopardy and Mowing the Lawn:  Vanlife as Freedom from Routines and Schedules ........................................................................................................................................... 152
Having “Itchy Feet”:  The Freedom to Go When You Want .............................................................. 173
Conclusion............................................................................................................................................... 180
**Figures and Illustrations**

Figure 1: When People Think your Gas Tank Runs on Friendship 65
Figure 2: Room and Drive 74
Figure 3: Steph and Lola 98
Figure 4: Steph Grinding Rust 101
Figure 5: Insulating the Van 102
Figure 6: New Floor 103
Figure 7: New Interior 104
Figure 8: Bed and Storage 105
Figure 9: Departure Day 105
Figure 10: All Powered Up 106
Figure 11: A 15,000 km Journey 108
Figure 11b: Washington Gathering 109
Figure 12: Joining the Convoy 110
Figure 13: Circling the wagons, down by the river… 110
Figure 14: Vanlife Word Cloud 160
Figure 15: Pre-nomadic Life Word Cloud 160
Figure 16: Bringing up the Rear 204
Figure 17: Slab City Circle 204
Figure 18: Slab City Circle 2 205
Figure 19: Gimme Shelter 206
Figure 20: Welcome to the Neighbourhood 207
Figure 21: No Sleeping in Vehicles 253
Figure 22: No Overnight Parking 254
Figure 23: No Residing or Camping 254
Figure 24: One thing that I learned pretty quickly… 258
Figure 25: No Camping at Rest Areas 259
Figure 26: Intentions and Ties 263
List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Terms and Definitions

49
A Note on Transcript Conventions

Throughout my thesis, I have cited material from my interview transcripts, and as some readers may not be familiar with the conventions for transcribing interviews, I feel it may be helpful to provide a list of the symbols I have used to indicate different things that happened during the interview (e.g., participants interrupting each other, or speaking at the same time). Some of these conventions were borrowed from Dunn (2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>Words between asterisks indicate overlap, speakers talking at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>//</td>
<td>Words between double slashes indicate that one speaker has interrupted the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I loved it</td>
<td>Italicized text indicates a word emphasized by the speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[laughs]</td>
<td>Italicized words in square brackets (other than the word “pause”) indicate a non-verbal action by the speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>Indicates a brief pause by the speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[pause]</td>
<td>Indicates a lengthy pause by the speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[…]</td>
<td>Indicates a point where material has been edited out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[unclear]</td>
<td>The word “unclear” in square brackets indicates that something the speaker said didn’t come through clearly on the recording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me:</td>
<td>Indicates a point in the interview where I am speaking to the participant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cast of Characters

**Boomhauer:** An awesome vanlifer I met at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous back when I was doing some initial legwork for my research.

**Heather:** A soft-spoken and artistically talented 32 year old woman from Colorado Springs, Colorado, she kick-started her nomadic life by backpacking 500 miles with her partner. She’s been on the road full-time for 2.5 years, and drives a big 1995 GMC Vandura called Manatee.

**Charlie and Koa:** Totally rad couple from Hawaii, travelling in an old 1969 Riviera Camper Volkswagen Bus named Claire. Koa, who majored in business, is 26, and he hails from Kalihi, Honolulu, Hawaii. Charlie, who majored in religion, is 25, and she’s originally from Steamboat Springs, Colorado. They’d been on the road for 3 months at the time I interviewed them, and they say they’re on the road because they’re “looking for their next hometown” (Interview 2, p. 48).

**Ludwig and Primrose:** This Connecticut couple’s as cool as a cucumber. Both college graduates, they’ve been on the road for a year and a half (although not consecutively), and they drive a 1983 GMC Vandura. Ludwig, who’s originally from Glastonbury, is 23, and studied anthropology, sociology, and political science as part of his degree. Primrose, who used the power of delicious Tuesday meals to win Ludwig’s heart, is 25 and hails from Uncasville. They hit the road so they could “explore and find people that were shining more like we were trying to” (Interview 3, p. 3).

**Ashli Towel and Duke Silver:** Best. Pseudonyms. Ever. Duke Silver, who grew up in Westport, Connecticut, is 31. His partner Ashli Towel, who’s originally from St. Louis, Missouri, is 26. They met when they were both working for a non-profit organization called Americorps, and at the time they were interviewed, they’d been on the road full-time for four months. Their van G______, a 1996 Chevy Express, had a mouse living in the engine when they went to buy him. However, with a little TLC, he became an awesome home on wheels that Ashli Towel and Duke Silver share with their canine companions.
**Drake Man O’War and Sinn Sage:** An awesome Californian couple, these two 33 year olds drive a 2004 Chevy Express 2500 van called Squanchy. Drake Man O’War was trained as a mechanic and Sinn Sage as a massage therapist, and they’d been on the road for about 16 months when I interviewed them.

**Medusa and Spener:** This lovely eco-conscious couple hails from Seattle. They’re both 30 years old, and they’ve been on the road for four months in a gorgeous 2014 Dodge Promaster van. They met in New Zealand, and when the time came to choose between a van and a house, they bought the van. Spener built the interior with his dad.

**Walrus Drummer:** At 44 years old, this totally boss professional drummer has written a book and also has plans to start his own coffee company. Upon graduating from high school, he threw his drums in the back of a Ford courier truck, drove to the city to audition for a band, and landed a position as the drummer on his first attempt. Roaming around in a 1999 Dodge Ram 1500 van named Debbie, this California native had been on the road for 11 months when I interviewed him.

**Jiselle and Roy:** One of those couples that make you feel happy and inspired just from being around them. Hailing from New Orleans (although Jiselle is originally from Trinidad and Tobago), they’d been on the road for 16 months at the time they were interviewed. They consider their van, a 1985 Volkswagen Westphalia, to be a member of their family, and her name means ‘powerful and pleasing.’

**Timmy Toothpicks:** Originally from Massachusetts, this 48 year old vanlifer travels in style in a 4x4 2016 Mercedes Benz 3500 model Sprinter van who doesn’t have a name yet (although it’ll probably be a cool name when she gets one). Timmy Toothpicks’ goal is to hike all the fourteeners, and he’d been on the road for 3 years at the time he was interviewed.

**Large Marge:** Hailing from northern Minnesota, I knew this 48 year old skoolie was a badass when she nonchalantly loaned me a pen with the address of the local strip club. At the time she was interviewed, Large Marge had been on the road full-time for a year, although she’d been part-time for over 6 years. Based on her chosen pseudonym and the name of her Ford Econoline 450 bus (PeeWee) I’m guessing she’s a fan of the movie *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure.*
CHAPTER 1

American Nomads

There is a certain type of American for whom freedom is more important than food. Always a minority, they reappear in every generation, right at the point where the social fabric is thinnest, right where the laws and mores and customs and taboos are just about to rupture and spill out into some new and temporarily looser mold: a new territory, a new social system, a new tomorrow…[…] They are a product of the system, but not quite a part of it. They’re the observers, the outsiders, the misfits…. We can handle these misfits one at a time…. But what happens when…a quarter million or more of them come out of the woodwork at once…. A quarter million self-sufficient individuals out there on the road, all marching in roughly the same direction, all following some hazy star of freedom and independence that’s invisible to everybody else….

- Thornburg (cited in Counts & Counts 2009, p. 97)

***

Unlike a few of the participants who were interviewed for this thesis project, I can’t say that I’ve always been a nomad. The first time I felt the call of the road, I was in my early twenties. I’d just lost my job as an ambulance dispatcher, and my savings and unemployment insurance payments had run dry while I was trying to find another job. Standing before a case worker at the welfare office, I’d told the woman behind the desk that the check she’d handed me was a hundred dollars shy of the rent for my tiny apartment.

Callously, she’d replied that I’d have to find somewhere else to live.

Walking back to my place from the bus stop, I paused at the top of the bridge on Merritt Street, turning to look out at the point in the distance where the metal train tracks converged. Leaning on the railing with a sigh, I contemplated my lot in life…and suddenly, an unexpected thought jumped into my mind.

What if I just left all of this? What if I just hopped a train and rode it to wherever it’s going?
I shook the thought off immediately, dismissing it as nonsense because I was unwilling to take that kind of risk. But the second time the road called to me, I answered. A few months out from turning 30, I was dating an animation student from Seneca College, and we’d just ordered a meal at a Korean barbeque joint in Toronto. Plucking a bit of pork belly off of the grill, I smiled at him and asked, “so where have you been in North America?”

“Oh, I’ve never left the area,” he replied.

Nearly dropping my chopsticks, I took a moment to process this reply, and then raised a brow. “Like…you’ve never even been to the United States?”

“Nope.”

That’s when it hit me like a Chevy falling off a busted jack stand: *Holy shit, my world is too small.* And the next day, I was in the Student Exchange Office at my university, asking what my options were. By September of 2014, I was on a plane to Seoul in South Korea, where I studied at Yonsei University for 10 months. In that time, I did a breakneck tour of Japan, backpacked through Thailand for two weeks, and spent five days in Cambodia.

And then, I came back.

You see, when someone says the word *homesick*, people know what that means. We know when it happens, and we know what it feels like. *Roadsick*, not so much. After being home for a couple of months, I sank into a deep depression, and I couldn’t figure out why. Eventually I put the pieces together, realising that now that I’d answered the call of the road, the fact that I wasn’t able to get up and go whenever I wanted was making me unhappy. However, I was coming up to the start of my Master’s Degree, so I had no choice but to bite the bullet, and power through.

That’s when the idea for this thesis came along.
My mum has this great habit of sending me things that she comes across in the news that are related to geography, and one day when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do for a thesis project, she sent me a link to a BBC clip about Richard Grant’s documentary film *American Nomads* (BBC News 2011). In the clip, Grant wanders out into the desert in Quartzsite, Arizona, and talks to a bunch of retired RVers who had sold their homes, bought RVs, and were now living on the road on a full-time basis.

I was utterly fascinated! Here was a group of people who’d gone from living in a fixed home in a fixed neighbourhood to living in a vehicle on the road; and what’s more, there were about three million of them (BBC News 2011). How could it be possible that nearly 1% of the American population had said goodbye to the norm of fixed property and taken up a nomadic lifestyle? What was driving their decision? Both the traveller and the geographer in me were intrigued. I had to do research with these people.

With the help of funds from the Dr. Raymond and Mrs. Sachi Moriyama Graduate Fellowship, I flew down to Quartzsite in January 2017, in hopes of meeting the nomads I’d be doing my research with that summer. And I did meet them, although they weren’t the nomads I’d originally intended to study. You see, this thesis project was initially designed to be an ethnographic study with retired RVers; however, when I got to Quartzsite, I stumbled onto a gathering of vehicle nomads that would change the course of this project (and my life).

Just like the RVers in the BBC clip my mum sent me, these vehicle nomads—who called themselves “vanlifers” and “vandwellers”—were camped out in the desert just outside of Quartzsite. And there were hundreds of them. It begged the question: how had I missed reading about these people when I’d been reviewing the academic literature?
When I got back from Arizona, I discovered the reason: because nobody in academia had studied vanlifers yet. I immediately changed the research proposal for my thesis, shifting the focus of my project from retired RVers to full-time van nomads. In the initial stages, my project revolved around the concepts of mobility and the home, with the intent of answering the following two research questions:

1. What meanings do vanlifers assign to their mobility?
2. In what ways do these nomads’ understandings of the concept of ‘home’ align with or challenge current scholarly understandings of this geographical scale?

I set out in my own converted van during the summer of 2017 to conduct my field research, and after returning from the west coast of America with some very rich interview data, I decided to narrow the scope of my final write-up and focus exclusively on my first research question. As a result of that decision, the ethnographic work you’re about to read presents a detailed exploration of the ways in which my participants represent and practice their nomadic mobility. But more on that later; for now, it’s important for me to provide a proverbial road map for how the next five chapters are going to unfold.

In Chapter Two, I provide a detailed overview of important literature in the mobilities paradigm, and I talk about the research that has been done to date on the topic of vehicle nomadism. As a part of this discussion, I also provide a brief breakdown of the two dominant bodies of literature on vehicle nomads: research on RV nomads, and research on nomadism in the United Kingdom. As I will explain in Chapter 2, the two bodies of work are being discussed separately because they’re grounded in two very different approaches to nomadic mobility; however, my findings draw them into conversation with one another in later chapters. Chapter Three contains an overview of my methodology, and explains why I decided to move into an old
cargo van and drive across the continent to interview and observe people in the first place. In this chapter, I also talk about mobile methods, and explain why these methods are useful for studying vanlifers, skoolies, and other nomadic people. From there, I continue by providing a walkthrough of the van conversion process, and an overview of how I went about doing my research in the field. After touching briefly on my ontology and epistemology, I move on to discuss the approach that I took in writing up my findings, and explain why I’ve included elements of narrative autoethnography and personal experience narrative in the final write-up.

From there, I move on to Chapters Four and Five, in which I use aspects of Cresswell’s (2010) definition of mobility—namely, as the interweaving of movement, representation, and practice—as my organizing framework. In Chapter Four (Defining Freedom: Representations of Vanlife), I relate the findings of my interview research, focusing on the ways in which my participants represented their nomadic mobility. Then, in Chapter Five (Slow Mobility, Community, and Dealing with Sedentarism: A Discussion of Vanlife Mobility Practices), I discuss some of the practices that my interviewees engaged in, exploring the manner in which participants differentiated their mobility from tourists’ mobility. I also engage more directly with the concept of sedentarist metaphysics, and discuss the impacts that sedentarist policies have had for my research participants (and myself). Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude my thesis with a discussion of how my findings uniquely inform discussions of automobility and vehicle nomadism more broadly.

Now, as you may have noticed, I am using a writing style that’s fairly unconventional, given that many Master’s students tend to write their theses in a formal academic style. Given that this unconventional writing style continues in the chapters that follow, I feel that I should pause for a moment and explain why I’ve chosen to write my thesis in this way.
To quote Malcolm X (1963), the primary reason why I’ve adopted an informal writing style and avoided elevated vocabulary wherever I could is because I wanted to “talk right down to earth in a language that everybody here can easily understand” (para. 1). This wasn’t because I’m incapable of using scholarly language or a formal writing style; rather, it was because writing my thesis in this way would’ve made it less accessible to some of the people I wanted to share it with. And that was important to me. I wanted my family, my friends, and all of the people who contributed to my research to be able to read my thesis and understand what I’ve written. Moreover, I wanted this write-up to be an enjoyable read, as I had a lot of fun conducting my research and I’m excited to share the results of my fieldwork.

So, now that I’ve explained myself and you have the road map for how the next five chapters are going to unfold, let’s go and explore…starting with the things that scholars and vanlifers are saying about mobility, and what it means to them.
CHAPTER 2

Matters of Representation: A Review of the Literature on Mobility, Vehicle Nomadism, and Automobility

Nomads have repeatedly been represented as “people without culture.” This devaluing of culture stems from the notion that nomads are a vestigial holdover from a simpler, more primitive time. Nomadism is seen as an earlier stage of humanity, and progress has led us to the sedentary way of life. Sedentary ways of life are now the taken-for-granted hegemonic norm. This emulates the evolutionary view of culture that prevailed in the nineteenth century.

-Rosaldo (cited in Kabachnik 2009, p. 467)

Introduction

An important part of writing a Master’s Thesis is reviewing the academic work that has been done on your topic, and acknowledging the research findings of those who came before you. In my case, when you’re looking at a topic that hasn’t received a lot of scholarly attention, that can make things a little challenging. This is especially true when you’re trying to select a theoretical framework (basically, a scholarly ‘angle’ or ‘lens’ for how you are going to approach your research) and justify why that framework is the best one for analysing the data that you have collected. In geography, there are quite a few ‘lenses’ that you can choose from, with different frameworks being inspired by different ways of thinking (Marxism and feminism are two of the better-known examples). Unfortunately, as of 2018, all of the available research on vehicle nomads has been undertaken in disciplines outside of geography…which means that there is no real ‘go-to’ theoretical framework I can retrieve from the geographical literature and say “yes, human geographers have shown that this is framework is ideal for analysing this particular kind of data.”

This is where the mobility turn, a new research ‘angle’ in the social sciences, comes in. The mobility turn gives researchers a way of thinking about our data that foregrounds movement in the analysis (and while that may not sound like a big deal, it actually is, because it gives
researchers new and useful ways to study moving people, things, and practices). Mobilities scholarship treats movement as something that is “increasingly important to our social worlds,” and as such, the mobilities framework has been adopted by academics across multiple fields (Dufty-Jones 2012, p. 207; Merriman 2009). However, for sociologists and geographers, adopting this lens involves reconfiguring how certain concepts in these disciplines are approached.

For quite a while now, societies and cultures have generally been understood as things that are created by people who stay in place(s). But in a world where people and things are constantly on the move, sociologists “can no longer talk, with any degree of safety, about discrete objects called societies,” and geographers can no longer argue that culture is something that gets written on the landscape by people who stay put (Cresswell 2006, p. 43; Winchester, Kong & Dunn 2003). In particular, the increasing flows of people, products, and information that have gone hand in hand with globalization have encouraged scholars to advance more fluid understandings of concepts like society and place. In a world where so many things and people are constantly moving around, it isn’t always easy to argue that society and culture are products of fixity.

The mobilities lens can be a bit of a challenge for geographers, as some of the concepts we use to describe and analyse our world do tend to make more sense when fixity is assumed to be the norm. As an example, in geography, one of the dominant ways of understanding the world and its processes is to use the concept of scale. This term originally referred to the scale of resolution on a map, with large-scale maps being more ‘zoomed in’ and showing less territory (with a higher level of detail), and small-scale maps being more ‘zoomed out’ and showing a larger amount of territory (Marston, Woodward & Jones 2009). In this use of the term scale, the
phenomena that geographers want to represent—such as local crime statistics or patterns of
global air travel—generally have a scale of resolution at which the information is best
represented. In the case of local crime statistics, a geographer would be focusing in on a city or
town, so a large-scale map that shows less territory would be better suited to represent the data.
However, if a geographer wanted to represent patterns of global air travel, a small-scale map that
shows more territory would make a lot more sense. Basically, this original understanding of
scale refers to the level at which data is being represented.

The second understanding of scale applies more to how data is approached or organized.
In this use of the term scale, the most ‘zoomed in’ level of resolution would be the scale of the
body, with the most ‘zoomed out’ scale usually being the planet (Marston et al. 2009). Much
like a set of Matryoshka dolls, these nesting scales exist in a hierarchy, and they can be
organized from micro to macro in the following order: body, home, neighbourhood, city, region,
state, nation, country, and globe (ibid). In a way, this understanding of scale is very much like
the original one discussed in the previous paragraph, in that some scales are better suited than
others for explaining particular processes. For example, if someone wished to study the way that
a person’s gender shapes daily interactions with urban space, they might use more ‘zoomed in’
scales like the body, the home, the neighbourhood, and/or the city. However, if a geographer
wished to study the economic effects of international migration, this might require more ‘zoomed
out’ scales like the state, the nation, and/or the globe.

Yet, in this use of the term scale, the different levels of analysis—such as bodies, cities, and
nations—are not understood as isolated containers; in fact, certain processes are better
understood when geographers look at how different scales are interacting and influencing one
another (Marston et al. 2009). For example, the implementation of trade agreements between
different nations can have effects at the level of the nation, but individual households and human beings can also feel the impacts, especially if employment gets outsourced to other nations as a result. Furthermore, the processes that geographers study do not occur in a vacuum; rather, processes at different or similar scales can shape, depend upon, or counteract one another. Using the example of the international trade agreement, the effects occurring at the national and local level could be amplified (or destabilized) by political revolutions occurring in neighbouring countries. In this second understanding of *scale*, the term describes a way of approaching the processes that geographers study, and a way to organize these processes into different levels so we can better understand how they unfold (and how they influence one another).

An alternative to this ‘nesting doll’ approach is to understand *scale* as something that’s socially constructed. In this version of *scale*, bodies, cities, nations, and other scales are not viewed as concrete entities in and of themselves, but as entities that are produced by—and likewise help to shape—human social practices. A good way to understand this view is to think about the scene in *The Walking Dead* where Rick enters the deserted city of Atlanta on horseback (Darabont, Eglee & Kirkman 2010). As he rides slowly through the empty city streets, no people can be seen in the windows of the buildings or on the sidewalk below. The landscape is entirely devoid of human activity: there are no cars honking, no pedestrians chatting…the only sounds we can hear are the clopping of the horse’s hooves on the pavement and the fluttering of wings as a pigeon suddenly flies by. This scene serves to unnerve the viewer, because all of the human practices that tell us that Atlanta is something more than a collection of empty buildings and pavement are gone. Without humans bustling about the streets and buildings, Atlanta just isn’t Atlanta any more. And that’s what the social constructionist approach to scale is getting at: in this view, it’s the social practices of human beings that make
cities, bodies, homes, neighborhoods, states, nations and the world the things that they are.

When human practices are removed from these scales, they become something different.

Now, whether we understand scale as a set of concrete entities or as a set of places produced entirely through human social activity, this way of thinking tends to imply a hierarchy between the different levels, with smaller scales often situated at the bottom of the hierarchy. As a result, when geographers used this concept to study the processes that accompanied globalization, it created the sense that the local scale and the global scale were constantly at odds with one another. In this understanding, local places were seen as being shaped by—and subject to—the forces of global (i.e., transnational) capital (Harvey 1996). Ultimately, this use of the concept of scale led to an understanding where the local and the global were situated at opposite ends of a binary relationship, with the global scale having most of the power.

This was the context within which Amin (2002) proposed that the concept of scale should be reconfigured, because “[t]he language of nested scales and territorial boundaries” didn’t fully capture some of the processes that were unfolding as a result of globalization (p. 395). Rather than looking at scale as a vertical hierarchy with the local and the global at opposite ends, Amin (2002) argued for a horizontal, “topological” understanding of the world that saw bodies, homes, cities, and nations as equal players in a network of interactions (p. 396). In this approach, the goal is to show:

how, at each scale, the properties of the whole emerge from the interactions between parts, bearing in mind that the more simple entities are themselves assemblages of sorts. Moreover, through their participation in networks, elements (such as individuals) can become components of various assemblages operating at different levels. (Escobar 2007, pp. 107-108)

To give an example of how this works, if we used this understanding to look at a city, we’d see it as a network where neighbourhoods, homes, people, animals, objects (and various other things and ideas) are all interacting with each other. But at the same time, people, animals, objects and
ideas may be coming into that network from other networks, leaving that network for another network, or moving back and forth between different networks (someone who commutes to work, for example, could be seen as bouncing between two networks on a regular basis).

Moreover, this understanding treats cities as components in an even larger network; the Tokyo stock exchange, for example, is part of Tokyo’s urban network, but it functions in a way that draws the city into a much larger network of interactions. In advancing this horizontal understanding of social relations, however, Amin (2002) was careful to point out that he was not denying the existence of “scalar politics” (i.e., the way in which politics at the local, national, and international levels shape our world and our day-to-day lives); rather, he was challenging scale as a way of thinking about the processes that researchers study (p. 396).

Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) were similarly critical of the use of scale as an epistemological tool,\(^1\) taking aim at the way in which it shaped geographical research:

> most empirical work is lashed to a relatively small number of levels—body, neighbourhood, urban, regional, national and global. […] [R]esearch projects often assume the hierarchy in advance, and are set up \textit{a priori} to obey its conventions. In short, hierarchical scale is a classic case of form determining content, whereby objects, events, and processes come pre-sorted, ready to be inserted into the scalar apparatus at hand.” (p. 422)

Marston et al. (2005) also took this critique a step further, stating that the concept of scale is more reflective of “the contingency of socially constructed political boundaries and associated data reporting than any serious reflection on socio-spatial processes” (p. 422). Conceptualizing scale as a network of interactions wasn’t something that effectively addressed these critiques, because all it did was turn the hierarchy sideways, replacing the “local-to-global” vertical hierarchy with a horizontal “origin-to-edge” one (ibid.). The answer, according to Marston et al. (2005), was not to reconfigure the concept of scale, but to get rid of it altogether. In its place, they proposed a \textit{flat ontology}.

\(^1\) i.e., a tool that we use to try and understand and/or explain the things we’re researching.
A flat ontology, as Marston et al. (2005) are careful to point out, is not a completely deterritorialised understanding of the world (one in which there are no boundaries, and the world is made up of the intermingling flows of people, animals, objects and ideas). A flat ontology is still a spatial ontology; however, it conceptualizes the world in terms of “localized and non-localized event-relations” rather than a set of hierarchical scales (Marston et al. 2005, p. 424). In this understanding, which draws on the work of Theodore Schatzki, we treat the places and processes we study as “dynamic contexts that allow various inhabitants to hang together in event-relations by virtue of their activities” (ibid., p. 425). In this understanding, things like governments and institutions are seen as “orders that produce effects on localized practices,” and the built environment is treated as “a relatively slow-moving collection of objects” which “function as an ordering force in relation to the practices of humans arranged in conjunction with it” (ibid.).

Regardless of whether we use a hierarchical or networked understanding of scale in our research, or adopt Marston et al.’s (2005) flat ontology approach, we are still using space and place as the lens through which movement is being understood. As I will explain in my section on ontology, this approach to studying mobility can be useful; however, there are contexts where it may not enable us to capture particular aspects of the processes that we’re studying. In contexts like these, the mobilities lens can be very helpful; however, before I move on to a discussion of ontology, it’s important to provide a review of the mobilities literature, and explain how the mobilities paradigm came to be.
Mobilities

[T]here is not an innate or essentialist meaning to movement. Mobility instead gains meaning through its embeddedness within societies, culture, politics, histories.

-Peter Adey (2006, p. 83)

Human beings have been thinking and writing about movement for many lifetimes, and the ways in which we have thought and written about movement have changed as time goes by (Cresswell 2006). For mobilities scholars writing in the current paradigm, movement is theorized as a social practice. The mobility of people, things, and ideas is understood as “a structuring dimension of social life” that plays a role in how we integrate into society; one that can afford status (or diminish it), and impact our ability to engage with the world in the ways that we desire (Flamm & Kaufmann 2006; Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye 2004, p. 754). Much like gender, mobility is understood to be something that we perform, and this performance unfolds in “an array of more-or-less transitory, individualized and embodied social relations and associations” (Merriman 2009). To put it simply, mobility is *lived* movement. How that movement unfolds can depend on how we feel, who we are interacting with, or the type of physical space we are occupying at the time. To clarify this point, one of the reasons why that famous *Saturday Night Live* skit with Chris Kattan, Will Ferrell, and Jim Carrey car-dancing to *What is Love* is so funny, is because even when the venue for their dancing changes, their movements stay the same.²

Of course, people are not the only things in the world that move around, nor are they the only topic of study for mobilities scholars. As Hannam, Sheller & Urry (2006) have noted, mobilities research focuses on the “large-scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation,

² This scene can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwVh8pmOot4 (Iron Pc 2014).
movement through public space and the travel of material things within everyday life” (p. 1). This means that a researcher can use a mobilities framework to analyse everything from the way a person walks down the street, to the way our Facebook posts zip around on the internet. What is at the heart of it all is movement and the ways it is related to, experienced, and represented. However, because mobilities scholarship offers such a broad range of potential research topics, it is important for mobilities research to have a coherent logical foundation, to ensure that researchers are going about their work in similar ways. This foundation is the ‘theoretical framework’ that I mentioned earlier: it’s the set of concepts and understandings that guides a researcher’s analysis, and makes sure that the researcher is ‘speaking the same language’ as the other scholars who are writing in the same field.

One of the most important theoretical underpinnings of mobilities scholarship is the idea that mobility and movement are not the same thing. This concept was developed by Tim Cresswell, a scholar who played a foundational role in the mobility turn. Cresswell (2006) argued that there is a lot of meaning assigned to the movements of people, things, and ideas; unfortunately, when mobility is studied exclusively as physical movement between point A and point B, much of that meaning gets lost. When that happens, researchers can lose sight of rich and potentially valuable information about our social world.

As a result, Cresswell (2010) conceptualised mobility as the combination of “movement, representation, and practice,” where movement is the part of mobility you can track with cameras or draw on a map, representation is the way in which people understand and talk about it, and practice is the physical and social behaviour wrapped up in the movement that’s being studied (2010, pp. 19, 20). This may seem confusing at first, but Cresswell (2006) offered a useful way for us to think about it. He explained that movement is comparable to location, whereas mobility
is more like place. If I go to visit my friend in Vietnam and she tells me I have to ‘remember my location’ when I am exploring the area, it would be very different than if she told me I have to ‘remember my place.’ Both instructions involve being aware of where I am in physical space at any point in time, but ‘knowing my place’ has the additional burden of being aware of how I’m carrying myself, and noting how others are responding to my presence. And that’s a good analogy for what mobility is: movement, with all of that social complexity kept in.

Sedentarist Metaphysics in Theory

Although it is useful to have a theoretical framework that allows us to talk about movement without losing sight of its meanings and practices, expanding our definition of mobility to include these elements isn’t really a monumental change in the academic landscape. When we say that there is now a mobilities ‘paradigm,’ it implies that there has been a noteworthy shift in thought, or that the way in which mobilities scholars are conceptualizing “mobility, spatial order, and place” is different from how other scholars are conceptualizing it, or from the ways that it has been understood in the past (Cresswell 2006, p. 26). So what exactly was it that changed when the mobility turn came around?

In a word, it was the metaphysics. The term metaphysics isn’t easy to define; however, in the first volume of his book The Principles of Psychology, the philosopher and psychologist William James described it as “nothing but an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly” (James 2008, p. 149). This is a useful way to approach the term, as your chosen metaphysics is like a set of guidelines for how you’re going to (attempt to) understand the world, especially in terms of concepts like reality and identity. The metaphysics you adopt reflects and guides how you are relating to and explaining the different processes you’re studying, and the ways that you’ve chosen to categorize the information you’ve gathered. In academic research, your chosen
metaphysics indicates what you are treating as ‘real’ and ‘knowable,’ and what the proper ways are to gather information about those ‘real’ and ‘knowable’ things. The mobility turn is occasionally referred to as a ‘paradigm’ because its scholars have departed from a sedentarist metaphysics, and instead, have moved towards a mobile one.

But what is a sedentarist metaphysics?

Basically, it’s a set of guidelines that treat rootedness, place, and belonging as foundational concepts for understanding the world around us. This way of thinking categorizes things in terms of fixity, and it’s why we think about our world as a collection of towns, cities, provinces, and countries. It’s also why the words ‘neighborhood’ and ‘community’ are often treated as synonymous, even though there are many communities that don’t occupy neighbourhoods (e.g., online communities). A sedentarist way of thinking understands people and things as in and of place, and their mobility as a temporary state—one that has an origin point and an eventual destination. Like the flight numbers on the screens in the airport, everything in motion is viewed as either coming from or going to somewhere. In this set of parameters, it’s the spaces and places in our lives that really matter, and movement is understood as something that happens in, between, or across them. And this is the metaphysics that concepts like scale are grounded in.

Sedentarist Metaphysics in Practice

It was January 4th, 2018. Mum and I had stopped in the tiny little town of Alliance, Nebraska, to see Carhenge on our way home from New Mexico. It was dark when we pulled in, so we had decided to get an early night and check out the monument in the morning.

It was 3:20am when someone rapped firmly at the side door of my van.

“Steph! Get up! There’s someone outside!”
“I know Mum, I know,” I replied calmly, wriggling out from under the blankets and climbing over my mother, who stayed in bed. Pulling on a hoodie, I grabbed my glasses and reached for the door handle, not bothering to put anything on over my boxers. Of course, the vanlifers I’d interviewed during the summer had talked enough about ‘getting knocked on’ that I wasn’t terribly surprised to see a cop standing outside when I opened the door. I guess someone in the sleepy little town of Alliance had seen my van in the parking lot at Carhenge and had called the police. Thankfully, we didn’t get moved on, but the officer did request to see our I.D. so he’d “know who’s out here.”

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Even though there are a lot of people and things that are on the move today, we still tend to view fixity as the ‘norm,’ and often use space and place as the conceptual starting point for making sense of movement. Using a sedentary metaphysics to think about movement is not a problem in and of itself, of course; rather, the problem arises when this way of thinking is used to assign a positive moral value to things like rootedness and fixity. Now, if this way of thinking never left academia, it wouldn’t be a problem; however, “the view of the world that attaches negative moral and ideological codings to mobility extends well beyond the ivory tower to pervade thought and practice in multiple domains of social and cultural life” (Cresswell 2006, p. 38). And when you’re a van nomad trying to park somewhere for the night, that can be a real pain in the fender.

It’s important to note that not all mobilities are assigned negative moral and ideological value in this way of thinking. As Henderson (2009) has noted, “normative views of correct mobility are based on morals and ideology,” which means that whether a particular mobility is represented as ‘deviant’ or not depends on what a particular society values (p. 70). In societies
where mobility is “constructed as central to, and essential to, capitalist development and circulation,” it’s the mobilities that keep capitalism running—such as the movements of commuters, passenger jets, and UPS vans—that tend to get coded as non-threatening (Merriman 2009, p. 137). However, movements that don’t appear to contribute to capitalist day-to-day functioning are viewed as suspicious, or even as “a threat to the routines of sedentary societies” (ibid.). When certain mobilities get represented as immoral or threatening, this can lead to the implementation of “particular strategies or government programs” that “aim to exclude particular mobilities, activities, entities, and individuals” (Merriman 2009, p. 136).

What this reveals is that sedentarist metaphysics is more than just a framework used in academic research. It’s also a mode of thought that influences policies and practices in people’s day-to-day lives by reproducing the association between morality and fixity, a way of thinking that has real negative repercussions for nomadic people (Cresswell 2010). Normative representations of ‘correct’ mobility are generally advanced by people who value fixity and rootedness above other ways of being in the world, which means that it’s predominantly particular kinds of mobility, performed by particular mobile subjects, that are valued, while others are constructed as threatening or suspicious (Cresswell 2006, p. 43). This makes it important for us to be critical of sedentarist metaphysics, because when fixity is the yardstick by which moral worth is measured, nomadic lifestyles get coded as suspicious or threatening. And when that happens, people like me get woken up by the cops a lot more often.

“Nomadic” Metaphysics

As I have mentioned above, in an era when so many people and things are constantly moving around, views of society and culture as things that are fixed in place have less explanatory value than they used to have. Furthermore, ways of thinking that cast movement as
an after-effect of sedentary life become more problematic, because they position mobility as secondary in a hierarchy where fixity comes first—something which, as I’ve just pointed out, has negative consequences for mobile people in real life. One of the benefits of using a mobilities lens for research is that it flips this hierarchy around, kicking fixity out of the dominant position and putting movement there instead (and yes, this is an equally problematic way of looking at things, but I’ll discuss that later). One of the benefits of reversing the fixity-mobility hierarchy is that it can help us to “break from a sedentarist metaphysics” and reveal the “politics that are enabled or silenced through the various understandings, practices and mediations of mobility” (Cresswell 2006, p. 46; Dufty-Jones 2012, p. 210). We can do this by shifting our metaphysics—the parameters for thinking that I was talking about before—to a mobile metaphysics.

Referred to as a “nomadic metaphysics” in the mobilities literature, or as “nomad thought,” a mobile metaphysics is “an alternative way of thinking with mobility at its center” that uses “metaphors of mobility to ask new questions about the structure of society” (Cresswell 2006, p. 27; Cresswell 2008, p. 129). Inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, this post-structuralist way of thinking about movement views fixity as a made-up concept, and celebrates mobility as a way to resist stable and fixed forms of control (Adey 2010; Cresswell 2006; Dufty-Jones 2012). In this metaphysics, “mobility is linked to a world of practice, of anti-essentialism, antifoundationalism, and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline” (Cresswell 2006, p. 47). To be nomadic is to be a rebel: the “nomad” is a subversive, almost heroic figure, one who values “lines of flight” rather than “points or nodes,” and one who moves through a different kind of space; a “smooth” space, one that’s not “closed and regulated like the driver on the road or the highway” (Adey 2010, p. 60; Cresswell 2006, p. 48, 49). In a “nomadic
metaphysics,” mobility is “associated with freedom, progress and change” while fixity is seen as “obsolete, limited and intransigent” (Dufty-Jones 2012, p. 209). In this metaphysics, to move is to be modern, and fixity is just another relic from the past.

Now, for flesh-and-blood nomads who might have found that last paragraph a little weird, allow me to point out that Deleuze and Guattari (and the original group of scholars that was inspired by their work) were never really talking about real-life nomads and their practices. Rather, they were using an abstract “nomad” figure as a tool for critique, in the same way that Rousseau used the concept of the “noble savage.” Of course, where this idea runs into trouble is that the term “nomad” is being taken and used for the purpose of commentary without the knowledge or consent of nomads themselves, in a way that probably doesn’t reflect the experiences or practices of actual nomads. Perhaps more problematically, the term “nomad,” when used in this way, denotes an abstract being “unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography” (Cresswell 2006, p. 53). This is why scholars like Christopher Miller and Tim Cresswell have pointed out that “[t]he romanticization of the nomad…is infected with the discourse of Orientalism” which “reproduces representational strategies of colonialism under the guise of the nonrepresentational” and ducks the “ethical burden of representing real, actual nomads who might eventually have something to say in response” (Cresswell 2006, pp. 54-55; Miller, cited in Cresswell 2006, p. 54). As a result of this critique, I’ve chosen to use the term mobile metaphysics apposite a sedentarist metaphysics, and it’s also why I’ve put the term “nomadic” in scare quotes in the previous paragraphs.

Critiques of “nomadic” metaphysics have taken aim at more than its Orientalist discourse; they’ve also put its submersion of political aspects of mobility in the crosshairs, arguing that “academics must not simply affirm or romanticize popular narratives which equate
mobility with freedom and resistance” (Merriman 2009, p. 137). Feminist theorists in particular have pointed out that “nomadic theory rests on a ‘romantic reading of mobility’, ” and that “the mobility paradigm can be linked to a ‘bourgeois masculine subjectivity’ that describes itself as ‘cosmopolitan’” (Kaplan, cited in Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006, p. 3; Skeggs, cited in Hannam et al. 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, the “transformation of movement into a fetish,” according to Sarah Ahmed, assumes that everybody has the same capacity for movement and experiences it in the same way (Ahmed, cited in Hannam et al. 2006, p. 3). It doesn’t acknowledge that people have unequal access to mobility. What this means is that a “nomadic” metaphysics, which only reverses the hierarchy that prioritizes fixity above mobility (ontologically and epistemologically), may not be a sufficient theoretical framework for research with vehicle nomads, because it could obscure important aspects of their mobile lives.

What this all amounts to is that it’s important for us, as social scientists, to avoid seeing “a language of mobility, flux, and movement as a simple solution to overcome sedentarist thinking. Instead, we should attempt to reveal the complex politics of mobility, examining how different mobilities are produced, practiced, and regulated” (Merriman 2009, p. 142). This means that we also need to avoid talking about mobile populations in the abstract, as we may end up misrepresenting the practices of these groups. However, what’s important to remember here is that the initial move to create a metaphysics that placed greater priority on movement instead of fixity was done in an attempt to help researchers preserve the meanings and experiences of movement—the elements which make it a powerfully political practice—and to undermine ways of thinking that constructed mobility as rootless or suspicious. If we wish to do this, then we need to move beyond discussions of abstract nomads, and employ a mobile metaphysics that engages with the world in a way that brings the politics of movement to the fore.
Cresswell’s Politics of Mobility

As I discussed earlier, mobility is a social practice, as well as “a way of being in the world” (Cresswell 2006, p. 3). The ways in which people are allowed (or not allowed) to move “are implicated in the production of power and relations of domination,” and perhaps most importantly, “[p]ower and inequality are central in understanding why some people do not have as many mobility/fixedity options as others” (Cresswell 2010, p. 20; Rogaly 2015, p. 529).

Basically, whether or not you’re able to move around (or stay put) in the ways that you’d like to can depend on things like your gender, your race, and your access to social or financial capital. This interplay between power and mobility is influenced by culture, and the ways in which power and mobility intersect in a particular cultural context can have an impact on varying “material, social, political, and economic processes” (Cresswell, cited in Henderson 2011, p. 643). As an example, people’s access to mobility can be a key determining factor in terms of their access to employment, as well as their ability to participate in political and social life.

Differential access to certain kinds of mobility (or alternatively, differential access to the ability to stay in place) can exacerbate existing forms of inequality and exclusion (Dufty-Jones 2012).

Differential access to mobility “concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t,” but also who is holding the power “in relation to the flows and movement” (Massey, cited in Dufty-Jones 2012, p. 215). Some people (and non-human animals) are forced to move when they would much rather stay put, while others have no choice but to stay put when they want nothing more than to be mobile (Jackson 2012). Examining the differing ways in which power influences, or is exercised within, the capacity to move can tell us something valuable about mobility and how it is experienced. Tim Cresswell’s politics of mobility is a useful concept for understanding how this works, as it draws our attention to some key aspects of mobility where power and movement tend to intersect.
As I mentioned earlier, Tim Cresswell developed the concept of mobility as the interconnecting trio of movement, representation, and practice, and each of these three elements of mobility does have a politics. In the case of physical movement, we can ask who is moving furthest, fastest, and most often. In the case of representation, we can ask who is represented versus who is doing the representing, and how that representation restricts (or enables) mobile practices. In the case of mobile practices, we can ask how mobility is being experienced and why it is experienced in that way, as opposed to some other way. But if we really want to dig into the ways in which mobility, social relations, and power produce and reproduce one another, we may need a more finely tuned schema (Cresswell 2010; Henderson 2011, p. 647).

The six facets of mobility that Cresswell conceptualized for this purpose are “the starting point [of mobility], speed, rhythm, routing, experience, and friction” (Cresswell 2010, p. 26). The starting point, also known as motive force, is the cause(s) of—or the motivation(s) for—movement (i.e., is movement chosen, or is it forced upon someone or something?). Speed or velocity is how quickly or slowly a thing or person is moving (and this can be either literal or figurative). Rhythm is the pattern of “repeated moments of movement and rest, or, alternatively, simply repeated movements with a particular measure” (Cresswell 2010, p. 23). Route is the path that movement takes or the corridors through which movement is channeled. Experience is about how movement feels, and friction is how, when and/or where movement is stopped or delayed.

Although the six elements of a politics of mobility do provide a useful framework for studying mobile subjects, I have chosen instead to rely on Cresswell’s (2010) tri-fold definition of mobility as movement, representation, and practice as the conceptual framework for my research. The reason I’ve chosen this route is because I determined during the analysis stage of
my research that concepts like *rhythm* and *friction* were difficult to deploy in a discussion of nomadic mobility (something I discuss in more detail in my Methodology chapter). This isn’t to say that I don’t discuss a politics of mobility in this thesis; indeed, in my chapter on vanlife practices, I engage in a detailed discussion of sedentarism and how it negatively affects my participants (and me). But let’s not get ahead of ourselves here; before I proceed any further, I ought to address an important ontological question raised by my earlier discussion of “nomadic” metaphysics: how am I going to engage with concepts like *place* and *fixity* in my analysis?

**Ontology**

Much like the framework for a house, a theoretical framework can be built on different foundations, and the shape of the foundation you choose can determine what your end product looks like. In mobilities research, how you deal with concepts like fixity (i.e., your chosen ontology) can determine the shape of your foundation. If I choose to keep fixity in my analysis using Urry’s (2003) mobilities/moorings theory, my thesis would be very different than if I were to take Peter Adey’s (2006) approach and argue that fixity doesn’t exist (relationality theory). And to understand this, it’s important to explain the two ontological stances on fixity in mobilities research, and what the two ontologies actually entail.

In his book *Global Complexity*, John Urry (2003) advanced the concept of *moorings* as a way to approach fixity in a discussion of mobility. He suggested that the movements of all manner of things rely upon networks of fixed objects and places like sidewalks, bike lanes, traffic lights, gas stations, and bus stops. He also argued that these “systems of immobility” are required in order for mobilities to function properly, and that the relationship between mobilities and immobilities is a dialectical one (i.e., one built on exchange between the two elements) (Urry, cited in Adey 2006, p. 86). This dialectical relationship is made up of social relations, and

25
as a result, is “entwined with a complex array of political, cultural, economic and environmental debates” (Cresswell & Merriman 2011, p. 5). Although the mobilities and moorings approach retains mobility and fixity as opposite ends of a spectrum, it does avoid some of the pitfalls of sedentarist and “nomadic” metaphysics (discussed above) by leveling out the constructed hierarchal relationship between movement and stillness. Basically, instead of valuing fixity over mobility or mobility over fixity, a mobilities/moorings approach treats movement and stillness as interdependent parts of a functioning whole.

The second approach to fixity in a mobile ontology is to reconceptualise it as movement that is only seen as fixed. As Adey (2006) notes, “when we say that something is immobile, we are normally saying this in relation to ourselves or something else,” which means that our labeling of certain things as ‘immobile’ is subject to the limitations of human perception (p. 84). Relying on the ideas of Henri Bergson, Adey (2006) argues that the slowness of the deterioration and movement of places and objects in relation to ourselves is what makes them appear fixed, and that, in reality, everything is always moving. This is why, in a relational ontology, the term relative immobilities is used instead of the word fixity: it’s meant to indicate that things like sidewalks and neighborhoods and cities are in a constant state of change (whether through being built up and torn down, or physically deteriorating over time), but in a way that is too slow—relative to our own mobilities—for us to perceive. Likewise, a relational ontology is meant to draw our attention to the ways in which people who are seen as being rooted or ‘stuck’ in place are actually always moving; it’s just that their movements may not be as rapid or cover as much territory as other people’s movements. Thus, where Urry (2003) argues that mobilities depend upon systems of fixed moorings, Adey (2006) argues that mobilities are dependent upon slower
mobilities, and exploring how these mobilities relate to one another can help to bring the politics of those mobilities to the fore.

Both of these ontological approaches to fixity suggest that if we study the ways in which mobility and (relative) immobility interact with and depend on one another, we may be able to capture important information about our social world (Adey 2006). However, because the ontological foundation we choose for our research shapes how our research findings are related (and thus, how they’re understood) in particular ways, it’s important to consider the implications of choosing one ontology over the other. In my case, because Urry’s (2003) mobilities and moorings framework would conceptualize my participants’ mobility in terms of its dialectical relationship with the fixed infrastructural moorings it relies on, there’s a chance that using this ontological foundation for my thesis could imply a higher degree of similarity between the mobilities of vanlifers and RVers than a relational ontology would.

I say this because the infrastructural moorings that vanlifers and full-time RVers rely upon as part of their mobility are fairly similar: they gas up at the same stations, drive on many of the same roads, pull into the same highway rest stops, go to the same grocery stores, and visit the same national parks. And if I were to move on from this discussion of moorings to talk about one of my key findings, which is that the participants in my study and the vehicle nomads in the literature tend to represent their mobility in similar ways, readers might get the impression that there isn’t much difference between vanlifers’ mobility and the mobility of RVers. This impression could also be reinforced by the fact that scholars have already classified van conversions and converted school buses as “RVs” in the literature (something I discuss in my review of the work on vehicle nomadism). However, as scholars have not yet studied the mobility of vanlifers and skoolies in much detail, we don’t have enough evidence to confirm
whether or not these nomads actually *do* belong to similar nomadic cultures. This means that using Urry’s (2003) ontological framework, which places emphasis on the infrastructural moorings that North American vehicle nomads share, may lead people to assume that vanlife and RVing are similar, when the groups that practice these mobilities may actually be quite distinct from one another.

As Adey’s (2006) relational ontology doesn’t require a discussion of infrastructural moorings, it does allow me to focus exclusively on mobility, and thus, to engage with my participants’ movements, representations, and practices in greater detail. This deeper engagement with their mobility may be helpful for future researchers who *do* wish to explore the similarities and differences between the mobilities of vanlifers and RVers. Moreover, because a relational ontology allows me to compare mobilities to one another without grounding them in a network of fixed infrastructure, this framework allows me to compare interviewees’ representations of their current nomadic practices to representations of their past practices, which helps me to unpack the association that participants made between the word “freedom” and their mobile way of life. Adey’s (2006) framework also allows me to explore the ways in which my participants represented tourists’ mobilities in comparison to their own, which helps me to capture another dimension of the association participants were making between freedom and being on the road full-time. By removing the ontological priority that’s usually assigned to fixity, Adey’s (2006) relational ontology allows me to engage with my research findings in ways that help me to more fully unpack the meanings that interviewees assigned to their mobility—effectively answering my first research question.³

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³ It may be helpful for me to indicate that although this is the ontology that I have adopted for my analysis, it does not mean that the authors cited in my Literature Review, or the nomads who participated in my research, think or speak in terms that align with this ontology. As such, when I’m citing sources or quoting my interview
That being said, it’s important for me to acknowledge that the decision to use Adey’s (2006) relational ontology, in which fixity doesn’t exist, doesn’t mean that I can’t use the concept of *place*. Although places have long been understood and described in terms of their fixity and boundedness, since the 1990s, scholars such as Doreen Massey (1993) and Arturo Escobar (2001) have pushed for geographers and other scholars to conceptualize places as contingent combinations of lives, objects, and practices, and to view places as entities that are in a constant state of becoming. In this understanding of place, things like cities and neighborhoods are treated as unique combinations of elements (e.g., people, animals, inanimate objects, languages, social norms) that have converged at a particular point in time to make those places what they are. In a way, it’s very similar to how a relational ontology describes place (as a coagulation of many different types of movement).

A useful way to understand how this concept of place works is to think about Detroit during the Motown era (when groups like The Supremes and The Jackson 5 were recording), and compare it to Seattle during the Grunge era. Detroit and Seattle emerged as distinct cultural hotspots in these two different eras because of the unique combinations of people, record labels, and musical tastes that came together at these particular points in history to make those places what they were. And if you picture Detroit during the Motown era, it’s a very different convergence of people, things and ideas than the Detroit that we know today. This is what it means when we say that places are always in a state of becoming, and that they’re contingent combinations of elements: Detroit during the Motown era is a different place than Detroit *now*, because the elements coming together to make that place “Detroit” have changed over time. And even if you compare places to one another at the same point in history, the combination of transcripts, words such as “destination,” “place,” “location,” and “fixed” may appear, as those were the terms used by the original authors/speakers.
elements that make Detroit the place that it is are different than the combination of elements that make Seattle the place that it is. Moreover, because it’s impossible for two places on Earth to be made up of the exact same combination of elements at the exact same time, neighborhoods and cities and countries around the world end up being distinct from one another. This is why Escobar (2001) refers to places as “event[s]” (p. 143), and why Massey (1993) refers to places as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (p. 67); in this view, places are all about how people, animals, and things have come (and are continuously coming) together.

This way of thinking about place does run counter to a sedentarist metaphysics, because it encourages us to see places in ways that don’t rely upon (or assign moral value to) concepts such as dwelling and rootedness. When we see a place as a contingent coming-together of elements (i.e., as an “event”), the movements of nomads into and through that place can be understood as part of that coming-together—nomads just happen to spend less time at that “event” than other people (Escobar 2001, p. 143). This way of thinking is politically significant, because when we treat place as an event that is “characterized by openness rather than by a unitary self-identity,” we start to undermine the association between fixity and morality that encourages people to see nomads as “place invaders,” and their mobility as something that should be controlled through legislation (Escobar 2001, p. 143; Kabachnik 2010, p. 100).

This conceptualization of place is also compatible with the relational ontology that I’ve chosen to adopt for my analysis, because it treats place as a gathering of “things, thoughts and memories in particular configurations,” just as Adey’s (2006) relational ontology treats place as a contingent coagulation of intertwining movement (Escobar 2001, p. 143). Understanding place and mobility in this manner also helps us to avoid what Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005)
have labeled a “reductive visualization of the world as simply awash in fluidities, [which
ignores] the large variety of blockages, coagulations and assemblages (everything from material
objects to doings and sayings) that congeal in space and social life” (p. 423). Put simply, the
understanding of place advanced by scholars like Massey and Escobar makes it possible for us to
engage with place as part of a mobile metaphysics.

One of the reasons why I’ve gone into a detailed explanation of how place can be
incorporated into a relational ontology is that I want to make it clear that my decision to exclude
the concept of place from my analysis wasn’t made on ontological grounds. And when I say that
I’m excluding the concept of place, I don’t mean place as an object—as “a thing that we can look
at, research, and write about” (Cresswell 2014, p. 23). Indeed, I fully acknowledge that places
(however they’re conceived) are an important part of vanlife (and human life more broadly), and
I accept Cresswell’s (2014) statement that “[i]t is impossible […] to think of a world without
place” (pp. 23, 55). What I am excluding from my analysis is place as an epistemological tool—
as “a way of looking” (Cresswell 2014, p. 23).

I want to emphasize that I’m not doing this because I think that place has no value as an
epistemological tool, or that it can’t (or shouldn’t) be used to study vanlife as a form of mobility.
Indeed, one could get a very good sense of the representations and practices that make vanlife
meaningful by using Escobar’s (2001) conceptualization of place (i.e., as an event) to talk about
van gatherings and what they mean to people, and how they fit into vanlifers’ mobile way of life.
One could also explore the practice of vehicle conversion as a form of place-making, and discuss
the ways in which the vehicle-as-place ties into a distinct politics of mobility. There are a
number of ways in which place could be used to engage with vanlife that would help to answer
multiple different research questions, and this is why it’s important for me to justify why I
haven’t discussed place as part of my analysis. However, before I can explain the logic behind this decision, I need to review the ways in which movement has been conceptualized in the discipline of geography over the last 60 years.

**Place Matters, Movement Matters: Mobility and Geography**

We can understand the significance of mobility only if we first recognize the centrality of fixed place in the psychological architecture of traditional man.

- Toffler (cited in Cresswell 2006, p. 38)

The movements of things, people and ideas are by no means a new topic of study for geographers. Indeed, “movements of one kind or another have been at the heart of all kinds of social science (and particularly geography) since their inception” (Cresswell 2010, p. 18). And, as is the case with other disciplines, the ways in which mobility has been represented in geography have been influenced by the paradigms that geographers were writing in at the time, as well as the social and political contexts in which that research unfolded. However, another important part of understanding how mobility was being conceptualized by geographers at any given point in the last 60 years is to consider how movement was being conceptualized in relation to *place*.

As an example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of transportation geography led to mobility being understood in terms of “[g]ravity models and spatial interaction theory” (Cresswell & Merriman 2011, p. 2). In this approach, the movement occurring between two or more places was conceptualized as a measurable pattern, an effect caused by the “relative push and pull factors” of the different places under consideration (Cresswell 2006, p. 29; Crowe, cited in Cresswell & Merriman 2011, p. 1). In these theoretical models, movement was characterized as rational and purposeful, it was seen as something that tended to follow paths of least
resistance, and it was something that geographers believed could be made more efficient through proper planning and design (Merriman 2009).

With the rise of humanism in geography in the 1970s and 1980s, some geographers departed from this theorization of movement as a neutral pattern unfolding between places. As concepts like ‘sense of place’ came into use, movement was instead cast as a destructive or corrupting force, and something that could, in excess, threaten “the integrity of places” or even dismantle them altogether (Merriman 2009, p. 134). Indeed, narratives of places under threat “[pervaded] the writings of humanistic geographers in the 1970s and 1980s” (Cresswell 2006, p. 38). Yi Fu Tuan, a man whose work was foundational in humanistic geography, also took this view, arguing that understanding the world in terms of process and change (as opposed to fixity and belonging) would undermine people’s ability to develop a meaningful sense of place (Tuan, cited in Cresswell 2006, p. 31). In humanistic geography, movement and place were understood as being antithetical to one another: if you moved around a lot, there was no way that you could develop an attachment to place.

As the new millennium dawned, geographers’ understandings of mobility began to change once again. Nowadays, human geographers take a greater interest in exploring “the way mobility has changed both the world and our ways of knowing it” (Cresswell 2006, p. 2006; Merriman 2009, p. 142). However, despite this greater interest in mobility, place is still taken as the conceptual starting point for understanding it, and geographical studies still tend to treat movement as “logically secondary to the arrangements of space and place” (Cresswell 2006; Cresswell & Merriman 2011, pp. 3-4). Put simply, even when the story’s supposed to be about mobility, we end up making mobility the sidekick instead of the main protagonist. And by casting mobility as “the other of some sense of function that is valued,” geographical writing
ends up reproducing a sedentarist metaphysics (Cresswell 2006, pp. 29-30). In summary, regardless of how movement is currently being conceptualized by geographers, the fact remains that when we’re writing about movement, we’re still, for the most part, writing about place.

**Foregrounding Mobility in a Geography of Vanlife**

Movement does not take place in a vacuum, it is effected upon the surface of the earth and it is very largely through movement that Mankind (*sic*) becomes conscious of its geography.

-Crowe (cited in Cresswell & Merriman 2011, p. 1)

Home isn’t a place, it’s a state of mind.

-Zach Deputy, “Home” (on *Out of the Water*, 2012)

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This centrality of the concept of place to geographical understanding has led Tim Cresswell (2014) to state that *place* is “one of the two or three most important terms” in the entire discipline (p. 1). Indeed, the statement “place matters” was uttered so frequently in our first year geography classes that someone actually wrote the phrase as graffiti on one of the tables in the university map library. However, geographers don’t just *study* place; we also use place as a framework for how we understand and talk about the world. Place is “part of the way we see, research, and write,” so the fact that geographers have tended to conceptualize movement in terms of how it relates to place actually does make a lot of sense (Cresswell 2014, p. 24). And given that there are understandings of place that are completely compatible with a mobile metaphysics, the fact that I haven’t used one of the most fundamental concepts in my discipline as part of my analysis really does need to be explained.

I’m aware that by adopting an approach to my research that focuses exclusively on mobility without grounding it in a discussion of place, I’m taking a stance that has already been critiqued by scholars. Escobar (2001), for example, stresses the importance of “highlight[ing]
the emplacement of all cultural practices,” and laments that the attention scholars have been paying to mobility and processes of deterritorialization “has made many researchers lose sight of the continued importance of place-based practices and modes of consciousness for the production of culture” (pp. 143, 147). Likewise, in his explanation of Nigel Thrift’s conceptualization of mobility (i.e., as a “structure of feeling”), Cresswell (2014) himself remarks that “[r]ather than comparing mobility to place, mobilities are placed in relation to each other,” and that “[p]lace in this world seems increasingly redundant” (Thrift, cited in Cresswell 2014, p. 80; Cresswell 2014, p. 81).

I want to be very clear in stating that my departure from using place as part of my geographical analysis isn’t meant to deny the importance of place to people’s everyday lives, nor is it meant to imply that place isn’t important to the people I studied. That simply isn’t the case. Nor am I trying to imply a binary relationship between place and mobility as concepts or as epistemological tools, as the ways that these concepts can be utilised to understand the processes that geographers study are varied and complex. My reason for using mobility as the primary epistemological tool for my analysis is that in the specific context of my research, it was very difficult to use the concept of place to pull my findings together in a way that answered my research question. I say this because there were certain things that my participants shared with me that were harder to make sense of when I tried to use place as the lens for understanding them. The value that interviewees placed on having the ability to pick up and go whenever they wanted is a good example of this, because there was nothing in the interview data that allowed me to relate this sentiment to the places that might be a part of that journey.4 Grounding the discussion of my research findings entirely in mobility allowed me to capture multiple

4 In their work on the Scottish Gypsy Travellers, Shubin and Swanson (2010) described this sentiment as one of the “[e]motional dimensions” of mobility, a commitment towards “possible mobility and change” (p. 921).
dimensions of my participants’ representations of vanlife, and to draw attention to the fact that similar representations have already appeared in the existing literature on vehicle nomads (though these representations haven’t yet been explored). And this is why the mobilities lens was created in the first place: so that researchers could write about mobility in ways that capture and retain important details about the social aspects of movement.

That being said, the fact that I haven’t used place as an epistemological tool for my analysis does raise an important question: does a Master’s Thesis where I don’t focus on place in this way still count as geography? It’s certainly a question I’ve struggled with; however, if, as Cresswell (2014) asserts, “mobility is every bit as geographical as place,” then an analysis in which I focus entirely on mobility should be just as geographical as one in which I relate mobility to place (p. 84). Moreover, as I mentioned above, although place is a valuable epistemological tool that can be used to study mobility in a number of productive ways, some aspects of mobile peoples’ social worlds may not make as much sense when we try to use place as the lens for analysis. As this was a problem that I encountered with my own interview data, I decided to write a geography of vanlife that relies on mobility as the primary epistemological tool for effectively answering my research question.

As a result, in the remainder of my thesis, places will only be referred to in passing as a way to further contextualize certain aspects and experiences of my participants’ mobility; they will not be used to ground my discussion of their representations and practices. Additionally, rather than engaging with my participants’ mobility in terms of how it’s situated in places, I will use a relational ontology to situate their mobilities in relation to other mobilities, including the mobilities that they practiced before taking up a life on the road (Cresswell 2006). What I present to you in the next few chapters is a human geography of vanlife, and through writing it, I
hope that I’ve related my findings in a way that accurately reflects the practices and experiences of the vehicle nomads who shared their time with me. However, before I proceed any further on this journey of geographical writing, there are still a few questions that need to be answered. For example: what on Earth is a vehicle nomad?

**Vehicle Nomadism**

Vehicle nomads can fall into a number of categories. Those who purchase a van and convert it into a living space (or alternatively, those who purchase a Volkswagen microbus that doesn’t need conversion) are commonly referred to as *vanlifers, vandwellers, van nomads, and vanners*. Someone who purchases a school bus (of any size) and converts it into a dwelling place is commonly referred to as a *skoolie*. There are also *RVers*, who purchase Recreational Vehicles (RVs), rigs that are designed and marketed as mobile living spaces. Although the latter have received some scholarly attention, the terms *vanners, vanlifers, van nomads,* and *vandwellers* do not yet exist in the academic literature. This isn’t because researchers haven’t encountered them; indeed, vanlifers have been captured in the sample groups of Onyx and Leonard (2005, 2007) and possibly Wu and Pearce (2016) as well. Rather, these vanlifers weren’t *recognized* as such, because the definitions that scholars were using at the time ended up classifying them as “RVers.”

Take the following definition of RV tourism, for example: “a form of tourism where travellers take a camper trailer, *van conversion*, fifth wheel, slide-on camper, caravan or motorhome on holiday with them, and use the vehicle as their primary form of accommodation” (Hardy & Gretzel, cited in Wu & Pearce 2016, p. 2, emphasis added). Because *van conversion* is included in the list, vanlifers would automatically be classified as RV tourists by scholars using this definition. Or take Wu and Pearce’s (2014) statement that “[s]enior retired people who buy
a RV or convert a vehicle and spend extended periods of time travelling long distances represent the defining image of the RV user” (p. 24, emphasis added). Once again, van conversions are classified as “RVs,” and vanlifers automatically end up in the sample. Onyx and Leonard (2005) also seem to define older vanlifers and skoolies as “RVers” in their study of Australian RV nomads, as 19% of the participants in their sample were “travelling by campervan, reconditioned bus, car with trailer, and other arrangements” (p. 64, emphasis added). To be clear, in the Australian context, a vanlifer’s vehicle qualifies as a type of campervan, which means that vanlifers are classified as RVers under the definition used in this study (Caravan Camping Sales 2006, Discovery Campervans 2018). Onyx and Leonard’s (2005) use of the term reconditioned bus also indicates that they are classifying skoolies as “RVers” (so does their use of the term converted bus, which appears earlier on in the article) (Onyx & Leonard 2005, p. 61).

It is true that RVers, vanlifers, and skoolies are all vehicle nomads; however, because no research has been conducted with the latter two groups, the decision to classify them as “RVers” may have been made prematurely. As Counts and Counts (2009) have pointed out, North American RVers have a distinct subculture, with “their own system of values, their own social networks, [and] their own symbols and metaphors to explain who they are to themselves and to others” (p. 16). They also share common sets of jargon, and they have “ways of identifying each other and ideas about how they should behave toward one another” (ibid.). Future research with the vanlifering community would help scholars to determine whether vanlifers and skoolies share in this subculture, or whether they belong to a subculture of their own.

Issues of classification aside, at present, the existing literature on vehicle nomads falls into one of two categories: research focusing on RV nomads (predominantly in the North
American and Australian context), and research focusing on traditional nomads and New Age Travellers in the United Kingdom. These are two very different bodies of literature, as research on RV nomads tends to focus on the practices and understandings of senior RVers, while research on British nomads tends to focus on the injustices faced by nomads as a result of discriminatory legislation. Although my findings will help to draw these two bodies of literature into conversation with one another, at this point in my thesis, they will be discussed separately.

Recreational Vehicle Users (RVers)

Research that has been conducted with RVers suggests that they are “a group of highly mobile travellers who are motivated by a desire to experience freedom and escape the constraints of routine home life” (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013). They treasure the opportunity to take to the road, and many of them associate this aspect of the RVing lifestyle with improved health (Counts & Counts 2009). Retired RVers can travel for extended periods of time, and are capable of maintaining this traveling lifestyle into their mid-seventies (or even later) (Murphy, cited in Pearce 1999; Pearce 1999). The ways in which RVers understand themselves and their peers “creates a distinctive way of life to which they are deeply committed” (Counts & Counts 2009, p. 92). As mentioned above, they are a group with “their own social networks, their own symbols and metaphors” and “their own jargon” (Counts & Counts 2009, p. 16). Although they may visit the same sites as tourists, they resist being labeled as such, because they tend to “travel further and stay longer than the average tourist,” often staying at one particular destination “for considerable amounts of time” (Gretzel, Formica & Fesenmaier, cited in Hardy, Hanson & Gretzel 2012, p. 221; Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011, p. 284).

Most RVers in North America are retirees, with baby boomers representing “the largest group of owners, with the highest ownership in the 55-64 year old group” (Counts & Counts
This trend appears to be similar in Australia, as nearly two thirds of motorhome buyers are 55 or older (Brannelly, cited in Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011). The numbers of these older travellers are by no means insignificant; Statistics Canada data suggest that “the total number of Canadian snowbirds…is in the neighborhood of 300-375,000 annually”⁵ while estimates of the Australian RVing population suggest that “there are 70,000 to 80,000 RVs travelling on an extended tour around Australia at any one time” (Coates, Healy & Morrison 2002, p. 436; Onyx & Leonard, cited in Wu & Pearce 2016, p. 2). These numbers represent a small city’s worth of people on the move.

However, it is important to point out that while RVers do share some things in common, they are by no means a homogenous group (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013; Holloway, Green & Holloway 2011). Depending on their location and their particular mobile practices, RVers have been organized into a number of different categories by the researchers who study them. In the North American context, academic articles tend to focus on snowbirds and other RVers, while research conducted in Australia examines grey nomads and Australian snowbirds (also known as sun seekers). The literature appears to be evenly divided between the North American and Australian contexts, with only one study focusing on RVers outside of these areas (see Viallon 2012 for a study of French snowbirds).

Snowbirds

In the North American context, snowbirds are defined as “northern residents who spend a month or more in the South and…return on a regular basis” (Canadian Snowbird Association, cited in Coates, Healy & Morrison 2002, p. 439). They are predominantly “older mobile travelers” who, when winter is approaching, migrate to “the warmer climates of [the] southern

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⁵ However, it is important to note that in these statistics, many of the snowbirds who are being counted may be flying to their southern haunts instead of travelling in a recreational vehicle.
US and Mexico” (Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011, p. 285). During their stay in the south, they tend to reside in RV parks, returning to them annually to enjoy “an especially active lifestyle amidst the abundant leisure equipment and programming so characteristic of American RV resorts” (Mings 1997, p. 168).

Australian snowbirds (also referred to as sun seekers) migrate to locations in northern Queensland in the winter, with “many of them [staying there] for several months” (Mings 1997, p. 169). In a comparison of North American and Australian snowbirds, Mings (1997) notes that they are very similar demographically, with “characteristics such as age, education, occupation, race and income [all being] very close” (p. 181). Both groups enjoy participating in recreational pursuits; however, because there are fewer recreation options available in Australian RV resorts, Australian snowbirds have much shorter stays in resorts than North American snowbirds, and tend to do more travelling outside of these locations (Mings 1997, p. 176). Australian snowbirds also tend to be “two to three years younger on average than North Americans, the mean for women being 62.5 years and 65.5 for men” (ibid., p. 172). Mings (1997) speculates that the age difference “reflect[s] more generous (earlier) retirement policies in Australia” (p. 181).

Viallon (2012), who conducted survey research with French snowbirds migrating between France and Morocco, presents us with one of the only studies focusing on RVers outside of Australia and North America. He found that his survey respondents “were primarily working or lower-middle class” and formed “a relatively homogenous group” (pp. 2078–79, 2085). Furthermore, unlike North American snowbirds, “[t]heir lifestyle is marked by few active pursuits…Some people even insist on having no particular program of activities” (p. 2085). Viallon (2012) suggests that the RVers in his sample group led a more “contemplative” lifestyle,
and had “little interest in activities requiring special infrastructure such as tennis courts, swimming pools, spas, riding stables, etc.” (pp. 2084-85).

**Grey Nomads**

Although snowbirds *have* been studied in the Australian context, the majority of research on Australian RVer focuses on the *grey nomads*. Onyx and Leonard (2005) assert that grey nomads are different from Australian snowbirds, claiming that “the true Grey Nomad is motivated by a different set of intentions,” and unlike snowbirds, “is vehemently opposed to staying in an organised resort of any sort” (p. 61). Similarly, Patterson, Pegg and Litster (2011) argue that grey nomads are distinguished from snowbirds by their higher levels of mobility, as well as their particular style of travelling (Mings, cited in Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011, pp. 84-85). Their research suggests that grey nomads “prefer to take their time and to drive longer distances, often preferring to keep to themselves,” and that grey nomads have little interest in the recreational and educational activities offered by RV parks (Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011, p. 293). As a result, grey nomads tend to avoid these parks, and seldom restrict their movement to a single area “for more than a few weeks” (Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 384).

Higgs and Quirk (2007) consider grey nomadism to be one of the “cultural shifts…occurring in later life as the baby boom generation ages” (p. 252). However, grey nomads have been a part of “Australian senior culture” for almost fifty years now, although their activities have only come to the attention of scholars within the last fifteen (Holloway, Green & Holloway 2011, p. 236; Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 384). Academics who conduct research with grey nomads have defined them as RVers over the age of 50 “who adopt an extended period of travel…independently within their own country,” and roam the highways and byways of Australia for periods of “at least three months, but often up to several years” (Onyx & Leonard
Like backpackers, these senior RVers tend to be “budget travellers” who “generally [avoid] the commercialized tourist resorts on the eastern coastline” (Holloway, Green & Holloway 2011, p. 237; Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011, p. 286).

Full-timers or Part-timers?

Snowbirds and grey nomads are groups of RVers that can be further broken down into subcategories of travellers based on the amount of time they spend residing in their vehicle (or ‘rig’), as well as their travelling and camping styles. Researchers who study RVers tend to differentiate between full- and part-time RVers, and will usually indicate the group(s) into which their participants fall. Jobes (1984) further differentiated between part-timers who are retired (seasonal travelers) and those who are still employed (vacation travelers); however, this is not a common practice in the literature.

Although they may live in their RV for several months at a time, part-time RVers tend to maintain a fixed address that they return to after being on the road (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013; Jobes 1984). Full-time RVers, on the other hand, are generally defined as those who consider their vehicle to be their sole place of residence, and “[a]lthough they may spend holidays away from their rigs they reside in them most of the time” (Jobes 1984, p. 184). One definition suggests that a full-timer is someone who has everything they own in their vehicle; however, as Counts and Counts (2009) point out, many RVers who classify themselves as full-timers still maintain a storage shed or a home base somewhere. Even so, full-timers’ decision to part with a fixed address and dispose of most of their worldly possessions is something that distinguishes them from part-timers, which may be why “many RVers define their identity in terms of their choice to be full-timers” (Counts & Counts 2009, pp. 132, 189).
**Boondockers**

In their ethnographic work on RVing seniors, Counts and Counts (2009) initially define *boondockers* as “people who park free or for minimal cost in places where there are no amenities” (p. 25). However, it is important to elaborate upon this definition, as *boondocking* is not so much about *where* a vehicle nomad camps, as it is about *how* they camp. RV parks commonly offer sites with “hook-ups” (i.e., external sources of electrical power and tubes connecting to the sewer, to which RVs can be connected). When you camp without “hooking up,” this is referred to as *boondocking or dry camping.* Most RVers will alternate between boondocking and camping with hookups; however, some RVers prefer to boondock almost exclusively (Counts & Counts 2009). Long-term boondocking presents certain challenges for RVers, as they still have to find ways to dispose of their toilet waste and refill their on-board water supply, and they have to generate their own electricity (Counts & Counts 2009). This may be why, for dedicated practitioners of this style of RVing, boondocking “becomes a statement about character” (ibid., p. 173).

**Gaps in the Literature**

As might be expected given what the demographic data says about the average RV buyer, scholars who conduct research with RVers focus almost exclusively on older vehicle nomads, and tend to relate their findings in one of two ways: either in terms of discourses about (successful) aging and alternative forms of retirement (Counts & Counts 2009; Higgs & Quirk, 2007; Holloway, Green & Holloway, 2011; Jobes 1984; Onyx & Leonard, 2007), or in terms of senior tourism habits and senior tourism marketing (Holloway et al., 2011; Patterson, Pegg & Litster, 2011; Wu & Pearce, 2016).
As a result, the majority of studies that have been conducted with full- and part-time RVers in multiple countries have focused on retirees or persons over the age of 45. Although Counts and Counts (2009) do acknowledge that there are RVers in their 20s and 30s, only one participant under the age of 40 is included in their sample. A study by Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) also included some RVers under the age of 45 in their sample, but the number included was unclear. White and White (2003) also included some RVers in their late 30s in their sample group, although the dominant focus of their article was “mid-life and older long-term travelers” (p. 200). I have located only one study in which younger vehicle nomads were studied exclusively (see Wu & Pearce 2014), although in this case, the researchers were focusing on short-term drive tourists in RVs, rather than RV nomads (only two of their participants had a trip lasting more than 28 days). As a result, the habits, opinions and understandings of younger full-time vehicle nomads are almost entirely absent from the literature.

The lack of data on younger full-time vehicle nomads makes it difficult to determine whether they hold views in common with older travellers, or whether their motivations and experiences differ from those that have been widely reported in the literature. Given that some of the researchers who have focused on older RV nomads attribute certain practices and motivations to the age of their participants, this absence is highly problematic, as there is no data on younger nomads to confirm or refute any claims that age is the primary driving factor behind older nomads’ behaviours or perspectives.

To give some examples, RVers’ decision to take to the road full-time has been described as a response to “the losses associated with impending poor health, reduced capacity to earn, and a family that no longer needs them” or in one case, to “empty nester syndrome” (Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 393; Viallon 2012, p. 2075). Some scholars have described RV nomadism as
“a phenomenon of the changing nature of later life,” and claim that these nomads are “rewriting the dominant social script for aging” (Higgs & Quirk 2007, p. 256; Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 281). In one article, grey nomads’ “desire to escape the bureaucratic control of their previous employment as well as their consumption driven, commercialised and homogenised former lifestyle,” is labeled a form of resistance to “their commodification as aged travellers” and “the homogenised and industry controlled ‘McDonaldization’ of retirement options” (Onyx & Leonard 2005, p. 67; Ritzer, cited in Onyx & Leonard 2005, p. 67). But what happens to claims like these if younger nomads are doing and saying the same things about their mobility?

A particularly valuable aspect of my own research is that it indicates that some of the motivations and opinions of senior vehicle nomads are shared by their younger counterparts, which suggests that RVers’ age may only be a single facet of a much more complex set of motivations which shape their decision to live on the road full-time. This raises the question: if older RVers are studied as nomads first and as older people second, is it possible that we might reach different conclusions about their mobility? There is no greater support, in my view, for using a mobilities framework to study the practices and understandings of people who engage in full-time vehicle nomadism. By putting a greater focus on the mobility of vehicle nomads (rather than on their age or their class), we might be able to gain a better understanding of why people—not just older people—depart from the social norm of living in a fixed location, and take to the road full-time.

What’s in a name: A Review of the Literature about Vehicle Nomads in the British Isles

Whereas the vehicle nomads in North America and Australia have been studied primarily as a tourist market or as a model for successful aging, research on vehicle nomads in the United Kingdom focuses almost entirely on issues of social and spatial justice. However, much like
RVers in Australia and North America, the nomads of the British Isles are not a homogenous group. Although this list is by no means exhaustive, research on nomadism in the UK mentions traditional nomadic groups like the English Romany Gypsies, the Scottish Romany Gypsies, the Irish Tinkers, the Scottish Gypsy Travellers, and the Welsh Gypsies (Bancroft 2000; Gmelch 1985; Niner 2004; Shubin 2010; Shubin & Swanson 2010). And yet, the nomads frequenting Britain’s streets and motorways haven’t all been born into these indigenous nomadic cultures. In the academic literature, new adoptees of nomadism in the UK are often bundled together under the terms New Age Travellers or New Travellers; however, this blanket term also conceals considerable diversity, as it’s used in reference to groups like the “‘Brew Crew,’ [the] ‘cosmic hippies,’ [the] ‘24-hour party people,’” and the “‘back-to-the-land’ers” (Halfacree 1996, p. 47).

The majority of British nomads are vehicle nomads, although Niner (2004) points out that a small percentage of the New Age Travellers “[live] in tents or benders” (Niner 2004, p. 145). Much like the RVers discussed above, nomads in the British Isles can be on the road full-time, or they may settle temporarily to access employment or other resources (Niner 2004). A 2001 estimate put the total population of nomads in Britain at around 200,000; however, this number should only be taken as a rough estimate, as some nomadic groups like the New Age Travellers may not have been included in the count (Clements & Morris, cited in Drakakis-Smith 2007).

Now, based on the lists of nomadic groups that I have provided above, one might wonder how they are being differentiated from one another. For example, what makes a Scottish Romany Gypsy different than a Scottish Gypsy Traveller?

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6 A bender is a dome-like tent that looks like a miniaturized open-air band shell, although the longer ones can look more like those portable canvas shelters people set up in their driveways when they don’t have a garage.

7 Based on comments that follow this estimate in Drakakis-Smith’s (2007) article, this population estimate probably doesn’t include the New Age Travellers or the “Gypsy/Travellers in Wales and Scotland” (p. 464). A footnote in an article by Niner (2004) also suggests this, as she mentions that the estimate generated in 1994 did exclude the New Age Travellers from the count. Niner (2004) points out that a 2003 estimate that included “all types of Traveller in England” put the number of nomads in England (not Britain as a whole) between 200,000 and 300,000 (Liberal Democrats, cited in Niner 2004, footnote 2, p. 157).
If I’m to answer that question honestly, I must admit that I’m uncertain. Shubin (2010) indicates that “Scottish (Romany) Gypsies” are a sub-group of Britain’s Gypsy Travellers, but it isn’t quite clear why Shubin placed the word “Romany” in brackets…I thought it might be his way of indicating that some Scottish Gypsy Travellers identify as Romany, but not all of them (p. 497). As a result, I acknowledged Scottish Romany Gypsies as a distinct nomadic group in the previous paragraph, alongside those Scottish Gypsy Travellers who don’t claim Romany heritage (i.e., those I referred to simply as “Scottish Gypsy Travellers”). But as I write this, I’m not sure if that’s correct.

This is actually one of the biggest challenges in terms of reviewing and citing the literature on nomadism in Britain: scholars rarely specify exactly which nomadic groups are being included under the terms that they’re using. Additionally, a limited number of umbrella terms is used to refer collectively to various nomadic groups in multiple different combinations, but the groups that are being included under a single umbrella term can vary depending on which scholar is using the term (Table 1). For example, Kabachnik (2009) uses the term “Gypsies and Travelers” to refer to British Gypsies, IrishTravelers, and New Age Travellers; however, Niner (2004) uses the same term in a way that suggests she’s referring to all British nomads except the New Age Travellers. I say suggests here because again, I’m not entirely certain: Niner (2004) does make a comment about “enabling Gypsies and Travellers to follow their traditional nomadic lifestyle,” but she also refers to the New Age Travellers (a group that most scholars don’t consider to be traditional nomads) as one of “three broad groupings of Gypsies and Travellers in England” (pp. 141, 143). So I’m not sure whether the term “Gypsies and Travellers” is meant to refer exclusively to traditional nomads in this case, or if it’s meant to refer to British nomads more broadly.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Term(s) Used</th>
<th>Nomadic Group(s) Included under Term(s)</th>
<th>Definition/explanation of term(s) provided?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Gypsy-Travellers and Travellers = English Romanichels, Welsh Kale, Scottish Travellers, Irish Travellers  | Yes                                        |
Gypsy/Traveller = traditional British nomads only                                           | No                                         |
| Halfacree (1996)       | “travellers”                           | all nomads in England and Wales (with one exception on page 46)                           | No                                         |
| Kabachnik (2009)       | “Gypsies and Travelers”                | British Gypsies, Irish Travelers, New Age Travelers                                       | Yes                                        |
| Kabachnik (2010)       | “Gypsies and Travelers”                | British Gypsies, Irish Travelers, New Age Travelers                                       | Yes                                        |
| Niner (2004)           | “Gypsies and Travellers,” “Gypsies/Travellers,” “Gypsies,” “Travellers” | Uncertain                                                                                 | No                                         |
| Richardson (2006)      | “Gypsies and Travellers,” “Gypsies/Travellers,” and “Travellers” | Uncertain                                                                                 | No                                         |
| Shubin (2010)          | “Gypsy Travellers”                     | Scottish Gypsy Travellers only                                                            | No                                         |
| Shubin & Swanson (2010)| “Gypsy Travellers”                     | Scottish Gypsy Travellers only                                                            | No                                         |

Table 1: Terms and Definitions. These are terms used in the scholarly literature to describe Britain’s diverse population of nomads.

As Table 1 indicates, when it comes to the literature on British nomads, this kind of terminological fuzziness does appear to be the norm rather than the exception. Only three articles out of ten include a clear explanation of what the author means when they use terms like “Gypsy-Travellers,” “Travellers,” and “Gypsies and Travelers,” and two of those articles were written by the same author. Why this ambiguity exists in the literature is uncertain; however, it does make writing a precise review of these sources a little bit challenging. That being said, before I continue my discussion of the literature on nomadism in the British Isles, it would make sense for me to indicate which terms I’ll be using, and to provide a clear definition for each one.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will use the terms British nomads or nomads of the British Isles to refer to all nomadic groups in the United Kingdom, including the New Age Travellers.
When I use the term *traditional British nomads* or *traditional nomads*, I am referring exclusively to Britain’s ‘indigenous’ nomads (i.e., all nomads except the New Age Travellers).

Unfortunately, because detailed information that would allow me to distinguish between the different nomadic groups in Britain is limited, I won’t be able to employ terms more specific than these; however, this only highlights the need for additional research with nomads in the United Kingdom that will allow different nomadic groups to be distinguished from one another.\(^8\)

Now that these terms have been clearly defined, let’s return to our discussion of vehicle nomadism in the British context. Although RVers in Australia and North America are usually categorized based on their decisions to travel part-time or full-time, research on vehicle nomadism in the United Kingdom does not generally make this distinction.\(^9\) This is because, for the most part, scholars who study nomadic groups in Britain are discussing their mobility as a cultural practice, rather than a “life-stage choice” (Drakakis-Smith 2007, p. 470). Furthermore, as scholars who study nomadism in the UK are often critiquing the personal and institutional forms of discrimination that British nomads face as a result of their mobility practices, arguing that part-time nomadism somehow differs from its full-time counterpart would be counter-productive in terms of helping to secure rights for the nomadic community as a whole. Thus, scholarly research on nomads in the UK—especially that which is focused on traditional nomads—tends to approach them as a group whose mobile practices make up their distinct way of life, much like the Bedouins or the Kalahari Bushmen. Because the mobility of traditional

\(^8\) Although I am aware that there are numerous other groups of nomads that have been studied by scholars (such as the Roma), the time constraints of my degree required me to be very focused in terms of how I approached my literature review. As a result, I have focused in on what I feel are two of the most prominent bodies of literature on vehicle nomads.

\(^9\) Drakakis-Smith (2007) does use the phrase “[m]obile and even site-dwelling Gypsies/Travellers;” however, it appears that this use of the terms *mobile* and *site-dwelling* is meant to differentiate between nomads who are camping illegally and those who are parking on an authorized pitch, respectively. In his article on Scottish Gypsy Travellers, Shubin (2010) acknowledges that “some travel year round while others do not travel at all;” however, this is only mentioned in passing as a way to describe the diversity of the group he is studying (p. 497).
British nomads is seen as a cultural practice rather than a choice, the fact that “travelling is currently being suppressed below the level of aspiration” by restrictive legislation is seen as a threat to their “personal and group identity and culture” (Niner 2004, p. 149).

Discrimination against British nomads and their way of life is a long-standing issue in the United Kingdom, and it’s one that continues to appear in news reports (BBC News 2017). At the heart of the matter, as Bancroft (2000) eloquently states, is the fact that “[t]he structure and practice of the law in Britain have problems coping with people who demand intermittent access to land and tend to end up criminalising them” (p. 53). This is because “[p]ermanent possession and ownership of land are valued in legal statute, whereas rights of intermittent access are not” (Bancroft 2000, p. 44).

As a result of policies that have been implemented since the 1960s, vehicle nomads in the United Kingdom “have been under constant pressure to stop travelling and settle down,” and the stopping grounds valued by traditional British nomads have been disappearing at an increasing rate (Kabachnik 2009, p. 461). This is because the policies that regulate the provision of camping areas for nomads were implemented under the (sedentarist) assumption that people do not live a nomadic lifestyle by choice (Shubin & Swanson 2010). In response to the number of people who were squatting as a result of the post-war housing shortage in Britain, The Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act (1960) was implemented (Drakakis-Smith 2007). This legislation required caravan sites to be licensed and gave local communities the power to create areas where nomads could legally camp; however, no assistance was provided to help with the creation of these sites, and as a result, the traditional stopping grounds of Britain’s indigenous nomads began to disappear (ibid.). Although grant aid was subsequently offered under the Caravan Sites Act of 1968, the revised legislation also placed restrictions on how large a
nomad’s caravan could be, and “gave local authorities the power to regulate sites and remove trespassers, that is, those not on authorised sites” (Drakakis-Smith 2007, p. 474).

These Acts were not revisited until the 1990s, when authorities created The Criminal Justice and Public Order (CJPO) Act of 1994 in an attempt to curb gatherings of ravers and protesters (Drakakis-Smith 2007). This legislation had a considerable negative impact on traditional British nomads, as, under the CJPO Act, convoys of more than five vehicles could now be broken up, which prevented indigenous nomads from caravanning with their extended families (O’Nions, cited in Bancroft 2000). Also, because a single family of traditional nomads can own multiple vehicles, this means that attempts by two or more families to travel together can constitute an offence, which makes it difficult to sustain the “networks of family and friends which are central to the organisation of Gypsy-Traveller society” (O’Nions, cited in Bancroft 2000, p. 49). Furthermore, the 1994 Act “removed all rights for Travellers to stop anywhere but on an authorised site” whilst simultaneously revoking the grant aid that had been provided under the 1968 Act for sites to be created (Bancroft 2000, p. 49; Drakakis-Smith 2007). And to top it all off, under the 1994 Act, stopping on an unauthorized site was now a criminal offense, rather than a civil one (Bancroft 2000). Nomads in Scotland, who are subject to all of these restrictions, are additionally impacted by the Roads Scotland Act of 1984, which also “forbids encampments anywhere on or near a road and forbids campfires within 30 m of a road,” which means that the Scottish police have the authority to “displace Gypsy Travellers parked near any road in the country” (Clark et al., cited in Shubin & Swanson 2010, p. 924).

Given that the British government has acknowledged “a shortfall of 4,500 pitches,” this means that “one-third of Britain’s nomads” have no legal sites on which to park their caravans (Kabachnik 2009, p. 462). To make matters worse, “[t]here are now no areas of common land
[in England] where Gypsies/Travellers can camp without the threat of eviction” (Niner 2004, p. 152). As a result, thousands of British nomads have been criminalized simply because they lack access to authorised sites, and as a result, have no choice but to park their vehicles illegally (Cowan & Lomax 2003; Kabachnik 2010).

In cases where sites have been provided, they are provided on terms that are not amenable to a nomadic way of life. According to Shubin (2010), “[t]he majority of tenure agreements on authorised caravan sites interpret mobility as physical movement, which has to comply with temporal regulations in the form of daily curfews and limited annual absences” (p. 503). Travellers who are staying on authorized sites must obtain permission to leave the grounds, and are charged rental fees while they are absent from them (Shubin & Swanson 2010). They are also required to “notify site wardens if they are absent for more than a week and they have to give written notification for [an] absence longer than 4 weeks” (Shubin 2010, p. 505). This means that nomads on authorized sites do not have the freedom to pick up and go whenever they like.

As a result of these restrictive requirements, British nomads who own their own property have often tried to secure the requisite planning licenses so that they can accommodate caravans on their own land; however, these licenses are so difficult to obtain that many nomads simply give up and accommodate caravans on their property illegally (Niner 2004). And although there are thousands of acres of land which are overseen by actual caravanning clubs, many of Britain’s nomads cannot gain entry to these sites. Clubs actively exclude nomads who are on the road full-time by making a permanent address a requirement for membership, and by banning working vehicles from entering the grounds (Lloyd & Morran, cited in Drakakis-Smith 2007).
Many of the problems around site provision for British vehicle nomads stem from a problematic understanding of what nomadic mobility actually entails. Kabachnik (2009) points out that nomads are commonly understood as people who are consistently mobile; unfortunately, this means that “when staying put becomes an issue, many local residents cannot accept it. For how can they be a Gypsy or Traveler if they don’t move?” (p. 475). This understanding of nomads as people who are always moving is used by local communities to justify their refusals to provide legal camping grounds for Travellers and their vehicles (Kabachnik 2009). People do not seem to be able to reconcile the notion that a nomad who leaves the open road and settles down—whether temporarily or for an extended period of time—is still a nomad.

Spatial, legal, and personal forms of discrimination against Britain’s traditional nomads are also fueled by the assumption that their travelling way of life is a choice, and that they could just as easily change to a different way of living (Kabachnik 2009). This is why, when traditional nomads in the United Kingdom face harassment and discrimination, people tend to ask why they continue to lead a nomadic way of life instead of settling down, when being nomadic exposes them to so much harassment and oppression (Kabachnik 2009). “Why not give up nomadism and its corresponding struggle,” they ask, “and turn in your caravan for a nice ‘regular’ house or apartment” (Kabachnik 2009, p. 462)? Although these questions may not be ill-intentioned, “by imploring nomads to change their way of life—for their own good—it is suggested that all that is required for Gypsies and Travelers is to simply choose” (ibid.). However, this way of thinking denies “the distinctive and legitimate way of life” of these nomads, and other nomads like them (ibid.). It reinforces ideas that fixity is the ‘norm,’ and that nomads should just assimilate and adopt a settled life like everybody else. As I mentioned in the section on sedentarist metaphysics, this is a situation where the ways of thinking that value fixity
over mobility have an impact on real mobile subjects. When people act as though lifestyles that don’t fit with a sedentarist metaphysics are deviant and should just disappear, sedentarism gets reinforced. And when this happens, life gets a lot more difficult for nomadic people.

**Making Connections**

Although retired RVers and the nomads of the British Isles are all vehicle nomads (except for the few who live in tents), the difference in how scholars approach these two nomadic populations is profound. Those who conduct research with RVers tend to understand their mobility as a lifestyle choice, frequently relating it to concepts like age, retirement, and tourism. Those who study traditional British nomads tend to defend their mobility as a cultural way of life, and study it in an attempt to bring issues of institutional, legislative, and personal discrimination to light. Both bodies of literature suggest that vehicle nomads are going against the grain of their respective societies by pursuing a nomadic way of life, but no attempt has yet been made to bring the two bodies of literature into conversation. As I mentioned before, this is something I hope to do through my own research, which looks at younger vehicle nomads who are practicing a life of full-time mobility.

The nomads in my study, as well as the RVers and British nomads already studied by scholars, all practice a form of mobility that is centered in and around the automobile. For those who are familiar with the mobilities literature, this raises the question of whether I should ground my work in *mobilities*, or in *automobilities*. Although I would argue that vanlife *is* a form of automobility, this is a much more complex question than it would at first seem, for reasons that I am about to discuss.
Automobilities

Driving can be included among the active corporeal engagements of human bodies with the ‘sensed’ world.

-Mimi Sheller (2004, p. 227)

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Some mobilities scholars, as well as other social scientists, have taken particular interest in “the complex and variegated social relations associated with driving and the spaces of the road,” which has given rise to a body of literature focused on automobilities (Merriman 2009, p. 141). The concept of automobility came into being to help address limitations in how cars were being conceptualized in the academic literature; namely, as “socially neutral object[s] or [as] evil one[s] hell-bent on destroying a past way of urban life” (Sheller & Urry, cited in Pesses 2010, p. 2). According to Sheller and Urry (2000), previous understandings of the automobile had not really considered its enormous impact on urban and suburban lives. However, it was also important to develop a concept that would not subscribe to “binary notions of the car as destroyer of urban society or the giver of freedom to the urban citizen” (Pesses 2010, p. 2). Rather, the concept of automobility was advanced to help understand how automobility shapes the spatial, social, and temporal worlds of urban and suburban dwellers, and how the practices of automobility are permeated and perpetuated by social relations (Sheller & Urry 2000).

The term automobility, of course, has a long history. Originally, it referred to the ability for a vehicle to move autonomously, without a horse or mule having to pull it (Featherstone 2004). It also referred to the fact that cars provided a form of transportation that was “freed from the confines of a rail track” (ibid., p. 1). In the automobilities literature, however, the auto in automobility is making reference to two things simultaneously: the self (as in the word autobiography), and the capacity for mechanized movement (as in automated and automobile) (Thrift, cited in Urry 2004). This “double resonance” in the automobility definition was meant
to advance the idea that cars and their drivers, when they are combined, form an entity that
enfolds (and is enfolded in) “specific human activities, machines, roads, buildings, signs and
cultures of mobility” (Thrift, cited in Urry 2004). In academic terms, this car-driver combination
is an assemblage or a hybrid.

In assemblage theory, “[t]he main objects of study are ‘assemblages’, defined as wholes
whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts” (Escobar 2007, p. 107).

Moreover, as Cresswell (2014) explains:

Assemblages are distinct from organic structures which are also assembled from
parts but depend on each part in order to exist. In an organic structure, if you
take away a constituent part, the structure would cease to exist in a recognizable
way. With an assemblage, constituent parts can be removed and replaced. The
parts can then enter other assemblages and contribute to new ‘unique wholes.’
(p. 52)

This theoretical approach views the vehicle as an assemblage that’s made up of multiple
components; however, when a person gets into the vehicle to drive it, that additional component
(i.e., the person) makes the vehicle a different assemblage than it was before. At the same time,
the car-driver assemblage can be seen as a component in a number of other assemblages (e.g.,
urban gridlock, an international auto show, or even the local demolition derby). Keeping this
understanding in mind, let’s proceed with a review of the automobilities literature.

The “System” of Automobility

When Sheller and Urry (2000) initially defined the concept of automobility, they
described it as a system. In this conceptualization, automobility was understood as a web of
“interlocking machines, social practices and ways of dwelling” that connects vehicles, drivers,
gas stations, traffic signs, and all of the other car-related objects and technologies in the
landscape to one another (Featherstone 2004; Sheller and Urry 2000, p. 739). This system,
according to Urry (2004), is a social structure, which means that the web of cars, drivers, and
technologies is a network that’s shaped by human practices and social relations. Urry (2004) also suggested that the system of automobility is self-sustaining (he uses the term *autopoietic*) and self-perpetuating; put simply, everything that the system of automobility requires to stay in place is made inside the system itself, and the changes that this system has brought about in our world are what help it to continue expanding. This system is occasionally referred to as a *regime*, as a way of highlighting the role that power (and its distribution) play in keeping the system going (Collin-Lange 2013; Green et al. 2018).

Automobilities scholars have pointed out that in this worldwide system of automobility, car travel is “uniquely privileged,” and that it has a tendency to dominate over other forms of mobility (Green et al. 2018, p. 14; Urry 2004). According to Sheller and Urry (cited in Urry 2004), the system of automobility has six components that, when combined, are what give automobility its dominant character:

1. Cars as distinctive manufactured objects.
2. Cars as one of the most significant items of individual consumption (second only to housing).
3. Automobility’s requirement for, and sustaining of, a massive industrial (both extractive and manufacturing) and infrastructural complex.
4. The mobility that cars provide is the “predominant form of ‘quasi-private’ mobility that subordinates other mobilities,” and as a result, this mobility shapes the ways in which many people schedule their daily lives. (Whitelegg, cited in Urry 2004, p. 26)
5. Cultural perceptions that people need cars in order to be independent and to have a good life.
6. Cars as a significant draw on environmental resources.

Put simply, when you take the way that human beings value their cars (both as distinct objects and something that costs a lot of money), combine it with people’s perceptions of cars as necessary for independence and for orchestrating the tasks of daily life, and then think about the amount of labour power, infrastructure, and material resources that go into making car use possible (and the number of jobs that would be lost if all of that stopped), you get a sense of automobility’s massive impact on the world we live in.
Automobility Theory

As the definitions provided above might suggest, assemblage theory is one of the frameworks that is used in automobilities research. In this particular understanding, scholars see the auto-mobile subject as “folded into the vehicle” (Huijbens & Benediktsson 2007, p. 145). What this means is that, although the person and the car normally exist as separate parts in the assemblage, when the person slides into the driver’s seat, it creates a new “social being that takes on properties of both and cannot exist without both” (Dant, cited in Featherstone 2004). The easiest way to explain this would be to use my dad’s car as an example. When it’s parked in the driveway, my dad’s Buick Enclave is just a static object (although a very nice one). When I get behind the wheel, the Enclave is no longer a static object as it was before; now, it becomes the social being called ‘carefully driven and expensive borrowed car.’ Later, when my dad gets behind the wheel, the Enclave will become an entirely different social being called ‘expensive car driven by a guy whose nickname is “Tommy Turbo”.’ As you might imagine, the first car-driver assemblage would be a very different (i.e., slower) social being than the second.

However, assemblage theory is not the only approach that scholars take when they are studying automobility; phenomenological approaches are also used. In 2004, Mimi Sheller proposed that the ways in which we move—whether we are driving, walking, taking a bus or riding a bicycle—affect how we relate to the world around us. Given that the car is a very popular way of moving around, Sheller (2004) called for “[a]n emotional sociology of automobility” (p. 223). She argued that “feelings for, of and within cars occur as embodied sensibilities that are socially and culturally embedded in familial and sociable practices of car use,” and that these sensibilities shape “the circulations and displacements performed by cars, roads and drivers” (ibid., p. 222). Put simply, our feelings towards our cars can influence the ways that we interact with the people and places in our lives.
These embodied sensibilities, or *automotive emotions* (also referred to as *auto-emotions*), are defined as “the embodied dispositions of car-users and the visceral and other feelings associated with car-use” (Sheller 2004, p. 223). Fancy language aside, *auto-emotions* are the things that we feel about cars, in cars, and with cars. To give an example of each, the deep affection I feel for Lola (my van) is how I feel *about* my van. When I am driving her, I usually feel like I am in control of my world, and that’s how I feel *in* my van. Then I hit a massive pothole, and I feel *with* my van how bad the freaking suspension is. Yet, the auto-emotions I experience with Lola are not what other people might feel in my situation, nor are they something I would necessarily feel towards other vans. The auto-emotions that emerge as a result of my relationship with Lola are a unique result of my *personal* relationship with this one *specific* van. This is why Sheller (2004) makes the point that auto-emotions “are neither located solely within the person nor produced solely by the car as a moving object, but occur as a circulation of affects between (different) persons, (different) cars, and historically situated car cultures and geographies of automobility” (p. 227).

**The Effects of Automobility**

Regardless of the approach that is taken to study automobility, what the literature makes apparent is that cars and their supporting infrastructure have had a significant impact on the world we live in. As the concept of automobility has been used primarily to help scholars understand and critique the processes and practices unfolding in urban space, the effects that cars have had upon city life have received particular attention. Close examination of the literature reveals three interconnecting spheres of influence that are commonly discussed: the way in which automobility has shaped (and continues to shape) the physical landscape; the creation of
an automobilized time-space; and the resulting reconfiguration of urban and suburban social relations.

*How Automobility Shapes Landscapes*

Featherstone (2004) has suggested that the ways in which the motorized landscape is configured “[contribute] to our sense of place, of ‘being in the world’ within a familiar context” (p. 5). This is because the ways in which highways, streets, road signs and rest stops are configured is not universal; indeed, these variations in the motorized landscape are said to “contribute to our sense of national identity” (ibid.). The fact that driving is not the same around the world is something that I learned the hard way when my mum and I rented a car in Scotland several years ago. Getting used to driving on the left hand side of the road was fine; it was those freaking traffic circles that kept messing with my head. Oh, how I hated those things. There were areas of the Highlands where I felt like a group of highway planners had gone utterly mad, building roundabouts in dozens of random places for reasons known only to themselves. As someone who hadn’t been exposed to traffic circles before, I didn’t know how they worked, and encountering them over and over again was intensely stressful. However, my experience showed me that the ways in which automobility shapes the landscape are not universal: North American planners tend to install intersections, while British ones tend to install roundabouts.

In North America, the motorized landscape outside of the major cities is structured in ways that channel “flows of people and goods along particular routes, especially motorways or interstate highways” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 745). However, the most significant impact of automobility on the physical landscape has arguably happened within urban spaces. Sheller and Urry (2000) have stated that cities around the world are defined just as much by automobility as they are by other recent technologies, and this tends to shape the landscape in particular ways.
Cars require “wide roads, ample parking, extensive infrastructure, and separated, low-density, dispersed land uses in order to ensure the automobile network is integrated and not overwhelmed with congestion” (Gordon and Richardson, cited in Henderson 2009, p. 71). In some North American cities, this results in a thick network of “ramps and overpasses, bridges and tunnels, [and] expressways and bypasses” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 740). Given that almost half of the land in the city of Los Angeles has been devoted to “car-only environments,” it’s not surprising that a large portion of the opening sequence of Lucha Underground shows highways and overpasses as a way of indicating that the show is filmed there (Saunders 2014; Urry 2004).

Automobility has also allowed for the continuing sprawl of suburbia, and in the North American context, this means that urban landscapes have “increasingly come to reflect the potentials and characteristics of the car” (Wells & Xenias 2015). In these places, where the assumption that everyone owns a car is implicit in how the urban landscape is constructed, people have to navigate long distances just to complete their day-to-day tasks. In many cases, this means that “[m]uch social life could not be undertaken without the flexibilities of the car and its 24-hour availability” (Urry 2004, p. 28). When the urban landscape is designed around car use, it gets harder to navigate the city without one; unless, of course, you have lots of time on your hands.

*Automobilized Time-Space*

Unfortunately, most people don’t have a lot of time on their hands, which means that automobility (and the ways in which it has shaped the urban landscape) has produced what Sheller and Urry (2000) refer to as an *automobilized time-space*. Because urban life is so stretched-out, people use cars to help them with “transcending distance to complete series of activities within fragmented moments of time” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 739). Car drivers
operate on “instantaneous time,” which is defined as an “individualistic timetabling of many instants or fragments of time” that Urry (2004) contrasts with “the official timetabling of mobility that accompanied the railways” in a previous era of mobility (pp. 28-29). With the rise of automobility, we became our own ‘station masters,’ replacing official transportation schedules with “personal, subjective temporalities” (Urry 2004, p. 29).

In cities that have been designed around car use, scholars argue that automobility becomes a coercive system in which people are forced to “juggle fragments of time so as to deal with the temporal and spatial constraints that [automobility] itself generates” (Urry 2004, p. 28). Patterns of social life become “complex, fragile and contingent” within such a system, because they end up being built around people’s ability to become mobile at the drop of a hat (Urry 2004, p. 29). Furthermore, the challenges of meeting day-to-day demands in such a stretched-out urban landscape generate a need for flexibility “that so far only the car is able to satisfy,” much to the chagrin of those who wish to encourage the use of public transit (Urry 2004, p. 29).

How Automobility Shapes Sociality

Well I've been a Sunday driver noo for many's a happy year
I've never had my Morris Minor oot o' second gear
I can drive at fifty miles an hour on motorway or track
With me wife up front beside me, and her mother in the back.
There was me and my daddy and my daddy's mammy
And her sister's Granny and four of her chums.
(…and Auntie Jean).
[...]
Well, I always drive as though my foot was restin' on the brake
I weave aboot the road just so's ye cannae overtake
I can get ye so frustrated ye'll finish up in tears
And the sound of blarin' motor horns is music to my ears!

-The Corries, “Sunday Driver”

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In light of the argument that the automobilized landscape forces people to juggle their schedules in particular ways, scholars have also claimed that automobility has had an impact on
some of our social practices, and the ways in which these unfold. Cars are incorporated into people’s daily lives in ways that are said to shape their interactions with family, friends, and the community more broadly (Sheller & Urry 2000). As a result of the way that social engagement is structured around automobilized time-space, cars become much harder to part with, because they’ve become part of “mobile sociability and the day-to-day moralities involved in coordinating family life or networks of friendship in automobilized societies” (Miller, cited in Sheller 2004, p. 229). Tasks like picking a child up at soccer practice or driving a sick friend to the hospital get entangled with understandings of what it’s like to be a good parent or a reliable friend. For auto-mobile subjects in the workforce, being able to stay late at the office (instead of leaving on time to catch a bus) gets incorporated into a person’s toolbox for getting ahead in their work life (Kent 2014). As Kent (2014) points out, this means that giving up automobility “entails not only a change of transport mode, but a change in practices of…working, socialising and parenting” (p. 110).

However, automobility doesn’t just shape the way that our social practices unfold in urban spaces. Driving also involves its own sets of social practices (e.g., pulling over for emergency vehicles, refraining from passing or merging into a funeral procession) and modes of sociality (e.g., cruise nights, road trips, illegal street racing). Many of the practices involved in driving are learned at an early age when a person is preparing to get their driver’s license. However, some rules of driving and passengering aren’t generally included in a driver’s handbook. A great example of an unwritten rule of passengering etiquette is the meme “when people think your gas tank runs on friendship” (Figure 1), which is an image people can post on their Facebook feeds if they want to passive-aggressively criticize that one person in their life who gets rides from them all the time but never offers them any gas money (Humoar, N.D.). As
Collin-Lange (2013) indicates, “automobility is social and only possible because it is social. It is also a matter of power, of status, structured and reproduced by social interactions” (p. 411).

Automobility also involves “a range of socialities that goes beyond the simple transportative purpose,” like cruise nights, drive-in movies, or the infamous ‘Sunday drive’ (Collin-Lange 2013, p. 410). Moreover, some forms of sociality in automobility are event-based, in that they involve spectators and sponsors, as well. Examples of this would be sled pulling, NASCAR racing, and monster truck rallies, where people pay admission to attend the events and watch drivers and their vehicles compete against one another. You also have events like the 24 Hours at Le Mans, where automobile companies strive, through careful engineering, to have their brands represented in the winners’ circle. What these events suggest is that automobility doesn’t just shape day-to-day interactions in our social worlds; automobility is also a social world in and of itself.

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10 Sled-pulling is a motorsport where a vehicle (such as a tractor or truck) is hooked up to a 'sled’ that is designed to increase resistance against the towing vehicle the further it is pulled. In sled-pulling, vehicles are pitted against one another to see which one can pull the sled the furthest distance.
As we have seen, the concept of automobility was originally advanced in order to help scholars understand some of the processes and practices that were unfolding in, and shaping, urban space. Whether automobility is studied using assemblage theory or the concept of auto-emotions, its effect on the landscape is often quite visible, and it can have considerable impacts on the ways in which people structure their time and their relationships. And yet, the preceding discussion of how scholars understand automobility would be incomplete if I did not explore how cars themselves have been understood.

**Cars in the Academic Literature**

This was the car that I never thought I would have, so it’s very special to me, and I treat it very well, and it puts me in a great mood. Every time I hear it start up, I love the sound. You just keep reminding yourself you’re in a Ferrari when you look at the little horsie on the steering wheel, it’s just like “wow, this is my car.” It’s…it’s pretty cool.

-Lisa Clark, owner of a 2016 Ferrari 488 GTB (in Weintrob 2018)

“[A] culture of the car amount[s] to a culture of death.”

-Mike Featherstone (2004, p. 16)

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From the armoured Rolls-Royces of the Western Front to the streamlined racers of the Monaco Grand Prix, motorized vehicles have occupied a space in the lot of human history for over a hundred years. The very first electric and gasoline-powered cars were built in the 1890s, although at that time they were such a rare and unusual sight that people would exhibit them in circuses (Bailey & Kimes 1971). Mass production began in the early 1900s, and by the 1920s, companies like Ford and Chevrolet were already vying for dominance (ibid.). At one point, the car was “seen by intellectuals as a fascinating and contested symbol of modernism,

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11 It should be noted that this review of the automobilities literature is by no means exhaustive. Again, as a result of the time constraints I was working under, I had to be very focused in my approach to reviewing the literature; nevertheless, I have done my best to focus on what I feel are key texts, as well as texts that focus on automobility in different geographical and social contexts.
Americanization and consumerism” (Inglis, cited in Featherstone 2004, p. 7). However, in present accounts, the ways in which cars are discussed in the literature can range from intense critiques of their harmful attributes (both perceived and real) to positive accounts of cars as unique and valuable social spaces.

**Critiques of Cars and their Effects on Urban Life**

In early sociological work on cars, private motorized vehicles were understood “either as a neutral technology, permitting social patterns of life that would happen anyway, or as a fiendish interloper that destroyed earlier patterns of urban life” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 738). Although the automobilities concept was advanced as a way to depart from this original conception, the latter view still resonates throughout the current literature on automobility. For example, Urry (2004) has suggested that we can understand the spread of automobiles across the globe as though it were an epidemic, “emerging first in North America and then virulently spreading into, and taking over, most parts of the body social…Indeed, to some degree, the poorer the country the greater is the power of this virus” (p. 27). Whether scholars subscribe to this analogy or not, critiques of cars and automobility that are found in the academic literature tend to advance arguments related to urban sociology, political sociology, or environmental sustainability.

**Urban Sociology’s View of the Car and Automobility**

Don’t it always seem to go  
That you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot.

-Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi”

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As discussed above, car use has had considerable influence in shaping the physical and social landscape of cities around the world. Indeed, scholars who study automobility claim that the car “has entirely configured modern urban life in increasingly environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable patterns of dwelling, production and consumption” (Sheller and Urry, cited in Henderson 2009, p. 72). Henderson (2009) is particularly adamant about the car’s negative impact on urban space, suggesting that “[a]ny reasonable transformation of cities based on ecological sustainability and social justice would surely require political contestation of automobility—and particularly parking” (p. 72). This is because some forms of parking require curb cuts, which “result in the loss of street trees and degrade the pedestrian environment” (Henderson 2009, p. 77). Urry (2004) is also highly critical of the car’s impact, stating that “[c]ar-travel interrupts the taskscapes of others (pedestrians, children going to school, postmen, garbage collectors, farmers, animals and so on), whose daily routines are obstacles to the high-speed traffic cutting mercilessly through slower-moving pathways and dwellings” (p. 29).

**Political Sociology’s View of the Car and Automobility**

Critiques of cars and automobility that are grounded in political sociology take the perceived negative impact of cars on (urban) public space as their main topic of focus. Cars are seen as “the enemy of urbanism, of civility, even of citizenship—an intrusion from the suburban borderlands” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 740). As Pel (2016) has noted, these critiques treat automobility as a “colonizing force” that is “undermining ‘normal’ social relations and uprooting traditional attachments to the natural environment” (p. 665). Private car use is understood as threatening not just the integrity of public space, but also public life and public goods. As Sheller (2004) explains:

Social commentators have long addressed the problem of car cultures in an explicitly normative manner concerned with the restitution of ‘public goods’
Pesses (2010) even states that no matter how you understand mobility in the urban environment, “the modern automobile presents a challenge (either perceived or real) to the socially important public place” (p. 6).

Claims that automobility undermines public space rest on the idea that the “power of civil society crucially depends on the democratic ‘social space’” that is created by people’s movement between the private and public spheres (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 741). By meeting with each other when they emerge from private space, human beings have opportunities to interact, communicate, and “develop their deliberative capacities as citizens” (ibid.). This, according to some scholars, is what creates chances for democratic dialogues in urban space. One reason why automobility is perceived as a threat to this interaction and communication is that when people are moving through urban space in their private cars, their interaction with the world outside of the vehicle can, at times, be quite limited. And because interaction with people outside of the car is limited, the communication between human beings that is said to create democratic citizenship does not occur. This is why many scholars have taken aim at the car as a tool for mobility, describing it as something that generates “privatized homogeneity” and an object that “fragment[s] social practices that occurred in shared public spaces within each city” (Pesses 2010, p. 8; SceneSusTech, cited in Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 744).

Political sociological critique of cars and their perceived impact on public space is occasionally carried over into a critique of their drivers, as well. The ability of auto-mobile individuals to live in the city but move through it without exiting the vehicle has been dubbed an “SUV model of citizenship,” which is “centered on privatized, unhindered, cocooned movement through public space, whereby people feel they have a right not to be burdened through
interaction with anyone or anything they wish to avoid” (Mitchell, cited in Henderson 2009, p. 84). Scholars who take this view assert that automobility allows drivers to travel around the city in their own little private protective bubble, safe from “the perceived evils of the city, such as homelessness” (Henderson 2009, p. 85; Sheller & Urry 2000). The rise of technologies like automatic door locks, tinted glass, and emergency call-out services like OnStar has only added to this perception (Wells & Xenias 2015). This is why scholars like Featherstone (2004) and Urry (2004) claim that driving through urban space is an “impoverished experience” compared to other forms of mobility (Featherstone 2004, p. 8). Immobilized by the seat belt, the driver is viewed as simply speeding through the city, unable “to talk to strangers, to learn of local ways of life, [or] to stop and sense each different place” (Freund, cited in Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 747).

When this perceived ability of private car drivers to cocoon themselves in a protective metal bubble is considered alongside the popularity of automobility, what emerges in the literature is a picture of urban space that is flooded with cars, where “everyone is coerced to experience such environments through the protective screen and to abandon urban streets and squares to the metallic cages-on-wheels” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 747). Public spaces in the city become “emptied non-places” and “the ‘coming together of private citizens in public space’ is lost to a privatization of the mechanized self” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 746). In this understanding of automobility, cars represent the victory of private bubbles over public space, and automobility is critiqued for promoting and perpetuating a “possessive” and “competitive” type of individualism (Harvey, cited in Henderson 2009, p. 84; Redshaw 2007, p. 126).

However, according to scholarly critiques of automobility, private car drivers do not just threaten, subtract from, and “deform” public space; they also destroy one of humanity’s most valuable public goods: the environment (Sheller & Urry, cited in Peses 2010, p. 1). Cars are
critiqued for the “disproportionate amounts of physical resources” that they use up, and are dubbed “large, wasteful and planet-destroying creature[s]” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 744; Urry 2004, p. 36). Private cars are said to “dominate the environment,” aggressively “carving a path into and through every aspect of social and cultural life” (Redshaw 2007, pp. 124, 139-40). Yet, despite the damage that private vehicles are said to be doing to urban public space and the environment, “speed-obsessed” city drivers are viewed as clinging to their “metal cocoons,” shunning “morally superior” modes of mobility, which offer “a ‘purer’ autonomy than the car can deliver, and one aligned to the healthy, ecological and efficient desires of the model urban citizen” (Collin-Lange 2013, p. 411; Green, Steinbach and Datta, cited in Green et al., 2018, p. 15; Green et al. 2018, p. 15; Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 754). People just keep driving, and scholars are left to lament that people simply won’t give up their cars because “[t]oo many people find them too comfortable, enjoyable, exciting, [and] even enthralling” (Sheller 2004, p. 236).

**Danger**

Critiques of automobility go beyond focusing on the dangers that private cars pose to the environment, for scholars have pointed out that cars are not just planet-killers—they are people-killers, too. Redshaw (2007) asserts that cars possess an “innate violence,” claiming that they are “the means and emblem of individual expression through aggression, [as] performance, power and speed are standard features of many cars” (pp. 121, 129). As a metal box weighing more than a thousand pounds, a car is capable of causing considerable damage to living organisms in the event of a collision. This is perhaps why, in the literature, it has been dubbed a “hugely dangerous capsule” that causes “significant carnage,” as well as the “regular murder of human beings” (Featherstone 2004, p. 4; Redshaw 2007, p. 139; Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 739). Sadly, statistics show that these “moving, dangerous iron cages” are one of the leading causes “of all
deaths worldwide and the leading cause of death by injury worldwide” (Redshaw 2007, p. 128; Urry 2004, p. 30). This leads scholars like Redshaw (2007) to conclude that the ways in which cars are “articulated allow[s] and tolerate[s] the violence that is incurred in order to maintain automobility in its current expressions—as competitive, dominating and aggressive” (p. 129).

Other Understandings of Cars

Given how strongly cars have been critiqued as being harmful to both the physical and social environment (as well as the fleshy bodies of animals and human beings), one might wonder if a scholar could ever say anything good about them. As it so happens, positive aspects of cars have been explored in the automobilities literature; however, the scholars behind these studies tend to put greater focus on the car as a cultural object, a space, or a site of particular practices, than as a mode of mobility. These analyses have commonly highlighted the car’s role as a personal and private dwelling space (something which political sociologists critique, as discussed above), but they also examine the ways in which the design of the automobile’s interior helps to foster communication, and the deep emotional relationships that people form with—and maintain through—their vehicles.

Kent (2014) notes that a person’s car “is explicitly perceived and felt as a very personal and private space” (p. 112). It’s a space where we can sing along to the radio, pick our noses, or just scream into the void about whatever’s bothering us. That makes it a pretty unique dwelling space, because “it is a closed realm of intimacy, but one released from the constrains (sic) that usually apply to the intimacy of the home” (Baudrillard, cited in Featherstone 2004, p. 9; Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006). In some cases, having access to this personal dwelling space can be really important to people, as time spent travelling in the vehicle “is time out from the busy schedules of modern life, or transition time, allowing distance to be created between two
activities or roles (for example, employee to parent)” (Kent 2014, p. 105). For those who have access to a car and a cell phone, the car in motion is also a space where it is acceptable (and often encouraged by our distracted driving laws) to ignore a cellphone when it rings. As Wells and Xenias (2015) note, many people’s cars “may offer [them] a moment of seclusion in an increasingly crowded and urban world” (p. 116).

As a result of the enclosed and private space that is created by the way automobiles are designed, the car has also emerged in some scholarly accounts as a unique site of communication between drivers and passengers. Although cars can be the site of a lot of mundane chatter, they are also “a good place for some of our most serious conversations on matters of life, love and death” (Laurier et al., cited in Ferguson 2009, p. 281). Moreover, as people are not usually inclined to jump out of a moving vehicle in the middle of a conversation, the car is a communication space that encourages “slow and considered responses to difficult issues” (Laurier et al., cited in Ferguson 2009, p. 282). Of course, the downside of this is that you’re forced to sit through angry and unpleasant conversations, as well.

Even so, research on automobility does confirm the car’s role as a special space of communication. In a study of Icelandic youth who had just begun to drive, Collin-Lange (2013) found that the car gave young drivers and their passengers “privacy to share emotion, pour their hearts out and talk about important things” (p. 416). Green et al. (2018) also found that young people spoke fondly of spending time in the car with their families, as “the physical and temporal bounds of the travelling car created spaces of intimacy for conversation, or heightened intensity for shared experiences” (p. 22). Ferguson (2009) also went a step further in this direction, arguing that the car’s design also promotes “deep therapeutic encounters” between social workers and their clients (p. 276). He stated that the benefits that are found in “car therapy” are
not just incidental; rather, they are “a product of the design of cars and the mobilities they produce in themselves” (pp. 276, 282). This is why, according to Ferguson, cars continue to be “a crucial site of practice” in social work (p. 280).

Cars and Our Emotional Bonds

Figure 2: Room and Drive. The day that the ownership papers were signed over and Lola truly became my van (Anderson 2017).

You can always tell when spring has arrived in Merritton, because a man who lives at the end of my mum’s street rolls his copper-coloured 1957 Chevy Bel Air out of the garage, polishes it up, and drives it around the town. Keeping a car in mint condition for sixty years is no small challenge, so it’s safe to say that the man who drives that Chevy is probably quite fond of it. The fact that many people “displace strong feelings onto their cars,” is something that automobilities scholars have acknowledged, even if it’s only in passing (Smith, cited in Ferguson 2009, p. 287). Sheller and Urry (2000), for example, point out that cars are “easily anthropomorphized by being given names, having rebellious features, being seen to age and so on” (p. 738). As you may have figured out by now, my van Lola (Figure 2) is no exception.
It has been said that there is a “humanity” to the vehicles we drive, “which derives from how people develop intense relationships with their [vehicles] and how different societies and cultures invest [vehicles] with particular meanings” (Miller, cited in Ferguson 2009, p. 277). Featherstone (2004) tells us that we should “take into account ‘the humanity of the car’, [as] it makes little sense to focus on the car as a vehicle of destruction without also considering the ways in which it has ‘become an integral part of the cultural environment [within] which we see ourselves as human’” (Miller, cited in Featherstone 2004, p. 5). This means that if we want to understand cars and people’s relationships with them, we can’t just focus on what vehicles are capable of; we also have to look at what they do for people. The meanings that we assign to our vehicles, and the ways in which these meanings differ from person to person and place to place, “express something humane about social relationships,” but they also provide the foundation for a phenomenon we’ve come to know as car culture (Miller, cited in Ferguson 2009, p. 277).

**Car Cultures**

The potential for cars to be something more than a resource-consuming, planet-killing, privatized metal death-cocoon is a topic that some automobilities scholars think merits further attention. Cars mean a lot to people, and in some cases, they mean so much to people that entire cultures and subcultures will form around them (as my earlier discussion of the socialities of automobility suggests). Yet, as recently as 2015, a number of scholars have observed that “while issues of governance, regulation, technology, political contestation and market framing are given attention in the literature, the cultural meanings and normative practices with regard to material objects are rather less well developed” (Wells & Xenias 2015, p. 108). Basically, when it comes to studying automobility, scholars rarely investigate what cars actually mean to people.
In an article by Wells and Xenias (2015), the authors noted that “[t]he concept of automobility cultures is relatively new, and has arisen as researchers have sought to understand how distinct forms of mobility have come to be embedded in society” (p. 110). As a result, there hasn’t been much research done on car cultures in the automobilities literature yet. Indeed, the concept is so new that there does not even seem to be an agreed-upon definition of “car cultures” yet. Sheller (2004) seems to suggest that car cultures involve our “psychological dispositions and preferences” relating to cars, and that these preferences are “shaped by collective cultural patterns and…emotional geographies” (p. 223). Unfortunately, this is a little too vague to be used as a definition on its own; however, Featherstone (2004) goes a bit further, suggesting that car cultures are groups of people who have a “sensibility” towards the differing attributes of different brands of cars (p. 14). He claims that:

[around each specialist or classic type of car a whole cultural world develops with its own form of specialist knowledge and publications, practices and argot, which seek to explore and define the details of car anatomy, ‘look’, styling, image and ride. A world which offers the pleasures of common knowledge and distinctive classifications, which work with shared embodied habitus and membership, through car talk as much as car driving. (ibid)

Although I feel that Featherstone hits pretty close to the mark here, the beginning of that definition is a little bit narrow, and it is also somewhat vague, given that he does not clarify the meaning of the word specialist. Is a specialist car something only certain people can drive, like a Formula 1 car or a monster truck? Or is a specialist car something that people need specific skill sets to service, like the Mazda RX-8 (which has a rotary engine)?

Regardless of what specialist means in that definition, car cultures form around more than just “specialist or classic type[s] of car[s]” (ibid). People rally behind countless makes and models, whether they are normal cars, classic cars, muscle cars, or supercars (as an example, the Ferrari brand has its own exclusive racing events). Car cultures also form around the act of building cars (a fact to which the phrase “built not bought” is a testament), and even around the
kind of car you put together when you build one (e.g., rat rod or hot rod?). People will even
gather around particular types of engines, as fans of diesel motorsports will probably tell you.
You also have off-roaders, low riders, rock crawlers, dune bashers, drag racers, drifters…there
are worlds upon worlds of automobility cultures and subcultures out there for researchers to
study.

And it’s important for us to do so, as Sheller (2004) argues that new approaches to car
cultures “can aid us in shifting attention…towards the lived experience of dwelling with cars in
all of its complexity, ambiguity and contradiction” (p. 222). Ferguson (2009) concurs,
suggesting that closer analyses of particular automobilities can tell us important things “about the
nature and meanings of cars and mobilities” (p. 277). For scholars who have advocated for the
uptake of alternative (i.e., non-private-car) modes of mobility, this lack of understanding around
car cultures and their “social, material and above all affective dimensions” is a matter of
particular concern (Sheller 2004, p. 222). This is because, without in-depth research into car
cultures and subcultures, there is little evidence to suggest “how new automobility cultures
(including alternatives to automobility) and sub-cultures might be nurtured” (Brand, cited in
Wells & Xenias 2015, p. 116). Put simply, if you want car cultures to form around hybrids and
smart cars, you have to know how these cultures work in the first place.

Gaps in the Automobilities Literature

As my review of the automobilities literature has shown, the concept of automobility was
originally advanced as a way to help scholars understand and critique some of the processes and
practices that have shaped, and continue to unfold in, urban space. However, it appears that
current scholarship on automobilities hasn’t yet departed from this original purpose, as
discussions of rural and nomadic automobilities are almost entirely absent from the literature
(although see Green et al. 2018 for a study on rural youth and automobility). This is problematic, because rural and nomadic auto-mobile subjects may not identify with descriptions of drivers who are “trapped within a growing (but increasingly static) sea of cars,” or “stuck behind a slow vehicle while trying to save precious fragments of time” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 747; Wells & Xenias 2015, p. 112). Nor might they identify with being a “speed-obsessed” motorist barreling along “urban freeways, where driving entails focusing on the road ahead, with minimal peripheral information from the featureless drab concrete to excite the gaze” (Featherstone 2004, p. 8; Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 754).

As the quotes used in the last paragraph have indicated, the driver described in the automobilities literature is almost exclusively an urban or suburban utilitarian motorist (although see Collin-Lange 2013 for an exception). And although this makes sense given that the concept of automobility was originally put forward to address “the absence of the car in the analysis of the urban,” this urban-only focus does tend to privilege one kind of automobility over all of the others (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 738). This means that by building on the concept of automobility in ways that account for rural and nomadic auto-mobile practices and ways of being, we can expand upon the existing automobilities literature and further develop automobility theory in ways that will make it applicable beyond the urban context.

That being said, scholars such as Kent (2014) and Pel (2016) have suggested that our theoretical approach to studying automobility does need a tune-up. As an example, scholars tend to conceptualize automobility as a ‘system’ when they are studying auto-mobile subjects and their practices, but that approach may not always be helpful. Pel (2016) asserts that this ‘system’ approach, through its implication that car use is both entrenched and self-perpetuating, “serve[s] to legitimate policies that presume, embrace, and facilitate socially embedded car-use” (p. 667).
For, if automobility is a system that is globally dominant and self-perpetuating, how can anybody hope to change it? Rather than conceptualizing automobility in this manner, Pel (2016) suggests that we look at car use as “multitudes of disciplining practices that subtly shape what is held to be normal” (p. 666). This approach may be advisable, as Kent (2014) has already pointed out that the way in which we travel “cannot be sufficiently explained by the structural influences emphasised by proponents of the new mobilities paradigm” (p. 113).

Moreover, in articles grounded in the ‘system’ approach to automobility, there exists a tendency to label all but a select few mobilities within the system as pathological, immoral, or unethical. Automobility gets described as “endemic” and “viral,” and cars are critiqued for having “deform[ed] public roads” (Kent 2014, p. 103; Sheller & Urry, cited in Pesses 2010, p. 1; Urry 2004, p. 27). The mobility practices of auto-mobile subjects are described as being “damaging to public life and civic space,” and it’s said that their mobility “require[s] political contestation” (Henderson 2009, p. 72; Sheller 2004, p. 236). Authors claim that car drivers must be encouraged to adopt “morally superior” mobilities such as cycling, walking, and taking public transit, which offer “a ‘purer’ autonomy than the car can deliver, and one aligned to the healthy, ecological and efficient desires of the model urban citizen” (Green et al. 2018, p. 15, emphasis added).

Pel’s (2016) critique of this practice of pathologizing bears quoting at length:

[S]uch diagnoses have often been proven to suffer from internal inconsistencies. First of all, the above diagnoses can be seen to display strikingly different normative yardsticks: Individual self-realization, ‘normal’ communications and public conviviality, or ‘sustainable’ system evolution of some sort. As the latter stands out as a rather undetermined normative yardstick, it has evoked pertinent questions begging for clarification: In the light of this diagnosis, what would constitute nonpathological or ‘normal’ conditions? Whose ‘system’ and ‘sustainability’ are we talking about, and what remedies could therefore be considered appropriate?” (p. 665)
The question of “whose system” and “whose sustainability” is particularly important here, because the representations and practices of full-time vehicle nomads draw our attention to one of the weirdest gaps in the automobilities literature, which is that—for the most part—it’s actually not about mobility. It’s about place. Automobility, as it’s currently being conceptualized, is grounded in (and helps to perpetuate) a sedentarist metaphysics.

Allow me to explain. In the automobilities literature, cars have been described as privatized mobile capsules that deform the urban landscape, threaten the integrity of public space, and undermine the civility of the social sphere. However, in order to advance arguments like these, you have to be grounded in an ontology where things like urban landscapes and the integrity of public space are assigned some level of moral and/or ontological priority. As an example, in the automobilities literature, citizenship and democracy are characterized as processes that unfold through personal interactions in (urban) public space, and because automobility allows people to traverse public space without interacting with anyone, automobility is viewed as being detrimental to these processes. But by constructing automobility in this manner, we create what Cresswell (2006) refers to as a moral geography, because we’re writing as though things like public space and the urban pedestrian environment are intrinsically beneficial to everyone, which reproduces the sedentarist association between morality and fixity.

This association between morality and fixity also emerges in descriptions of the “post-car” or “no car” system, a system of mobility which has been offered up as a remedy to the environmentally harmful aspects of automobility. The post-car mobility system involves a shift from “ownership to access,” where people would use car-sharing schemes whenever they needed to be auto-mobile, and they would complement this mobility scheme with telecommuting and alternative forms of transit (Urry 2004, p. 34). In this vision of a post-car system, urban streets
would be “transformed through a more mixed flow of slow-moving, semi-public micro-cars, bike lanes, pedestrians and improved mass transport” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 754). In this mobility system, “[e]lectronic tolls will regulate access, price and speed [and neighbourhoods] will foster ‘access by proximity’ through denser living patterns and integrated land use” (Urry 2004, pp. 35-36). For people in a post-car city, “[t]he cool way of travelling will not be to own but to access small, light mobile pods when required” (ibid.).

Given my positionality as a vehicle nomad, the post-car mobility system, as it has been presented, actually worries me. As I mentioned in the section on sedentarist metaphysics, normative representations of ‘correct’ mobility are generally advanced by people who value fixity and rootedness above other ways of being in the world, which means that it’s predominantly *particular* kinds of mobility, performed by *particular* mobile subjects, that are valued (Cresswell 2006). And the post-car system would present particular challenges for full-time vehicle nomads.

De-privatized vehicles are for shared use, so they can’t be converted, and a “micro-car” is too small to live in (Urry 2004, pp. 35-36). Moreover, the post-car system is built around an assumption that cars have no purpose outside of transporting people from point A to point B within urban space, an understanding that doesn’t really reflect the practices of full-time vehicle nomads or other non-utilitarian motorists. This isn’t to say that larger vehicles wouldn’t be available for long-term travelling in a post-car mobility system; indeed, RV rental companies already exist to fulfill this purpose. However, it’s important to consider the financial viability of nomadic automobility in a post-car system: at around $1,000 per week, the cost of renting a small RV for a single month already exceeds the purchase price of my van (Go RVing Canada, 2019). For me, the post-car city is an unsettling vision: filled with “slow-moving, semi-public
micro-cars,” it’s a city I probably couldn’t afford to drive away from (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 754).

**Conclusion**

The mobilities paradigm came about when scholars like Tim Cresswell observed that the movements of people, animals, ideas, and things were being studied in ways that didn’t fully capture the varied social aspects of movement. To address this, Cresswell (2006) advanced a definition of mobility that conceptualized it as the combination of physical movement, representation, and practice. As part of this shift in thinking about movement, mobilities scholars began to critique the dominant ways in which movement was being discussed; namely, in terms of a sedentarist metaphysics, in which movement was treated as “logically secondary to the arrangements of space and place” (Cresswell & Merriman 2011, pp. 3-4). Mobilities scholars also observed that this understanding of movement was having an impact outside of academia, because it often led to certain mobilities being characterized as ‘normal’ and others as ‘deviant’ or ‘suspicious.’ To challenge this way of thinking, mobilities scholars initially advanced the idea of a “nomadic metaphysics,” inspired by the works of Deleuze and Guattari, in which fixity was criticized as being passé, and movement was celebrated as modern and progressive. In this metaphysics, the “nomad” was viewed as a subversive figure who undermined “established forms of ordering and discipline” and rebelled against powerbrokers who relied upon stability and fixity to exert their control (Adey 2010; Cresswell 2006, p. 47; Dufty-Jones 2012).

However, these early mobilities scholars were only talking about “nomads” in the abstract sense, something that Christopher Miller and Tim Cresswell would later criticize (Creswell 2006; Miller, cited in Cresswell 2006). If mobilities scholars were going to talk about
how movement and power intersected in a meaningful way, it was important to move beyond discussions of abstract nomads and engage with mobility in a way that brought its political nature to the fore. This was where Cresswell’s (2010) *politics of mobility* came in. By breaking mobility down into six components (motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience, and friction), Cresswell provided mobilities scholars with a conceptual tool that they could use to examine the ways in which power, movement, and social relations intersect.

As part of the move towards a mobile metaphysics, two dominant ontologies appear to have emerged: the mobilities and moorings framework described by Urry (2003), and the concept of a relational politics of mobility, advanced by Adey (2006). In Urry’s (2003) framework, mobility is understood in terms of its dialectical relationship with fixity, an approach which levels out the hierarchy between mobility and fixity, treating them as interdependent parts of a functioning whole. In Adey’s (2006) relational politics of mobility, rather than being understood in relation to fixity, mobility is treated as being dependent upon slower mobilities, and the politics of those particular mobilities emerge when we consider mobilities in relation to one another. Although this may not appear to be an approach that’s well suited for research in geography, relational understandings of place—such as those described by Doreen Massey (1993) and Arturo Escobar (2001)—can certainly be utilised as part of a relational ontology.

However, as Cresswell (2014) has noted, place is both an object in the world and a way of understanding the world, and over the last 60 years in geography, movement has been understood predominantly in terms of how it relates to place. And although place can be a highly valuable epistemological tool for understanding mobility, there are certain aspects of mobility which may not be as easy to explore and describe when place is being used as the lens for our analysis. This is a challenge that the mobilities paradigm was developed to help us
address. As part of adopting a relational ontological framework for this project, I’ve chosen to employ mobility as the primary lens for understanding and discussing my research findings, leaving place(s) in the background as I compare and connect mobility to mobility in an attempt to understand the things that vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) have said to me. By doing this, I hope to paint a picture of my participants’ mobility that may help us, in future, to distinguish it from other types of vehicle nomadism.

Studying vanlifers and skoolies in this way is important, because the scholars who have captured these nomads in their research have already defined them as a type of RVer. However, they may have been defined in this way prematurely, as the literature suggests that groups of RVers represent and practice their mobility in particular ways, and that many of them belong to a distinct RVing culture—one with which vanlifers and skoolies may not actually identify. Moreover, almost all of the information we have gathered from full-time vehicle nomads in North America has come from RVers over the age of 45, and some of the views that these nomads hold may not be shared by younger people living on the road full-time. Studies of Grey Nomads in Australia and snowbirds in France are similarly geared towards older participants, which means that the views of young vehicle nomads around the world have often been overlooked.

This is not to say that older RVers like the snowbirds and the grey nomads have nothing in common with younger vehicle nomads; indeed, something I discuss in the later chapters of this thesis is that nomads who are on the road full-time—whether they’re travelling in an RV, on a bicycle, or in a van—do share some opinions about their mobile way of life. But it’s only when we focus in on their mobility—the combination of movement, representations, and practices—that those commonalities really emerge. By investigating the ways in which nomadic
groups like snowbirds, New Age Travellers, grey nomads, traditional British nomads, vanlifers, and skoolies represent and practice their mobility, we can get a better sense of what makes their mobilities distinct from one another, and what similarities they might share. And perhaps more importantly, by studying vehicle nomadism with an eye to mobility, we can add a new dimension to the literature on automobilities.

The concept of automobility originally emerged as a way to address the car’s absence from the literature on how urban space is formed and navigated. Current theories of automobility tend to view it as a durable and self-perpetuating system that shapes people’s urban landscapes, their time-related behaviours, and their socialities. Scholars study automobility by examining how different auto-mobile subjects experience and/or contribute to the system of automobility, or by looking at the auto-emotions which link humans and vehicles together in an intense and personal bond. These are areas where research with vehicle nomads could enrich our understandings of automobility, because nomadic auto-mobile practices are so different from those that have been discussed in the literature thus far.

It’s also worth noting that as a result of automobility being so widely practiced, “the car and the societal structures that tie into it have become prominent targets of critique” (Pel 2016, p. 665). For example, urban and political sociologists in particular have criticized the perceived and real impacts that automobility has had on urban public spaces. Automobilities scholars have also criticized the car’s destructive potential, both in terms of damage to the environment, and damage to human (and non-human animal) bodies. However, the car has also been studied as a dwelling space and as a unique site of interpersonal communication. Cars are objects with which many people form intense emotional bonds, drawing them into networks of family and friends and making them a part of everyday sociality. These lines of inquiry would be particularly
interesting to pursue in automobilities research with full-time vanlifers and skoolies, given that their vehicle is also their primary living space.

Whether vanlifers and skoolies can be considered a “car culture” remains to be seen; however, the importance of studying the varied social worlds referred to as “car cultures” has certainly been acknowledged in the automobilities literature. And by conducting research with people who belong to these varied social worlds, scholars may be able to further develop our understandings of automobility, and explore the meanings that vehicle-based mobility holds for people on wheels around the world. However, before this can be done, it’s important for scholars to ensure that the ontological framework being used to study automobilities is in line with the mobilities paradigm itself; namely, that research on automobility is being grounded in a mobile—rather than a sedentarist—metaphysics.

In the chapters that follow, I ground my analysis of participants’ interview data in a relational ontology, discussing what they’ve said about their current mobility in ways that draw aspects of their pre-nomadic mobilities into focus. I have also used two components of Cresswell’s definition of mobility (representation and practice) as organizing frameworks for the discussion of my research findings, as a way to keep my analysis focused. However, before we can get into all of the interesting data that vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) shared with me, it’s important to talk about how I gathered that data—and that’s the purpose of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

It takes a Village to Build a Van: Hitting the Road as Methodology

Accounting for mobilities in the fullest sense challenges social science to change both the objects of its inquiries and the methodologies for research.

-Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006, p. 5

We need to appreciate different ways of life from the vantage point of someone living within it, where not only is switching to a different way of life not a viable option, but it is not even a consideration.

-Kabachnik 2009, p. 471

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Medusa and Spener had a gorgeous van. It was a Sprinter-type, 2014 Dodge Promaster with a nice high ceiling, and they had basically turned it into a beautiful little tiny home on wheels. It looked like something you’d see in a magazine. Halfway through the interview at this point, I was eager to hear what kind of considerations had gone into converting the vehicle into a living space.

In response to one of my questions, Medusa informed me that space, design, and layout were some of the concerns you had to think about when you were converting a vehicle.

“Why is that?” I inquired.

“Just wanted a, as open of a floor plan as possible,” her partner, Spener, replied.

“Just... [...] ease of moving around. Y’know, she’s small but I’m huge. And, um, wanted to have a, a permanent sitting area, and a bed long enough, so the sitting area turns into the bed. [...] Um...and lotsa storage, just, I—”

“He has a lot of...equi-equipment,” Medusa interjected, by way of explanation.

“Yeah, like, camera gear, that I need to haul around,” Spener agreed.

“[...] He likes, uh, gear. So we needed to have a lot of storage space [...] which is why the bed is high, and we have like, a big garage,” Medusa explained, her use of the word ‘garage’
here referring to the space under the bed at the back of the vehicle. “Um, I would say other considerations for build-out is power?”

“Yup,” Spener concurred.

“We really had to think about like, um…” pausing for a moment, Medusa laughed. “I had to learn about electricity. And like, [...] ‘how much power do you use?’ uh…and so, that’s where, y’know, researchin’ wires, and solar, and like, a few things like refrigerators, and just learning about all that. [...] Yeah, so it was like, materials, layout…power.”

“And just, how to build,” her partner added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, I mean, trying to keep it like…simple, but not…falling apart,” Medusa agreed with a laugh.

“Mm-hmm,” I agreed, making some more notes.

“Because like, we don’t have building experience, so it was like, how can we do this basic, but also not have it like, rattle. ‘Cause, being that it moves, um, things move a lot, and shift? So you have to make sure everything is like, either really contained, or, like, won’t break. Um, ‘cause things will fall, and things can—like, screws and stuff can rattle out.”

“Mm-hmm! [...] I’ve started noticing that, too, actually,” I agreed, as I had had to make some adjustments in my own vehicle the day before. “I’m like ‘oh!’ get to a destination, ‘oh, one of my ceiling panels is popping out! [...] I’ll just tighten the screws again!’”

“Moving homes,” Medusa said with a knowing smile.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And [...] that is a fascinating aspect of it!” I exclaimed, “that [...] I wouldn’t even have guessed. [...]”

“It’s totally different,” Medusa agreed. And she was right…one of the benefits of doing a van conversion as part of my methodology had been that it put me on common ground with
vanlifers like Medusa and Spener. There were things about vanlife that I just wouldn’t have learned about if I’d hit the gatherings in a rented vehicle.

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Hitting the road with your participants isn’t the usual M.O. for researchers who study vehicle nomads; in fact, it’s very rare. After a long and detailed search, I could only locate three ethnographic studies conducted in the last 50 years in which the authors of the study were mobile themselves. Although George Gmelch (1985), who studied the Irish Tinkers, did accompany some of his participants to other encampments, the majority of his ethnographic research was conducted while he was living in a covered wagon at the Holylands Tinker encampment just outside of Dublin. The other three ethnographic studies, in which the researcher(s) lived on the road in an RV as part of their research, focused specifically on RV nomadism in the North American context. The first was by Jobes (1984), who collected data between 1969-1977; the second was by Counts and Counts (2009), who collected data between 1990 and 1994 (with supplemental data collected in 1998); and the third was by Célia Forget (2012), who collected data between 2003 and 2005. Of these studies, only Forget (2012) focused exclusively upon nomads who were on the road full-time; however, the results of her work were published in the French-language book *Vivre sur la Route*, and I have not yet been able to locate an English translation of this work (Forget, 2012). And although Maclean’s magazine published an article on vandwellers almost a decade ago (McKinnell, 2008), I could find no material on van nomads in the academic literature, outside of their inclusion in studies on RVing (which was discussed in the previous chapter). Thus, this thesis project is the first ethnographic study I’m aware of that has been conducted with full-time American van nomads.
One of the reasons why ethnography might be an uncommon method for studying vehicle nomads is that mobile populations present researchers with a unique logistical headache (Shubin 2010). To quote Benson (cited in D’Andrea, Ciolfi & Gray 2011): “the investigation of dispersed populations poses obvious operational difficulties constraining the ethnographer’s own patterns of movement when collecting data in the field” (p. 153). Put simply, when the nomadic groups we wish to study are highly dispersed, it can be a bit of a challenge to figure out where (and if) potential participants are congregating, unless we’re a part of that community ourselves (and even then, it can still be a challenge). As an example, now that I have attended multiple van gatherings, I know of two major gatherings of vehicle nomads that happen every year (Descend on Bend, and the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous or “RTR”), and I know that there are frequent van gatherings held during the summer months that can be found online; however, I didn’t have any of this information when I started my research. The only reason I knew about the RTR when I started my fieldwork in the summer of 2017 was because I had stumbled onto the gathering while I was trying to recruit participants for my original research project (although I’ll speak more about this in the next chapter).

Another challenge that researchers face when they seek to learn about dispersed nomadic populations is a methodological one: researchers must decide which research methods are best suited to studying the nomadic group in question, and justify why those methods have been chosen over other methods. As Law and Urry (cited in Spinney 2015) have already noted, some research methods “[deal] poorly with the fleeting—that which is here today and gone tomorrow,” so the range of options open to a researcher studying van nomads and other dispersed groups may not be as wide as it would be for a researcher studying a group that stays in one place year-round (p. 232). For example, it’s possible to study the views of nomadic participants by
examining their Instagram pages, blogs, and YouTube channels; and, if this is the route a researcher takes, the results could be written up using discourse analysis. Alternatively, you could park in one of the places where your participants are congregating (e.g., an RV park, if you’re studying RV nomads) and interview everyone who comes through, then code the interview data to see what common themes have emerged in the transcripts. In some cases, it may be possible to buy/rent/build an RV or a converted van, catch up with a bunch of vehicle nomads, and travel with them, learning about their way of life through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The method(s) most suited for research on vehicle nomads may depend upon the cultural practices or behaviour of the group under study, as well as the financial resources to which you (as a researcher) have access. Purchasing or renting a vehicle may not be a viable option for those who haven’t got a lot of funding for the project. In my case, I was fortunate to receive a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which helped me to purchase my van, and paid for fuel and repairs while I was on the road during my fieldwork.

That being said, it seems that in most of the academic literature, the mobilities of vehicle nomads have been studied by researchers who were grounded in a non-mobile setting (i.e., the researcher went to sites where vehicle nomads were camping and interviewed them, or reviewed nomads’ communications from a fixed location via the internet, or went to fixed locations to interview individuals responsible for policing nomads or managing the places where they were staying). In a way, I think that this trend might be what D’Andrea, Ciolfi and Gray (2011) were referring to when they spoke of researchers “producing static accounts of mobility” (p. 151). Of course, I don’t wish to imply that researchers who do not move alongside their participants are producing less accurate or less ‘authentic’ research…rather, I wish to use this observation as a
way of pointing out that most of the material written on vehicle nomads to date has been written from the perspective of researchers who aren’t nomads themselves.

As a result, it’s important for me to disclose to the reader that I do identify as a nomad and a vanlifer, because my orientation towards the subject of vehicle nomadism (i.e., my positionality) isn’t one that’s shared by most of the researchers in my field. This difference in positionality is important to acknowledge, as it has shaped this write-up in particular ways. For example, my engagement with the concept of sedentarist metaphysics does not unfold strictly at the intellectual level, because for me, sedentarist metaphysics is personal: it’s a way of thinking that has had (and continues to have) tangible negative impacts on my way of life. This means that I probably relate to sedentarist metaphysics differently than other researchers, who may not have had those negative experiences.

Furthermore, my decision to adopt mobile research methods has shaped this thesis project in particular ways, due to the impact it had on the data collection process. In particular, using my own converted van in the field led to my identification as a fellow vanlifer by some of the participants, and it also allowed me greater flexibility in the field than I might have had if I’d rented a vehicle and camped out at the van gatherings in a tent. Moreover, I didn’t just move with my participants as part of my mobile methods. I also camped with them, shared meals with them, and at one point, I even got kicked off of a site with them. And although I cannot say what impact this might have had on the data that I gathered, the fact that some (if not all) of the interviewees spoke to me as a fellow vanlifer—and the fact that I do identify as one now—are things that need to be acknowledged. I’ll discuss issues of positionality in greater depth at the end of this chapter; for now, let’s talk about what mobile methods are, and why they can be useful for conducting research with vanlifers and other vehicle nomads.
**Mobile Methods and their Framework**

One way of conducting ethnography against the background of this commitment to mobility, as various authors have suggested, is to focus on patterns of movement, with the researcher following people and objects as they circulate to conduct a truly ‘mobile ethnography’. This understandably requires the researcher to be on the move and to use methods that are capable of recording and collecting data while in motion.

-Büscher & Urry, cited in Benson (2011, p. 222)

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In my Literature Review chapter, I mentioned that researchers will use a conceptual framework as the lens for making sense of their data. However, researchers also need to have a *methodological* framework for their research, and that isn’t quite the same thing. As an example, while the relational ontology I talked about in my Literature Review chapter is great for grounding my analysis of the interview data that I gathered, it’s not a good fit for my methods section, because I can’t really explain why I chose to observe and interview people at van gatherings by talking about how some mobilities are faster or slower than others. If I decide to move into a van and drive across the continent to do a bunch of interviews with vanlifers, I need to be able to explain why *that* methodological approach was the one I chose for my particular research project (i.e., how doing that will help me acquire the right kind of data to answer my research question). This is what a methodological framework is for…put simply, it’s the set of ideas and understandings that guide—and justify—the ways in which you *do* your research.

In my case, the decision to attend multiple van gatherings and convoy out with other vanlifers in a converted van is grounded in the literature on *mobile methods*. Spinney (2015), explains mobile methods as any attempt by researchers “to physically or metaphorically follow people/objects/ideas in order to support analysis of the experience/content/doing of, and inter-connections between, immobility/mobility/flows/networks” (p. 232). Basically, mobile methods are a way to learn about mobility by deliberately engaging in (or with) the mobility of the
objects/ideas/group(s) you are studying. In some cases, the researcher(s) will be mobile themselves and “follo[w] the subject through space” (as an example, a researcher who’s interested in the mobility of cyclists might ride a bike alongside their participant(s) as part of their research) (Hein, Evans & Jones 2008, p. 1269). In other cases, the researcher might “mak[e] the subject mobile for the purposes of the research;” for example, a researcher interested in the way a dancer moves might ask a participant to dance while using video cameras to record the motions (ibid.).

In the case of my own research, an ethnography that wasn’t grounded in a mobile methods framework might have involved staying put in Moab or Slab City for nine weeks and interviewing and observing the vanlifers who showed up there. Instead, I adopted a mobile form of ethnography, in which I used my converted van to engage in the same kinds of mobility patterns and practices that vanlifers did, and to travel alongside them whenever the opportunity arose. Spinney (2015) refers to this type of ethnographic method as the “go-along,” defining go-alongs as “any method that attempts to (re)place the researcher alongside the participant in the context of the ‘doing’ of mobility” (p. 232). Put simply, to learn more about the mobility of vanlifers, I did the mobility of vanlifers. What makes this approach unique, according to Kusenbach (cited in Hein, Evans & Jones 2008), is that “ethnographers are able to observe their informants’ spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time” (pp. 1275-76). Moreover, by adopting a similar form of mobility to that of my participants, I was able to encounter and “reflect on the role(s) played by barriers, moorings and stillness” in the lives of my participants (Benson 2011, p. 222).

Vergunst (2011) has suggested that a ‘mobile methods’ approach is useful because it helps to “creat[e] a particular kind of sociability based on a shared rhythm of movement” (p.
In a way, my decision to align my mobility practices with those of my participants—namely, to do a mobile and multi-sited ethnography—oriented me differently towards my participants than a “place-based and bounded ethnography” (i.e., parking in Moab) might have (Benson 2011, p. 223). Living in my own converted van and attending the gatherings—where my van was peeked into and explored just as much as everyone else’s—was a way to experience vanlifers’ “mobile practices first hand” (Benson 2011, p. 232). It also gave me common points of reference when I was conducting my interviews (which I cover in Chapters Four and Five), and helped me to relate better to some of the comments that my participants made when they were speaking with me.

However, as Merriman (2014) cautions us, although “[p]articipation, performance and movement with others is seen to foster forms of knowing and understanding which are either obscured or erased by traditional methodological techniques,” it’s important to be mindful of “what mobile methods are and can do” (p. 175). After all, ‘go along’ or ‘mobile’ ethnography isn’t really new, and in terms of methods, it doesn’t differ noticeably from ethnography that has been done with mobile populations before (D’Andrea, Ciolfi & Gray 2011). As Merriman (2014) explains, mobile methods are not a “specific set of social science methods which enable the researcher to travel with their research participants/subjects and develop a more clear and accurate understanding and knowledge of their experiences” (p. 171). Rather, they are an adaptation of existing methods to the challenges of doing research with mobile subjects. What makes mobile methods different from other methods is that they emerge out of an assumption that mobility is a unique area of study that requires a different orientation to the research process (D’Andrea, Ciolfi & Gray 2011). They aren’t a way for the researcher to “more accurately know or represent practices, contexts, and events”; rather, they are a way in which researchers can
experiment with existing methods to “ai[d] self-discovery and facilitate[e] discussion” in research on mobilities (Dewsbury, cited in Merriman 2014, p. 177). In summary, mobile methods are grounded in a claim that mobility involves a particular way of being in the world, and scholars who advocate for the use of mobile research methods assert that the practices and understandings of mobile subjects and objects can be related, analysed and explored in new and interesting ways if they’re studied by a mobile researcher.

Personally, I would define mobile research methods as those in which you adopt the mobility of your participants as a way to study them (or as a part of the research process), or at the very least, temporarily align your mobility (i.e., both your movements AND your practices) with theirs as a way to learn about them. In a way, we can use Adey’s concept of relationality to get a handle on this: archival research on RV nomads, for example, wouldn’t be a mobile research method, because your mobility patterns and practices are not aligned with those of the group being studied. D’Andrea, Ciolfi & Gray (2011) capture this difference in their statement that “[t]he multidimensionality of mobility is entwined with the researcher’s own relative positionality before, during and after empirical research” (p. 155). Basically, if you do not experience the mobility of your participants while you are conducting research on their mobility, certain aspects of your data collection and analysis may be different than if you had done so. As an example, having my own van (instead of relying on hotels near the van gatherings for accommodations) allowed me to convoy out in the middle of one of my interviews, and continue the interview at the next location when we arrived. Having my own converted van also allowed me to stay on site after the gatherings were over and conduct more interviews, and it also allowed me to stretch my research funding much further than I would have been able to if I had rented a vehicle and relied on hotels near the van gatherings for my accommodations.
Again, I am not trying to suggest that my data are better or more authentic because I used mobile ethnographic methods and engaged in the mobility practices of my participants. Indeed, one could learn a great deal about vanlifers and their mobility practices by attending a van gathering in a rental car and doing interviews and participant observation for the weekend. However, what I am arguing is that engaging in mobile participatory ethnography (as opposed to a form where I stayed put and observed vanlifers who came through the site) has shaped and informed my analysis in particular ways, as my interpretation of the interview data has been shaped by my own experiences as a mobile researcher and a (then novice) vanlifer. This is important to note, as Hein, Evans and Jones (2008) have asserted that:

[w]hile mobile methods intuitively ‘make a difference’ to the research process by yielding different data to that which would normally be produced, there is a need to rigorously explore exactly what difference mobile techniques make compared, for example, with traditional sedentary methods. (p. 1280)

By threading my own experiences into the write-up alongside the comments and anecdotes of the vanlifers I have interviewed, I hope to draw attention to the ways in which my use of mobile methods, and my own identity as a vanlifer, have shaped and informed my understandings of the data I gathered in the field. As a result, my findings sections shift back and forth between standard ethnography and the autoethnographic forms of personal experience narrative and narrative ethnography (Butz and Besio 2009). However, I’ll discuss how I wrote up my research at the end of this chapter; right now, it’s time to explain how my research was actually done.
Finding “Lola,” and turning her into a Home on Wheels

One of the reasons I decided to get my own van was that I didn’t want to have to rely on another vehicle nomad for shelter and transportation. This was my project, and I wanted to limit external influences on how it was being executed. Besides, I’ve encountered difficulties with harassment when I’ve relied on others for a ride and shelter before, and this was a risk I wanted to try to eliminate from my fieldwork. Another benefit of doing a van conversion was that being able to pick up and go at a moment’s notice and follow the vanlifers I encountered in the field would allow me more opportunities to gather data. I wanted to be able to join up with convoys of vanlifers if I encountered them, and camp alongside them so I could learn about vanlife while I was gathering my observational and interview data. This meant that I couldn’t rely on hotel accommodations for shelter—I had to have my shelter with me.
Buying and Converting the Van

When I returned from my initial recruiting trip to Arizona (where I had my first encounter with van nomads), I immediately began to search for a van on Kijiji, a website version of the local classified ads. The problem was, at the time that I started looking, I knew absolutely nothing about cars. Thankfully, as I was scrolling through the ads for vehicles posted online, my friend Khat messaged me and asked if I’d thought about getting a vehicle with a diesel engine. Somewhat stupidly, I answered that I hadn’t, shrugged the question off, and continued looking. And then, Khat sent me an episode of Top Gear called “Killing a Toyota,” where the host spent the entire episode trying to destroy a diesel truck so badly that it wouldn’t start again (Top Gear 2010). The host drove it down a flight of stairs, smashed it into a tree, left it in the ocean for 8 hours, crashed it through the studio’s mobile production office, dropped a trailer on it, hit it with a wrecking ball, and set it on fire. And every single time, a trained diesel mechanic was able to get the vehicle started again.

Needless to say, I was sold!

Now, as someone who cares about the environment, I’m well aware of the criticism leveled at diesel engines for the emissions they produce. However, as somebody who has had a great deal of trouble with used vehicles in the past, and given that my fieldwork would depend on how this vehicle performed, I had to be pragmatic. The last thing I wanted, after spending the time and money on converting the van, was to have it break down in the field, so I needed something that could take a lot of punishment before giving up on me. Although it wasn’t a factor I considered at the time, given the distance that I was likely to be travelling, the higher fuel efficiency of a diesel engine in comparison to a gasoline engine was another point in diesel’s
favour. Ultimately, a diesel-powered vehicle was the option that made the most sense for the work that I wanted to do in the field.

So, now that I had decided on getting a vehicle with a diesel engine, I had to figure out which one would take me the furthest for the longest amount of time. After doing some research online, I learned that Ford’s 7.3 liter diesel engine was legendary for its durability. The problem was, I had to find one…and I had to find one for less than $4,000. I started by looking at ambulances for sale, as they already had an inverter built-in that was meant to run 120 volt power (which would save me time and money when I was hooking up my solar panels); however, they were usually priced above $7,000. Eventually, I decided that it would be better to go for a cargo van; unfortunately, the popularity of the 7.3L engine meant that any vans listed with this engine were either snatched up before I could meet with the owner, or priced well beyond what I could afford. After two weeks of emailing and phoning people with nothing to show for it, I started to get frustrated. Sitting in the Grad Lounge in the basement of my university, I looked up at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling and said “universe, I don’t ask you for things all that often. But now, I’m putting in a request. Please send me my van.”

Two days later, I was scrolling through the ads on Kijiji when a photo of a burgundy cargo van covered in snow suddenly caught my eye. I’d noticed the image in my previous searches, but for some reason I’d never clicked on it. When I opened the ad and saw that it was a 7.3 liter Turbo Diesel, I looked at the photographs again, and my intuition soundly told me: *that’s my van.* Retired from a small plumbing and heating business, she was a 2003 Ford E-350 cargo van with a 7.3 liter Turbo Diesel engine, and at 22 feet long and over 6,000 pounds, she’d offer me 66 square feet of living space once I’d done the full conversion. She was perfect. And once I completed the Winter school term in May, she’d become my home.
The Conversion Process

Figure 4: Steph Grinding Rust. Grinding rust out of the vehicle bed after gutting the interior. It was a 15 hour job (Murray 2017).

Rust is public enemy #1 if your home is made of metal, so an important first step in the conversion process was gutting the van and grinding the rust out of the interior of the vehicle with a wire brush attached to a drill (Figure 4). Thankfully, Lola had been a work van instead of a passenger van, so I didn’t have to rip seats and carpeting out of the back. However, after I took out the makeshift wooden floor and ripped up the rubber mat underneath it, I discovered that Lola was a lot rustier than I’d anticipated, and getting rid of it all was going to take me a couple of days. After 15 hours of work, I was satisfied with the vehicle bed, and I laid down a coat of red rust paint to protect the newly exposed metal. Now that the floor was taken care of, it was time to do the walls.
I learned a lot of things the hard way when I was doing the insulation job…probably the most important thing was that if you can fit your hand into a cavity, it’s much cheaper to insulate it with fiberglass than with spray foam. Spray foam insulation, commonly known as gap and crack filler, expands to fill the area that you spray it into, which makes it ideal for filling narrow sections of the vehicle wall that you can’t fit your hands or fingers into. But it isn’t cheap, so it’s best to use it only in the places you have to. Once the spray foam had set, I covered the wheel wells, the exposed metal panels on the ceiling, and the upper portions of the walls with reflective insulation (which looks like silver bubble wrap), and then covered the window and ceiling panels with hard foam insulation cut to fit each section. Finally, I insulated the lower portion of the van walls with fiberglass insulation and covered it with thick plastic (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Insulating the Van. Lola and her colourful panoply of insulation! (Murray 2017)
Once the insulation was completed, I screwed wooden 1x2s into the ceiling joists so that I could mount the plywood ceiling, and I made a template of my vehicle’s floor using old newspapers. Using the template, my grandfather and I cut sections of 5/8ths plywood to make a new floor, as having a wooden floor would allow me to secure my bed and storage compartments to the interior of the vehicle later on in the conversion. Once the sections were cut, I covered the vehicle bed with construction adhesive, and we laid the new floor down, putting concrete slabs on top to hold them down while the glue set (Figure 6).

Figure 6: New Floor. New plywood floor, glued and then weighted down with patio stones (Murray 2017).

The next steps were to mount and secure the plywood ceiling (with the help of a few friends), and to cut a hole in the roof for my fan so that I would be able to have ventilation while I was cooking (this was done with the help of my neighbour and his angle grinder). Once that
was completed, I built wooden boxes to go over the wheel wells, so that I could mount things to them if I needed to (Figure 7). From there, a friend and I constructed two narrow single beds that doubled as storage bins (one along each wall) (Figure 8, Figure 9). The whole process was an absolute nightmare. Tools were breaking, cuts that I had measured two or three times were off when I completed them, and I was constantly hurting myself and tripping over things…as the end of the three-week build period approached, I was convinced that the van was going to spontaneously combust with me inside it, and that was going to be it. Fortunately, with the help of my friends, family, and neighbours, I survived to complete the interior (Figure 9). In my case, it seems that it takes a village to convert a van!

Figure 7: New Interior. Newly mounted ceiling, roof vent, and wheel boxes (Murray 2017).
Figure 8: Bed and Storage. First bed/storage compartment mid-construction. By this point in the build, I was fully convinced that Lola and her gremlins were intent on killing me (Murray 2017).

Figure 9: Departure Day. The two black suitcases belong to my partner Guber, who was hitching a ride to Winnipeg with me on my way across the country (Murray 2017).

The next step in the conversion process occurred after I departed on a trip across Canada (a personal dream of mine that I wanted to realise before conducting my research). I wanted to
run my laptop while I was in the field, which meant that I needed to have electricity, so I had ordered two 100 watt solar panels and a charge controller from Renogy a month before I started the conversion. Because the panels were much cheaper if I shipped them to an American address, I sent them to my friend Khat in Colorado Springs, since his place was a straight shot south from where I would be visiting my friend in Edmonton. It was fortunate that I did so, as Lola’s alternator and forward battery were giving out by the time I arrived at Khat’s place, and he was able to save me a few hundred dollars in repair costs by showing me how to install a new alternator and battery myself. After these repairs were done, we mounted the solar panels (Figure 10), and I was off to my first van gathering in Pike National Forest, Colorado.

Figure 10: All Powered Up. Lola and her new 200 watt solar rig (Murray 2017).

Taking Lola into the Field: Ethics, Data Collection, and Sample Characteristics

So, now that I’ve discussed the process of conversion, it’s important to talk about what I did during my fieldwork. Needless to say, as I was going to be interviewing people, my research
had to be approved by the Research Ethics Board before I could do any fieldwork. To my surprise, getting ethics approval for conducting mobile research with van nomads involved logistical hiccups which may not arise for researchers working with less mobile communities. As an example, it’s difficult to explain to an ethics board that “no, I can’t ask someone I’ve just met to drive 40 miles with me to the nearest Starbucks in the middle of a van gathering so that I can ensure their privacy.” Also, once ethics approval was granted, I also had to fill out a Travel Risk and Emergency Management Plan (TREMP) form before departure. This involved signing a waiver promising I wouldn’t sue the university if my nomadic shenanigans ended in tragedy, and convincing the nice young man in charge of TREMP that yes, my van was really insured, and yes, I had taken the necessary precautions to ensure that she wouldn’t collapse or catch fire while I was cooking my Kraft Dinner.

Once the paperwork was taken care of, I was free to conduct my research. Over the eight weeks that I spent in the field, I drove 15,000 kilometers, conducting interviews and engaging in participant observation during four different van gatherings, all of which were held in Colorado or Washington State (Figure 11). However, it should be acknowledged that a secondary “gathering” was also involved in the data collection process as well, given that I had to pause the last interview at the van gathering in Washington State to convoy out with my participants, and I resumed the interview once the convoy had set up camp.

I found the first van gathering, which occurred in Pike National Forest in Colorado, through an internet search. At this gathering, I was handed an advertisement for the Adventure Van Meet-up in Golden, Colorado (site #3) and the vanlifers I was camping out with told me about the van gathering at Neah Bay in Washington State (site #2) that would be held two weeks after the gathering in Pike National Forest. Similarly, when I was parked at the Adventure Van
Meet-up in Golden (site #3), I learned that there would be a Van Life Rally held at the Upslope Brewery in Boulder twelve days later (site #4). All four gatherings that I attended fell between July 13th, 2017 and August 18th, 2017.

Figure 11: A 15,000km Journey. Overall route for my travels in summer of 2017. My trip began in St. Catharines, Ontario, and I drove across Canada (northern section of red line) before driving south to Colorado, where I attended the first van gathering. I then drove west to the gathering in Washington State, and returned to Colorado for two more gatherings before driving home (southern section of red line). (Original Map Source Ezilon.com).
During the gatherings in Pike National Forest, Colorado, and Neah Bay, Washington State, I engaged in participatory ethnography, camping alongside the other vanlifers, allowing them to tour my van, and attending the nightly bonfires. I remained on the site of the first van gathering after the event ended, in order to continue camping with a handful of vanlifers I had met, and to secure another interview. In the middle of my last interview in Neah Bay, I and my participants were invited to join a convoy out to another site, so the interview was paused while we relocated to the next site, where I camped out with other vanlifers who had moved on from the Washington gathering (Figure 12, Figure 13).
One of my interviews had to be paused midway through so that Lola and I could join the convoy out to the next site. This was certainly one of the benefits of using mobile research methods! (Murray, 2017)

Initially, I encountered some difficulties with securing interviews at the first two gatherings, as I was competing with events, activities and meals for vanlifers’ attention. One of
my interviews also had to be canceled due to a hailstorm, as the sound of the hail on the roof of
the participants’ van would have interfered with audio-recording the interview. By the time I
arrived at the gathering in Washington State, I had figured out that the best time to conduct
interviews was around breakfast time, because vanlifers could be found at their vans, and there
were no activities that they would be missing out on by sitting down for an interview with me. I
also learned that the worst time to try and secure an interview was when people had just pulled
into the site at the beginning of the event, because this seemed to be the time when everyone
wanted to go around and do some socializing.

Given the time constraints of my work in the field, convenience sampling was used to
recruit interviewees. Participants were required to be over the age of 18 and living in the vehicle
full-time at the time of the interview (i.e., their vehicle was their primary place of residence, and
they did not rent or own an apartment/house). Participants also had to be American citizens, to
control for any effects that Canadian health care requirements and Australian visa requirements
might have had on their mobility practices and trajectories. Participants were provided with a
letter of invitation, and asked to sign a letter of informed consent before the interview began.
Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and participants were asked to choose a
pseudonym that I could use when quoting the transcripts, to preserve anonymity. Given that I
would be sending the transcripts to the participants for proof-reading via e-mail, a separate
signed consent authorizing electronic transmission of the transcripts was also acquired.
Interviews were conducted in the participants’ vans, wherever they had parked at the gatherings.
Upon returning to Brock University in September of 2017, verbatim transcripts of the interviews
were generated for the purpose of analysis.
During my time in the field, I conducted interviews with 15 vanlifers and one skoolie, for a total of 16 participants, 8 male and 8 female.\textsuperscript{12} This group of interviewees included 4 single vehicle nomads and 6 couples,\textsuperscript{13} something I had not expected given my experience with meeting mostly single vanlifers at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in January of 2017. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 48 years old, and most of them had been on the road for more than eleven months at the time that they were interviewed. The average length of time participants had been on the road was 15 months. Two of the vehicles in the sample were Volkwagens (which do not require conversion), one vehicle had been converted by a company called Sportsmobile, and the remaining 7 vehicles had been converted by their owners.

**Participant Observation and Semi-Structured Interviews (i.e., the Part of the Chapter where I talk about Ontology and Epistemology)**

When I started my fieldwork, it was with the goal of learning what the mobility of vanlifers meant to them. And, given that no-one appeared to have done research with vanlifers yet, that meant that I was doing exploratory research, and I couldn’t really use surveys for gathering data as I had no idea what questions I should put on them. I was also wary about using surveys to collect my data because Counts and Counts (2009) had indicated in their book on RV nomads that surveys were not an ideal method to use with vehicle nomads, as they belong to communities that value reciprocity, and surveys are a far less personal and interactive form of data collection. Although I didn’t know yet whether vanlifers placed a similar value on reciprocity, I wanted to avoid using a data collection method that might undermine my rapport

\textsuperscript{12} Although I did not plan for a 50/50 ratio of male to female participants, because I interviewed 6 couples, 2 single male vanlifers, a single female vanlifer, and a single female skoolie, this was how things worked out.

\textsuperscript{13} One of the vanlifers I met at the Washington gathering was a father travelling with his toddler. Unfortunately, although I did request an interview with him so that I could capture information about his experiences with parenting on the road (and he agreed), I wasn’t able to get him to sit down with me before he left the gathering. Another vanlifer I camped with is currently on the road with his partner and their baby (who was born shortly after I completed my fieldwork). Although I very rarely encountered vanlifers travelling with children during my fieldwork, future research that explores this dimension of vanlifers’ mobility would be very interesting.
with participants. Also, because I wanted to learn what vanlifers’ mobility meant to them, and to use that information to engage with sedentist metaphysics in a critical manner, I needed a research method that was going to access vanlifers’ “deeply held personal opinions and attitudes” (Spickard 2017, p. 60). This was why I decided to use in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather the majority of my data.

Nettleton and Green (cited in Green et al. 2018) have noted that interview data “can be used to explore social practices around mobility,” so long as the researcher takes care to “avoid superficial readings” of the data when they’re writing up the analysis (p. 16). However, because I have used interviews to collect my data, I also have to acknowledge that my use of this method is grounded in a belief that vanlifers have unique understandings of their mobility and their social world that I, as a researcher, can access by sitting down and conversing with them. This means that where my methodological framework is concerned, I have subscribed to a “transactional and subjectivist” epistemology; namely, I have adopted the ontological position that vanlifers’ understandings of the world around them constitute a legitimate form of knowledge, and the epistemological position that I can access that knowledge by interviewing them about their personal experiences and understandings of the world (Guba & Lincoln 2004, p. 26; Ley & Samuels 1978, p. 13). As a result, I am engaging in a qualitative form of research which treats the ‘subjective’ views of vanlifers as legitimate data for answering my research question, and I am not basing the ‘reliability’ of my data on qualities like (scientific) objectivity and factual/numerical accuracy. Because I have engaged in this kind of research, this means that I do not seek to generalize about vanlifers as a whole based on what my participants have said; rather, my goal is to relate how these vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) understand their mobility, based on the content of their interviews with me and my observations of their practices.
As part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I also decided to use participant observation, because it allowed me to learn more about vanlife itself, and engage in “performative practices [of] mobility” with my participants (e.g., setting up camp, tearing down, convoying out) (Shubin 2010, p. 510). As a research method, participant observation “involves living with the people one is studying and doing what they do,” (Counts & Counts 2009, p. 27). The goal of doing this is to observe participants’ practices in their respective contexts, and to “learn and experience embodied cultural practices as an aid to understanding particular cultures” (Merriman 2014, p. 175). Participant observation is a research method which, like interviews, is also grounded in a “transactional and subjectivist” epistemological framework, as it suggests that I (as a researcher) believe that I can learn about the people I wish to study by going to a van gathering and interacting with vanlifers in that context (Guba & Lincoln 2004, p. 26; Ley & Samuels 1978, p. 13). And, as with my use of interviews, my use of participant observation relies upon an epistemological stance that my own experiences and observations in the field constitute a legitimate form of knowledge about the world, which can be related to you in the chapters that follow.

From Researcher to Vanlifer: An Important Discussion on Positionality

The multidimensionality of mobility is entwined with the researcher’s own relative positionality before, during and after empirical research.

-D’Andrea, Ciolfi & Gray (2011, p. 155)

It is considered bad form for anthropologists to become too emotionally involved with the people they study, and especially to “go native”—to become all participant and no observer. A perfect balance is difficult—probably impossible—to achieve, but most of us try hard and succeed fairly well.

-Counts & Counts (2009, p. 27)

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114
Before I can take you on to the next chapter, it’s important for me to devote a few pages to discussing my positionality. When I say “positionality,” I’m talking about my identity and how it has played into my research, because the way that I am positioned did shape (and was shaped by) the way that I interacted with my participants. Moreover, as a nomadic queer white female scholar with ADHD, I’m positioned differently in regards to my research than other scholars or nomads might have been, and this affects how I’ve interpreted the things that participants told me, as well as the way in which I’ve presented the things I was told. In particular, the fact that I currently identify as a vehicle nomad has shaped my analysis, my write-up, and the way that I relate to the existing literature, so I’d like to take some time to talk about that aspect of my positionality before I present you with the findings of my research.

As a Master’s student who now identifies as a vanlifer, I occupy a complex position in relation to the material you are reading, because even if I do take the stance that ethnographers can never claim that their work is truly ‘objective,’ it would be intellectually dishonest to pretend that my identity as a van nomad has had no effect on the way that I wrote up my data. More importantly, I cannot approach this work as though I went into the field, did my research, and came back just the same as I was before, because that isn’t what happened. When I began my research, I had no experience of vanlife whatsoever. And although I considered myself a traveller, living in houses or apartments and traveling whenever I had the time to do so (i.e., a tourist’s mobility) was all I’d ever known. And although I didn’t know it yet, this was a very different realm of experience from the one that I had set out to study (something which I explain in more detail in Chapter Five).

Because I’d never done ethnographic research with anyone before (let alone a group of people that scholars hadn’t even studied yet), I reviewed a number of textbooks on ethnography
before leaving for the field, so that I would know how to properly conduct my research. These sources encouraged me to be reflexive in the way that I approached my work; namely, to remain conscious of how my position as an academic researcher embedded me in a particular context (i.e., of knowledge production), and how that context shaped interactions in the field. No matter how much I engaged with my participants, I would be subject to pressures that they weren’t, because as a researcher, my ultimate purpose for being in the field was to collect data. And with that data, I hoped to write a Master’s Thesis that would help me to gain credibility in academia, thus attracting the attention of potential PhD supervisors. This was “the spirit in which [I] had undertaken the work,” and if I wanted to engage in research in a way that was reflexive, it was important for me to keep these motivations in mind (May & Perry 2017, p. 163).

Ironically, it was because of my preoccupation with reflexivity and academic credibility that I ended up approaching my fieldwork in a way that was surprisingly unreflexive. You see, I was aware of the legacy of colonialism and cultural appropriation associated with the research method I was using (ethnography), and because I wanted to avoid replicating the proverbial ‘sins of the past,’ I was highly conscious of the things that ethnography books told me about power, representation, and how I was supposed to perform my identity as a researcher. For example, in one of the books I read, Cook and Crang (1995) cautioned me to be careful of how I presented myself, and to be mindful of the ways in which I was being understood by my participants, as this would affect their interactions with me (and thus, the kind of data I would be able to gather). In another book, Davies (2008) told me that I must be as reflexive as possible when relationships between myself and my participants developed, and warned me to be careful in seeing these relationships as friendships that were uncomplicated by any kind of power dynamic. Rather, I had to maintain an awareness of myself as a researcher who was observing the things going on
around me, and remain conscious of how I was interacting with people in the field. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) advised that notes should be taken in plain sight so that my identity as a researcher would be kept in the front of participants’ minds; however, it would also have the downside of reinforcing my status as an ‘outsider’ to the vanlife community (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011).

For some reason, what I ended up taking away from all of this scholarly advice was a belief that my professionalism and credibility as a scholar were tied to my ability to stay embedded in, and perform, the identity of a researcher who was living in a van as part of her fieldwork (p. 27). Worse still, I was so determined to avoid appropriating the culture of my participants that I stalwartly cast that “researcher” identity in stone, effectively (and obviously somewhat unreflexively) constructing myself as ‘other’ to my participants before I’d even turned the key in Lola’s ignition. Completely forgetting Okely’s (2012) critique of the fear of “going native” as a hold-over from positivist and colonial ways of doing ethnography, I took to the road, about to reproduce in my own fieldwork the very practices I’d been so determined to avoid. Hell-bent on remaining legible—to myself and others—as a researcher-doing-vanlife, I left for the United States to begin my research.

And then, I got to the border.

You see, it was my first run-in with sedentarist discrimination (or at least, it was the first run-in with this kind of discrimination that I recognized as such), and it was a pretty rude awakening for someone who’d never been treated like a criminal before. As I have family and friends in the United States, I was used to going back and forth over the border without any problems. Plus, I had no criminal record. I was always forthcoming with the border staff, and my passport was valid for another seven years. It never occurred to me that the border guards
were going to look at my converted van any differently than they’d looked at all the other vehicles I’d used to cross the border in the past. So when I was ordered to pull into the impound lot so they could search my vehicle, I was really confused.

After being subjected to a “good cop, bad cop” routine by the two men staffing the border crossing until I was literally in tears, I was told that from that point onward, I would be obligated to bring materials with me that I had never needed to bring when crossing the border before. Now that I had a van I could live in, I had to bring proof that I was tied to a regular job and that I was paying rent and utility bills somewhere, or that my bank account was overflowing with cash (see Appendix). My passport and my clean criminal record were no longer sufficient qualifications for granting me entry into the United States. And although I saw myself as a researcher living in the van as part of my fieldwork, the border guards saw me as a nomad and a potential illegal immigrant. And that’s how I was treated.

In her book Ethnographic Methods, Karen O’Reilly (2005) mentions that sometimes when you’re doing ethnographic research, even though you might have carefully thought out the role you’re going to play—as I had done—the role you actually play in the field may end up being assigned to you. My difficulties at the border were my first taste of this particular reality; however, after crossing into Montana, I put the experience behind me, still secure in my identity as a Master’s student doing a thesis project on full-time van nomads.

And then, I arrived at the first van gathering in Pike National Forest.

It took a few days for me to clue in to the fact that although I understood myself as a researcher-doing-vanlife, that wasn’t how the vanlifers at the gathering saw me. Some of the vanlifers at the gathering were aware that a researcher was going to be in their midst (possibly from the event organizer, who had been informed about my research in my registration email),

118
and seemed quite tickled at my presence. But you see, the problem in this case was that I wasn’t just a researcher…I was a researcher in a converted van in the middle of a van gathering. And that meant that just like everyone else who was there, I had people touring my van on a regular basis, and I was drawn into activities, communal meals, and nightly bonfires just like everyone else. Just as Karen O’Reilly (2005) said, the role that I was playing at the gathering had been assigned to me, and it seemed that as far as the vanlifers at the gathering were concerned, I was a vanlifer-doing-research, not a researcher-doing-vanlife.

This became crystal clear when I was approached for an interview by the group who had organized the event. Stunned, I asked why they wanted to interview me. “I’ve only been living in my van for two weeks,” I protested, insisting that I was in no way qualified to be interviewed for a documentary on vanlife; however, they insisted. The fact that I was a researcher seemed to be why they wanted to interview me: they wanted my take on the lifestyle I was studying. So somewhere out there, O Best Beloved, there is footage of my nervous researcher-self being interviewed by people who knew far more about what I was talking about than I did.

Even though being treated like a vanlifer by these documentary filmmakers—and everybody else at the gathering—had shaken the foundations of the constructed identity I’d been clinging to when I entered the field, I persevered, resolute in my determination to avoid laying claim to their way of life. In my mind, I firmly reinforced the boundary that I had erected between myself and my participants. Diligently, I spent the last morning of the van gathering transcribing one of my recorded interviews in plain sight as I ate my breakfast, just as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) had instructed me to do in their book. Although I was starting to feel like an ‘insider’—in the sense that I lived in a van like my participants, and I was engaging in
their practices with them—I would not undermine the credibility of my research by calling myself a vanlifer when that wasn’t what I was.

Fortunately, the nomad I’d parked next to at the gathering saw what I was doing and stepped in to give me a proverbial smack upside the head.

It was the first of two occasions that Boomhauer—a vanlifer I’d grown to admire and respect over my time at the gathering—stepped in and saved my vanlifing butt (I’ll talk about the second time in another chapter). After seeing me transcribing during the remaining hours of the gathering, Boom waited until after the bonfire that evening to take me aside. Seated across from me on the floor of my van, he asked me why I was wasting my time journaling and transcribing in the field, when I could be engaging fully with the other people at the gathering. I tried to defend my behaviour by explaining my concerns around privacy and confidentiality (as doing the transcripts later and sending them via e-mail would mean that I could not guarantee my participants either of these things). He basically called “bullshit” on that. So then I said some other things in an attempt to justify how I was going about my research, and he just kept on calling “bullshit.” I was ultimately left dumbstruck as Boomhauer, who I’d met back in January at the RTR, bluntly deconstructed the illusionary wall I’d erected between myself and my participants, leaving all of my rigidly-held ideas about reflexivity and appropriation to crumble at my feet.

That was the day I stopped transcribing in the field. From that point onward, I spent more time engaging with vanlifers at the gatherings, and I stopped cramming my identity into the researcher-doing-vanlife box. Although I had completely forgotten it, Rose (1990) wrote a guide to qualitative research that advanced the same critiques that Boomhauer was throwing at me.
And while I’d read through it earlier in the year, it wasn’t until I got back from the field that I realised the importance of what Rose (1990) was saying:

It is as if we know by our texts and as if fieldwork is an extension of our anthropological, academic everyday life, a deformation of the outer skin of our western culture that never ruptures. In the field we are still academics, safe behind the membrane, we keep the same hours, do the same sorts of things, or do different things temporarily in order to advance our life chances back home. In brief, in the field we work. In the office we work. We work and we write. (p. 16)

It was time for me to stop hiding behind the membrane. Although I didn’t realise it at that point, by clinging to the ‘researcher-doing-vanlife’ identity that I had created for myself, I was “reproducing a discourse of academic authority and objectivity” in my own mind (Butz & Besio 2009, p. 1662). Furthermore, I was “imagin[ing] the objects of [my] research in constrained and ideologically suspect ways”—namely, as “native informant[s]” (ibid.). However, the more time I spent talking to vanlifers, the more I realised that I wasn’t alone in that feeling of roadsickness I’d been getting since my return from South Korea. Perhaps most importantly, vanlife turned out to be the ideal remedy for me when this feeling arose, because having a converted van allowed me to travel whenever I needed to without having to spend a lot of money. By the time I returned from the field, I identified as a vanlifer (although unlike the majority of my participants, I can only be on the road part-time).

This is why I am obligated to discuss my positionality: because I identify as a member of the vanlife community, it’s important for me to acknowledge that this thesis has been written from a particular point of view. As Kabachnik (2010) might say, I claim a “nonsedentary” identity, and as a result of that identity, I relate differently to my participants and to some of the concepts in this thesis than other scholars might (p. 96). This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as the research that I’ve done for this thesis is qualitative, and as part of doing qualitative research, you adopt the view that total objectivity isn’t something human beings are actually capable of. Even
so, it’s important for me to be forthcoming about the fact that my nomadic identity has shaped this thesis project in particular ways.

As an example, I relate differently to the concept of sedentarism than most other scholars, because I’ve personally felt the negative impacts of this way of thinking in my own life. I’ve been kicked off of a campsite by locals, I’ve been knocked on by the police in the middle of the night, and I’ve been detained and searched at the United States border five out of the last six times I’ve tried to cross it. I’ve also been turned back at the American border because I didn’t have enough paperwork with me to demonstrate proof of residency (as my passport is no longer sufficient). Because I’ve had these negative experiences as part of performing a “nonsedentary” identity, my critique of sedentarism (and the kinds of policies that this way of thinking fosters) comes from a different place than it does for other scholars (Kabachnik 2010, p. 96). That being said, I’ve also had a lot of wonderful experiences that I wouldn’t have had if I hadn’t taken up vanlife. But having these experiences also means that I can’t relate to the topic of nomadism in the same way as other scholars, because vehicle nomads aren’t ‘other’ to me…they’re my fellows, they’re my friends, and they’re my road family, and that’s going to affect the way that I write about them. So as you read through the following chapters, it may be useful to keep these things in mind.

A Few Words on Representation and How this Thesis has been Written

The point of narrative ethnography is primarily epistemological; it is a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyze how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships, and is a way to describe the situatedness and partiality of the academic knowledge that results. Although narrative ethnography may have characteristics of ethnographic memoir or travel narrative the main point of self-reflexivity is to understand the epistemological characteristics of information that is assembled in relation to the research field and of the resulting representations.

-Butz and Besio (2009, p. 1666)
Given that the goal of my thesis project was to conduct ethnographic research with American vanlifers, my readers may be wondering why on earth I’m talking about myself so much. Allow me to explain: one of the reasons I discussed the change in my approach to fieldwork after Boomhauer’s talk with me is that it reveals the process of transculturation that occurred while I was in the field; namely, my shift from being a researcher-doing-vanlife to a vanlifer-doing-research (Butz & Besio 2009). And because I view my fieldwork in this way, I cannot cling to standard ethnographic representations of myself as an “agen[t] of signification” and my interviewees as “objects of signification” (ibid., p. 1671). As a result, I have made the written work you hold in your hands a bit of a Frankenstein monster, with some parts ethnography, some parts personal experience narrative, and some parts narrative autoethnography. Furthermore, I have deliberately made the fieldwork setting more present in my write-up by using sections of the interview transcripts to create story segments (written in italics and usually included at the beginning of a relevant section) which read like excerpts from a novel. This is another aspect of this thesis project that makes it a little different, because fieldwork isn’t something ethnographers usually discuss or engage with in their written work (Rabinow et al., cited in Butz & Besio 2009).

One of the reasons I chose to thread autoethnographic moments throughout this work is because when I began writing up my findings, I realised that my own experiences as a vanlifer allowed me to “use [my own] subjectivity deliberately as an epistemological resource” (Butz & Besio 2009, p. 1662). Put simply, I could use my own experiences as a way to frame, engage with, and represent the data that I had gathered in the field, whilst simultaneously dismantling any idea of myself as being separate from the world of my participants. Moreover, taking an
autoethnographic approach allowed me to acknowledge my participants as creators of knowledge who were engaging *with me* in the research process—as “autoethnographers in their own right, whose self-presentations in the context of research are reflexive” (ibid., p. 1671).

However, I wish to make it clear that my own experiences as a vanlifer and a researcher are *not* the primary focus of this thesis; indeed, this is still very much an ethnographic work, focused on the understandings and experiences of the vanlifers and the skoolie that I interviewed. This is why I have included so much material from my transcripts, in the form of quotes and anecdotes, in the pages you are about to read. One of my goals was to ensure that each of the participants was speaking as much as possible through this work, and my reasons for this were multiple. Firstly, I wish to compensate for the fact that most of the theorizing around nomads in the mobilities literature to date has dealt with nomads in the *abstract* or metaphorical sense.\(^{14}\) As a result, I have tried to use my participants’ interview data in a manner that allows the vehicle nomads in my sample to contribute to a body of literature from which their voices have been, for the most part, entirely absent.

Secondly, I have noticed that, in some of the existing research on full-time vehicle nomads, authors who have used interview methods to collect their data have tended to quote their participants sparingly. This means that even when scholars have *not* focused on the abstract nomad, we still don’t get a great deal of access to the voices and opinions of the nomads themselves. Much like Shubin and Swanson (2010), I have done my best to represent my nomadic interviewees in a way that acknowledges them “as effective speakers and actors” (p. 927). As a result, I have done my best not to speak *for* my participants, as it is their views and understandings—not mine—that I want to be the central focus of this project. This is why I draw

\(^{14}\) Kabachnik (2010) has advanced a similar critique of the dominance of metaphorical discussions of nomadism in social theory.
so heavily on my interview data in the next two chapters, and it is also why I used an inductive approach when I was coding the transcripts. In these ways, my thesis has responded to Shubin and Swanson’s (2010) call to “continue giving voice to itinerant people themselves by attending to their constructions of mobility” (p. 927, emphasis added).

Finally, I have included a significant amount of interview material because I do not wish to act as a barrier between the readers and my interviewees. One of my greatest frustrations is when a scholar who has conducted interview research provides access to their participants’ perspectives almost exclusively in mediated form (i.e., the researcher writes their own version of what the participants have said, rather than quoting the transcripts directly). To me, this feels like the academic equivalent of when you ask your friend a question and their overly controlling partner jumps in and speaks on their behalf…after a while, you kinda get the urge to punch them. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the vanlifers in my sample are fully capable of representing themselves in their own words, and although I acknowledge that I am still acting as the mediator between the reader and my participants, it’s my hope that I’ve behaved more like a doorman than a bouncer in the way I’ve presented their interview data.

**Coding**

When I started coding my interview data, I began with an inductive approach. In inductive coding, you go through the interview data to see what kinds of themes emerge, instead of using an existing set of ideas to pull themes out of the data (which is known as deductive coding). I did this first because my research was exploratory in nature; in other words, there was no existing literature on vanlifers and/or skoolies to suggest what themes might appear in my transcripts, and I wasn’t sure if Cresswell’s politics of mobility framework would be viable for
deductive coding yet (although I did use Cresswell’s ideas for a round of deductive coding later on).

Words or phrases that appeared frequently in the transcripts in reference to participants’ current and former mobilities were flagged, and counts of the terms were generated and used to create a word cloud for each (current mobility and former mobility). As word cloud generators tend to use single words for generating a cloud, I tried as much as possible to change phrases to a single word that captured what the phrase was about, so it could still be represented in the word cloud. Two rounds of inductive coding were conducted, to ensure that any themes that weren’t picked up in the first round of coding were more likely to be captured. These rounds of coding generated very rich data pertaining to participants’ current and former mobilities: concepts like freedom, difference, experience, adventure, and community emerged in connection with participants’ nomadic mobility, and concepts like consumption, unhappiness, expense, and a lack of balance emerged in connection with participants’ pre-nomadic mobility (and the mobility of people outside of the nomadic community).

During my deductive round of coding, I used Cresswell’s (2010) politics of mobility framework to code the interview data, using the headings movement, representation, practice, motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience, and friction to code comments made by interviewees. There was a lot of material from my interviews that fell under the headings of motive force and experience, some important mobility practices were captured under speed and route, and the issues that participants experienced around parking raised interesting questions about how the concept of friction can be deployed in a discussion of nomadic mobility. However, I felt that the themes that emerged during the inductive round of coding were more interesting and impactful than the themes I drew out of the data using Cresswell’s politics of
mobility as a framework. Moreover, I wanted my participants to have as much influence as possible on the final write-up, and using material from the inductive round of coding felt like another way that I could achieve this, because I focus on themes that emerged out of my conversations with them, rather than discussing their data within a pre-existing set of themes that they had no part in creating. However, because I did have so much material to work with, I used the concepts of *representation* and *practice* (two components of Cresswell’s (2010) definition of mobility) to organize my findings, so that I could discuss the themes from the dataset in two separate chapters.

**Potential Limitations of the Project**

This thesis project focuses on the views and experiences of fifteen vanlifers and one skoolie, with the majority of the participants being couples, and four of the participants (three vanlifers and one skoolie) being solo travellers. Because the research I conducted for this thesis was qualitative in nature, the views expressed by my participants should not be interpreted as being representative of the larger population of vanlifers and skoolies, as it is not the point of qualitative research to generalize to a broader population. It should also be noted that because I was only able to interview one skoolie (Large Marge) during my time in the field, it is impossible to tell whether other skoolies might have related to their mobility in similar ways without doing further research. It’s possible that, if I had been able to interview multiple skoolies, subtle differences in how skoolies and vanlifers represent and practice their mobilities might have emerged in the dataset.

Although I have included material from Large Marge’s interview alongside vanlifers’ interview material, and the title of my thesis and two of its chapters refer only to vanlifers, I want to be clear in saying that I’m not trying to imply that skoolies are vanlifers, because that might
not be how they understand themselves. I feel that further research with skoolies would be highly beneficial, as some of the comments made by Large Marge do suggest to me that the mobilities of skoolies and vanlifers may differ in important ways. As an example, Large Marge felt that she was harassed a lot more because she couldn’t hide the fact that she was living in her vehicle, whereas vanlifers with panel vans like mine can more easily conceal the fact that someone’s sleeping in the back. Her indication that it’s a lot more difficult to stealth camp\(^{15}\) in a school bus does make sense, because there are very few places you can park a school bus where it’s not going to be noticed as being ‘out of place.’ This is one reason why I’ve been as careful as possible not to imply that vanlifers and skoolies are the same kind of nomad, or that they experience or represent their mobility in similar ways. That being said, it would be wonderful to conduct ethnographic research with skoolies so that some of their opinions and attitudes towards vehicle nomadism could be recorded, and the differences between vanlifers’ and skoolies’ mobility could be explored.

The small number of participants in my study is another potential limitation, although I do not feel that it has impacted the results to any great degree. Even so, it is possible that interviewing more participants may have allowed for different views to emerge in the final analysis, or that less prevalent themes may have had a stronger presence if I’d been able to analyse a larger number of interview transcripts. However, as I mentioned earlier on in this chapter, when I started my fieldwork, I did not yet know the best times to approach vanlifers at the gatherings, which meant that I wasn’t getting as many interviews as I could have been getting.

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\(^{15}\)“Stealth camping” involves blending into your surroundings so that your vehicle’s door won’t get knocked on by the police when you park to sleep for the night. It requires you to have a vehicle that hides the fact that you’re living in it, and you need to park it in areas where your vehicle doesn’t really stand out. This is one of the reasons that I tried my hardest to find a white panel van for my conversion, as these are so commonly used as work vehicles that people generally don’t think twice when they see one parked somewhere.
when I first started out. I feel that if I were to go back to the field again, I would be able to recruit a larger number of participants.

It should also be noted that all of the gatherings I attended were held in the western United States, and it’s possible that groups of vehicle nomads in the eastern portion of the U.S. may have differently nuanced understandings of their mobility than the ones I interviewed. It should also be noted that because I conducted my fieldwork during the summer, many vanlifers and skoolies who move around the northern states in the summer and migrate south for the winter might not have been present at the Colorado van gatherings where half of my interviews were conducted. As these nomads might also hold differently nuanced understandings of their mobility than vanlifers who stay in the southern states year-round, this is another potential limitation of my thesis research. Although a comparison of my findings to existing research on vehicle nomads suggests that geography does not influence the ways in which mobility is understood by full-timers (something which the next two chapters will explore in greater detail), future interview research with vanlifers and skoolies could be conducted at van gatherings in the eastern and northern United States to help support this claim.

Another limitation of the study is its short duration: due to the amount of time needed for the van conversion and my need to return to my job in September, all of the data for this project was collected in five weeks. This limitation was amplified by the fact that I knew so little about the online presence of the vanlife community when I went out into the field, and the fact that I only had one contact who identified with the vanlife community. As a result, I was only able to learn about the first van gathering I attended by using Google, and then I learned about subsequent gatherings from other vanlifers. Now that I am a member of the vanlife community through email and on Instagram, I receive updates about upcoming van gatherings, and I have
multiple contacts I could meet up with in the field. I feel that if I were to conduct this research again, I could plan my route to hit a larger number of gatherings in the same span of time; however, being able to be on the road with other van nomads for a longer span of time would definitely be preferable.

Representations, Practices, and Freedom (and Why I’m Using these Concepts to Organize my Work)

Before we move on to my findings, I need to explain my chapter titles (i.e., why I’m using the concepts of representation and practice as the organizing framework), and why I thread a discussion of freedom throughout the next two chapters. As my literature review might suggest, I am situating my work, first and foremost, in the mobilities literature. To do this, I’ve adopted an approach to vanlifers’ (and skoolies’) mobility that understands it as the combination of physical movement, representation, and practice (Cresswell 2010). This 3-part conceptual framework actually provides a straightforward way to talk about participants’ mobilities, because in theory, I can break the discussion down into three parts, with a chapter being devoted to each of the three components of mobility. However, in practice, a discussion of my interviewees’ physical movement wouldn’t involve enough material to take up an entire chapter, so that’s why the ‘movement’ component of my participants’ mobility isn’t discussed on its own. Of course, this isn’t to say that I don’t talk about it; indeed, there’s an interesting discussion of the routes that vanlifers take in my chapter on vanlife practices.

The reason I’ve devoted one chapter to the representations of vanlife and the other chapter to the practices of vanlife is that it’s a straightforward way to organize my discussion; however, representations and practices are also what differentiate quantifiable physical movement from mobility. This is why I feel that it’s useful to focus in on representations and practices: they are the components of mobility that tell us the most about the social—as opposed
to just the physical—aspects of my participants’ movement. Moreover, an in-depth exploration of the representations and practices of vanlifers and skoolies is what will ultimately allow us to distinguish vanlifers and skoolies from—and relate them to—other types of vehicle nomad.

One of the reasons I begin the findings section of my thesis with a chapter about how my interviewees represent their mobility is that these representations provide a sense of what vanlife is (or is believed to be) before I move into a discussion of the things that my participants do. I feel that this approach makes the most sense, as the chapter on the things that vanlifers and skoolies are doing might not make as much sense if we don’t go into it with a basic sense of how vanlifers define and relate to their mobile way of life.

In the next two chapters, I also place a great deal of emphasis on the concept of freedom, as I have chosen to use it as the primary conceptual vehicle for discussing my findings. The reason I do this is because freedom was such a dominant theme in the interview data, and it’s a trope from the interviews that folds in so many other responses that vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) provided. Many of the concepts that participants discussed—such as experience, exploration, difference, adventure, and unpredictability—were discussed in connection with this central trope of freedom, which makes it an effective concept to use as a framework for discussing the results of my interview research. Moreover, I feel that weaving the concept of freedom throughout the findings sections has helped the flow of my thesis, because it draws Chapters Four and Five into conversation with one another at different points, instead of leaving them to stand alone as separate, self-contained entities.

Finally, as I indicated in my literature review section, my discussion of participants’ representations, practices, and the freedom trope has been grounded in a relational ontology and a mobile metaphysics. And although place is a concept that is fully compatible with such a
framework, I have chosen to refrain from using place as an epistemological tool in my analysis, and focus instead on describing my research findings in terms of *mobility* and *relative immobility*. As a result, I will not be discussing my interviewees’ mobility in terms of where it is unfolding, where it is going, or where it began. Rather, I’ll be discussing participants’ current nomadic mobility in relation to their pre-nomadic mobility, and their current practices to their past (pre-nomadic) practices.

Now that you’ve got a clear view of the road ahead, let’s get rolling! It’s time to talk about what nomadic mobility means to the people I interviewed.
CHAPTER 4

Defining Freedom: Representations of Vanlife

“Despite the ugliness of our civilization, I am sure I would live as we do rather than like the caveman.”

“Yes, of course you would. But would the caveman?”

-Wittgenstein

Ludwig: Some of the people we met at the farm would refer to society, um, as Babylon. […] They would say “oh, we’re going into Babylon today, we need some groceries.” Y’know? And […] that’s always stuck with me. […] I’m most, most comfortable outside of Babylon.

-Ludwig (Interview 3, p. 56)

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It all began with some funnel cake.

It was January of 2017, and I’d flown down to the tiny town of Quartzsite, Arizona for the annual Sports, Vacation and RV Show. The event attracted thousands of RVers to the town every year, which made it an ideal location for me to rub elbows with some vehicle nomads. I’d just submitted the research proposal for my Master’s Thesis (which was intended to be an ethnographic study on full-time RV nomadism), and Quartzsite was the perfect place to cozy up to some potential research participants. I was totally pumped.

I’d spoken at length with a group of RVers on my first night in town, and had also chatted with a lovely retired couple at lunch the next day; however, people’s interest in the research I was hoping to do was…well, polite at best. Of course, ethnography doesn’t always go as well as we’d hope, and I had a sneaking suspicion that the age difference between myself and the retirees I was approaching (in academic terms, my “lack of shared ascriptive characteristics”) might have been affecting people’s willingness to speak with me. Unfazed, I sauntered off down a side street, hoping to meet some full-time RVers who’d show a bit more interest in my project.

133
Walking past a vendor’s cart on my way down the street, I got about twenty feet down the road from it, and suddenly came to a stop. A little voice in the back of my head said “you should get some funnel cake.” Blinking, I looked back over my shoulder at the nondescript little stand, amused by the weird twinge of intuition (something my mum refers to as a “psychic twinkle”). Shrugging, I murmured to myself “I should get some funnel cake,” and turned back. Little did I know that one moment would change my life.

As I was waiting for my order, I overheard a grizzled young man behind me talking to someone about his tiny house. As I’d been enamoured by the tiny house movement for quite some time, I was delighted to encounter someone with a common interest, and quickly sat down to speak with him. He’d been on the road for 18 months, living in a diminutive cabin he’d constructed out of wood from reclaimed shipping palettes and an old trailer that he’d bought off a guy for two hundred bucks. Surprised that I’d come all the way from Canada to visit the small town of Quartzsite, he asked what I was doing there.

“I want to write a Master’s Thesis about nomads,” I explained, “so I came down for the RV show, because I need to meet some full-time RVers. I’m not really having much luck…I guess having someone my age showing interest in their way of life kinda creeps them out a bit.”

“If you’re interested in nomads, there’s a whole bunch of them camped out in the desert at Scadden Wash,” he suggested with a smile. “You should come out! It’s the last night of the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, and we’re having a big bonfire tonight.” After giving me directions to the site (along with a detailed description of his tiny house), the young man took off on his dirt bike.

Picking up a bag of Doritos (the ultimate friend-maker), I hopped into my rental car and headed east down Kuehn Street, following its curving length until the road started to run parallel
with the highway. The weather-worn pavement passed beneath the tires of my rented Optima in a continuous loud rumble, and as I followed Dome Rock Road down to Mitchell Mine Road, I marvelled at the number of boondockers that were camping out on the site. There were vehicles everywhere. Buses, trucks, RVs…there was even a deuce and a half\textsuperscript{16} with the word “OUTLANDERS” painted on the side in bold white letters.

Now, finding a single nomad in the desert—even one with a corrugated metal roof on his tiny house—is no easy task. Locating this guy’s setup in the sea of tents, vans, and old repurposed school buses took me about 45 minutes; however, after finding him, we sat down to chat for an hour as the sun set over the barren, rocky landscape. Whether it was my aspiration to be a great ethnographer or a sudden fit of madness that drove me to accept the dare to try the Honda dirt bike on for size, I will never know; but within the span of a few minutes, I was buzzing around the campsite with a white-knuckled grip on the handlebars. Of course, I must’ve done a good job hiding my terror, as a bunch of the nomads who’d gathered around to watch my antics complimented me on a job well done when I dismounted. Ice broken by my feat of derring-do, I pulled out the Doritos and proceeded to make some new friends.

That night, I was introduced to the concept of vanlife.

People had gathered around a few campfires in their conversions, and unlike the retirees I had met at the RV show, these nomads were fascinated by my desire to study people like them, and were delighted to speak to me about their lifestyle. Tinny sequences of guitar chords drifted around us as we spoke, eventually morphing into a full-on dance party as one of the vanners started DJ-ing music out of his vehicle. Two days later, I joined a convoy en route to Slab City in California, and camped out in a circle of vehicles with half a dozen other vanlifers. By the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} A deuce and a half is a 2.5 ton cargo vehicle, predominantly used by the military.}
time the sun rose over our camp in the desert on the third day, I knew I’d be buying my own van when I got back.

What is “Vanlife?”

Me: So what does being a vanlifer, or a van nomad mean to you guys?
Primrose: Being happy.
Ludwig: Yeah.

-Ludwig and Primrose (Interview 3, p. 23)

I would say vanlife is, uh, is a movement all of its own. It’s […] opposite from, from “I live in my car.” It’s opposite from that. Vanlife is […] a socially and politically aware group of like-minded people, that I think are um, artists and […] seekers, and adventurers. […] I feel like it’s a new kind of social revolution. Now, have people been doin’ it before? Of course. They did it in, in the ’60s and like, you know, […] time repeats itself. History repeats itself all the time. […] it’s people thinking […] outside of the box, outside of the system, right? […] and, uh, yeah, kinda doing stuff their way.

-Walrus Drummer (Interview 7, p. 2)

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Seated inside a flat black Chevy van parked a few meters away from my own, I curled up on a patch of thick shag carpet and pulled out my clipboard. Just outside the van’s side door, a large sheet decorated with an image of Ganesh hung from the van’s canopy, stirring lightly in the breeze wafting in from the Pacific Ocean. Leaning back against the back of the passenger seat, I asked the couple how they’d define vanlife if they were explaining it to somebody who’d never heard of it before.

Exhaling softly, Drake Man O’War was the first to respond. “Ultimate freedom. Um, to be honest, it is just…you get to see the world that you, has been—not exactly closed off, but you see it from a distance.”

His partner, Sinn Sage, offered up her own understanding. “I think like, vanlife is a rejection of the standard way of life that everyone is sort of expected to follow?”
“Mm-hmm,” I responded, mentally noting that her comment echoed sentiments from a couple of my previous interviews.

“[W]e watched our parents,” she continued, “like, we watched them raise us, and saw them like, being miserable, and like, getting divorces, and hating their lives, and then, uh, regretting everything when they’re in their 60s or whatever, and [...] I think that, y’know, our generation saw that, and is just…fully rejecting that, and like ‘that does not look like how I wanna live my life.’ Y’know?”

“That’s not freedom from anything,” her partner interjected.

“Yeah, it’s not freedom,” Sinn Sage agreed. “And so, [...] I never fuckin’ wanted that. I never wanted to be like my parents,” she said with a laugh, “like, and just, y’know, house, family, job, and then you’re trapped. I just [...] saw that, that trap, and everybody falls into it, and I was just like ‘I’m not doing that.”

I nodded at the words, recalling how hard my own mum had worked to pay off the last of her mortgage.

“And so, I think by finding a way to live...vanlife...that’s, that’s just what it is,” Sinn Sage explained. “You’re just, you’re rejecting that, that form of the American Dream, and finding your own. Y’know.”

“Tradition,” Drake Man O’War jumped in, elaborating on the theme of what vanlifers were rejecting. “[T]he tradition of uh...what your life should be. According to everybody else.”

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One of the first questions that I asked vehicle nomads in the field was how they actually defined the concept of vanlife. Their responses were as varied as the nomads themselves; however, common themes around simplification, freedom, and the rejection of social norms did
emerge. Describing it as “a nomadic and free-spirited way of living,” Medusa replied that “obviously the, the general thing is you live in a van” (Interview 6, p. 2). Elaborating on this point, she added that “it’s more about this simple way of living, and the ability to be mobile.” (ibid.) Her partner Spener concurred: “Yeah. A, a simplification of life and…going and doing the things that you always say that you wish you could do” (ibid.). This conceptualization of vanlife as a simplified lifestyle echoed sentiments expressed at a previous gathering by Primrose and Ludwig, who said that vanlife involves “getting rid of all the complicated stuff that so many people do,” and “spending all of your time…for yourself” (Interview 3, pp. 4, 5).

Given that the word freedom also echoed through all ten of the interviews, it came as no surprise that a few of my participants defined their lifestyle as one that brought them a sense of freedom. In one of my first interviews, vanlife was even defined as “an expression of freedom” (Interview 2, p. 1). Relating vanlife to the Dharma, Walrus Drummer similarly described vanlife as freedom, but also as a form of practice (Interview 7, p. 12). Jiselle, who I interviewed later at the same gathering, concurred: “It’s…utter freedom. Utter freedom. I have never been this free in my life, before. […] I can…just…choose the life that I wanna live. That’s what it means to me” (Interview 8, p. 9).

This concept of ‘choosing your own life’ was another dominant theme in the interviews, as Sinn Sage’s discussion of the “trap” of social norms around housing (included above) suggests. Participants made reference to experiencing social pressures towards conformity in half of the transcripts, which might explain why my interviewees so frequently described vanlife as a way to break free from these pressures and blaze their own trail. “Every day I wake up and there’s nobody…making me feel like I need to be anybody else,” explained Primrose (Interview 3, p. 55). This sentiment shows through earlier on in the same interview, as well:

Primrose: We take care of our needs as human beings…instead of
//Ludwig: Other people’s needs.//
Primrose: artificial, or other people, yeah, making other people rich.
Ludwig: Yeah, society’s needs. (Ludwig and Primrose, Interview 3, p. 5)

Over and over, interviewees talked about rejecting the paths that they were being ‘told’ to follow. Ludwig and Primrose explained that it “[wasn’t] even an option to just like, pretend and go along with the motions that were handed to us” (Interview 3, p. 2). Describing members of the vanlife community as “incredibly creative,” a vanner named Duke Silver similarly explained that vanlifers are “creating their own lives, […] instead of just like, going with a life that’s, y’know, been handed to them, or they were told to pursue” (Interview 4, pp. 5-6). Jiselle and Roy echoed this sentiment in almost identical terms, describing vanlife as having the freedom to “live the life that we’ve, that we’ve wanted to” and to “figure out our own path in life, rather than the path that’s dictated to us” (Interview 8, p. 3).

Based on more detailed material from other transcripts, it seems that the ‘path’ that my interviewees are purportedly rejecting is being conceptualized in different ways by different participants. For some, vanlife is rejecting “the standard nine-to-five, get a career type of path” (Interview 3, p. 1). For others, it is a way of rejecting “the social norm of, y’know, ‘you have to have an apartment,’ or ‘you have to buy a house’” (Interview 7, p. 2). A description of vanlife as a lifestyle that rejects consumerism also appeared in half of the transcripts, echoing a mantra I encountered in the field: “experiences over things” (Interview 6, p. 2).

As I mentioned above, there did not seem to be a single unified definition of vanlife that was advanced by my participants; indeed, the ways in which vanlife was described by the vehicle nomads I interviewed were as diverse as the nomads themselves. However, some of the common themes which emerged in participants’ definitions suggest that vanlife can be described as a simplified lifestyle that rejects commonly held social norms around employment, housing, and consumerism. According to these interviewees, vanlife is also a way of life that allows them
to go out and do the things that they want to do, without being pressured to follow a particular path in their lives—which, for many of the nomads I spoke to, was a form of freedom.

**Vanlife as Freedom**

So, *every* time I leave town, my…I get, like, choked up. My, my throat gets a little constricted and tears come into my eyes, ‘cause…there’s just this, this freedom. It’s like this ‘oh shit, I’m doing this.’ Um…just…possibilities explode. Anything could happen. Ugh, it’s the most amazing feeling in the world!! I love it so much.

- Heather (Interview 1, p. 6)

I *love*, I love leaving. I love it. […] Y’know, it inspires me. It just…it lights my soul on fire.

- Jiselle (Interview 8, p. 14)

***

*It was the first morning of the van gathering in Washington, and I’d managed to secure an interview with a cheerful couple in a pale brown high-top van. The interior of their van was gorgeous, and I couldn’t help but take a shine to the two vanners because of the pseudonyms they’d chosen for themselves. Ashli Towel and Duke Silver…the names reminded me of the time my buddies and I had used a random name generator for the characters in one of our Dungeons and Dragons campaigns. Ah, how the halls of many a dank castle echoed with the battle cries of Mommy Orc-Crusher, mightiest of dwarves!*

Leaning back on the bench seat in the back of the van, I smiled as I asked the creative couple one of the questions I loved most: “What is your favourite memory from your first few months on the road?”

“Hmm…” Ashli Towel mused, thinking a moment on the query.

“That’s tough,” her partner laughed.
“I mean, it’s super fresh, so I don’t know how much that counts,” Ashli Towel began, “but, last week I guess? We just like, hiked an hour into like, the middle of this national forest with some friends of ours, and there was this big old waterfall watering hole, and...we literally just like, put up the hammocks, and went swimmin’ with the dogs, and just like, hung out all day.”


“And it’s one of those where—and it was in the middle of the week, it was like a Thursday or something. And we were like ‘we couldn’t do this in our old 9-5 life, just [...] show up in Tahoe on a whim, [...] and go [...] hiking in on a Thursday and chilling out all day.’”

“Yeah,” her partner agreed, “we always like, joke when we’re like, driving through like, some beautiful scenery and it’s a Monday, we’re just like ‘ah, typical Monday!’”

“Yeah,” Ashli Towel agreed, and the three of us all laughed.

***

I would like to further explore this concept of freedom, which appeared in all of my interview transcripts, and was advanced by some of my interviewees as a way to define their way of life. The reason I wish to do this is because my research is not the only study on vehicle nomads in which participants have emphasised the word freedom in relation to their mobile lifestyles. Onyx and Leonard (2005), for example, remarked that “[o]f the 109 comments on [our] questionnaires about why people had chosen to become Grey Nomads, 32 were about freedom” (p. 65). Likewise, Counts and Counts (2009) noted that in response to a question asking participants “what they would miss most if they had to give up RV living, almost 20 per cent cited freedom or independence” (p. 98). Patterson, Pegg and Litster (2011) also reported that “older Australians loved the sense of freedom and adventure that came from traveling
around Australia” (p. 290), while White and White (2003) plainly state that “[b]eing on the road…meant freedom” (p. 211). Even in studies on nomadism in the British Isles, which tend to focus more on the negative impacts of legislation on vehicle nomads, “[r]epeated references were made [in interviews with Gypsies and Travellers] to feeling free, not being tied down, keeping options open, avoiding feeling shut in” (Niner 2004, p. 144). In study after study, interview after interview, questionnaire after questionnaire, vehicle nomads in multiple countries are using the word *freedom* to describe their mobility. And based on the studies that have been conducted thus far, they’re doing it regardless of their age or their cultural context.

However, as Counts and Counts (2009) have noted, “[t]here is no single, agreed-upon definition of freedom” among the participants in our studies (p. 101). The word *freedom* is deployed in many different ways, in reference to multiple practices and contexts. Perhaps this is why scholars have only discussed the use of the word *freedom* briefly (if at all) when they write up the findings of their research with vehicle nomads. After all, how much evidence *is* there to support a claim that vanlifers, skoolies, retired RVers, and British vehicle nomads are even talking about the same things when they use the word *freedom*?

As it turns out, there’s a lot, and it’s been sitting in the peer-reviewed literature all along. However, it takes a focus on mobility—rather than on age, tourism, or culture—to draw it out. Across the literature and in my own interview data, full-time vehicle nomads say similar things about their mobilities, and I would argue that one of the keys to understanding full-time vehicle nomadism lies in deconstructing the manner in which the word *freedom* is used. Evidence from the literature and my own transcripts suggests that when vehicle nomads use the term *freedom* to represent their mobility, they are referring to three things in particular: freedom from social norms, freedom from routines and schedules, and the freedom to *go* whenever you want.
Resolving Cognitive Dissonance: Vanlife as Freedom from Social Norms

There’s a continuum of people who […] live in vehicles. There are the homeless—and right now, in America, there are a lot of those—who they lost their job, and then they lost their house, and then they lost their apartment, they’re in their cars ‘cause they have absolutely no choice. They are homeless. And then there are people such as myself…who choose to live in their vehicles…I think the key difference is…a homeless person doesn’t want to live in his vehicle. He, he doesn’t, he isn’t escaping the rat race, he doesn’t hate the rat race, he hates living in his car or his van, he wants to get out of it as soon as he possibly can. That’s a homeless person. I love living in a van, or camper, or a vehicle. I love it. Uh, I don’t wanna ever live any other way. So I don’t think of myself as homeless. A person who hates it is homeless.

-Bob Wells (cited in Tubbs 2014, 1:52-3:06)

They just, my family is a brick-and-mortar home, y’know, “gotta live in a home, because that’s where your roots are.” Well, guess what? My roots are the whole United St—well, the whole world, technically, it’s not even the United States […] and now that I’ve been doin’ this for three years, I mean…I don’t wanna put roots down anywhere. I really don’t.

-Timmy Toothpicks (Interview 9, p. 6)

***

Heather and I had just climbed up the hill to where her van was parked in a stand of trees. It was a spacious high-top setup, minimalistically adorned with objects that seemed to hint at different aspects of her personality. Following her inside, I sat down on the edge of the rug and pulled out my recorder, going through the informed consent material with her before turning the mic on.

“I figured a good question to start with is just to tell me how you became a vanlifer,” I began.

“So I landed the perfect job,” she replied, her tone measured and contemplative. “I had all of this library/used book store experience, and I took it into a school district. And my, I had a mentor growing up that, um, she was a school librarian, she took me under her wing, I learned the library software. So I got this like, admin level position managing the software for an entire district.”
“Oh, wow,” I murmured, genuinely impressed.

“It was like this beautiful, wonderful, cushy dream job,” she continued. “I, I couldn’t have asked for anything better. Um, but there was still like, this something missing that I’d always felt working in retail, working, y’know, other stupid jobs that weren’t as great, so I was like ‘what is this, that’s missing?’ Um, so I was like, completely autonomous in my job, um, so I started watching YouTube videos, like daydreaming, and I ran across Bob Wells, the Cheap RV Living guy.”

“Yep,” I acknowledged, having used Bob’s website when I was shopping for a solar setup for my van.

“And, I’m like, ‘you know, I could do this now, I could just use what I have’—I had a little Subaru Impreza—‘I could just go. I don’t need to save more money, I don’t need to wait ‘til I retire. I could just, you know, start living and go on adventures and be challenged every day and learn new things.’”

I nodded, taking some notes.

“Um...so I always had dreams in high school, like, to ride my bicycle across the United States, or go on these long hiking trips and I was like...for some reason I never thought it was possible, like I had some sort of block. [...] Like...inner...um, discord. Like, my...my life wasn’t matching...I wasn’t as happy as I thought I should be,” she said, later revealing to me that the term she’d been searching for at this moment was ‘cognitive dissonance.’ “[...]

Anyway...um...so I had been with my partner at the time, um...I actually quit school to move in with her. [...] I left town to go to school for a year, and I thought my unhappiness was being away from her, so I moved back and we moved in together.”

Again, I nodded.
“So that was another thing,” she continued. “[T]he job, I was supposed to be happy. I was in an amazing relationship, I was supposed to be happy. [...] So I was like ‘hey. We’ve lived together for a year. I’m not happy, I need to do something. I’m gonna quit my job and live out of my car. I don’t think you’ll wanna come with me, but maybe you do.’ And she said yes. And like, I cried. That was…I don’t cry very often, but I totally broke down ‘cause like…she was willing to quit [her job], she’d been there for ten years, um…but we, we agreed that this, just this consumer lifestyle, the same day in day out, it wasn’t fulfilling.”

***

What is it that leads vanlifers (and skoolies) to shun the lifestyles that have been handed down to them, and hit the road full-time in a van (or a school bus)? As I mentioned above, the nomads I interviewed did discuss the rejection of social norms around housing, employment, and consumption as a part of defining their way of life. This is not unusual, as the view of long-term or full-time mobility as a way to opt out of particular social norms has already been discussed by Ateljevic and Doorne (cited in White & White 2003), who said that:

> [l]ong-term travel enables those who feel “pessimistic about the economics and lifestyle of the West, (who feel) the pressure of globalization, a loss of control over their lives, and uneasy about restructuring, competition, environmental degradation, big profits, greed, stress and consumerism” to move away from them. (p. 206)

Moreover, a few of my participants placed particular emphasis on how their way of life liberated them from the pressures and expectations placed on them by others as a result of these social norms. As Primrose related to me in a quote included above: “Every day I wake up and there’s nobody…making me feel like I need to be anybody else” (Interview 3, p. 55). Medusa expressed a similar sentiment, stating that “I don’t feel like a rebel, but you come up against like, people’s ideas about you. And so you have…you have to face your own identity and like, um, I dunno, it means being different, sometimes. And […] learning to be okay with that, […] for me, it means
like, a fully-lived life” (Interview 6, p. 7). Remarking on the vastness of the United States, Walrus Drummer asserted that the ability of vanlifers to live differently was something for which he was very grateful, because “we have the freedom to be able to say ‘fuck the system,’ and […] we’re absolutely free, uh, to do that” (Interview 7, p. 5).

However, much like the participants in Jobes’ 1984 study of full-time RVers, the nomads I spoke to during my fieldwork usually refrained from criticizing friends or family who were understood as still being embedded in the norms that participants were rejecting, and thus, still subject to the resultant social pressures and expectations. Indeed, interviewees often “recognize[d] the pressure to conform to such social norms as the permanent respectability and order of a house in a community” (Jobes 1984, p. 186). And yet, despite this acknowledgement of the power that social norms could have over people, one social norm that my participants refused to recognize as having any degree of legitimacy was one that Heather referred to in the anecdote included above. It was a narrative I have coded as “delayed gratification”; namely, the idea that it’s only acceptable for someone to adopt a nomadic mobility after they’ve worked their whole life and saved up for retirement.

This idea of nomadism as something that is ‘earned’ at the end of someone’s productive (i.e., working and family) years emerges in studies conducted by Jobes (1984) and by Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson (2013). The language used by participants in these studies is important to note: they felt that “they [had] earned the right to [full-time travel] by hard work and responsibility prior to retirement” and that retirement was their “time to travel, enjoy life, live out their dreams and spend their hard earned money” (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013, p. 54; Jobes 1984, p. 191). Cohen (cited in White & White 2003) likewise observed that those who went against this narrative by living on the road full-time when they were “at an age where
working at a regular and enduring job is the norm” were evaluated in a more “manifestly critical” way than people who were “approaching retirement age” (p. 206). The reason for this, supposedly, is because:

[Long periods of absence from a permanent home and frugal approaches to living arrangements clearly violate social norms and expectations of stability, permanence rather than mobility, and traditional forms of consumption. (Cohen, cited in White & White 2003, p. 206)]

These normative views around working in youth and traveling in retirement were taken to task in half of my interview transcripts—in some cases, quite passionately:

Sinn Sage: […] how many of your precious days are you gonna spend doing something you wanna do, and like, living your dream […] rather than just keep putting it off and thinking “some day.” […] Well, there is no *some day. Today is some day.*
Drake Man O’War: *Always working towards it,* but never, y’know //Sinn Sage: Never getting there.//
Drake Man O’War: Never being happy in the day-to-day. […] Working, working 40 years of your life, y’know, just to try to […] fit a lifetime of experience into the last 5 years, or 10 years, or 15 years of your life […] if you’re lucky. […] Y’know, we, […] talk to some of the older um, people that are doing this, that waited until they retired, and um, they all congratulated, they all congratulate us on, on figuring it out early. […] Um, because of their, the //Sinn Sage: They get tired! Their bodies get tired.//
Drake Man O’War: Yeah, *you can’t, you can’t go on a, y’know, 9 mile hike, 10 mile hike.* […] Y’know, maybe you can, but for the most part, you get to a certain age, and that just doesn’t sound fun any more. […] And right now, that, that sounds like the most fun. Being able to see the small little reaches of the world, um, that aren’t accessible to somebody, y’know, not in a physical…state of, of, y’know, making that happen. (Interview 5, pp. 7-8)

In discussing how she got started as a vanlifer, Heather likewise rejected this narrative, saying that when she first considered moving into a vehicle, it occurred to her that “I could just go. I don’t need to save more money, I don’t need to wait ‘til I retire. I could just […] start living and go on adventures and be challenged every day and learn new things” (Interview 1, p. 1). In a later interview, Ludwig advanced a similar opinion:

Ludwig: […] so many people, y’know, sacrifice their time going to work in hopes that they can have a good time later, y’know? And vanlife, uh, takes that away and allows you to live a more like, organic life and kinda deal with direct experience more, and like your immediate surroundings. (Interview 3, p. 5)
In another section of the interview cited above, Sinn Sage emphatically dismissed social pressures towards ‘working now and having a good time later’:

Sinn Sage: […] So many people are just like, they’re like “well, y’know, what’re you gonna do when you’re older?” And it’s like […] “you know what? Nobody promised me that I’d even get older. […] Like, you don’t know that! You could get hit by a fuckin’ bus! […] You could die of cancer next month, suddenly. […] So are you gonna just wait? You’re gonna put it off, […] and say like, “I’ll do that later”? […] Then, then your chance may never come! […] So you just have to do it. [laughs] You have to do the thing you wanna do.

(Interview 5, pp. 9-10)

These words still resonate with me, as I had a similar encounter to that described by Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War. It was a year after I had conducted my interviews for this project, and I was passing through Dawson City in the Yukon Territory with my partner. Seated at a table with a married pair of retirees from Ontario, we were chatting with them about our travels when the woman, whose name was Phyllis, turned to me and told me one of the saddest stories I’ve ever heard. When Phyllis was young, she had adored canoeing; however, she didn’t really have the time to go out on the water after securing a full-time job, getting married, and having a family. She decided to put off camping and traveling until after these social obligations had been met, only to find out in retirement that she wasn’t physically capable of getting in and out of a canoe any more. Just like the retirees mentioned by Drake Man O’War and Sinn Sage, Phyllis gently congratulated my partner and I on taking up nomadism while we were still young, and I left the table that night feeling like the wedding guest in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Some of the nomads I spoke to had actually been going down Phyllis’ path when they decided to move into their vehicles, and more than one interviewee talked about the ways in which adhering to social norms around employment and social reproduction had left them feeling dissatisfied: “You go to school, you go to college, you get married, [taps table on each point for emphasis] you buy a house, you have children, you raise a family. […] *Nowhere* in there does it fit a full-time vanner,” Timmy Toothpicks emphatically pointed out (Interview 9, p.
7. “[L]ife happened, and we settled into the, the regular 9-5,” said Roy in another interview, “[…] and I think we both realised—separately, at the same time—we knew, kinda knew it wasn’t working for us” (Interview 8, p. 1). His partner, Jiselle, concurred: “[O]ur lifestyle was just not working for us any more. The, it was extremely redundant […] it was just go to work, come home…party, drink, do it all over again” (ibid.) Ashli Towel and Duke Silver related a similar story:

Ashli Towel: we fell into the, uh, 9-5, bought a house in the suburbs, kinda thing, and squeezing in trips with every sick vacation holiday […] day that came about. Y’know, worked every time that we were sick so that we had those vacation days. [laughs]

[…] Duke Silver: Yeah, and we had like, plans to keep traveling and move somewhere else, and then you just, kinda just fall *into a rut, I guess?*

Ashli Towel: *You get stuck,* yeah. And one of those where like, every once in a while we would be like, “how did we get here?”

Duke Silver: [laughs]

Ashli Towel: “Like, we said we didn’t want this.” (Interview 4, pp. 1-2)

These comments resonated with an earlier exchange between Primrose and her partner Ludwig:

Primrose: We knew we had to do something different.

Ludwig: Y’know, I have friends that are already building their 401Ks, and I could not, I literally could never do—like, not that I wouldn’t be capable of it— […] uh, but I just couldn’t. [laughs] Y’know, I, I could never bring myself to do that.

Primrose: Sacrifice happiness for…a job. (Interview 3, p. 3)

An RVer named “Muncy,” cited in an ethnographic study by Counts and Counts (2009), expressed a similar view of work and retirement:

I’m not an SKP¹⁷ just for two or three weeks a year and hoping ‘someday they’ll let me have 5 weeks if the Company doesn’t fold.’ I don’t have to wait for retirement to do what I want to do. I’m free to leave or stay because I’m an SKP without any limits except those I place on myself. I’m free, really free, because I’m an SKP. (p. 100)

Although some of my participants discussed rejecting the world of the “9 to 5,” a couple of them also acknowledged that the social norms and narratives around employment did have a particular staying power:

¹⁷ “SKP” is an abbreviation for “Escapee” (i.e., a member of the Escapees RV Club).
As much as like, I wanted so badly to live in a van for a long time, at the same time, I easily get caught up in like, the society around me […] And so I definitely had this mentality of like—and I still am challenged by it—but like, needing to like, build a career, build my like, following, in order to build my career as like, a self-employed person, or like—just kind of being in the rat race, being on the hamster wheel. (Medusa, Interview 6, p. 5)

Jiselle, in a later interview, concurred:

Jiselle: […] I think I carried a lot of fear for a long time, I think I was extremely agitated for the most part, just like, getting in my own head, and then dealing with, y'know…the voices of other people. Like, y'know, like "what are you doing?" Like our friends, like, "this is a terrible idea," and just how they treated us as if we were…y'know, I dunno, like…[...] betraying them.
Roy: Yeah, like we were betraying them, or rejecting them.
Jiselle: Rejecting them, and betraying them. So I was getting [unclear] "maybe this is a terrible decision, what am I doing? What about my career? What about…y'know, like, the house,"
Roy: Yeah, retirement."
Jiselle: "the kids, the retirement?" Y'know, so all of that was going through my head, and I lived with it for quite a few months. (Interview 8, p. 8)

And yet, despite the staying power of these norms, interviewees held fast to the idea that these norms were not something they could subscribe to any longer. When I asked Ashli Towel and Duke Silver how they would feel if they had to give up their nomadic way of life, Ashli Towel responded that “I guess it would depend on what I was giving it up for? Y’know, like, if, if the answer is like ‘you’re going back to the 9 to 5 life,’ I would feel like my soul was just like, ripped out of my body’” (Interview 4, p. 36). This mirrored Heather’s response from my first interview:

Heather: [pause] [laughs] [pause] I just…I get so depressed. The…people who… I don’t, I don’t know if it was just the people I worked with in the school administration, but, um…they…they like, get these like, really good cushy jobs and start having all of these health problems, and…their refrigerator goes out, and it’s like a crisis, […] Um, it’s like Plato and the cave thing [laughs]. Trying to go back and…I have to show everybody else the light. (Interview 1, p. 13)

When I asked Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War how they would feel if they had to give up their nomadic lifestyle, Drake Man O’War offered up a similar response: “I wouldn’t be able to dictate my own life, and have the freedom…freedom I’ve worked so hard to achieve” (Interview 5, p. 60).
As I have explored in the paragraphs above, representations of vanlife as a mobility which granted participants the freedom to reject social norms around housing, employment, and retirement were common in my interviews. Indeed, references to having the ability to act or move freely appeared in all but two of the transcripts I brought back from the field. What is interesting about this finding is that representations of full-time vehicle nomadism as freedom from social norms are almost entirely absent from the literature, except in two of the studies that included vehicle nomads under the age of 45 in the sample (see Counts & Counts 2009 and White & White 2003). In an ethnographic study conducted by Counts and Counts (2009), for example, a brief aside from the authors about RVers who call themselves “Boomers” suggests that other full-time vehicle nomads under the age of 45 could understand their mobility in this way:

Quitting full-time secure jobs to go full-time traveling distinguishes [Boomers] in their minds from the RVers who wait until they retire to do it. All of them say they left a well-paying job doing something that made them say ‘shit’ when they woke up in the morning. (pp. 128-129)

It also bears mentioning that even though existing studies of nomadism in the British Isles may have focused on vehicle nomads below retirement age, the representation of nomadism as freedom from social norms around housing, work, and retirement may not have emerged in these studies because they tend to focus overwhelmingly on traditional nomads. After all, is it possible for someone to understand their nomadism as a practice which frees them from social norms around employment, housing, and retirement if they were raised in a nomadic community where these norms weren’t perpetuated? It’s an interesting question—one which further research with traditional nomads and New Age Travellers might help us to answer.
Busyness, Jeopardy and Mowing the Lawn: Vanlife as Freedom from Routines and Schedules

The perfection of clocks and the invention of watches have something to do with modern nervousness, since they compel us to be on time, and excite the habit of looking to see the exact moment, so as not to be late for trains or appointments. Before the general use of these instruments of precision in time, there was a wider margin for all appointments, a longer period was required and prepared for, especially in travelling—coaches of the olden period were not expected to start like steamers or trains, on the instant—men judged of the time by probabilities, by looking at the sun, and needed not, as a rule, to be nervous about the loss of a moment, and had incomparably fewer experiences wherein a delay of a few moments might destroy the hopes of a lifetime.”

-George Beard (cited in Cresswell 2006)

Um, we were in California, and there was this huge like, mountain, er, road biking thing, and the traffic was backed up forever and ever and ever…and, like, people were stressed out, honking at each other. […] We’re just like “Hey, let’s pull off and go to the beach and make pancakes!”

-Heather (Interview 1, p. 12)

Me: What would be the hardest thing to get used to, uh, if you had to stop being nomadic?
Large Marge: A sedentary lifestyle?
Me: [laughs] Anything specific about the sedentary lifestyle that would be…a pain in the arse?
Large Marge: The mind-numbing pain of a sedentary lifestyle? [laughs]
Me: [laughs]
Large Marge: The boring monotony of a sedentary lifestyle?

-Large Marge (Interview 10, p. 15)

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The vanlife gathering in Pike National Forest had already ended; however, I had hung back to stay with a few of the vanlifers who were still camping there because I was really enjoying their company. Plus, now that the gathering was over, it was less of an inconvenience for people to sit down with me for an interview, as I wasn’t taking them away from fun activities or from spending time with other members of the vanlife community. Sitting under a canopy that

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18 To be clear, when vanlifers describe their mobility as liberating them from routines and schedules, it is in the sense of being free from those routines and schedules that they don’t have much of a hand in determining. Based on participants’ comments, there are certain routines and schedules that they maintain on the road; however, for the most part, these appeared to be schedules and routines that vanlifers themselves designed or chose, or ones that held particular meaning for them.
we’d had to set up mid-interview because of the rain, I hit Ludwig and Primrose with one of my favourite questions, asking if there were things that their friends or family didn’t ‘get’ about their lifestyle.

“Yes,” Primrose replied. “Um…we had a fr—I had a friend I’ve known my entire life,” she began, as her partner Ludwig chuckled knowingly. “[A]nd um […] we’ve always been different, but we’ve always played on those suits, we’ve worked together and it’s always been positive, and she moved out to Colorado and invited us to stay at her home.”

Mimicking Primrose’s tone of voice, Ludwig chimed in: “And got you a job.”

“And she also got me a job, with the intention of having Ludwig and I stay at her home. Knowing that we weren’t gonna hang around for a long time. It was like in a pinch, and she was like ‘you’d be great, you’ll be here tomorrow, you wanna make some money?’ And I was like ‘yeah. Cool.’ […] Um…but it did not work out. We were very different, she didn’t understand our way of life.”

“She never even like, checked out the van, or like, got a tour or anything,” Ludwig added.

“Yeah, she wasn’t, they were not interested,” Primrose agreed. “[…] And um, meals were hard, because we…the way that we cook, because we spend a lot of time cooking, and that’s what we’re used to.”

“Mhm?” I murmured, sensing where this story was going.

“So there would be frustration over meals,” she continued, “because we would wanna do it one way, and they just would wanna do it quicker, and not spend so much time doing it, and just get in the chair and watch TV, and we’d be like, ‘oh, like, instead of watching TV, we, like…just spend the whole night cooking and eating.’ […] And hangin’ out.”
With a chuckle, Ludwig turned to me and continued the story. “So you, you’ve hung out with me, y’know, a bit at this, uh, gathering,” he began. “[…] Before the guy would come home from work, uh, I would be like, maybe, y’know, cookin’ or doin’ a little somethin’ meal prep in the kitchen, and have like, some live Grateful Dead playin’, or like, some funky music.”

Smiling, I made a few notes, sensing yet again where this story was going.

“And he’d come home and put on Jeopardy, and turn it up over my music,” Ludwig finished with a laugh. “And so that was—that, I think, exemplifies the clash of our different personalities […] and ways of life.”

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When I talked to my participants about their way of life, what emerged was a sense that the mobilities that they’d left behind were more time-restricted, faster-paced, and far less interesting than their current full-time mobilities. There were several aspects that gave rise to this impression: participants talked about their past and current relationships with routines and schedules, their busyness and the lack of balance they experienced in their pre-nomadic lives, and the positive effects that vanlife had had on their health as a result of parting with this busyness and lack of balance.19 And yet, what the following discussion of my findings—in connection with the literature—will reveal is that this representation of full-time mobility is not unique to my participants at all.

The representation of vanlife as freedom from routines and schedules emerged at several different points in my interviews with vanlifers and with Large Marge, the skoolie. To begin with, one of the most interesting trends that emerged in the transcripts was that in the majority of the interviews, participants made reference to the act of waking up in the morning. I wasn’t

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19 In a way, this could be understood as a shift into a more relaxed and self-determined temporality.
quite sure what this meant, as I hadn’t asked a particular question to elicit this response; and yet, over and over, my interviewees made reference to it:

Me: […] What’s your best memory from [your first few months on the road]?
Timmy Toothpicks: Well […] it would be waking up…like, sleeping on Loveland Pass, or sleeping on Vale Pass, and waking up, and looking out your windows, and say “Oh, my goodness, look at that.” […] That is the most—and I have, I remember when I first got the van, I went to Moab, and I have a picture of this coffee can, with this door open, and I took it from here, and all you can see is like, Canyonlands National Park, right there.
Me: Aw, that’s awesome.
Timmy Toothpicks: Yeah. That sticks in my head, every time. (Interview 9, p. 8)

“[…] I enjoy going to different places, waking up in new places,” said Koa in an earlier interview, “I think that’s so cool” (Interview 2, p. 9). “Like van, vanlife is great,” said Drake Man O’War in a later interview, “I get to wake up in amazing places” (Interview 5, p. 13).

Likewise, when I asked Large Marge what the biggest difference was between fixed dwellings and mobile ones, she replied that “the obvious is the ability to move. I mean, to wake up someplace different all the time” (Interview 10, p. 20).

At first, I wasn’t certain why my participants placed so much emphasis on waking up in the morning; however, if we consider these comments in terms of a relational ontology, what emerges is the sense that “waking up in new places” is something that distinguishes participants’ current mobility practices from their pre-nomadic ones (Interview 2, p. 9). Put simply, waking up in the same place every morning is a routine, and it’s one that interviewees are suggesting they’ve left behind.20 That my participants understand their mobility in this way does make sense, as the nomads I interviewed aren’t really obligated to return to—or wake up in—the same place every day, unless they need or want to come off the road for some reason (e.g., to repair

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20 I’m using the term ‘place’ deliberately in this paragraph as a way to echo the comments that my participants have made, so that the connection between waking up in the morning and the representation of vanlife as freedom from routines and schedules is more apparent. Although I’d prefer to use a term that reflects my use of a relational ontology, I felt that doing so here would have obscured the point that I was trying to make.
the vehicle, to spend time with family members, or to access employment). And yet, when we look at participants’ descriptions of their pre-nomadic mobilities, waking up up to the same sights every morning isn’t the only routine they claim to have left behind:

Jiselle: [...] our lifestyle was [...] extremely redundant...and we lived in New Orleans, so we were pretty much sucked in by the city. I mean, you know how cities can be, and New Orleans [...] is one of those cities. So, y’know, it was just go to work, come home...party, drink, do it all over again.
Me: Yeah.
Jiselle: And, y’know, I mean, yeah, it was fun, but we wanted more. (Interview 8, p. 1)

In response to my question about what the hardest thing to get used to would be if her mobile lifestyle had to be given up, Charlie shared an opinion along these same lines:

I think like, the routine. Like, when you, I’ve, any time I’ve lived in a place, like, you go to work, then...you know? And like, you have to do the same thing every day, and like, it’s hard to plan fun activities sometimes? Like, you feel like you can’t. And I think we did a pretty good job balancing it in Hawai’i, like fun versus work. But still, you have to like, balance it, and I feel like in a van, you don’t have to balance it. You can do everything...like, all things all day, a little work, a little fun, a little—a little nap, a little everything. Yeah. (Interview 2, p. 16)

This description of pre-nomadic mobility as unbalanced, busy, and tightly scheduled was an association that more than one of the participants ended up making. “Like, being in a house, for some reason—I know this is probably, is like a bigger thing than, than just the house—but it’s part of what keeps the rat race going, in some ways, to me,” explained Medusa, “[a]nd like, here, I can kinda step away from it” (Interview 6, p. 33). Her partner Spener agreed, saying “[y]ou definitely get into like, hav[ing] to schedule and prioritize every single thing [...] in a house, or whatever, and like, fill your schedule out. And...here, it’s a little more fluid” (ibid.). Medusa and Spener explained that this fluidity had a positive impact on their ability to engage in fun or relaxing activities, which was a connection made by other interviewees, as well:

Heather: I can...do yoga when I feel like doing it, and tell myself it’s okay not to do it every day. Like...[...] my journal practices increased exponentially,

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21 As an example, Large Marge had come off the road and was working as a hairdresser at the time that she was interviewed.
um...when I need to do it, like, I don’t need to do it all the time, but when I feel like I need to, I do. It’s not so much of an inner battle. Like I always felt like I was fighting everything that was good for me when I was in sticks-and-bricks. (Interview 1, p. 18)

Ashli Towel made a similar connection between flexibility and healthy practices, saying that “we wake up and we don’t have the 9 to 5, we know that we have work to do, but we can schedule in ‘all right, let’s do yoga in the morning. [...] Let’s do this, let’s do that.’ And we still have like, four hours of unscheduled time” (Interview 4, p. 51). In another interview, Primrose pointed out that vanlife’s more fluid schedule helped to foster a better relationship between herself and her partner: “our communication skills are, like, really good,” she explained, “but [...] a lot of couples, like, they don’t communicate enough. Because they’re always so busy they don’t even see each other sometimes” (Interview 3, p. 5).

However, the busyness that kept some of the interviewees from journaling and doing their yoga may have been a result of more than just the 9-5 “rat race.” The vehicle nomads I spoke to also complained about how much time they had been putting into maintaining their former (non-mobile) dwellings. This humorous excerpt from my interview with Ashli Towel and Duke Silver is particularly illustrative:

Duke Silver: [...] when you own a house, you’re like, almost a slave to that house.
Ashli Towel: Yeah.
Duke Silver: Like,
Ashli Towel: The A/C
Duke Silver: Yeah, like, y’know, you have to fix things, and, and there’s
//Ashli Towel: Cut your grass.//
Duke Silver: yeah, keep it clean—and yeah, like, *cutting the grass*
Ashli Towel: *We would so frequently* stand in our front yard, bein’ like
“what do you want from us?!?” [laughs]
Me: [laughs]
Duke Silver: Yeah, yeah, y’know, I will grow vegetables all day long, but [...] I would get so like, pissed off at how much time like, taking care of a lawn just ate away. And I’m just like, “this, this is time I’m never gonna get back, [...] but I have to like, mow the lawn.” (Interview 4, p. 50)

Large Marge made a similar comment about being a ‘slave’ to a fixed dwelling:
I mean, brick and mortars suck balls! I mean, they really do. You’ve got a lot offuckin’ upkeep and maintenance, and you’re, you’re married to your damn house—and I’m married to my house too, but it happens to wake me up in a different area all the time. (Interview 10, p. 4)

In a write-up of Westh’s (2001) documentary on Grey Nomads, a pair of vanlifers captured in the sample group made similar comments: “‘It’s great,’ says Tony, ‘No rates to pay, there’s no kids to babysit and we’ve got the biggest back-yard in Australia…and I don’t have to mow it!’” (p. 79). Following along with this theme of upkeep and maintenance, three of my participants made reference to housecleaning in their interviews, with two expressing a distinct sense of relief at how much easier and quicker it was to clean their homes now that they lived in a vehicle.

“That one, is the biggest difference,” Jiselle explained, “because…it takes me 5 minutes to clean this, versus […] the hours, or the entire day it would take in my previous apartment” (Interview 8, p. 32). “I hated cleaning our two-storey house,” Ashli Towel concurred, “[a]nd now I’m like ‘yes, I’ll sweep the floor!’” (Interview 4, p. 49).

Critiques of fixed housing as eating up time, money, and energy were common in the transcripts; however, they were usually advanced alongside comments about vans and buses having their own distinct challenges, as well. Interviewees pointed out that their vehicles, like houses, also required material and financial upkeep; however, this was often done as a way of illustrating the reduced strain of maintaining a vehicle as compared to maintaining a house:

Timmy Toothpicks: […] I think this would be a super-duper difficult life, if money was an issue, because you have gas that has to go in here. Okay? You have, y’know, mechanical issues can go wrong. Now, the expenses living in a van are 100 times smaller, okay? But they’re still expenses. You can’t live in this if you don’t have income. (Timmy Toothpicks, Interview 9, p. 12)

In another interview, Medusa spoke about fixed and mobile dwellings in similar terms:

I think the financial…um, aspect…to me, feels like the di-difference. When we were tryin’ to decide, whether we were gonna buy a home or, or buy a van, it’s like the home is such a commitment […] in some ways. It’s like…you’re tied to this place…physically, and by a mortgage. […] You’re always—I mean, and you’re probably always working on a van—but like you’re, there’s always like,
things you have to do to your house, and they’re like, big spendy things, and…I dunno, it’s like, the van is, it’s paid for. (Interview 6, pp. 31-32)

One of Counts and Counts’ (2009) respondents expressed a similar view when comparing their current mobility to their pre-nomadic mobility, interpreting the term *freedom* as “[t]he fact that I can travel, see many wonderful things […] without great expense and not be tied down. Being free of the bonds (financial mostly) associated with home and property” (p. 101). Jobes (1984) discovered similar sentiments in his sample of RVers:

> Mowing lawns, shoveling sidewalks, painting siding and repairing plumbing no longer hang heavily around their necks. Mechanical problems occur with their ‘rigs,’ but they are comparatively few and simple. (p. 192)

Echoing comments made by my interviewees, “Carole,” a participant in a study by Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013), provided another comparison: “You really have to do a lot of responsibilities and chores when you own a house. [With RVing] you can just pick up and go. You don’t have any taxes or utility bills” (p. 54).

In a reflection of these statements, the contrast that many of my participants made between their current and former mobilities was quite stark, something which the word clouds included below (generated using data from the interview transcripts) make far more apparent (*Figure 14* & *Figure 15*). These word clouds show which terms and concepts appeared most frequently in the transcripts in association with fixed and mobile dwellings, with larger words appearing in more transcripts. Words such as *freedom, experience, different, adventure, lifestyle,* and *community* loom largest in the cloud describing vanlife (*Figure 14*); however, words like *consumption, unhappy, expensive, TV,* and *routine* dominate the cloud describing vanlifers’ pre-nomadic lifestyles (*Figure 15*).
Figure 14: Vanlife Word Cloud. Terms and Concepts interviewees used to describe their nomadic lifestyle.

Figure 15: Pre-nomadic Life Word Cloud. Terms and concepts interviewees used to describe their pre-nomadic lifestyle.
Given this representation of vanlife as something that liberates people from routine and provides access to adventure, experiences, and difference, the fact that many interviewees associated the adoption of their lifestyle with benefits to their physical and mental health does not seem surprising. “This is easily the happiest I’ve ever been in my entire life,” said Ashli Towel (Interview 4, p. 36). Later on in the same interview, she told me that after she and her partner Duke Silver moved into the van, “I feel like we began living dramatically healthier” (ibid., p. 51). Other participants referred to cooking more and/or eating better since taking to the road, as well:

Jiselle:  We eat better. […] We’ve been forced to be creative with healthy meals.
Roy:  [unclear]
Jiselle:  We uh, we eat, y’know, mostly farm to table, we go straight to farms and get our food. Y’know? It’s much better.
[…]
Roy:  Yeah, yeah, that’s true. We definitely eat better, and we’re more active, far more active.
Jiselle:  Yeah, certainly.
Roy:  I mean,
Jiselle:  We don’t watch TV […] that much. Like, a movie night is like…y’know, a huge deal! [laughs] (Interview 8, p. 33)

Medusa also told me that she and her partner cook more since taking to the road, and that she is “on the computer, and on, like, the cellphone less often” (Interview 6, p. 33). In a comment that blends healthier eating practices with Medusa’s earlier comment about tending to more “primal” needs, Ludwig and Primrose said that:

Ludwig:  […] we like to be camping way out in nature, and just, when you only have to worry about feeding yourself, y’know, and taking care of yourself, and pursuing
Primrose:  Yeah, vanlife is feeding yourself.//
Ludwig:  Yeah. [laughs]
Primrose:  It takes away all that extra stuff, that instead of going to get that burrito, or like, going out to eat, it’s, you have the control over it, and it’s like your duty to yourself to make your, to make meals. […] And I feel like it turns off, like I’m able to spend hours preparing my meals. Because I don’t have all of these other things to do. (Interview 3, p. 4)

References to these moments of intentionality and being present were common in the interview transcripts. Indeed, given my role as a volunteer peer facilitator for a Dialectical
Behavioural Therapy group, I was intrigued to discover that in all but three of the transcripts, participants were using terms and phrases related to mindfulness practices in describing their way of life. In my first interview, Heather made reference to “finding a healthy balance through intentional living, and being present, and being able to focus on what’s important” (Interview 1, p. 18). Likewise, Ludwig told me that he felt that “our decision to leave, y’know, and live like a, a road type of life, um…went alongside like a, a waking up. Um, in terms of…y’know, just sort of mindfulness, and y’know, awareness” (Interview 3, p. 2). “It gives you a, a chance to slow down,” said Spener, “[a]nd I think that everyone is capable of that. It just might take some uh, like, other people longer” (Interview 6, p. 3). His partner Medusa expressed a similar view:

Medusa: For me, being a van nomad—it’s hardly a meaning—but like, […] it helps me to get to a place of more ease, and peace, and less anxiety. […] because of the simplicity, and because I’m able to like, quiet my mind, without having like, so many other people’s opinions and expectations around me all the time[…]…it means it’s a place for me to like, find and be who I am? And, um, yeah, being on the road, it’s like—sounds kinda silly—but there’s like, less decisions. It’s very much more like, kind of primal decisions, of like […] “where am I going? What am I eating? Where are we sleeping?”

Me: Mm-hmm.
Medusa: And for me, that like…it’s really helpful on my brain. Um, too many decisions like, makes me anxious and like, *stressed out.*
Spener: *[laughs]*
Me: Mm-hmm.
Medusa: [laughs] Um, and so…it means, I guess, it means, like, peace and fun and joy. […] for me, it means like, a fully-lived life. (Interview 6, pp. 6-7)

When I asked them how they’d feel if they had to give up their way of life, Jiselle and Roy expressed a similar view of full-time mobility as bringing positive mental health benefits, as well as giving them a “fully-lived life” (Medusa, Interview 6, p. 7):

Jiselle: […] I don’t see another lifestyle giving me…the enriching, um…I guess…life.
Roy: Yeah, and fulfillment.
Jiselle: Yeah, I’m fulfilled, living this way. Y’know, I feel full, and I feel whole, and I’m calm. And…I love the person that I am…now, than any other time in my life. (Interview 8, p. 22)

Over and over, interviewees expressed the view that their way of life had brought improvements to their health and overall sense of well-being, a perspective which is present in previous
research on vehicle nomads. “I have no worries and no problems,” said a participant in a study by Counts and Counts (2009), “I’ve extended my life a long way” (p. 108). Another participant in the same study, the 81 year old “Tonia Thornson,” asserted that “[p]eople stay young on the road” (p. 50). In an article summarizing a documentary film by Westh (2001), a nomad named “Ellen” similarly relates that “when we’re travelling, we FEEL better. We’re more alive” (p. 79). In their study of grey nomads, Onyx and Leonard (2007) found that “[a]lmost without exception, the interviewees indicated that their health had greatly improved since adopting the Grey Nomad lifestyle. […] the most common response concerned the reduction in stress” (p. 389).

Where the benefits of vanlife to the participants in my sample became most apparent was in interviewees’ responses to questions about how they’d feel if they had to give up their nomadic mobility for some reason. In three of the transcripts, interviewees immediately responded with the word devastated:

Jiselle: Oh, I’d be devastated.
Roy: Yeah.
Jiselle: I would be crushed.
Roy: Yeah, we’d feel, uh, we’d have, uh,
//Jiselle: I’d probably buy a boat.//
[…]
Roy: I think there would be a feeling of incompleteness.
Jiselle: Yeah.
Roy: Like we didn’t finish.
Jiselle: Yeah…definitely.
Roy: Not that we’ll *ever finish.)*
Jiselle: *At least,* y’know at least I wanna ride it out until I’m ready to say “okay. I’ve had enough.”
Roy: *Mm-hmm.
Jiselle: Y’know, and I haven’t. (Interview 8, p. 22)

Sinn Sage’s response was almost identical: “…that would be pretty devastating. That would be pretty devastating. I, I really feel like I’m not done. Like, [laughs] I mean, I think even when we stop, I’ll feel like I’m not done, but again, I feel like we can do it again at any time”
Although they did not use the word *devastated*, Medusa and Spener also provided an almost identical response:

Medusa: Eugh! I dunno what I would do!! Um.
Spener: We’d probably just…fly somewhere and travel.

*Spener and I laugh*

Medusa: I dunno how we’d afford it, though, but…um…I would be stressed.

*laughs* I’d go back to stress. *[laughs, unclear]*

Spener: No, no, we’d just fly to like, Thailand or something.

[...]

Medusa: Yeah. Um…that would be sad. I dunno.
Me: Why sad?
Medusa: Because, if you—I mean, like…if…I don’t know what the circumstances would be, but it’s like, we worked really hard, to create this van and like, he worked really hard on it, took a lotta time and energy, and […] like, because we’ve just started, it’s like, you’re just on the road. So if it just, tomorrow, ended, it would be like “what?” Like, “I don’t feel like we’ve really gotten the full experience, or like, lived it out to its fullest.” So it’d feel like it’s something that’s like, unfinished, I guess? (Interview 6, pp. 20-21)

As this response shows, even in cases where the word *devastated* was not used, my participants expressed great attachment to their nomadic mobility:

Timmy Toothpicks: I’d cry. Um, I really would. I actually, uh, last year, I, I um…I broke my ankle, uh, mountain biking. So I was in the van for like, y’know, a month. I didn’t, I didn’t get a cast on, but y’know, I had crutches and stuff like that. So it was more inconvenient, *but*, y’know, I could lay right there, and reach up here and get to the sink. So it was, it was easy, actually, as a, as an invalid, for a little while, to, to move around the van. So, um, so I know, I know the normal stuff, like breaking a bone or somethin’, it’s still doable. But if I had to give it up because—let’s say I, let’s say I broke my back, and I was in a wheelchair, it would kill me, because I’m so into it right now. Like, it is, it is my life, right? So, when you take a life away f—y’know, if you take that part of a life away from somebody who is loving it, y’know, that’s, boy, that, that’d be tough. (Interview 9, p. 15)

In a short but powerful response to one of my questions, Walrus Drummer expressed a similar view:

Me: […] If something happened where you had to give up this lifestyle tomorrow, how would that make you feel?
Me: Why “trapped”?
Walrus Drummer: Uh, just, y’know, the, the whole freedom thing.
*pause*
Me: Like, “freedom” in the sense of like, away from the nine to five, “freedom” as away from the city?
Walrus Drummer: Yeah, well, freedom as, uh…I need to be nomadic.

(Interview 7, p. 18)
As all of these responses demonstrate, many of my interviewees were strongly attached to their mobility, and were reluctant to consider the thought of giving it up. This mirrors findings from a study by White and White (2003): “[f]or almost all of the interviewees the prospect of […] settling for an extended period was approached with some degree of trepidation” (p. 215).

However, what is remarkable about my participants’ responses to questions about having to give up their lifestyle (even if only temporarily) is how powerfully their answers convey a sense of momentum—of *mobility*—in the way that they are delivered. Participants would ‘get a boat’ or ‘fly somewhere’ and keep going; they would feel a sense of ‘incompleteness’ if they had to stop, because they’re not ‘finished’ seeing the things that they want to see. “[I]f we had to completely give it up, um…there’s a lot we didn’t experience,” said Drake Man O’War, tying his response back to the idea of freedom from social norms as well: “[A]t that point, I, I, I wouldn’t be able to dictate my own life, and have the freedom…freedom I’ve worked so hard to achieve” (Interview 5, p. 71). In an earlier interview, Charlie even used the word *momentum* to describe how she would feel if she had to stop living on the road: “I feel like it would, like, kill our momentum. […] I think it would be hard to get me back in it, […] [i]f I…had to be out of it for a while” (Interview 2, pp. 28-29).

Even in cases where participants responded with a more optimistic view, there was a similar feeling of movement in their words:

> Ludwig: if it was just me and I lost my van, through like, unfortunate circumstances, uh, I would probably follow even further-out people’s leads that we’ve met, and go like, real minimalism. Like, kinda just have a backpack and a bike or somethin’. (Interview 3, p. 54)

Similarly capturing the essence of the saying that “[y]ou can take the traveller out of the road but never take the road out of the traveller,” Koa said that he would be “doing everything possible, as quick as possible. And like, still be excited to get back on the road” (Interview 2, p. 29;
Smith, cited in Shubin & Swanson 2010, p. 921). Heather offered up the same perspective: “I would be very sad, but I wouldn’t lose hope. It’s so easy to start it up again” (Interview 1, p. 13). Duke Silver expressed a similar view, saying “whatever obstacle had popped up […] I think we would definitely just like […] beitchin’ to get back out on the road, so we would, y’know, make that happen” (Interview 4, p. 36).

In line with these passionate responses is the fact that in most of the transcripts, my participants’ mobility was represented in ways that suggested it wasn’t something that could be suppressed or taken away. “I can’t really imagine a life without…kinda bein’ on the move” said Spener (Interview 6, p. 21). “I’ve always been a nomad,” Large Marge told me in a later interview (Interview 10, p. 23). “Even when I didn’t have a vehicle, when I was younger, and I couldn’t figure out this urge to move, I still moved apartments every year” (ibid.). Sinn Sage related a similar story, saying “I’ve always only lived in southern California, but I moved apartments like, at least once a year” (Interview 5, p. 98). “I feel like I’ve always been this kind of person,” said Koa, “I, I don’t really like being in one place? Um, I like being free, I guess” (Interview 2, p. 9). Mirroring Walrus Drummer’s statement about needing to be nomadic (included above), Ludwig said that “it was just a, a need, y’know, just sort of an instinctual [laughs] y’know, feeling that we had to go explore and find people that were shining more like we were trying to” (Interview 3, p. 3). Jiselle and Roy expressed a similar sentiment, as well:

Roy: Yeah, we had no idea what we were gonna do for money.
Roy: For income.
Jiselle: Yeah, but we were willing to figure it out. That’s how much it meant to us, like, we had to do this. (Interview 8, p. 6)

“I think we’re always gonna be nomads […] to some extent,” said Ashli Towel (Interview 4, p. 60). Her partner, Duke Silver, concurred: “it’s tough to, tough to leave this, once you, once you’ve gotten the taste of it” (ibid.). “I think I might be addicted or something,” Koa concurred
(Interview 2, p. 20). When I asked how long he intended to remain a nomad, Timmy Toothpicks likewise confirmed this view: “Tsk, as long as my health lets me […] I have, right now, I have no inkling of not doing this. That’s how much I love it” (Interview 9, p. 22). Heather, in an earlier interview, gave the same type of response to this question: “Until physically I’m not able to any more” (Interview 1, p. 23). These comments echo the findings from Viallon’s (2012) study of RVers in France: “[t]hey note clearly what might make them desist: sickness or loss of physical mobility” (p. 2083). Jobes (1984) made a similar observation, saying that he “[knew] of no full timers who have stopped mobile living for reasons except ill health” (p. 188).

Whether it was described as an ‘urge,’ a ‘need,’ an ‘addiction’ or an identity, full-time mobility was something that many of my participants were profoundly attached to, to the point where some of them wouldn’t even entertain the notion of a permanent breakdown (something which I will discuss in greater detail in my next chapter). Interviewees felt that their nomadic mobility exposed them to adventure, excitement, and difference, liberating them from pre-nomadic lives that were experienced as stressful, busy, repetitive, routine, and tightly scheduled.

The emphasis that interviewees placed on “the qualities of adventure and flexibility” and the freedom from routines and schedules is important to note, as it is one of the most dominant themes that appears across multiple existing studies with full-time vehicle nomads (Counts & Counts 2009, p. 93). In a study by Shubin (2010), a Gypsy Traveller called “Mr. Turner” related a story about his cousin, saying:

She was put [by the local council] in the brick and mortar house and felt completely out of place. She wanted to get out there, see what the world is about, instead of being stuck in a house…The same routine everyday, everyday, and she started drinking and all that…And then she was away to Ireland for the first time. (p. 513)

Another Gypsy Traveller, called “Mr. Grey,” related a similar story about his brother in a study by Shubin and Swanson (2010):
My brother settled down in this place, Methil, over in Fife, right. […] He just couldn’t adapt to this lifestyle you know […] He lived with nothing to do, the same routine everyday, getting up, walking to the shop, getting the driving license, and then he finally passed his test. ‘That’s it’, he said. ‘I am out of here now’. That was him back to the travelling way of doing it. (pp. 922-23)

British vehicle nomads aren’t the only full-timers who represent their mobility as freedom from routines and schedules, either. In a comment that echoes Sinn Sage’s story about watching her parents struggle in the 9-5 lifestyle, a participant in a study by White and White (2003) remarked that:

> Working that hard at sixty, like my dad, wasn’t really something I wanted to do. I wouldn’t want to get up at five or six every morning, work twelve hours a day. I wanted to sell up. There’s more to life than just work, work, work, work, work. Money, money, money. (pp. 205-206)

“I wanted to get away from the usual everyday routine,” said another participant in White and White’s (2003) study, echoing Jiselle’s comments about living in New Orleans (p. 206). “Getting up, going to work, coming home. You try to vary your life, but basically you’re doing the same thing, seeing the same people” (ibid.). Rvers in a study by Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) likewise stated that “RVing gave them a sense that they could do what they wanted, when they wanted and gave them freedom from the day to day responsibilities of home life” (p. 54). Echoing Primrose’s comment about couples being too busy to even talk to one another, White and White (2003) observed that long-term travel also offered couples “an opportunity to rediscover and rebuild relationships that had been marginalized because of work and other pressures” (p. 204).

Over and over and over, participants cited in the literature on vehicle nomads talk about their way of life as freedom from routines and schedules. In a documentary by Westh (2001), a vehicle nomad called “Mary” was “bored, lonely and fed up with routine,” and after hitting the road, found that there were many others like her who were “dissatisfied with a sedentary and predictable lifestyle” (pp. 77-78) In a statement which resonates with Large Marge’s comments
about the “mind-numbing pain” and “boring monotony of a sedentary lifestyle” (cited above), a participant in the study by Counts and Counts (2009) described the type of people who were best suited for full-time vehicle nomadism as those who “[want] to get away from the drudgery and routine of an everyday typical lifestyle and [have] the guts to try something dramatically different” (p. 133). Likewise, the Grey Nomads in Onyx and Leonard’s (2005) study, comparing their current mobilities to their pre-nomadic ones, said that “‘life’s too organised’ ‘too bureaucratic’ and they ‘do not want to be marshalled’” (p. 65).

While Onyx and Leonard (2005) claim that Grey Nomads’ representations of full-time mobility as freedom from structure reflect a resistance to “their commodification as aged travellers” or “the traditional Australian icon of the self reliant bushman,” comments from dozens of full-time vehicle nomads in the literature and in my own study suggest that this representation is a view held in common by vehicle nomads across age groups and cultures (p. 67). A remark made by one of the respondents in a study by Counts and Counts (2009), in response to a question regarding what was liked most about RVing, is particularly illustrative: “FREEDOM! I don’t have to be here at a certain time or there at a certain time. If I want to stay up until 2 o’clock in the morning I can, if I want to sleep until noon I can” (p. 108). Counts and Counts (2009) also noted that some of the RVers in their sample “do not make reservations at RV parks because they refuse to be tied to a schedule” (p. 145). In a similar vein, Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) found that North American RVers valued their style of mobility “because it allows spontaneity and flexibility and requires no fixed itineraries” (p. 53). Likewise, Viallon (2012) found that 25% of the respondents in his study of RVers in France “like[d] the fact that an RV liberates them from the constraints of fixed schedules” (p. 2080). Across the literature and in
my own data, full-time vehicle nomads equate their mobility with freedom from the
“‘instantaneous’ time” that Urry (2004) critiques in his discussions of automobility (pp. 28-29).

And yet, even the mode of mobility does not seem to influence this representation of full
time nomadism as a mobility free from structure and time constraints, so long as the person is on
the road full-time. Take, for example, the comments made by cross-country cyclists who spent a
few months being on the road full-time with their bicycles: describing how the end of their
cross-country journey would feel, one of the cyclists remarked that “I’ll find myself submitting
back to a scheduled life with demands beyond eat/sleep/bike, demands and expectations from
people other than me…” (Pesses 2010, p. 18, emphasis added). Note that in this comment, both
freedom from schedules and freedom from social norms are captured. Another cyclist even
echoed the ‘waking up in the morning’ comments of vanlifers in my study, saying: “[o]f course,
I’ll sleep in the same spot most nights” (ibid.).

Of course, there is a flip-side to this representation of full-time mobility as freedom from
schedules and routines, as well as the more relaxed and self-determined temporality that
participants appear to have adopted as part of their mobility. In many of the transcripts I brought
back from the field, participants made reference to having difficulties with making set plans with
other people or with developing a routine on the road. “We change plans a lot” Ashli Towel
acknowledged with a laugh (Interview 4, p. 26). “I’m a ‘go where the wind takes you’ girl,” said
Large Marge, in response to a question about whether she’d had a detailed plan of where to go
when she started out as a skoolie (Interview 10, p. 5). “I think—this life can’t be about miles,
and where to be next,” she elaborated, “[b]ecause you […] can’t plan, judge…any of that. […]
because that’s saying you know what to expect. [laughing] Fu-u-uck, that doesn’t happen!”
(ibid.). “It’s hard,” said Primrose, “because we—being on the road everything’s unsure. You
don’t know how long it’s gonna take some—to get somewhere […] So it definitely, we have to be very conscious of trying to plan things out with people who have jobs, and have, y’know, what their days off are” (Interview 3, p. 27). “Yeah, we learned the first time that, uh, plans don’t work,” Ludwig told me with a laugh (Interview 3, p. 28). These sentiments are not unique to my participants, either. White and White (2003) found that when they asked long-term travellers what their future plans were, “many expressed a palpable reluctance to make binding decisions about what this new future might be” (p. 215). To quote one of their participants: “[w]e’ve got a rough itinerary that we’ve already changed. So we don’t know. Anything could happen” (p. 212).

I must admit, these issues with scheduling were an aspect of vanlife that I learned about firsthand during my time on the road. After rescheduling my arrival date at a friend’s house two or three times on my first trip across Canada, I realised that when I wanted to meet up with people on the road, it was better to say “I’ll arrive the week of the 10th,” or “I’ll be there between this date and this date,” instead of estimating and committing to a set arrival date. This is because a lot can happen on the road. You can stumble onto interesting locations, have a breakdown, or even get turned back at the border (true story). As Jiselle and Roy explain:

Jiselle: You have to be willing to let go.
Roy: Mm-hmm.
Jiselle: Which is a huge part of vanlife.
Me: In what sense?
Jiselle: Um, being able to be okay with things, the way that they are. Like, not having a plan, or, being able to say “okay, I’m gonna just change my plan at the spur of the moment.” Y’know, some people need structure. And being a vanlifer, you, you, it’s just not that way.
Me: Right.
Jiselle: Y’know, life on the road is just…anything at any time. It’s ever-changing, and you have to be open to that. (Interview 8, p. 4)
These comments also echo those made by a couple in the study by Counts and Counts (2009). Describing why their family members couldn’t cut it on the road, they replied that “[r]outine means a lot to them” (p. 136). Jiselle and Roy acknowledge this as well:

Roy: […] I think that a lotta people need to feel like they’re in control of their lives, and feel like they’re in control of what happens day-to-day, even though //Jiselle: Yeah.//
Roy: as we all know, there’s no, we don’t have much control over it. […] But, people need to feel like they have control, and ev—reg, regular routines, and fitting in society kind of makes people have that comfort, of control? Like, letting go is recognizing that we don’t. (Interview 8, p. 5)

As we have seen, participants have represented vanlife as a form of mobility that is free from routines; however, for some of my interviewees, it seemed that vanlife could also be incompatible with them to a certain degree. During my interview with Ludwig and Primrose, Ludwig discussed the impact that this lack of structure was having on particular daily practices:

Yeah. I find, um…although it should be easier, it’s like, harder to exercise, to get like, an exercise regimen. […] I would find when I had like a routi—like, a work routine, it was easy, easier to kinda like, do other like, focused, disciplined type things [laughs]. (Interview 3, p. 66)

In describing which of her everyday practices had changed the most since moving into the van, Charlie related a similar experience:

I haven’t like, figured out my workout routine…on the road…yet. Like, I don’t, I don’t work out a lot, but like, when I was stationary […] I would dive, most of the time. […] A couple times a week. And then, like, do some sort of exercise a few times a week, also. And right now it’s like, if we go on hikes, and that’s about it. […] We’ve worked out like, once [laughs] properly [in the last 3 months]. (Interview 2, p. 39)

“It’s hard to have routine on the road […] work-wise,” Drake Man O’War acknowledged in a subsequent interview, although his partner Sinn Sage remarked that this was part of vanlife’s appeal (Interview 5, p. 98). In my first interview, Heather had expressed similar sentiments regarding routine and productivity:

Heather: […] I’ve had a really hard time, um, getting in routines, like being able to be creative on a regular basis. […] it’s very…haphazard, like, it feels like A.D.D. sometimes.
Me: You just work on one thing, and then work on another thing, then work on another—
Heather: Yeah. [...] But on the other hand, you’ve simplified, so you’re able to focus more on one hand [...] you just have to plan things. It takes more planning. (Interview 1, pp. 3-4)

Despite these repeated warnings that it is hard to maintain a routine on the road, I still attempted to take my thesis work with me on my recent road trip to the Yukon; however, it wasn’t long before I discovered that my participants were right. Between all of the driving, exploring new places, meeting new people, cooking meals, and spending time with my partner, I found it incredibly difficult to keep to a steady work schedule. About a month into the road trip, I finally gave up.

Across age groups, cultures, and perhaps even modes of mobility, being on the road full-time is being represented as freedom from routines and schedules. In my own interviews, vanlife was represented as liberating participants from mobilities that were constrained by ‘9 to 5’ careers and the financial and time commitments involved in maintaining a fixed dwelling. Participants felt that their mobility gave them access to adventure, difference, and experience; however, some of them did acknowledge that vanlife presented them with unique challenges around sticking to routines and meeting up with friends who didn’t share their mobile lifestyle.

Yet, at the end of the day, full-time mobility was something that many of the nomads I interviewed were strongly attached to. They felt that freedom from routines and busy schedules had brought improvements to their physical and mental health, although they acknowledged that not everyone could follow the path that they had taken to attain these benefits.

**Having “Itchy Feet”: The Freedom to Go When You Want**

RVers are subject to a disease they call “hitch-itch.” The snowbirds who spend the winter in one park may be immune to it, but most of the travelling RVers we met said that after a week or two in one place they begin to feel its symptoms. Once it starts, the only recourse is to hitch up and head down the road. The relief is only temporary. The next time the victim is in one place for a while, he or she will suffer a relapse.

Jiselle: [...] I need...to be in ever-changing environments. I just have this calling inside me. [...] It’s like, I think...y’know, people that live this way, full-timing on the road, like this, it’s—that’s just who they are. It’s like...[...] it’s your soul.

-Jiselle (Interview 8, p. 14)

The sweetest words of tongue or pen/This morning we will roll again.


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It was Friday, February 16, 2018...Reading Week had arrived, and I was finally free to hit the road again (even if only for a few days). And I knew exactly where I was going—a beautiful cottage on the reservation at Curve Lake, where a dear friend of mine was currently house-sitting. My soul was singing. I had just gotten Lola back from the mechanic after taking her in to have a minor fuel leak repaired, and in about 14 hours, I would start my restful drive northwards on the quietest back roads I could find. God, how I’d missed being on the road. As I drove back to my mum’s place after a practice session with my re-enactment unit, I relaxed into the driver’s seat and let out a happy sigh.

Suddenly, a powerful smell flooded the cab, and I looked around. What the hell was that? Had there been a spill in the area I was driving through? It couldn’t be Lola, I’d just gotten her back from the mechanic 24 hours ago...turning off the vents, I drove the rest of the way back to my mum’s, pulled into the driveway, and turned off the engine. Climbing out of the cab, I turned to grab my bag and my heart dropped into the pit of my stomach.

Fluid was cascading from the underside of my vehicle. Fear and anger coursed through my body as I ran to grab a pile of newspapers, shoving them under the front of the van to try and minimize the damage being done to my mum’s new concrete driveway. Fuck!! This couldn’t be happening!
The next day, I was on the phone with the shop that had done Lola’s recent repair job, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Of course, the mechanics feigned ignorance and blamed it on the vehicle. “It’s an old van,” they said. “It’s a domino effect,” they said. “You can fix one thing, and then another thing will go wrong, and another, and another,” they said. “We’re willing to offer you the full scrap value of the vehicle, if you want,” they said.

In that single moment, my entire world came crashing down around me. I immediately sank into one of the deepest depressions I’d ever experienced. My freedom…my independence…all of it gone, gone in an instant. I couldn’t stop crying…I’d have to move back in with one of my parents, and I wouldn’t be able to go on the road whenever I wanted to. The thought literally made me want to die.

After bawling my eyes out for a solid hour, I managed to pull myself together enough to go outside and take a video of the kilometers-long trail of fluid Lola had left behind her on the pavement the night before. Shortly after I posted it to Facebook, Boomhauer—the vanlifer who’d convinced me to stop transcribing in the field—called me up on the phone and told me what to do. With his help, I figured out that the mechanics I had taken Lola to had damaged her fuel filter cap, and diesel fuel was now spraying out from under the cap while the engine was running. Needless to say, I was fuming pissed. After taking Lola to another mechanic (whose repair job failed), I eventually had her towed back to my mum’s driveway. My patience exhausted, I purchased the shop manual for my vehicle, climbed under the hood, and fixed the problem myself. That was the day I stopped being ignorant about how my van actually worked, and started learning basic repair skills. Never again would I put my freedom in the hands of another human being.

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An important facet of the representation of vanlife as freedom from routine—one which merits its own separate discussion—is the idea that vanlife grants participants the freedom to pick up and go whenever they like. Having this freedom to move whenever they wished was something that interviewees discussed in half of the transcripts I brought back from the field. Although having freedom from fixed schedules and having the freedom to take to the road whenever you like may seem like they should be discussed as a single category, I disagree, as it is possible to be completely free from routines and schedules and never go anywhere. Likewise, it is also possible to be bound to set schedules and routines and travel great distances (as my recent road trip to the Yukon demonstrates). However, the freedom to hit the road whenever your schedule allows you to is not what my participants are talking about…they’re talking about being free to go whenever you like, and that’s not the same thing.22 Indeed, as a vanlifer, one of the most frustrating things about my life right now is that I don’t have the freedom to hop in my van and take off whenever I like. Unlike most of my participants, I must book time off or wait until the end of the term to travel, and for a nomad like me, living with that kind of constrained potentiality is utterly maddening.

Timmy Toothpicks does an excellent job of explaining this sentiment in his response to my question about what would be hardest to get used to if he had to give up his current lifestyle:

Timmy Toothpicks: […] I feel that depending on what it was, being locked back down to that one place. Y’know, you could, you could do day excursions from there, but you’re not…you’re, you lose that ability to say “you know what? I think I’m just gonna go here.”
Me: Yeah.
Timmy Toothpicks: “And how long I’m gonna be there? It doesn’t matter!”
Me: Yeah.
Timmy Toothpicks: So I think, I think the total freedom is probably the biggest thing you, you’d give up. (Interview 9, p. 15)

22 Much like the representation of vanlife as freedom from routines and schedules, this representation of vanlife as having the ability to “go when you like” can be understood in terms of the temporality of participants’ mobility; namely, in the sense that participants appeared to value having control over the timing of their movements.
Walrus Drummer provided a nearly identical response to this question, asserting that if he had to give up vanlife, the hardest thing to get used to would be “not bein’ able to just get up and roll out whenever I want” (Interview 7, p. 19). Jiselle revealed something similar in one of her comments to me, as well:

> I need to have the ability to […] go when I need to go. […] And I think […] for the most part, it keeps me sane. It keeps me grounded […] it’s such a deliberate…way, to just say “okay, I’m going to move today.” It’s a conscious decision, and when I’m stationary, I…I don’t get that. (Interview 8, p. 24)

Drake Man O’War likewise explained that “being in a van, it’s, it’s the freest thing we can do […] [w]hen we don’t like the place, we just get up and leave. Y’know, when we love a place, we stay longer” (Interview 5, p. 10).

These views resemble comments made by one of the participants in Counts and Counts’ (2009) study: “[w]e’re not bound to anybody, and if you don’t like your neighbors you can be gone in 15 minutes” (p. 101). Indeed, in their ethnographic study with retired RVers, Counts and Counts (2009) highlighted the fact that one source of freedom for the people they were studying was the “ability to leave whenever they choose” (p. 196). White and White (2003), in their study of long-term travelers, also captured this kind of statement in their claim that long-term travelers “are not tied to one place; they are not bound by time. They can stay in one place for extended periods, or ‘just up and move along’” (pp. 211-212). As Large Marge exclaims, “I wanna stop, when I wanna stop, I wanna do what I wanna do, and I don’t wanna have to consult with anybody to do it!” (Interview 10, p. 14).

A facet of this ability to go when you want—and one that was discussed by four of my interviewees—was a resistance to being ‘stuck’ (i.e. relatively immobile) for extended periods of time. “Mobility, exploration, um, being a, an adventurer, um, is a drug. And once you start to take it, you want more and more and more,” explains Large Marge (Interview 10, p. 23). “I’m
usually about [...] every four weeks, I have to go do something” (ibid., p. 24). In an earlier interview, Spener had said something similar. He had told me that he was fortunate to have a job that kept him mobile; however,

if *that* left, and I had to be stuck in one place for a long time, I, I mean I know the feeling that I’d get, and I’d be so incredibly restless. [...] And I’d have to figure out, definitely, some sort of other outlet, in order to kinda stay sane, because, y’know, I’ll, I’ll have been gone for three months working [...] and always bein’ on the move. And then I get back home, and like “ah, nice to be back home.” And then two and a half weeks rolls around, I’m like, “all right, I’m ready to get outta here again!” (Interview 6, p. 21)

Ludwig echoed these sentiments, saying that “I think if I, y’know, moved to the city and went into an apartment I would go crazy, um, for sure, and it wouldn’t even take that long. [*laughs*]” (Interview 3, p. 54).

In four of the ten transcripts, participants mentioned that they could only be ‘sedentary’ for a certain amount of time before they started feeling restless or unhappy. In their ethnographic study of RVers, Counts and Counts (2009) touch on this sentiment, saying that it’s a well-known feeling among RVers—one commonly referred to as “hitch-itch” (i.e., the need to hitch up the RV or trailer and get on the road again) (p. 97). Relating a story about two of their participants, Counts and Counts (2009) state that “[b]ecause of Roy’s health problems, [the Johnsons] have been forced to spend two or three months at a time at their home base. Both of them get restless after so long in one place” (p. 146). My mum, a Glaswegian Scot, has always referred to this feeling as “having itchy feet,” and it’s a feeling I know all too well. I can only last about 4-6 weeks in one place before I start getting stir-crazy. This is the feeling of being “roadsick” that I mentioned in the introduction to my thesis. It’s not that anything about the place I’m living in is making me unhappy…heck, I love the town I grew up in. It’s just that after being (relatively) immobile for a certain amount of time, I start to feel a sense of longing. I just want to leave, to be on the road to other places. If you’ve ever heard the theme song from *The
*Littlest Hobo*, Terry Bush (1978) captures the sentiment perfectly in the opening verse, echoing Jiselle’s reference to a ‘calling’:

There’s a voice that keeps on calling me  
Down the road is where I’ll always be  
Every stop I make, I’ll make a new friend  
Can’t stay for long, just turn around and I’m gone again.

Jiselle captures this feeling in another of her comments, as well, saying “I need to be in an ever-changing environment, and I need to have the ability to, to…go when I need to go” (Interview 8, p. 24).

This need to be able to go whenever you wish resonates with some of the comments made by British nomads in the scholarly literature. In Kabachnik’s (2009) article, a participant named Patricia indicated that “she did not enjoy her time without her caravan and ‘without the ability to, just, you know, go. It isn’t like I travel all the time, but I like knowing that I, you know, can.’” (p. 471). Two Gypsy Travellers in an article by Shubin and Swanson (2010) likewise expressed this sentiment when they explained their rationale for not moving into a house:

Mrs. Hearne: Our only option was that we would have to sell the caravan to [move into the house] and we weren’t willing because we thought it promised us too much. Our idea was at least we have always got the caravan to up and go.  
Mr. Hearne: If we didn’t like the house we could just go back in the caravan.  
Go on the road. (p. 921)

Shubin and Swanson (2010) refer to these kinds of sentiments as the “[e]motional dimensions of mobility,” noting that the Scottish Gypsy Travellers feel a commitment “towards possible mobility and change. In this context, dreams about travel can be as important as a physical movement itself” (p. 921). This commitment “towards possible mobility and change” is reflected in my participants’ comments about having the freedom to pick up and go whenever they like, as well as in the concept of “hitch itch” described in the excerpt included above (Counts & Counts 2009, p. 162; Shubin & Swanson 2010, p. 921).
Counts and Counts (2009) have suggested that this ability to get up and leave whenever you wish is about having “the power to choose and […] to control [one’s] physical and social environment” (p. 196). However, I do not believe that this is what lies at the heart of statements about being able to “just jump into the [front] seat and drive off” or comments about having the “freedom to move when we want, where we want” (participant, cited in White & White 2003, p. 212; Peterson, cited in Counts & Counts 2009, p. 99). To say that a vehicle nomad’s need to be able to move whenever they want to is related to a desire to control their physical and social environments is to say that the need to move is related more to the where, and not so much the when, of that nomad’s moving. In a way, it’s like saying that the need to move is tied to the desire to control place (regardless of whether you’re conceptualizing place as relational or fixed). However, the words that participants have used in my interviews, as well as in the data cited by scholars studying RV nomads and British vehicle nomads, tend to suggest otherwise. Vehicle nomads are saying that they need to have the freedom to go when they want to go—not where, not if, but when.

**Conclusion**

[T]he physical fact of moving is just one aspect of a nomadic mind-set that permeates every aspect of our lives. Nomadism entails a way of looking at the world, a different way of perceiving things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work and to life in general.

-McDonagh (cited in Shubin & Swanson 2010, p. 922)

[S]omething came into my body, this lifetime around, and I am more at home on the road than I am sedentary. So, for me, it’s a natural state, to be exploring. […] I feel like I’d be a Calamity Jane, or somebody else, if I was born in a different lifetime.

-Large Marge (Interview 10, p. 13)

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When I went out on the road in the summer of 2017, it was with the intent to learn about the meanings that vanlifers assigned to their mobilities. According to the nomads I interviewed, vanlife is a mobile lifestyle that they defined in many different ways; however, what these definitions held in common was a sense of freedom that embraced simplification and rejected social norms around employment, housing, and consumerism. Interviewees adamantly dismissed the idea that full-time travel was something that could (or should) only be pursued in retirement, embracing their lifestyle as one that allowed them to follow their own paths in life without being subjected to societal pressures to conform to normative ideals around what a person’s life should look like. For many interviewees, full-time mobility allowed them to choose and follow their own routes, rather than the ones that society had mapped out for them.

Every transcript I brought back from the field contained the word freedom, a term which has also appeared frequently in the literature on full-time vehicle nomads. And yet, this commonality across articles has never been explored, perhaps because the focus in previous studies on vehicle nomads has been on age or culture, rather than on mobility. When the mobility of full-time vehicle nomads is foregrounded, an analysis of my transcripts combined with a review of the literature suggests that full-time vehicle nomads represent their mobility as freedom in three dominant ways: freedom from social norms; freedom from routines and schedules; and freedom to be mobile whenever they wish. As I have argued above, the absence of the first understanding of freedom from much of the literature on vehicle nomads highlights the need for scholars to study nomads who are below retirement age, as the current body of literature has focused almost exclusively on retired nomads, or on nomads who belong to a culture that doesn’t subscribe to the social norms that vehicle nomads of working age may be rejecting.
For my participants, a fully nomadic lifestyle liberated them from the constraints of rigid routines and highly structured schedules, and allowed them to live a life that was healthier and more balanced. It freed them from the busyness and repetitiveness of their former mobilities, and it removed the time-consuming maintenance tasks associated with larger dwelling spaces from their day-to-day lives. Interviewees also represented their mobility as one that allowed them the freedom to move (or linger) whenever they wished, a form of freedom that may be facilitated by, but is not the same as, freedom from routines and schedules. This particular representation of freedom is one that resonates through many academic articles on full-time vehicle nomads, even though it may not have been the researchers’ intent to capture this particular trend. Niner (2004), writing about nomads in Britain, emphasized that the “[d]esire to be free of constraints and able to act at whim to take opportunities as they arise is perhaps as much part of the ‘nomadic’ Gypsy/Traveller culture as actual travelling” (Niner 2004, p. 155). However, the “hitch itch” phenomenon discussed by RVers and the statements made by vanlifers in my sample have helped to demonstrate that the need to be able to pick up and go at a moment’s notice is a sentiment shared by full-time vehicle nomads regardless of their age or cultural context. This is an important finding, because it suggests that when we place our focus on mobility, rather than on age or culture, important similarities between different types of vehicle nomads may emerge.

The fluidity of interviewees’ nomadic mobility will be explored more fully in the next chapter, where I will discuss the ways in which vanlifers differentiated their mobility from that of tourists visiting the same locations and traveling along the same routes. Through this comparison, the representation of vanlife as freedom from schedules (discussed in this chapter) is
carried further, and an image of vanlife as an unstructured form of mobility that is distinguished by its practices and its distinctive temporality will take shape.
CHAPTER 5

Slow Mobility, Community, and Dealing with Sedentarism: A Discussion of Vanlife Mobility Practices

I am the granny who visits a week and leaves for far-away places.

-Participant, cited in Counts & Counts 2009, p. 137

Me: How does it feel when you’re on the road between places?
Primrose: It’s exciting. I love it. I love marking my places off on my map, I picture like, myself just lighting up my own atlas, everywhere we go, and just creating like, a big colourful world that I’ve gone to and explored.

-Primrose (Interview 3, p. 45)

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After floating around in a couple of inner tubes until the ice-cold water of the mountain-fed pond made our butts go numb, Charlie and I walked back to the site where over a hundred vans were parked. Some were arranged in circles, while others peeked out from between the trees, and still others (including my own) were doubling as tarp anchors. Charlie and Koa’s van, a plucky little Volkswagen Riviera named Claire, was in a circle with a bunch of other Volkswagens.

At the end of the interview—which had been interrupted by a large and adventurous insect, a friendly vanlifer spreading well-wishes, and a pause to watch an industrious camper lighting his pipe with a magnifying glass—I was about to wrap things up when Charlie stopped me.

“Did we go back to our favourite thing?”

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23 The vanlifers and skoolie who participated in my research engage in a wide range of practices as part of their mobility. As I cannot possibly discuss all of them, and because this is an exploratory study, I have chosen to focus on what I feel are key or common practices based on the transcripts and the observations I made during my fieldwork. I have also focused on employment practices, as this helps to give a sense of how participants finance their mobile way of life.

184
I pulled my hand back from the recorder, having almost forgotten to return to that question. “Yeah!! We gotta go, go back to what’s, what’s your, uh, ”

“Your favourite memory,” Charlie finished my sentence.

“Oh. God,” said Koa, laughing.

“Best memory from the first few months on the road,” I prompted with a grin.

“You go first,” said Charlie to her partner. “‘Cause I have several, so if you say one that I’m gonna say, I’ll say another one.”

“No, I don’t have any, so you go first. I can’t think of any,” he laughed.

“Okay, so…like, I’ll tell you, and then we can like, narrow it down. ‘Cause, when we went—so like, one of the first places we camped was Mojave Desert. And it was a really awesome national park that like, didn’t have any rules.”

“You hear J, uh, dogging on it last night?” Koa asked with a laugh.

“No?” Charlie ventured.

“He’s like, ‘fuck Mojave, that place sucks!’” he laughed again.

“Oh, no?”

“It’s like, so ugly or whatever.”

“I mean, [...] it’s very barren,” Charlie acknowledged.

“Yeah,” Koa laughed.

“But it was the first place, kinda, that we got away from the city, and uh, we could camp anywhere,” Charlie explained. “And, uh, [...] we got kicked outta the first place we stayed, ‘cause it wasn’t quite in Mojave. And that was like, one thing that typically happens in a van, and then the next place we found, we just, it was dark.”

I nodded, taking some notes.
“And then the next place we found, we loved it, and then we decided to stay for an extra day,” Charlie continued. “And I feel like that weekend was like, what’s gonna happen over and over and over again throughout periods of time, but it was just like, all jammed into a weekend, of like, what vanlife is gonna be.”

As I was only two weeks into living in my van at this point, I didn’t know yet how true Charlie’s words were, but I would later learn that she was right... getting kicked off a site, having to find somewhere to park after dark, and finding a spot you really like and staying there a bit longer than you originally intended—that experience really did capture the ups and downs of vanlife in a single weekend.

“Um...and that, like, the, the favourite part of it was we found this like, really awesome rock formation to camp under,” she continued, “and, uh, we like, made dinner on the fire, and we like, invented a new recipe.”

The couple laughed, and I smiled as I pictured the story in my head.

“And we just thought we were like, the kings of the world,” Charlie concluded, “‘cause there was no one else in sight, and we were the best chefs ever.”

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As was noted in my literature review, mobility as a concept encompasses more than just physical movement; it also includes the representations and practices that go with that type of movement, and the politics behind those particular practices. In the previous chapter, I discussed how my participants represented their mobility, describing it as freedom from social norms, a way to break from routines and schedules, and the ability to pick up and go whenever they liked. Across transcripts, vanlife was described as a lifestyle that embodied flexibility, openness, and freedom. However, these representations do not tell us very much about what vanlife looks like,
how it unfolds, and how it might differ from other types of mobility. That is the purpose of this chapter.

Based on the data from my interviews and the literature on RVers, full-time vehicle nomads appear to have a different relationship with temporality, community, and material possessions than people who aren’t on the road full-time. And because vanlifers and skoolies travel with their homes, their mobility practices also appear to differ from those of tourists and many other travellers. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which interviewees differentiated their mobility from other mobilities, and relate these understandings back to my first research question, as the underlying narratives that emerge through interviewees’ discussions of their practices do tell us a great deal about what their mobility means to them. However, before we can get into a discussion of these narratives, it’s important to explore one of the more widely discussed practices engaged in by full-time vehicle nomads, a practice they engage in before their life on the road even begins.

**Purging Belongings**

You’re content and busy, I’m busy and bored
And I’m threatened by all these possessions I hoard
Kick it all to the curb, I don’t want it no more,
I don’t want it no more, I don’t want it no more

[…]

Take a risk, take a chance
Let’s move into a van
Burn the map, burn the map
Let’s craft a secret plan
Sell your stuff, sell your stuff, we’ve got more than enough
We’ve got more than enough, we’ve got more than enough

-Broken Glass Kids, “Burn the Map” (Caela & Sam 2017)

As we were sitting there chatting, a couple wandered by who were interested in [my friend’s] tiny house, [and] he told them to go ahead and take a look. They said that they were thinking of going mobile, and they were at [the Rubber

24 My first research question was “What meanings do vandwellers assign to their mobility?”
Tramp Rendezvous] to talk to people and make sure it was doable. They had already started selling all of their belongings; all that was left was their bedroom set, and whatever they couldn’t sell or give away would “go on a bonfire.”

-Field notes, Scadden Wash, Arizona, Sunday January 22, 2017

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Cozied up inside a Volkswagen Westphalia with the couple I was interviewing, I looked over to where they were seated under a set of Tibetan prayer flags. “So, I’ve actually had a couple of interviewees who have mentioned selling all of their belongings, putting them on Craigslist, putting them to the curb. Do you think that that’s an important step in getting ready for vanlife?”

“Yeah,” Jiselle replied, her partner Roy concurring with a soft ‘Definitely.’ “That was huge for us,” she added.

“How so?” I inquired.

“Well, for me, the first thing that we sold was our record player,” Jiselle explained. “And letting go of that...was painful. Y’know, it was like ‘oh my gosh, like, I just sold this.’ I, and that’s when I realised how attached I became to material things. […] Y’know, like, selling our, our sofa, it was like, ‘oh my gosh.'”

“Yeah,” Roy agreed softly.

“Like, that’s, ‘I’ve had that sofa forever.’ Like, I don’t wanna be attached to material things in that way!” Jiselle stated emphatically. “I don’t wanna feel like those are the things that make me whole.”

“Right,” I murmured, taking some notes.

“And realising that, when it happened, was a huge step for me, in allowing myself to be free. To really be free. To detach from these things. Like, those things are not the things that make me whole. […] Y’know, we are told that they fulfill our lives, but that’s not true. And
189

A question about purging belongings was added to my interview script long before I left the first van gathering. Selling, donating, or storing material belongings was a practice that was commonly discussed, and it seemed to be an important step that many of my participants had gone through before moving into their vehicles. This act seemed to have both practical and symbolic aspects: practical, because interviewees lived in a space which didn’t allow for a great number of material possessions, and symbolic, because a few of the nomads I spoke to felt that it liberated them from practices of—and narratives around—consumerism. Given that I’m still working on finishing my Master’s Degree, I haven’t had the chance to whittle down my belongings just yet; however, I’m planning on doing so after graduation. When I mentioned these plans to Large Marge, she was careful to caution me about how I undertook this process:

[I]t’s like cutting really long hair. Whether you want to or not, and you do, that process of shedding has emotional attachment to it whether, again, you want it or not. So if you don’t honour that—and I see a lot of people buy like a motorhome, an RV, a bus or something, and one month later, sell everything and move into it. I took several years of reducing stuff down, and I still…as, as much as I am a processor of emotions, and paying attention, and holding space for myself and what I’m going through, it was still a big event. So, I would caution anybody who was getting ready to do something like this, to honour that space a lot more than what you may think in the moment.  (Interview 10, p. 2)

I was grateful for the advice, as Large Marge’s warning echoed a story that had been told to me a week before, where a vanlifer had been a bit hasty in purging, and had later regretted getting rid of a few of the items he had parted with.

In my interview with Ashli Towel and her partner Duke Silver, I learned more about the practical concerns that went with moving into a vehicle:

Ashli Towel:  [T]hat’s one thing that we kept running into, that like, was the only thing holding us back […] from being like ‘let’s do this vanlife,’ is because we were like ‘what do we do with all of our stuff?’ […] We can’t, we can’t fit it

that’s when, like, a, a veil was lifted. […] That was the first step. Into, in having…total freedom.”
all in the van, so are we gonna pay for storage? That’s a monthly expense. Are we gonna pawn it off on a family member? That’s a lotta stuff.

Duke Silver: And then there’s also like, if you, y’know, if you’ve got stuff sitting in a box somewhere, like, why do you have that stuff? […] You don’t need it. (Interview 4, pp. 6-7)

As this excerpt suggests, when you have a lot of ‘stuff,’ taking up full-time mobility means that you either have to store it or get rid of it (something interviewees quickly pointed out when I asked them about the preparations they had made for vanlife). This makes sense, as all of the vehicles in the sample provided participants with less than 200 square feet of living space (and the majority provided less than 100 square feet). My own van is 66 square feet, into which I have to fit my toilet, bed, cooler, food storage bins, and anything else I want to have with me; therefore, like the nomads I interviewed, I have to prioritize which material items come into that living space. As Timmy Toothpicks says, “you only have, y’know, 50 square feet of living or whatever it comes out to, and—so, your mind has to be on ‘what is most important to me’ materialistic, to have it fit in that van” (Interview 9, p. 1). It’s worth noting that this comment echoes Sahlins’ statement that “[m]obility and property are in contradiction” (cited in Counts & Counts 2009, p. 105). However, my participants are not the only full-timers who talk about getting rid of their belongings.

As Counts and Counts (2009) have acknowledged, “[t]he ability to fit essential possessions and the artifacts of memory into a limited space is a requirement for full-time RVing” (p. 190). And, just as the importance of purging material belongings was an important topic of conversation in my interviews, so too “[t]he difficulties of deciding to sell the house and dispose of the things in it, and then doing it, are favorite topics of discussion by full-time RVers” (p. 189). In most cases, vanlifers in the sample sold or donated their belongings instead of storing them, much like one of the participants in White and White’s (2003) study of long-term
vehicle nomads in Australia, who remarked that they “sold up everything” before taking to the road (p. 204).

Given that most of the nomads I spoke to had purged themselves of a greater part of their material belongings before moving into their vehicles, the fact that my participants often described their previous homes or apartments as sites of ‘stuff’ accumulation does not seem surprising. The following quote, offered up in response to a question about the biggest obstacle faced in taking up vanlife, is illustrative:

Charlie: I think it was like, uh, minimalizing my shit. [laughs]
Uh…‘cause…when I went to Hawai’i, I just, like, wanted to collect stuff? Just because like, it was my first home […] and I just wanted to have um, all the…I dunno, domestic necessities like a craft drawer, and all that kind of stuff. And clothes, clothes was no object, we could just like, find more places to put clothes. (Interview 2, p. 3)

This may be why the process of shedding belongings was often described as more than just pragmatism by my participants. Much like vanlife itself, getting rid of material possessions was described as ‘liberating,’ a view that full-time RVers in the study by Counts and Counts (2009) shared. RVers “spoke at length about their sense of relief at being free of things,” and “consider[ed] their lack of possessions to be liberating” (Counts & Counts 2009, pp. 105, 106).

Also, much like the RVers in Counts and Counts’ (2009) study, who “celebrate minimalism [and regard] rejection of the consumer ethic to be a virtue and a form of freedom,” some of the nomads I interviewed understood their practice of purging as a rejection of consumerism and other social norms (as we can see in Jiselle’s story about parting with her record player and her sofa) (p. 104). A comment made by Large Marge, a skoolie, exemplifies this particular view:

Even though it’s—I take a very loose perc-view of material items as just being material items, you quickly…push up against…would I call them social norms? You push up against, um, everything you’ve been told. You know…everything you’ve bought into. All the commercialism, all the stories. You push up against, all of a sudden, every—you’ve got a stream of hundreds of thousands of
people swimming upstream to get as much as they can, […] and I’m floating downwards, ridding myself. (Interview 10, p. 2)

“It’s easy to start to hoard,” agreed Medusa, another vanlifer (Interview 6, p. 4). Heather, who gave most of her belongings away through a Curb Alert ad, elaborates on this point: “being in a house […] you get bored, and you buy all of this…crap you don’t need to keep yourself entertained. It just kinda, your money slips through your fingertips” (Heather, Interview 1, p. 5). This comment is reflected in Counts and Counts’ (2009) statement that “RVers do not have space to put a lot of things, so they do not spend money on them” (p. 199).

“That’s the beauty of the nomadic lifestyle,” said a participant named “John” in an article about Westh’s (2001) documentary on grey nomads (p. 78). “It strips away the unnecessary and reveals the essential,” he further explains, echoing Jiselle’s story about her record player (ibid).

“We spend our lives slavishly accumulating material possessions. We overburden ourselves with clutter but as a nomad, I have discovered I actually need very little” (ibid.). In my interview with Ludwig and Primrose, Ludwig expressed a similar view of vanlife as getting away from consumption:

Um, y’know, there was an old way of thinking that, y’know, to us, I guess it still exists, but, y’know, it seems like it’s been, y’know, made fun of and poked at for a couple generations now, so people should get it. Um, but y’know, just the consumerist, uh, y’know, busy bee type of thing. Um, that’s on it’s way out, you know? And, uh, [clears throat] people that, y’know, move into vans, there’s a [clears throat] huge realisation about the world, and what life can be, and uh, how unfulfilling most people’s, like, most conventional paths ultimately lead. (Interview 3, p. 7)

Based on comments like these, it appears that participants understood their pre-nomadic lifestyles as ones which allowed or encouraged them to perpetuate consumerism as a narrative and/or a practice. And as critical as interviewees often were of the accumulation of material belongings, this criticism wasn’t always unreflexive:

Walrus Drummer: I know people, and…let me put this out there, that […] I know people who are genuinely fulfilled by having a lotta stuff, and, and having a house, and going to a mall, and not having dirty feet. And that’s…I don’t care
what it takes, if you’re fulfilled, or if you think you’re fulfilled, or if you’re tryin’ to be fulfilled, then we’re all doin’ the same thing. I’m doin’ exactly what that person’s doing, so I can’t hate on them, and they can’t hate on me.

(Interview 7, p. 4)

Purging or storing material belongings was a step that many of my interviewees undertook before adopting a mobile way of life, and based on the way in which this process was discussed, it was one that seemed to have practical and/or symbolic dimensions. Much like the RVers studied by Counts and Counts (2009), my participants discussed the decision to “sell, pass on, or store non-essential articles” as an important part of making the transition to a life on the road (p. 85). And, as Counts and Counts (2009) have already noted, minimalism is a necessary practice for those who engage in full-time vehicle nomadism, as:

people who derive meaning from collecting things—especially bulky things such as antiques that cannot fit in a [vehicle]—are not good candidates for serious or full time RVing. (p. 104)

However, once my participants had dealt with these issues related to their material possessions, they were ready to start living on the road full-time.

…weren’t they?

“What the fuck did I just do?”: How Participants felt when they first Hit the Road

Me: How did it feel when this rig was ready to go and you hit the road for the first time?
Ashli Towel: I was a nervous wreck. I, like, the day we hit the road, I was like pacing around in his parents’ basement, and I was like “we haven’t taken it on that long of a drive yet, like, what if it’s too heavy, we never weighed it, […] what if, y’know, we can’t even make it onto the highway?” And I was, I was like a nervous wreck.
Duke Silver: Yeah, and we kept pushing it back, too.
Ashli Towel: Yeah.
Duke Silver: It would be like “all right, we’re gonna leave Tuesday.” And then “we’re gonna leave Wednesday.” Like, “oh, we’ll stay ‘til Friday.” And then, y’know, we were,
//Ashli Towel: “Oh, we don’t wanna leave on a week-end.”//
Duke Silver: Yeah.
Me: [laughing] Mmm, yep!
Ashli Towel: [laughs]
Duke Silver: And there, there were all these little like, finishing touches that we wanted to like, […] that eventually, we were just like “y’know, stop. We, we have to go. We’ll, we’ll do more on the road.” [laughs]
Ashli Towel: Yeah, we were like “if we keep doing this, […] we’re gonna be fixing this for fifty years, and we’re not gonna go anywhere.” [laughs]

-Ashli Towel and Duke Silver (Interview 4, p. 14)

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Large Marge’s school bus was a home that I couldn’t help but admire. With a comfortable sitting area, a cozy back bedroom, and lovely cupboards paneled with deep-grained beetle-kill wood, the care she had taken in constructing her tiny home was evident in every square inch. Having borrowed a pen inscribed with the address of the local strip club, I held it at the ready as I asked her how she’d felt when she hit the road for the first time.

“Scared shitless,” Large Marge replied flatly.

I laughed at the blunt response, nodding as I wrote the words down. “So why were you scared shitless?” When she didn’t respond right away, I looked up from my notes, smiling when I saw that she was taking a photo of her basset hound, who was seated on the bed behind her.

“Sorry, I always have to get his regal moments. […] Um...you start doing all the ‘what ifs,’” she explained. “‘What if I get on the road and the engine blows?’ ‘What if I get on the road […] and something happens to me?’ ‘Holy shit, everything I own is in one vehicle. What if somebody breaks in?’ ‘What if I never find a place to park?’”

I nodded, the latter thoughts being ones I was already well-acquainted with.

“It’s just filled with alllll the doubts,” Large Marge added. “‘What the fuck did I just do? Did I really just get rid of everything? Holy shit.’ It’s just a, you—it’s like, all of a sudden you just have to take a deep breath and go ‘okay, I can’t do this to myself, I gotta go to a happy place.’ […] But you can very easily tunnel down into a series of ‘what ifs.’”

“Mm-hmm. Yeah, I’ve had those moments, too,” I agreed, “in a parking lot, of ‘what happens if I don’t lock my doors?? All of my stuff is in there!’”
“Yep,” she acknowledged. “You get about…this happens, I always, I, I seem to feel—even when I was doing it on my motorcycle—within the first 50 miles of leaving home. And then after you’re outside of the 50 mile radius, it all starts to calm down a little bit. ‘Cause then you’re like “well, I’m, I’m doin’ it, sooo” she laughed, “suck it up, buttercup, it is what it is.”

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Given participants’ critiques of their former lifestyles as subjecting them to various social pressures (e.g., pressures towards consumerism, pressures towards following a particular path in life), one might think that the day they turned the key in the ignition and took up a full-time life on the road was a day filled with positive emotions. Not so. Moving into a vehicle is a significant lifestyle change, and for the nomads I interviewed, fear and anxiety were the most commonly cited emotions used to describe this moment of transition.

In two of the interviews, this fear was related to whether or not the vehicle was ready for departure. However, this fear was more commonly associated with leaving the predictability, stability, or material comforts of their former lifestyle behind. Indeed, Large Marge’s reaction of “what the fuck did I just do?” echoed through multiple transcripts:

Jiselle: […] I think I carried a lot of fear for a long time, I think I was extremely agitated for the most part, just like, getting in my own head, and then dealing with, y’know…the voices of other people. Like, y’know, like “what are you doing?” Like our friends, like, “this is a terrible idea,” […] ”maybe this is a terrible decision, what am I doing? What about my career? What about…y’know, like, the house,”
//Roy: Yeah, retirement.//
Jiselle: ’the kids, the retirement?” Y’know, so all of that was going through my head, and I lived with it for quite a few months. […] so yeah, there was a lot of fear. A lot of fear. (Interview 8, p. 8)

In an earlier interview, Ludwig had similarly described the morning he and his partner Primrose left in their van, saying that he “had this anxious fear, ‘what the hell am I doing?’ […] I have a place to go, y’know? I have a bathroom, and a bedroom, and a refrigerator full of groceries, and now who knows where the hell we’re going. Like, what am I, crazy?” (Interview 3, p. 8).
Timmy Toothpicks’ story was similar: “When one morning, I woke up, the day after I didn’t renew my lease […] I woke up in the morning, and got in this and said ‘oh lord, what did I do?’” (Interview 9, p. 5). In one of my favourite departure stories, Sinn Sage described how her partner, Drake Man O’War, was running around picking up items, making finishing touches on the van before they left (much like Ashli Towel and Duke Silver in the excerpt included above). “[H]e was like, stressing out!” she exclaimed (Interview 5, p. 26). “He was like ‘we gotta do this! I gotta do that!’ Like, ‘and we gotta get this thing!’ And I was like, ‘you realise we’re not like, going to Mars?’” (ibid.).

Although in six of the transcripts interviewees did describe feeling fear and anxiety when they left for the first time, these stories were often followed up with an assertion that these emotions did not last very long. Immediately after talking about the anxiety caused by leaving his bedroom, bathroom, and his “refrigerator full of groceries” behind, Ludwig stated that “that quickly wore off [laughs] y’know, as the, as the adventures begun” (Interview 3, p. 8). Timmy Toothpicks also pointed out that fear was experienced

more at the very beginning, when you don’t know […] where you’re gonna sleep, and you don’t know where you’re gonna […] fill up with water, that’s where it kind of, the reality hits you, and you’re like ‘ohhh boy, what did I get myself into?’ But that feeling, it goes away in a minute. (Interview 9, p. 5)

For Large Marge, these anxious emotions were quelled by distance, and tended to calm down “after you’re outside of the 50 mile radius” (Interview 10, p. 3).

Along these lines, the nomads I interviewed often told me that their way of life was a state of mind, or that living in a vehicle was something that required a particular mindset. “[I]t’s not for everybody, and that’s the beauty of it,” said Walrus Drummer (Interview 7, p. 3). Indeed, when I asked if living in a van was something that anybody could do, the most common response from interviewees was straight-up laughter. “[P]eople like their luxuries,” explained Heather, a
solo vanlifer (Interview 1, p. 5). “[I]t’s too much to think about, like…you, you need to know exactly how much water you’re gonna need when you go out for two weeks in the desert” (ibid.).

Jiselle and Roy expressed a similar view:

Jiselle: Um, you just, I dunno. It's, it's tough. You have to be resilient, and you have to be open.
Roy: Yeah.
Jiselle: And it takes courage.
Roy: It’s not the most comfortable […] lifestyle.
Jiselle: Yeah! You have to be open to discomfort. Y’know, not showering all the time. Y’know…your van being dirty, [laughs] y’know, sleeping in Wal-Mart parking lots, at times, y’know. (Interview 8, p. 4)

This idea of being able to live with discomfort was commonly discussed by the nomads I spoke to, appearing in half of the interview transcripts. Referring to two of her friends who were quite home-centered, Sinn Sage explained that:

I just see them in a van, and they would just be like, having anxiety attacks […] like ‘we’re sleeping in a Wal-Mart parking lot? I am not okay with this!! […] And you’re not, there’s definitely […] times where you don’t get to take a shower for like, three, four, five days. […] but you’re sacrificing a consistent shower for being in the middle of Utah, hiking through national parks every single day. (Interview 5, p. 15)

As these participants have mentioned, their mobility involves certain practices that go along with living in a vehicle, such as having to sleep at Wal-Marts sometimes, going for days at a time without a shower, and having to deal with discomfort. Indeed, in my field notes, I made comments about the “baby wipe shower” (July 13, 2017), and upon noticing that my portable toilet was getting full after six days in the mountains, I made a note that “[h]umans really do produce a lot of biological waste” (July 15, 2017). Perhaps one of the most inconvenient experiences I had during my fieldwork—one which is humorous in retrospect—was having to do a “clandestine toilet dump” in the middle of the night. The waste reservoir on my portable toilet

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25 Wal-Mart is a business that tends to be friendly towards RVers and other nomads, and as a result, Wal-Mart parking lots are some of the only places that vanlifers can park to sleep for the night where they’re unlikely to be knocked on (or moved on) by the police.
has a six gallon capacity, and I learned the hard way that it’s much easier for me to sneak into a rest stop bathroom to dump my toilet if I’m not lugging the full six gallons.

The nomads I interviewed stressed that their lifestyle, while rewarding, was a mobility with its own unique challenges, and that it wasn’t as idyllic as social media might suggest. “Like, I’m not posting the pictures of when I wake up in the Wal-Mart parking lot, […] and saying like, ‘van views,’ […] or ‘morning views,’ y’know?” admitted Sinn Sage (Interview 5, pp. 12-13). “[I]t does just seem like this romantic, or like, cool thing to do,” Medusa cautions, “[w]here you’re just like ‘I’m gonna live in a van!’ And for some people that might work,” she continues, “but there are certain things that come up with living in a van, and […] you have to know if you’re willing to deal with those things […] [o]r if it’s just gonna make it miserable, and you’re not gonna wanna do it any more” (Interview 6, pp. 28-29). In the book Vanlife, Sarah Leamy (2016) has a similar moment where she alerts the reader to this flip side of vandwelling:

I picked up pen and paper and played with ideas as to how we could live like this full-time. Would we want to though? Some days were so hard on me, on all of us really. (p. 96)

“There’s a lotta rundown, a lotta shakeout, a lotta stuff that’s really fuckin’ hard, that’ll call into question whether or not you can do this,” said Large Marge, in a comment I would later come to appreciate when I started living in my van on the campus of my university (Interview 10, p. 8). “Like, can you sleep with a hundred cars going by, and […] drunks yelling outside” (ibid.). In my case, I’ve had campus security called on me, I’ve been startled out of a dead sleep by students dragging their fingers along the side of my van at 3:45 in the morning, and I’ve had people slap, sit on, or hit my vehicle with their car doors when I’m getting ready for bed.

A lot of shakeout, indeed.
Community

Personal mobility and the development of modern forms of communication such as mobile phones, faxes and the Internet mean that people can develop social networks beyond their immediate locality and are more easily able than in the past to maintain these relationships (which are not necessarily face-to-face) over greater distances.

-Davies and Herbert (cited in Valentine 2001, p. 118)

I dunno, it’s just cool, like, being able to find that on the road, just like a nomadic community, and you’ll meet up occasionally and stay in contact, and… [...] kinda makes, it kinda makes being nomadic a lot easier. […] Particularly just like internet and social media being able to feel like you’re part of a community, even though you’re not physically around anyone.

-Duke Silver (Interview 4, p.57)

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The first van gathering I’d attended was drawing to a close, and as groups of vanlifers milled around outside, I wrote a few summary notes on my clipboard. I’d just reached the end of my interview with Charlie and Koa, and was about to turn off the recorder when Charlie said something that made me pause.

“I guess like, something to add at the end, uh, we could’ve said it a couple times in the interview but I just forgot that like, Volkswagens, specifically, […] have a whole other sense of community within the vanlife community.”

Having noticed that many of the Volkswagens at the gathering were parked in their own circle, I quirked a brow, curious as to where she was going with this.

“Yeah, it’s cool,” Koa agreed.

“Yeah it’s just…it’s so tight-knit, but you’ve never met these people,” Charlie explained, “But the fact that you have a Volkswagen, and like, [...] they like Volkswagens or they have a Volkswagen [...] …you just go above and beyond to help that person out, or to meet that person, or to like—like, you already know that you have so much in common with them, I guess? That you just like, feel drawn to them,” she concluded. “And I, and then, when you’re driving down
the road, like, you wave at other Volkswagens. And I don’t think that other cars are like that. Like, motorcycles are, kinda?”

“Mm-hmm, yeah,” I agreed, having noticed this behaviour when I’d ridden on motorcycles before.

“Like, motorcycles wave to other motorcycles, but like, I don’t think like—uh, what are those called, Sprinters?—wave to other Sprinters—maybe!”

“Yeah,” I nodded, smiling as I took down a few more notes.

Laughing, Koa pitched in: “Her mum said to us: ‘I didn’t know Volkswagen has a cult!’”

The three of us burst out laughing.

“Yeah!!” Charlie agreed, “[...] ‘cause that’s what happened when we [...] broke down, like [...] we just chased after the one Volkswagen in Richfield, Utah, and, and then he got it fixed for us,” she laughed. “[...] Like, if he couldn’t fix it, he was gonna do everything possible [...] to fix it for us.”

Taking more notes, I clarified the name of the town before Koa continued the story.

“Yeah, we got towed there, to a Wal-Mart,” Koa explained. “And then [...] I thought I knew what part we needed, but um, we were like, four hours away from any [...] Volkswagen parts store. So we were walking to the rent-a-car-center, to rent a car so I could drive, and go get it, and come back. And then, right when we were walking across the street from the Wal-Mart, I see a Dune Buggy roll up, and I saw him go to an ATM, eh, um, across the street and I ran over and told him what’s wrong, and he had the part in the back of his car,” Koa laughed.

“Oh my goodness, wow!!” I exclaimed, surprised at their good fortune.
“And then, uh...we thought, I thought that was the part that was fixed,” Koa admitted, “and it wasn’t.”

“So he said “bye,” like, [...] he like, put the part in for us,” Charlie continued.

“But he, he gave us his address for something,” Koa interjected.

“Because I wanted to send him a postcard,” she replied with a nod.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Koa agreed. “So we just looked up his address, and we went to his house after, like [...] ‘it’s still broken!’”

“But we didn’t even wanna like, say like, ‘help us,’” Charlie confessed, “again, we just wanted to be like ‘oh, we’re just letting you know that we did end up renting a car and we’re going to Salt Lake.’ And he was like ‘no, no, no, you’re not going to Salt Lake.’ Like, ‘somewhere, we’ll be able to fix this, in town.’ [...] And B____, the older gentleman we met the first time, he’s, he was like ‘make sure that they don’t charge you for anything, [...] ‘cause like, that’s not what we do, like, if you’re stuck somewhere, you never charge someone for something.’”

“Mm-hmm,” I prompted, curious as to how the story ended.

“And uh—of course, he didn’t make us,” Charlie confessed, “we just bought the part off of him, of course,”

“And they installed it for us,” Koa finished her sentence.

“Yeah, they installed it for us on a Sunday, [...] I think that’s just so crazy!!” She laughed. “Especially in Utah, y’know, like, Sunday is like a very [...] holy day. [...] Um...so,” she paused, exhaling softly, “it’s not, my favourite experience,” she laughed, “but the fact that we broke down and that happened to us is a very fond memory to look back on.”

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On the first night after the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, I was sitting around the campfire with a handful of vehicle nomads (the ones who’d been impressed by my dirt bike antics the night before), explaining the conceptual framework for my research. When I got into the concept of sedentarist metaphysics, one of my companions turned to me and asked “why people wouldn’t want a life where you can always live next door to your friends, because in an apartment or suburb, hardly anybody knows or talks to their neighbours any more” (Field notes, Monday January 23, 2017). He emphasized that when you live in a house or an apartment, you hardly ever get to live next door to your friends, but in vanlife, you could live next to your friends all the time, if you wanted to. It was certainly an interesting view.

In the discipline of Geography, when we use the term “community,” it’s often in reference to communities that are spatially fixed; however, the concept of community is defined in a way that encompasses other types of communities, as well. According to the International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, community is:

> a form of social organization based upon some commonality between individuals, which results in them being defined as members of such a community and simultaneously demarcates others who are not members of the community. (Flint 2009, pp. 354-355)

As you can see, this is a definition that includes vanlifers, especially given that Flint (2009) acknowledges that “[c]ommunities need not be primarily spatially based” (p. 355). But how does community work, when the members of that community are scattered to the four winds? What does community look like for vehicle nomads who are on the road full-time, and how is that community maintained?

This was something that I was particularly curious about when I set out to do my fieldwork. Given that vanlifers and skoolies are such a dispersed population, one of the questions I asked participants at the gatherings was: “[h]ow does the concept of ‘community’
work, when you’re on the road like this?” (see Appendix). Their comments (some of which were provided before I’d even asked this question) indicated that for my participants, community was quite important. A few of the interviewees explained how the internet and social media played a unique role in fostering and maintaining the bonds of vanlife community. Moreover, for these vehicle nomads, the community was a source of mutual help and moral support, and the bonds that it fostered grew quickly and held strong, even in the face of great distances.

Because I knew absolutely nothing about the vanlife community when I went into the field, I took a lot of notes related to this aspect of vehicle nomadism as part of my participant observation. Indeed, I was so fascinated by the practices I was observing that I started recording them before I even got to the field, as the story about the campfire at the opening of this section suggests. It was actually at the next night’s campfire, with this same group of nomads, that I was invited to convoy out to Slab City in California with them (Figure 16). There were five vehicles in the convoy, and we drove from a gas station near Quartzsite to a Wal-Mart in Brawley, where we crossed paths with someone who had been camped out with the nomads in the convoy a couple of nights before (Field Notes, January 24, 2017). When we all arrived in Slab City, we engaged in a practice I would participate in later on at the van gatherings: forming a circle of vehicles (Figure 17, Figure 18).
Figure 16: Bringing up the Rear. View from the tail end of a five vehicle convoy to Slab City (Murray 2017).

Figure 17: Slab City Circle. Our circle of vehicles in the Slabs, with my rented Kia Optima at the bottom left of the shot (Murray 2017).
Figure 18: Slab City Circle 2. This aerial shot of our vehicle circle in Slab City is a still shot from a drone video taken by AdventureVanMan, a YouTuber I would cross paths with again during my fieldwork in Washington State (AdventureVanMan 2017, 12:56).

In their research on RVers, Counts and Counts (2009) make reference to this practice, observing that when vehicle nomads boondock (i.e., camp without hookups):

> they are unconstrained by the requirements of water, sewage, and electrical lines necessary for hookups. This permits them to structure a social space reminiscent of pioneer life. They circle their wagons, front doors and awnings facing a central plaza. The modern wagon circle is designed not to keep ‘hostiles’ out, but to draw friends together. There they gather around their campfire to sing, share a common meal, or play games. (p. 95)

Although the layout of the camping site in Pike National Forest meant that some of us had to park in a line instead of a circle, a communal space was still formed between my van and Boomhauer’s van, with Lola acting as an anchor for one of the tarps (Figure 19). In my field notes, I observed that on the day before the van gathering officially started, people were gathering “under two different canopies, sitting in a circle and chatting. People ask each other their stories and how long they’ve been on the road” (Field Notes, Thursday July 13, 2017). Later on at the gathering, I noted that when it started raining, rather than retreat into their vans,
“a group of vanlifers [had] congregated under the tarp set up by [Boomhauer]” (Field Notes, Sunday July 16, 2017).

**Figure 19: Gimme Shelter.** Lola playing her part by helping to secure a tarp over a soon-to-be communal space. The space under the tarp was eventually filled with chairs, and then with vehicle nomads (Murray 2017).

At the next gathering in Washington State, my van was incorporated into a circle of vehicles which, when everyone’s awnings were deployed, formed an impromptu ‘street’ (Figure 20). And, as I already noted in my Methodology Chapter, I had to pause midway through my last interview at this gathering so that I could join my interviewees in a convoy out to the next site, where we formed another vehicle circle (Figure 13). Interestingly, one of the vanlifers I camped with in the circle at Slab City would eventually join our circle there, as well. As I noted during my convoy to Slab City: “[i]t seems as though nomadism, even at its most solitary moments, is filled with points of convergence” (Field Notes, Tuesday January 24, 2017).
According to Flint (2009), “[a] neighborhood may be enclosed by physical boundaries […] It may also comprise residential properties of a similar built form or housing tenure” (p. 354). (Murray 2017).

An important aspect of community that participants emphasized in the interview transcripts—mutual aid—was another practice that I witnessed and documented while I was in the field. When I arrived at the van gathering site in Pike National Forest, I didn’t have the electrical wiring for my roof fan hooked up yet, as I hadn’t had the time (or the appropriate skills) to do so before I got there. Around noon on the Thursday (the day before the gathering officially started), one of the vanlifers asked me if he could check out my solar setup. When I pulled the back doors open, he looked at the mess of cable under the driver’s side bed, then looked at my roof vent, and asked whether I had hooked it up yet. I replied that I hadn’t. I was utterly staggered when he “spent an hour and a half helping me with cable management, shortened all the unruly cables under my one bed, and hooked up my fan for me” (Field Notes, Thursday July 13, 2017). And he expected absolutely nothing in return (of course, I insisted that he take a couple of the hand-made dishcloths that I’d crocheted before coming to the gathering, as it had meant a lot to me that he’d spent so much time helping me out).
Two days later, when the gathering was in full swing, I had another firsthand encounter with these practices of mutual aid. I had made an offhanded mention that I was “hop[ing] to pick up a Mr. Buddy propane heater for my van at some point,” and Heather, who I’d interviewed earlier that day, spoke up and “said she’d sell me hers since she just upgraded […] She sold me the heater for $40 (it’s worth over $100 brand new)” (Field Notes, Saturday July 15, 2017). And what’s more, she sold it to me for $40 that was a cobbled-together mix of all the American and Canadian cash that I had on hand, since I hadn’t stopped at a bank to withdraw money before coming to the site. I was really grateful for that, as I hadn’t realised that the van gathering was being held at over 8,000 feet of elevation, and it was extremely cold at night.

The next day, I was witness to (and a participant in) another act of mutual aid, rather than being the recipient this time. One of the solo vanlifers had just discovered that the rubber seals on her van doors weren’t exactly water-tight, so the rain had come through around the doors and soaked sections of the interior of her van. I went over with a handful of towels, and with the help of one of the other vanlifers (and my can full of bungee cords), we secured a tarp over the rear section of her vehicle and bungeed it to the frame so the water would stop getting in while she was parked. Worse still, we found out later on that her van wouldn’t start, so “a few of the guys [came] over to take a look and try to help out” (Field Notes, Sunday July 16, 2017). It turned out that her carburetor wasn’t functioning properly, so her engine was literally being ‘choked out’ whenever she tried to start it. As it was the last day of the gathering, people were leaving, but a few of the vanlifers (myself included) reassured her that we wouldn’t leave the site until we knew that she was able to get down off the mountain safely. Then, I watched in wonder as one of the other vanlifers came over and removed the doghouse (the console section inside the vehicle’s cab that covers the engine), and jury-rigged a bypass out of thin air. As I had to go into
town that day anyway, I offered to leave the site with her to make sure that she would be okay to make it to the mechanic’s on her own power. She did.

This practice—and spirit—of mutual aid was commented on by a few of the nomads I interviewed. Large Marge, for example, pointed out that “just like in my motorcycle community, I could be somewhere, and break down, and if I put it out on social media that I need help, or that I’m here, it’s amazing the resources that come through” (Interview 10, p. 22). Jiselle made a similar comment, saying:

> everyone [in the vanlife community] is so open, everyone is so giving, everyone is always “are you okay? What can I do?” Y’know, “hey, I saw on social media, you had a break down, do you need anything? Do you need some help?”

(Interview 8, p. 10)

Although this may come across as nothing more than fluffy sentiment, you may recall from the previous chapter that I have had firsthand experience of the phenomenon that my participants are describing. When Lola broke down last February, twenty-three minutes after I posted it to Facebook, Boomhauer reached out to ask me if I needed help. Furthermore, I’m not the only researcher who has noticed these practices of mutual aid in communities of vehicle nomads.

“The researchers observed many examples of mutual help at the camping grounds,” stated Onyx and Leonard (2007), in their article on Australian grey nomads (p. 392). Likewise, in a study of North American RVers, Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) said that many RVers “were strongly protective of the other members of the tribe, looking out for each other on the road and assisting those in need” (p. 53). Almost 30 years earlier, Jobes (1984) had noticed exactly the same thing, pointing out that American RV nomads were prone to “aiding and receiving aid from others” (p. 191). In one of my interviews, Heather speculated as to why vanlifers are like this:

> Everybody’s just [...] so generous. I’ve never, ever met such an outpouring of selfless, generous people in my life. It’s like, the less you have, the more you have to give. Um…and there’s…there’s a deeper connection in between people.
It’s…it’s tribal, like, you invest in relationships, you, you give—not with the expectation that you’re gonna be receiving in return, but there’s…there’s this unknowing, like “I’ve got your back, you’ve got my back,” it’s just a comfort…um, it’s just this unspoken…it, it feels more natural, like the way people evolved. (Interview 1, p. 6)

In an earlier interview, Primrose advanced a similar view, saying that in vanlife

[y]ou learn how to make communities […] quickly, and [be] okay with them ending shortly. I think. ‘Cause we […] went to a farm, and we were only there for two weeks, but we put down…so much, so much there. Just so much love, to a lot of different people. (Interview 3, p. 70)

Her partner Ludwig concurred, saying that “communities form a lot faster” on the road, referring to the people he met on the road as his “new family members” (Interview 3, pp. 10, 70). “[I]t’s a beautiful thing,” Jiselle noted in our interview, “[t]he sense of community is just so natural.

Y’know, the way that…the way that it should be. […] All the way around, that’s the way society should be. […] it takes these subcultures to like […] bring it out” (Interview 8, pp. 10-11).

Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson’s (2013) use of the word “tribe” in the quote included above is interesting, as it was a concept that showed up in three of my interview transcripts (p. 53). The following comments from Walrus Drummer are illustrative:

Oh, man. Um…community is, it is huge, y’know, man. Because, y’know, it’s like, uh, we can all, we all, um, support and lift up each other. And it was, it was awesome meeting other people who, um, uh…y’know, who are on, uh, the same, like-minded, and stuff like that. Y’know, kinda like finding, uh, your, your tribe, and stuff, […] and, and we all really understand each other. And instead of like, instead of hangin’ out and explaining, uh, the lifestyle and bein’ different, we can just hang out and go with the flow, and just do our, our deal, and just, just be. (Interview 7, p. 21)

The saying ‘find your tribe,’ which Walrus Drummer makes reference to here, was one that I encountered more than once when I was in the field. Perhaps one of the most moving uses of the term ‘tribe’ was when Jiselle explained to me how conflicted she had felt when she and Roy had started out on the road. When I asked her and Roy what their favourite memory was from the
first few months, Jiselle told me about the moment when she felt that her doubts had finally been put to rest:

Jiselle: My favourite memory…would probably be going to Bend.
Me: Okay?
Jiselle: And realising that…I have a tribe.
Roy: Yeah.
Me: Oh, Descend on Bend?
Jiselle: Descend on Bend.
Roy: Mmm.
Me: Awesome.
Jiselle: That I have a tribe, that we are not alone. That’s when…it just sealed the deal for me, that this is right for me. […] I think that’s my favourite memory, really. It was just amazing. […] It’s like “wow, so I’m not alone! So I’m not crazy!” (Interview 8, pp. 11-12)

Jiselle makes a very important point about the perceived benefits of belonging to the vanlife community: it provides them with support, and helps to reassure vanlifers and skoolies that they’re not ‘crazy.’ Large Marge described it in almost identical terms in her interview, stressing the importance of social media in her comments:

social media is, um…if used properly, an incredible tool for community […] and community creates, a validation, which we all need at some time. Um, and a support structure, and, um…that we all need. ‘Cause, you can push against the stream and go floating down it as much as you’d like, and you can say that you’re doing the right thing in your own head, but every now and then, it’s good to hear that “oh yeah, there are other people that don’t think that this is as crazy, either.” (Interview 10, p. 22)

Medusa acknowledged the role of social media in vanlife community, as well, saying that it “gives you a way to like, connect with people […] that you wouldn’t, and I think that’s really…important. […] what I think is the best, is like, when that online space can create a in-person space? […] Which is like this [van gathering]” (Interview 6, pp. 7-8). Walrus Drummer concurred. “I mean, these people are here [at the van gathering] because of Instagram,” he stated, pausing for dramatic effect (Interview 7, p. 2). “I mean, how fuckin’ wild is that, right? […] I mean think about that. Instagram. Nobody…not chain mails…people are here because they fuckin’ all linked up on Instagram, and now we’re, and now we’re talkin’” (ibid.).
Through the van gatherings, the vanlife community does engage in brief periods of what Valentine (2001) has termed “non-residential spatial expression,” as my photograph of the ‘street’ in Figure 20 shows (p. 118). However, as Jobes (1984) noted in his study of RVers, full-time vehicle nomads “have largely excluded permanent geographically based interaction” from their lives (p. 186). And yet, my participants, much like the RVers studied by Davies et al (cited in Holloway, Green & Holloway 2011), still seem to feel “a strong sense of community” with one another (p. 243). Moreover, my interviewees felt that their community was a source of mutual aid and moral support; however, they acknowledged that vanlifers “don’t need to be, um, together all the time. Because we all understand where we’re all coming from, we all know we’re moving all the time” (Primrose, Interview 3, p. 70). Yet, with the aid of social media, they can still “feel like [they’re] part of a community, even though [they’re] not physically around anyone” (Duke Silver, Interview 4, p. 57).

In the geographical literature, this type of community has been referred to as community without propinquity: namely, community that doesn’t require continuous physical proximity to offer its members a sense of support, identity, and belonging (Nash 2016; Valentine 2001). Based on what vanlifers told me during their interviews, ICTs and social media platforms offer vanlifers and skoolies a way to stay in touch with one another—and engage in practices of mutual aid—long after the van gatherings have ended. And even though my participants tend to be dispersed most of the time, their interview data suggest that they still feel connected to the vanlife community.26

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26 Something I wish to mention here, given that I’ve cited Cresswell’s (2006) critique of the abstract nomad as a being “unmarked by the traces of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography,” is that while vanlife does appear to be a socially differentiated practice, participants didn’t actively discuss aspects of social differentiation (e.g. ethnicity, class) in their interviews (p. 53). As this section on community might suggest, there was far more focus on shared identity and practices, and on the sense of belonging to a “tribe.” And although one of the 16 participants in my study was black and another was queer, it should still be noted that the majority of my participants were white, and were travelling with an opposite-sex partner (which shouldn’t be taken to imply that
Community appeared to be very important to many of my participants. They claimed that their “tribe” provided them with mutual aid and moral support in times of need, reassuring them that what they’re doing isn’t “crazy.” Which is funny, because when I was interviewed about my research by a reporter from the Toronto Star, I actually said something similar in my own interview. I mentioned that I’d done my fieldwork at van gatherings, and after I explained what they were, the reporter asked why they were held. Sheepishly, I replied that when all of your friends and family and everyone you work with are living in a different way than you do, it can be hard not to wonder if you’re crazy sometimes. But when you’re parked in a sea of over 200 converted vehicles, it tends to reassure you that “no, I’m not crazy, because there’s lots of other people who are doing it this way, too.”

Employment as a Mobile Practice

[W]orking in one place, like, really burns me out. And it’s just like, you begin to resent any relationship that you don’t love, after a long period of time of just dealing with that every day, it…it sucks. So I would much rather have multiple different jobs. And be able to see different people, and not be totally immersed in the culture of my job. When I was at Dave and Buster’s in California, it was amazing, because I didn’t know anybody, and I didn’t care about knowing anybody or what they thought of me. And I had the best numbers, ‘cause everything’s on like, a weird number system. […] And they were all like ‘who is this new girl that’s just like, showing the managers that like, you can hit these numbers?’ And I just like, stayed out of it. I won my $50 gift cards every week, and […] it was awesome, not being emotionally invested […] into like, a toxic environment.

-Primrose (Interview 3, pp. 41-42)

One of the first questions that people ask me when I talk about my research is “so what do the vanlifers do to make money?” The simple answer is: “it varies.” A few of the participants in my study had already saved up money before they took to the road; however, regardless of whether they did this or not, 15 of my 16 participants engaged in employment of
one kind or another as part of their mobility. Some participants settled temporarily to access work, saved up money, and then went out on the road again, while others worked continuously from their vans. Two participants, Spener and Timmy Toothpicks, even had jobs where they would leave the van behind because their employer was flying them to another location for work. Among the group of nomads that I interviewed, employment was incorporated into their mobile lifestyle in a number of different ways; however, the two most common approaches that participants discussed were settling temporarily to work, or working remotely from the vehicle.

*Saving up before Departure*

Whether by selling all of their belongings or by working a lot of hours, some of the nomads I spoke to saved up money before they went out on the road. Ludwig and Primrose are one example:

Ludwig: We did the taverns.
Primrose: Yeah, [laughs, unclear] And then…Ludwig…was gifted…a good chunk of cash for graduating college. So that definitely helped.
Ludwig: Yeah, and I was roofin’ that summer, too.
Primrose: And then yep, and then he started roofing. So I think we had about ten thousand dollars when we left.
Ludwig: Yeah.
Primrose: In our bank account. Or-
//Ludwig: No, we actually, we had a lot, I think we had like fifteen or sixteen the first time.//
Primrose: I think we told ourselves we had ten, and then we actually did have more, I think you’re right. (Interview 3, p. 11)

During their interview, Charlie and Koa told me that they’d saved money for a year and a half before buying their van and hitting the road full-time:

Koa: I, I worked at a pet store during the day, and then…you know what CPK is?
Both: California Pizza Kitchen?
Me: Oh, okay.
Charlie: we both worked there.
Koa: I worked there at night, yeah. And, and what, six days a week? Five, six days a week?

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27 It’s possible that all 16 of my participants pursue employment; however, because Medusa did not mention engaging in employment during my interview with her and Spener, I’m unable to say this for certain.
Charlie: Yeah, six days a week. He worked doubles at the two jobs, two days a week, and so I, er three days a week
Koa: Three.
Charlie: So I tried to do at least doubles, three days a week, worked all the holidays. (Interview 2, p. 4)

Part of the reason for doing this, as Charlie explained, was that she and Koa “were trying to save up as much as possible so that we didn’t have to work right away,” (Interview 2, p. 5).

In some cases, participants took to the road with the money that they had made from selling their belongings. “We probably made about ten grand from that,” Ashli Towel confessed (Interview 4, p. 10). Jiselle and Roy told a similar story:

Jiselle: [...] So we basically sold everything we owned,
Roy: Yep, had a yard sale.//
Jiselle: all our personal possessions. We put it on Craigslist, we had, y’know, uh, multiple yard sales.
Me: Mhm?
Jiselle: And sold everything. Used that money to—we had some savings, which we used to purchase our van. [...] And um, and then, the rest of the money that we made from selling everything is what we used to get us on the road. (Interview 8, p. 5)

However, even in cases where participants had used money from selling their possessions to purchase their vehicle or to fund their travel, these participants still engaged in employment as part of their mobility. On the whole, the vanlifers I spoke to were working many different types of jobs; however, the two most common approaches to employment were to come off the road temporarily to work, or to stay on the road and work remotely.

Settling Temporarily for Work

As part of engaging in their mobile way of life, some interviewees settled temporarily to access employment before returning to the road again. This involved multiple different types of work, from seasonal positions at an Amazon warehouse, to working in a city as a hairdresser. As Primrose explains, “so far what we have done, is we’ve worked, and then saved up money, and then played. And then come back and work, and then…” (Interview 3, p. 39). Heather
mentioned a similar strategy, indicating that when she and her partner first took to the road, their mobility was organized around seasonal employment opportunities (Interview 1). “Most of it was working on the road through Amazon, and the camp hosting,” she explained (Interview 1, p. 5). Charlie and Koa also mentioned settling in Steamboat Springs for a few weeks to work for a temp agency (Interview 2).

It should also be noted that three of the nomads I interviewed mentioned “WWOOFing” (working for World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) as a financial strategy. Although WWOOFing is technically a volunteer position rather than paid employment, meals and accommodations (rather than wages) are provided to WWOOFers in exchange for half a day’s work, which would considerably reduce food costs for vanlifers while they’re volunteering (WWOOF-USA 2019). Given that food and fuel were reported as being two of the main expenses that interviewees had to deal with, this may be why WWOOFing was mentioned as a financial strategy by a few of the vanlifers I interviewed.

Working Remotely

Almost half of my participants worked remotely, and this work took many different forms. Walrus Drummer, for example, made money by doing paid gigs (live and recorded); however, he also had his own company:

> I work every single day, just about. And then, when I have days like this where I don’t work, that’s, that’s planned. Y’know, dude, that’s in my schedule. But I work every single day, just about. I run a business, just like a fuckin’ business owner does. [laughs] (Interview 7, p. 16)

Duke Silver and Ashli Towel also worked from the road, drawing an income from running their blog, which provides them with affiliate income from companies like Amazon. “[I]f somebody like, clicks through one of my articles to Amazon then buys something, we get like a percentage,” Duke Silver explained (Interview 4, p. 12). Jiselle and Roy also worked remotely:
Jiselle: […] We...decided to quit our jobs
Roy: Mm.
Jiselle: But when Roy [laughs] went in to quit his job [laughs] […] his boss offered him a remote position. […] We were, we were floored.
Roy: [laughs] Yeah.
Me: So a remote position is…what?
Roy: So we can work remotely, we can work from
Me: *From your van.*
Jiselle: *Anywhere.*
Roy: Yeah, any, just need an internet connection from time to time. (Interview 8, pp. 5-6)

Although Timmy Toothpicks was not yet working remotely from his van (as he was still working for an employer who was flying him out to jobs on occasion), he described working remotely as the “[n]umber 1 priority in my next job” (Interview 9, p. 8).

A handful of my participants saved up money from working or selling their belongings before they went out on the road; however, even when this was the case, the vast majority of the nomads I interviewed engaged in some form of employment as part of their mobility. Based on the transcripts I brought back from the field, settling temporarily to access work and working remotely from the vehicle were the two dominant approaches to employment. These approaches, however, don’t have to be mutually exclusive: some nomads (e.g., Timmy Toothpicks) may switch from settled work to working remotely if the opportunity arises, and nomads may also do both at the same time. Although the rise of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and the expansiveness of the telecommunications networks in the United States make it possible for vehicle nomads to work remotely, it was still quite common for my participants to access employment by settling temporarily, saving up money, and then returning to the road.28

“Home is everywhere, and I love it”: Perceived Differences between Vehicle Nomads’ and Tourists’ Mobility Practices

Primrose: Are we touri—tourists?
Ludwig: We’re gonna be tourists in Scotland,
Primrose: Yeah.

28 For an excellent and recent discussion of the types of work that vehicle nomads engage in, see Bruder (2017).
Ludwig: for sure. Y’know? Like, we’re goin’ with my mom, and she’s got bed and breakfasts paid up. So that’ll be like, the more conventional, older, adult tourism, and it’s not gonna be anything like [laughs] what we would do if we had a van in Scotland.

-Ludwig and Primrose (Interview 3, p. 50)

There was this teeny tiny dot in the atlas. We get the state atlases, the Benchmark, or, I forgot what the other name is, for the States…um…and we were driving through Utah, and there was a teeny tiny dot, a hot spring. We were like “okay, we’ll check it out. We’ve never really been to hot springs before.” So we went off on this dirt road, and it was this old, old, abandoned spa. All the windows were broken out, there was “KEEP OUT” signs everywhere, there was like, these wild donkeys that were drinking from it, a family of owls in the willows. […] Um, and, so they had two pipes leading down to the pools, uh, and compl—inobody anywhere. It was like this magical thing that happened, that would never have happened if we had an itinerary. Like, we just happened to be passing by, and it’s like “oh, look at this little dot off to the side. Let’s try it out.”

-Heather (Interview 1, p. 7)

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Seated on a bench in the high-top Chevy Express van, I listened as Duke Silver and his partner Ashli Towel offered up a story in response to my question about the differences between vanlife and tourism.

“We were driving down Highway 80, from Utah to Tahoe, so, through Nevada, […] and there was a, a fire. A forest fire, or whatever.”

“Yeah,” Duke Silver interjected, “big one, thousand-acre fire, just straddling the highway […] there were planes dropping water on it, and everything was […] intense.”

“[…] [T]hey uh, they were telling people ‘just pull up to this gas station, we’ll tell you where you can go’” Ashli Towel continued. “And we were like, ‘okay, well, let’s pull up the news.’ We pull up the news, and we saw how big it was, and we’re like ‘they’re not opening this any time soon.’ […] And we were sort of in a rush,” Ashli Towel added, “’cause this was like, almost a week and a half ago. […] So we were like ‘okay, let’s look for another route.’ And it
backtracked us maybe like, 3 hours, but we were like ‘if we were a family on summer vacation trying to go here, and we had all of these plans and everything, this would ruin our trip.’”

“Yeah,” Duke Silver chimed in, “[...] Something like that could just torpedo [...] your whole plans.”

“And then, for us, it’s, y’know, even like worst case scenario, if we couldn’t make the meet-up, it’s okay,” Ashli Towel explained, in reference to the vanlife gathering we were currently attending. “Like, we can meet people other places whenever we want, ‘cause it’s not just a trip that could get ruined. It’s just a typical Monday,” she said with a laugh.

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As my literature review has indicated, vehicle nomads are often studied as a tourism market segment; however, one of the questions that I set out to answer in my interviews was whether or not my participants even saw themselves as tourists, or whether they understood themselves as having different mobility practices than tourists who might be taking the same routes and staying in the same places. This question was actually what elicited the humorous exchange included above, where one of my interviewees turned to the other and asked whether they were tourists. Much like the French RVers studied by Viallon (2012) and the grey nomads studied by Patterson, Pegg, and Litster (2011), most of the nomads I interviewed did not see themselves as tourists. When I asked participants about how their mobility differed from tourist mobilities, their responses tended to resonate with the representations of vanlife explored in the previous chapter.

Much like their pre-nomadic mobilities, tourism was often described by interviewees as a highly-structured, fast-paced, and time-constrained form of mobility, especially when it was compared to their current practices:
Large Marge: Most tourists are getting to a destination, and going there quickly. So it’s like—they might have one week off, they’re gonna get to Yellowstone, they’re gonna do this, they’re gonna do that, so they’re very structured. Whereas, um, I think most of us just wander for the enjoyment. (Interview 10, p. 15)

Ashli Towel similarly described tourists’ mobilities as “strictly scheduled, whereas our schedule is 100% flexible” (Interview 4, p. 34). Medusa and Spener further elaborated on the busyness and structured-ness of tourist mobilities in comparison to their own:

Medusa: […] I think that like, tourism, it’s like, you save up your—either your money or your vacation time, or whatever, and you plan around this, this thing that you do once every year, once every six months, or whatever it is. […] and you try to. I mean, you do try to cram-pack as much as you can. Ultimately, I feel like van living is…is the idea that like, you don’t, it doesn’t have to be so rushed? (Interview 6, p. 16)

What these comments suggest is that participants understood vanlife as an open-ended and flexible mobility, whereas the mobility of tourists was seen as being closed-ended, fast-paced, and highly structured. And when I reflect on a road trip I took during the winter break in 2017, this (relational) way of thinking about vanlife makes sense.

My mum and I attend the same university, so we have the same period of time off in December and January. And so, for Christmas of 2017, I thought ‘I’ll show her what vanlife is like, so she can see why I love living like this.’ What didn’t occur to me at that point was that with only 20 days to travel in, it would be difficult to have anything other than a busy, cram-packed, and tightly scheduled road trip, unless we went a very short distance and/or saw very few things. And based on the comments included in this chapter, busy, cram-packed, and tightly scheduled are not terms that describe vanlife. Indeed, it’s everything that my participants said their mobility isn’t.

By the end of the road trip, I was kicking myself, because what my mum and I were doing didn’t really feel like vanlife, and I couldn’t figure out why. After returning to the university and going through my interview transcripts, it began to make sense: the mobility my
mum and I had engaged in over the break was one shaped by the fast-paced temporality that my participants were associating with tourism. Because Mum and I both had to return to my hometown before the new semester started, we had to adhere to a tight schedule, no matter what events or interesting locations we encountered along the way. Much like the (stereotypical) tourists my participants were describing, our mobility was fast-paced and closed-ended (which may have been why it didn’t feel like vanlife, to me).

This is why I feel that participants’ relational way of thinking about vanlife and tourists’ mobilities makes sense: vanlife, as an open-ended mobility practice, has the potential to be very flexible. Timmy Toothpicks, for example, emphasises open-endedness in his attempt to differentiate between vanlife and tourism:

I can change my itinerary at any time. Like, I’m not locked into—because again, they’re locked down to a house, so they probably have a dog sitter, or somebody watching the house—um, so they have to get back, where I don’t. [...] I can always continue going forward, if I have to, I never have to go back for any reason. (Interview 9, p. 14)

Spener and Medusa expressed an almost identical view in their interview, as well:

Spener: […] that’s always…kinda the, the major shift. Is that, if you wanna do something, you can go and do it, you don’t have to worry about, like, getting home to the pets, or like […] having a house sitter, or something like that, y’know, where you’re so worried about your stuff, and getting back to home, like…home is, y’know, where you are, and Medusa: Yeah.
Spener: that’s like, where your comfort is, is…
Me: Home is where you park it.
Spener: Yeah.
Medusa: Yeah.
Spener: Home is where you park it. (Interview 6, p. 16)

These views about ‘having to get back’ are supported by comments made in the scholarly literature. For example, Leonard and Onyx (cited in Patterson, Pegg & Litster 2011) stated that grey nomads “generally do not have many of the burdens that limit the holidays and journeys of others in society” (p. 284). In a study of part-time RVers, Patterson, Pegg & Litster (2011) also acknowledged that “all the four couples who participated in this study determined the start and
finish of their trip based on their future family commitments” (p. 293). These commitments determined “when they were free to leave to travel, and when they were required to return home” (ibid., p. 292).

*Serendipity and Slowness*

This reported open-endedness and flexibility of vanlife in comparison to tourism and other types of mobility was valued by participants for the ways in which it fostered serendipitous experience, as Heather’s story about the abandoned hot spring suggests. A few of my other interviewees similarly emphasized how the flexibility of their mobility allowed them to stumble onto remarkable places or engage in spontaneous adventures…or, in the case of Ludwig and Primrose, to find your future furry traveling companion abandoned in a box at the side of the road:

Primrose: And then we met back up [with our friends] again a month later, in Utah. And because we met back up with them, they wanted to go to this national
/Ludwig: Monument Valley/
Primrose: Monument Valley that we Ludwig: Or some random place. [*laughs*] […] That we never even like, thought about going to. So we caravanned, and that’s when we found [*dog’s name*].
(Interview 3, p. 30)

Indeed, the serendipitous quality of my participants’ mobility practices in comparison to tourism was described in a few of the interviews:

Charlie: […] I feel like most of the time if you’re a tourist you want to, uh, book things before you get there, […] so you might not get the best place, because you’re looking at it on the internet and booking there; whereas if you’re just traveling along, you might happen upon the most spectacular place, that you would never see in a guidebook or anything like that. (Interview 2, p. 27)

Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War agreed:

Drake Man O’War: You can’t find everything to do on the internet. Sometimes you just gotta drive by it. […] Y’know, and […] be in the moment. Live in it. Sometimes you, you find a place and you wanna stay there five days longer than you should, […] [a]nd now you have to adjust your whole trip. […]
I have had a few of these experiences, myself. On my recent trip to the Yukon, my partner and I were passing through Flin Flon, Manitoba on our way across the country, and we had no intention of stopping there for more than a night. However, it just so happened that our arrival coincided with a community barbeque, an annual hockey tournament, and the hosting of a popular movie at the drive-in movie theater. Then, one of the local residents took a shine to us and practically adopted us for the weekend…so we ended up staying in Flin Flon for a few days.

I have also engaged in a practice that Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War made reference to, where you choose the general route that you want to take on your journey, and if you see something interesting on the map that isn’t terribly far off of that route (although keep in mind, ‘far’ is a relative term here), you go and see it. This is how I ended up at The Crooked Bush in Saskatchewan and the Devils Tower National Monument (the weird-looking mountain from Close Encounters of the Third Kind) in Wyoming. Shubin and Swanson (2010) comment on these kinds of mobility practices in their article on the Gypsy Travellers, making reference to mobilities that do not follow a linear progression, and to the “more chaotic and ‘messy’ itinerant practices, which involve both unplanned, interrupted movements and different kinds of travel” (p. 923).

And yet, participants did not only describe their mobility as being more open-ended and flexible than that of tourists; they also indicated that vanlife tended to be a slower form of mobility. “[T]he second time [we hit the road], y’know, we’d kind of learned to, that we oughta go slow, ultimately, and that’s really the real way to do the, the vanlife,” said Ludwig (Interview 3, p. 19). When I asked Heather how she would compare her mobility to that of tourists who might be following the same routes, her immediate response was “[s]loowwwwwer. Even
compared to people at this gathering, um, it seems like everybody here moves a lot faster than we did” (Interview 1, p. 12). Two of the couples I interviewed actually felt that they were moving too quickly, and were trying to slow down. As an example, when I asked how often they moved from place to place, Duke Silver and Ashli Towel replied that they were moving “[t]oo much”:

Ashli Towel: We’re working on slowing it down, but we just had so many obligations right off […] the bat, […] and we have friends and family scattered everywhere, so it’s really easy to fall into the—and y’know, a lot of our friends and family follow us on Instagram or whatever, and they’ll see us check into Denver, and then everyone’s like
Me: *Oh, “come visit.”*
Ashli Towel: *“[gasp] I wanna see you,* I wanna see you,”
//Duke Silver: Mm-hmm.//
Ashli Towel: “I wanna see, I wanna see the van, I wanna see the van.”
(Interview 4, p. 28)

In a later interview, Medusa and Spener also confided that they felt that they were moving too quickly, and that vanlife was more about slowing down:

Medusa: […] we always feel like we’re in a rush. We feel like we have to be like, going to the next place? […] Um, and I just wanna break [laughs] that pattern, and instead be like “we don’t have to be anywhere at any time.” Like, the, the value, one of the values of this is like, we get to choose, and we can sit here if we want, and we can move whenever we want. […] So. Just like slowing down our minds, and life.
Spener: Mm. We’re gettin’ better at it. (Interview 6, p. 15)

What is interesting about these comments is that—much like interviewees’ comments about tourists’ mobilities—they reflect the association (explored in the previous chapter) that participants were making between busyness and their pre-nomadic mobilities. During my interviews, vanlife was described in terms that tended to set it apart from the fast-paced and tightly structured temporalities participants ascribed to tourism and settled life, to the point where a couple of interviewees even suggested that adopting a slower, more relaxed temporality was “the real way” to do vanlife (Interview 3, p. 19). This may not be entirely surprising; as Jobes (1984) noted in his study of retired RVers, full-time vehicle nomads “are engaged in travel as a way of life rather than as a means of getting to a place” (p. 188).
Unlike tourists and commuters, whose mobility may conform to a more tightly-defined temporality, the nomads I spoke to aren’t on the road because they want to get from point A to point B as quickly and/or efficiently as possible. And, based on studies conducted to date, neither are full-time RVers:

there is a sense of wonder and discovery for most of the Grey Nomads. There is wonder at the vastness, diversity, and beauty of the country […] and [t]he longer they travel, the slower they move, the more they notice and appreciate. There is a paradox in this pattern. At one level it is about moving more slowly, relaxing, taking it easy. But, at a deeper level, it is about an intensification of the senses and an expansion of awareness of the country as a whole. It is not about a restriction of the life-space, but rather about an expansion of it. (Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 391)

Counts and Counts (2009) likewise mention that “[w]hile RVers may travel at a leisurely pace, they usually have a destination toward which they are moving, however slowly” (p. 168). Patterson, Pegg and Litster (2011) make a similar observation about the mobility practices of RVers in their sample; however, they attribute these slower and more flexible mobility practices to their participants’ age: “[t]ravel time is not seen to be important for older drivers who are less concerned about stops and delays along the travel route, and are more prepared to take side trips because most have retired and can take their time” (p. 293).

The interview data that my participants provided raises questions about whether age actually is the key factor which influences retired vehicle nomads’ mobilities; indeed, Timmy Toothpicks was slowly moving around Colorado while he hiked all of the Fourteeners, and Drake Man O’War and Sinn Sage hovered around Maine and Pennsylvania for a while just to see the leaves change colour (Interview 9; Interview 5). What these practices suggest is that slower mobilities are not the exclusive realm of older nomads, nor does one have to be retired in order to practice them.
The slower quality of vanlife mobility similarly emerged in interviewees’ discussions of the routes they preferred to take while travelling. In seven of my interviews, participants told me that they preferred to take the back roads and scenic routes when they were travelling, despite the fact that I only inquired about routes in one of the interviews. “Avoid those interstates, man, those are sooo boring,” Heather told me in my first interview (Interview 1, p. 11). “[I]n the atlas they have the little dots next to the scenic routes, those are…priceless” (ibid.). Jiselle and Roy talked about taking the back routes, as well:

Roy: We avoid interstates, as much as possible.
Jiselle: We take,
Roy: *Take back routes.*
Jiselle: *always take the scenic,* scenic routes, back roads.
Roy: Yeah.
Jiselle: The dirt roads. (Interview 8, pp. 18-19)

Relating the story of how he’d gotten to the vanlife gathering where I conducted our interview, Walrus Drummer elaborated on these points:

Walrus Drummer: […] if I don’t have a, an absolute time restraint, I always, um…I’ve travelled across the U.S. so much, I’ve been on every, y’know, like, all the standard routes. So, I, I’m basking, and I always look for the longest, most scenic route.
Me: Mm.
Walrus Drummer: Y’know, like, uh, comin’ up here […] um, y’know, a day and a half, and you just fuckin’ ssshh, like that. I went, y’know, I went up, uh, I went up like, y’know like, up through Reno, up through Death Valley into the Modoc forest, and then into, y’know, um, uh, Klamath Falls. I just did all these…and there was three different ways out of Klamath Falls, I’ve already taken two, so I did like, a new highway, it added like another hour. Fuckin’ was killer!
Me: Awesome.
Walrus Drummer: Yeah! Ah, yeah, always. […] I mean, if I don’t, what the fuck’s the point? (Interview 7, pp. 16-17)

 “[T]he highway’s stressful, and we don’t travel because we want stress,” Primrose told me at the first van gathering (Interview 3, p. 46). “So we’ll find, if we can, a road that follows the highway that’s gonna go the, the speed limit is what we were gonna go on the highway anyways [laughs]” (ibid.).
Ludwig and Primrose are not alone in this mobility practice of avoiding major highways; indeed, references to hating or avoiding highways appeared in six of the ten transcripts. Over and over, interviewees talked about taking slower routes and/or steering clear of the interstates, to the point where some of my participants actively forced their GPS to re-route them:

Medusa: […] we use Google Maps, but it’s not like we always go the fastest route, I guess?
Me: Mm-hmm?
Medusa: Like, there’s definitely times where we purposely try to take the, like, back roads, um, and make it re-route us. And, y’know, if you take people’s advice and go other ways. (Interview 6, p. 17)

Ashli Towel and Duke Silver engaged in a similar practice:

//Ashli Towel: We try to hit the “avoid highways” button.//
Me: Mmm.
Duke Silver: Yeah, if, if we have time we’ll, we’ll try to avoid interstates, ‘cause it’s a lot more fun […] ridin’ down like, back roads. (Interview 4, p. 31)

My participants’ mobility practices around using back roads and avoiding highways are important to note, as Cresswell (2010) has explained that the routes that mobility takes can reveal valuable information about the politics of that particular mobility. However, when he originally advanced the concept of routes, it was grounded in a discussion of how movement is channeled by the creators of those routes. In a way, it’s a top-down view of how routes factor into a politics of mobility. Yet the comments made by my interviewees suggest that we can also take a bottom-up view, where we uncover valuable information about the political nature of mobility by exploring the ways in which ‘created’ routes are circumnavigated or appropriated by different groups of mobile people.

Given that many of the nomads I spoke to described their nomadic mobility as flexible and open-ended, it would seem that my participants were often free to choose whatever routes they liked. If this is the case, then their decision to avoid highways and spend more time driving on back routes—when three of the transcripts had references to limiting drive time—is
significant. When they were not on their way to a scheduled event, my participants seem to have chosen or changed their routes based on what those routes meant to them. Back roads were ‘fun’ and ‘scenic,’ while interstates were ‘boring.’ And if we refer to the scholarly literature, it isn’t hard to see why:

the engineer’s vision of the freeway system won out over the planner’s, i.e., an efficient movement of traffic at high speeds was the goal for road construction rather than incorporating the transportation network into the built landscape.

(Brown, cited in Pesses 2010, p. 3)

As Brown notes, interstates weren’t designed to be scenic or interesting; they were designed to ensure that people and goods could move quickly and efficiently from point A to point B. And that really isn’t what my interviewees felt their mobility was all about.

The alternative relationship that many of my participants have with major highways actually prompts a closer examination of how routes have been conceptualized in the literature: in the original definition, Cresswell (2010) described routes as allowing speed for some while denying it to others, or as connecting certain areas while bypassing others. But this isn’t a definition of routes that helps us to understand my participants’ mobility, because speed wasn’t heavily prioritized in my interview transcripts, and participants didn’t appear to stay in one place long enough to be “bypassed” by a route. However, if we expand Cresswell’s (2010) original conceptualization of routes to encompass the ways in which certain routes are resisted or circumnavigated by mobile people (rather than focusing exclusively on the ways in which mobility is being channeled), it could help us to uncover important dimensions of a nomadic politics of mobility. In my case, interviewees’ representation (and circumnavigation) of major highways tells us something very interesting: these routes were described as boring, stressful, and fast—all terms that mirrored my participants’ descriptions of the pre-nomadic mobilities they’d left behind.
Accommodations

And yet, speed wasn’t the only thing that participants felt distinguished their way of life from other forms of mobility. They also emphasized the fact that their mobility wasn’t constrained by the need to search for accommodations. Much like vanlife itself, this was often discussed as a form of freedom:

- Duke Silver: And uh, [you have] that freedom and not being locked into like, “we booked an Air BnB in this town,” or, y’know
- Ashli Towel: “we have to get there,”
- Duke Silver: Mm-hmm.
- Ashli Towel: “we already have the reservations.” (Interview 4, p. 35)

“[T]here’s a lot more freedom,” agreed Large Marge (Interview 10, p. 15). “‘Cause you don’t have to worry about reservations, or a place to park, ‘cause if all else fails, you can just pull over on the side of the road” (ibid.). This ability to ‘just pull over’ was mentioned in half of the transcripts I brought back from the field, and it appeared to be an important aspect of my participants’ mobility; a flexibility that they felt made their mobility practices different from those of the tourists who were reliant upon others for places to eat and sleep. “[I]f they don’t have a bed, then they have to go wherever the hotels are,” observed Charlie (Interview 2, p. 2).

“[A]s long as we have a place to park, we’re, we’re good,” said Duke Silver (Interview 4, p. 15). “We’re self-contained” (ibid.). These comments echo those made by young Chinese RVers in a study by Wu and Pearce (2014), as well: “In my opinion, the biggest benefit of RV travelling is the flexibility. When you are tired, you can park and take a break, have a meal or even take a nap” (Informant 9, cited in Wu & Pearce 2014, p. 29, emphasis in original). Timmy Toothpicks advanced a similar view:

- Me: So in what ways does being able to sleep in your vehicle affect the way that you travel?
- Timmy Toothpicks: Oh my God, it’s so nice.
- Me: [laughs]
Timmy Toothpicks: It is the best thing ever, because—especially if you’re on a long journey, and you’re tired—you just pull off the side of the road and you go to bed!
Me: Yup!
Timmy Toothpicks: [laughing] I mean, there is no “I gotta find a hotel!” Or “where’s the nearest town?” I love rest areas. Love ‘em!
Me: Me, too.
Timmy Toothpicks: Because […] I actually feel secure, because I park right in between the, the 18 wheelers, and I know no-one’s gonna come in and bother us. Because, y’know, these guys are big brutes, and if they hear somebody scream “help,” they’re probably gonna come out with a, y’know,
Me: Tire iron. [laughs]
Timmy Toothpicks: Yeah, a tire iron. (Interview 9, pp. 14-15)

Parking at rest areas is a mobility practice I picked up fairly early on when I started my fieldwork, and I noticed that there are certain aspects of this mobility practice that did make travelling as a vanlifer very different from my past travels as a tourist. As Charlie observed above, vanlifers do not have to choose their routes based on where the hotels are, nor do they have to plan out their mobility in advance based on the location of their hotel reservations. For me, this meant that the direction of my mobility was not determined in advance; I could choose routes—as I was travelling—that took me through Podunk little towns in the middle of nowhere, without having to worry about finding a vacancy at the last minute or having to cancel a reservation. As an example, on my way through Kansas, I actually ended up pulling over to sleep at the farm where “Home on the Range” was written. Moreover, as Ashli Towel and Duke Silver explained, vanlifers seldom have to change the speed of their mobility based on check-in times at set locations. For me, this meant that I was free to drive for 17 hours straight if I felt like it, or I could cut my drive time short if I needed to rest; there was never a need for me to push when I was tired, or stop driving before I was ready to stop for the day. This was actually how I was able to drive 5,500 kilometers from Whitehorse, Yukon Territory to St. Catharines, Ontario in 6 days (and no, I don’t recommend it).

Having limits on drive time or distance was another mobility practice that was discussed in a few of the transcripts. “[W]e do our best not to drive more than three hours when we do
drive [...] [s]o that it doesn’t like, suck up a whole day,” said Ashli Towel (Interview 4, p. 30).

Spener and Medusa likewise made reference to being “cooped up for a little too long, and sitting for a little too long”:

Medusa: Yeah, I think it depends on the length of time, right?
Spener: Yeah.
Medusa: Like, if you’re driving someplace that’s only like, two or three hours away, it’s exciting. [...] Um, and you’ll li-listen to tunes, or podcasts, and like, enjoying the views, and...if you ever like, hit hour six, you’re like
Spener: [laughs]
Medusa: “O-kay, [laughs]”
Me: Yeah.
Medusa: “y’know, I’m done.” (Interview 6, pp. 17-18)

Roy and Jiselle expressed a similar view: “when we do move, [...] we try not to drive more than four or five hours a day [...] ‘cause [...] it’s stressful. And you wanna…be able to relax, and spend time” (Interview 8, p. 17). In a study of Grey Nomads by Onyx and Leonard (2005), one of the participants remarked that “[w]e don’t travel more than 200 km in a day, because we’ve got the time now” (p. 65). Likewise, Counts and Counts (2009) found that for full-time RVers:

time, distance, and destination have a lower order of priority than they have for those who must watch the clock or the calendar. Traveling, instead of being an interlude between events, is in itself an important and enjoyable part of life. Serious RVers are, therefore, likely to go short distances. Most say they seldom travel more than 200 miles a day. (p. 168)

Counts and Counts’ (2009) comment about traveling being something other than “an interlude between events” is important here, as I found that interviewees’ representations of their mobility practices often broke down the binary distinction between ‘home’ and ‘away’ (a topic that has been explored in other contexts by scholars in tourism studies) (p. 168). Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) have made this observation in a study of RVers, as well, saying that “[t]he act of RVing reflects the deconstruction of distinctions between home and away” (p. 55). A story related to me in my first interview captures this breakdown in distinctions fairly well:

Heather: Um, I, so I was in the group with B__, and B__ [...] was complaining about people’s generators, and um, people playing their music with the really low beat after 10pm.
Me: Mm-hmm.
Heather: And, you know, they're on vacation, but for him, and for you know, like, full-time vandwellers, this is a way of life, this isn't vacation. You're just out here in the forest, people are partying, and you have your sleep schedule. You're like...[...] they get to go home and rest and recuperate, and...tomorrow's just the same for you. [...] So it might take some of the magic out of, like, having a real vacation. Like, this is just every day.

(Interview 1, p. 12)

Medusa and Spener’s comments similarly undermine the separation between ‘home’ and ‘vacation’:

Medusa: [...] like, my place is here. Y’know what I mean? Like...when you’re on a...a vacation, or when you’re car camping, it’s like...you never really go into your home. But like, I can come...this is my home. Like, all my things are here, it’s comfortable...yeah.

Spener: A lotta people need to decompress from like, vacations, or...whatever, y’know, they get home and they like, plop onto the couch, and you're like “ahh.” [...] Like, “oh that was nice being on vacation, but it’s really nice being home.” And like, now it’s just...you’re always home.

Medusa: [laughs]

Me: Yeah. It’s like—

//Spener: And always on vacation.//

Me: Yeah.

Medusa: [laughs] Best of both worlds, hey? (Interview 6, pp. 33-34)

Interestingly, Heather, Medusa and Spener’s use of the word ‘vacation’ draws our attention to the binary distinction between ‘home’ and ‘away’ that is fostered within a sedentarist metaphysics; in particular, by the assumption that ‘home’ is a fixed space from which an individual departs to go on ‘vacation,’ and to which they will eventually return to resume everyday life. For my participants, their home went everywhere with them, which meant that in most cases, travel was not labeled as ‘other’ to their everyday reality, or marked as a ‘different’ kind of mobility by practices like booking tickets and accommodations.29

For those who do not live in their vehicles, the separation between everyday mobility and travelling mobility (i.e., ‘home’ versus ‘away’) was further highlighted by interviewees’ comments about their own ability to leave at a moment’s notice without packing a bag. Echoing

29 Although, as Ludwig and Primrose’s comments about being tourists in Scotland suggest, vanlifers can engage in forms of travel that don’t involve their vans, and these might involve booking tickets and accommodations.
Medusa’s comments about having all her things with her, Timmy Toothpicks explained this particular aspect of vanlife in a story about his family’s response to his choice of lifestyle:

Me: […] Are there things that your friends or family who, uh, aren’t vanners—are there things that they don’t really get about your lifestyle?
Timmy Toothpicks: [laughs] How, how ‘bout everything??
Me: [laughs]
Timmy Toothpicks: Yes. When, when I told my family “I’m going to live in a van.” Basically, the question was “why would you do that?”
Me: Yeah. [laughs] What was your answer to them?
Timmy Toothpicks: Uh…well, I think I said “because I can.”
Me: [laughs]
Timmy Toothpicks: Um, and because, I mean, I said, “it’s liberating.” Why would I not? Especially where I live now, in Colorado, why would I not wanna live in a van? Why would I not wanna be able to go wherever I want, and not have to pack a bag to do it? ’cause my bags are already packed. […] Everything I, everything I need, and I want, is with me. (Interview 9, p. 6)

Jiselle, in the prior interview, concurred, saying “Everything I need is right here […] I don’t have to prepare, or pack a bag” (Interview 8, p. 22). A similar comment was made on the blog of one of the Chinese RVers studied by Wu and Pearce (2014): “[t]he biggest advantage for a motorhome is saving the packing” (p. 29, emphasis in original).

This attitude of ‘everything I need is right here’ appeared repeatedly in my interview transcripts. When I asked Charlie and Koa about the differences between vanlife and tourism, they explained that:

Charlie: So like, we have our house with us, which is nice, and…
Koa: I think it’s a lot easier for us.
Charlie: Yeah.
Koa: We have everything with us that we need. (Interview 2, p. 27)

Likewise, when I asked how being able to sleep in the vehicle affected the way that Primrose and Ludwig travelled, Primrose replied that “being able to pull into Wal-Mart parking lots and just pass out…is really nice. […] Always having my house with me. [softly] Always having everything that I need” (Interview 3, p. 53). Reflecting on his own belongings, Walrus Drummer remarked that “I have a friend who builds Harleys, and he’s always like ‘Dude, come out on the fuckin’ road with me’” (Interview 7, p. 16). “And I’m like ‘this is my Harley.’ Like, this is […]
a million times cooler than, than havin’ a bike, to me, because, y’know, I’ve got my instruments with me” (ibid.). Yet again, a similar comment was made by one of the young Chinese RVers in Wu and Pearce’s (2014) study, who made reference to the convenience of having “everything on board” (p. 29). In Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson’s (2013) study, a participant named “Carole” made a similar point, saying that RVing “allows you to bring your life with you and your comfort with you while experiencing something different” (p. 55).

In a similar vein, one of the most powerful responses advanced by my participants in describing how their mobility practices differed from those of other travellers was a mantra of ‘wherever I go, I’m home.’ As Timmy Toothpicks explains: “when people travel, they’re never home. You’re in a hotel. You’re in, you’re in a rented camper. You’re in a tent. It’s not home. See, wherever I go, I am home” (Interview 9, p. 19). This came up in Spener’s explanation of the differences between vanlife and tourism, as well:

Spener: [...] you don’t have to say “I wish I could do that” any more. Y’know? It, that’s always...kinda the, the major shift. Is that, if you wanna do something, you can go and do it, you don’t have to worry about, like, getting home to the pets, or like [...] having a house sitter, or something like that, y’know, where you’re so worried about your stuff, and getting back to home, like...home is, y’know, where you are, and
Medusa: Yeah.
Spener: that’s like, where your comfort is, is...
Me: Home is where you park it.
Spener: Yeah.
Medusa: Yeah.
Spener: Home is where you park it. (Interview 6, p. 16)

When I asked Jiselle and Roy how being able to sleep in their vehicle affected the way that they travelled, Jiselle responded to the question with one of the most memorable quotes in my pile of transcripts: “Home is everywhere, and I love it” (Interview 8, p. 22). Jiselle and Roy’s elaboration, which captures many of the trends discussed in the previous paragraphs, bears further quoting, as well:

Jiselle: It’s, I mean, really. …It’s everywhere. Everything I need is right here, and I love that I wake up…y’know? I can jump in the front seat in my
underwear, and say “hey, let’s go, let’s do this!” Y’know, like,
Roy: [laughs]
Jiselle: I don’t have to prepare, or pack a bag, or…
Roy: Yeah.
Jiselle: Y’know? That’s, it’s the best part about it! [laughs]
Me: [laughs]
Roy: Yeah! We don’t have to seek out hotel rooms, or, we don’t even have to
pitch a tent!
Jiselle: Yeah.
Roy: Y’know, we just, wherever we stop is…home. If it’s a great campground
like this, or if it’s a roadside campground, or just a pull-off, or a Wal-Mart
parking lot…we’re home. (ibid.)

Yet again, RVers express similar sentiments to the ones expressed by my interviewees: “RVers
described a dominant advantage of RVing as the ability to travel with their ‘home’ and their
comforts around them such as their own bed” (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013, p. 55). In
particular, some of my findings resonate with Viallon’s (2012) statement that “RV owners feel
like they live simultaneously in two worlds, partaking of adventure and vacation while enjoying
the comforts of their own home” (p. 2075). In his study, all of the RV owners he spoke to
indicated that “[f]eeling free to discover new worlds while remaining in a familiar environment
[was] an advantage” of their way of life (ibid., p. 2080).

Taken together, these statements reflect Counts and Counts’ (2009) claim that “[a] home
is an idea, one that is located in space but not necessarily in a fixed space” (p. 185). Indeed, the
mantra of ‘home is everywhere’ and the ways in which interviewees undermined the home-away
binary undermine the normative (i.e., sedentarist) understanding of homes as fixed and immobile
spaces. As Mort and Zelda Risch explain in Counts and Counts’ (2009) ethnographic study of
RVers: “[t]he key word is ‘home.’ We are not campers—we have taken what we wanted of our
home and put wheels on it” (p. 188). By challenging the association between homes and fixity,
the mobility of full-time vehicle nomads pecks away at the foundations of a sedentarist
metaphysics. And I don’t believe that this is something that my participants were unaware of. As
I was explaining my research to a group of vanlifers over lunch, Primrose turned to me and gave
me the song lyric “[h]ome isn’t a place, it’s a state of mind” that was included in my literature review chapter (Zach Deputy 2012). This topic will be discussed further in the sections that follow.

The ways in which my participants differentiated themselves from tourists reveals important information about their mobility practices, often tying back to the representations of vanlife that were discussed in the previous chapter. Even if tourists were visiting the same places and taking the same routes, from the point of view of the nomads I spoke to, tourists’ mobility practices marked them as belonging to the world that my participants had left behind—a world where mobility was orchestrated around—and constrained by—tightly-packed schedules. Likewise, the routes that interviewees decided to take (or to avoid) during their travels reflected their desires for fun and experience rather than efficiency and speed, hinting at the open-ended and flexible nature of their mobility, as well as the types of freedom that my participants seemed to value. Finally, the ways in which interviewees described their mobility practices indicated that normative distinctions between ‘home’ and ‘away’ or ‘home’ and ‘vacation’ (which are perpetuated by, and within, a sedentarist metaphysics) don’t make as much sense “when you live in what you drive in what you work in, in what your, your whole life is in” (Interview 2, p. 10). And settling into a metaphysics where these distinctions break down is the ultimate goal of this thesis project.

On Weird Questions, A shift in Positionality, and what Makes a Vehicle a Home

Me: So, people often state that they feel positive emotions towards the places that they live in, uh, like, “home is where the heart is.” How does your home make you feel?
Timmy Toothpicks: My heart comes with me wherever I go. […] if truly, your heart is where your home is, well then, I’m good, because my heart is right here. I drive her every day.

-Timmy Toothpicks (Interview 9, p.21)
Me: So yeah, the question, uh, that I was asking is uh, that people often state that they feel really positive emotions towards the places that they live in, like that old saying “home is where the heart is.” And I was just asking how your home makes you feel.
Sinn Sage: Oh! …yeah, definitely. Like that.
Drake Man O’War: [laughs]

Sinn Sage: [laughs] I feel like if, if…it’s because, y’know what? And that’s, that comment that I made the other night, was based on me thinking about that. Like, how…we, we get s-very very attached to like, the place, like, the home we grew up in. […] ‘Cause this girl was talkin’ about that like, her parents sold their family home to someone she knew, or something like that. And I was like “it’s crazy, because it’s just like, bricks and wood, and” […] —I mean, it’s literally just a dwelling. It’s just a place to shelter you.
Me: Mm-hmm?
Sinn Sage: But like, we ascribe so much personality and emotion to it, it becomes like, another person, like, another entity. […] And so, [laughs] and I was thinking about the van […] like, the concept of being like, “well, let’s sell this van, take the money, and buy a better one, and then like, make it better from scratch.” And I’m kind of like [tiny voice] “oh, I don’t wanna do that!” [laughs]

-Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War (Interview 5, p. 88)

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Walrus Drummer was one of those guys who reminded me of my grandfather…he smiled from the soul, and he was full of great stories. Watching as the Californian packed up his belongings, I leaned against the back of the passenger seat and threw out another question.

“So…how did it feel when this rig was ready to go and you just hit the road, in this vehicle, for the first time?”

“Man, I, um,” he paused for a moment, and then grinned as he corrected me: “[…] and we can refer to her as Debbie, […] so she doesn’t get her feelings hurt.”

“Awesome,” I replied, sharing a knowing laugh with him. Of course, I talked the same way about Lola…greeted her when I returned from my errands, gave her a pat on the dashboard every now and again while I was driving…it seemed like Debbie and Walrus Drummer had that kind of relationship, too.
“No, um…I fell in love with—it was love at first sight,” Walrus Drummer explained. “I found this, uh, I found her on, on, um…you know, Facebook has the Marketplace, kinda like Craigslist?”

“Somebody mentioned that to me,” I said with a nod. “Yeah, I didn’t know about that.”

“It’s the fuckin’ best. […] So I found her on Facebook Marketplace. And um [...] yeah, dude, she’s y’know, clean, really low, **68,000 original miles**.”

“Jeez,” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, dude. And so, [...] [I] took her around the block, and it, um...y’know, I work on intuitiveness, just...I just do. [...] And this...I manifested every sing—like, this was my van. Like, I rolled up and it was in the guy’s driveway, and [...] he was like ‘ah, you wanna take it for a spin?’ ‘Yeah, I want to, but, I mean...it’s already...it’s already a done deal.’”

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When I designed this Master’s Thesis project, it was with the intent of gathering data that would allow me to challenge the dominance of sedentarist metaphysics in particular ways. And while this is still my goal, it’s important for me to discuss how the things that have changed for me in the last two years have shifted how I relate to this way of thinking about the world. At the time when I created my interview guide, my understanding of mobile and sedentarist metaphysics was entirely academic; although I identified as a traveller, I did not yet have any personal experience with vehicle nomadism and its mobility practices to instill a more personal connection with the mobile metaphysics I was trying to flesh out. As I mentioned in my Methodology chapter, I’d only ever had the resources to travel short-term—brief spurts whenever I had the money and time to do so, but always truncated by the need to return ‘home’ to wherever I was at that point in my life. And based on my own experience and the results of
my interview research, I feel that this was a very different realm of mobility than the one I set out to study in the summer of 2017.

Because I knew nothing of nomadism except what I’d read in the literature, my interview questions were written from the perspective of a non-vanlifer who was trying to learn about vanlife (which is great, because many of my readers aren’t vanlifers, so I went out and asked the same sorts of questions that they might’ve asked). However, what I didn’t realise when I was designing my interview script was that some of the questions I’d created actually reflected the sedentarist assumptions I was making about my participants’ mobility at that time. This is valuable, though, because it allows me to touch on a few of the ways that sedentarism can find expression in our research, even when our goal is to do research that’s grounded in a mobile metaphysics.

Now that I’ve been a vanlifer for two years, I can’t help finding some of the questions on my interview script a little odd. For example, it’s hard to keep a straight face when I read the question “how long do you think you’ll stay a nomad?” because it’s the equivalent of asking a straight person “how long do you think you’ll stay a heterosexual?” I mean, *yeah*, the question makes *sense*, and you’ll probably get an answer if you ask it…it’s just a bit weird, because you’re asking someone how long they plan on adhering to an identity that they’ve claimed for themselves. But I didn’t realise that when I started my research. Of course, it’s not a *bad* question, because I did get great data when I asked it; it just sounds weird to me now.

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30 To be clear, for those who identify as nomads, the act of retiring from the road due to injury, old age, or financial circumstances may only mark a change in practices, and may not involve a change in identity at all. Although it’s possible that some nomads who come off the road *do* stop seeing themselves as nomads because they can’t engage in some of their nomadic practices, this may not always be the case. And while being a vanlifer appears to be an important part of participants’ identity at the present time, it is difficult to say whether or not this is an identity that they will hold ten or twenty years from now, as the “vanlifer” identity may be fluid, like other forms of identity.
When I started working on this project, my interview guide was written up based entirely on what I had read in the academic literature on nomads, and based on that literature and my own imaginings, what I *thought* nomadism was all about. And I think this was where some of the weirdness in a few of my questions emerged. For some reason, I’d come away from the literature with an understanding of nomadism as a type of movement, rather than an identity or a lifestyle. This is why I asked questions like “How long have you been a full-time nomad?” instead of “How long have you been on the road full-time?” It’s also why, when I first started writing up my results, I was using terms like “full-time nomad” and “part-time nomad” instead of “nomad who’s on the road full-time/part-time.” The difference is that when we use the term “part-time nomad,” it seems to suggest that part of the time a person identifies as a nomad, and part of the time they identify as something else (and while some vanlifers who alternate between settling for employment and living on the road may understand their identity in this way, the point I’m trying to make here is that this wasn’t what *I* meant when I was using the term “full-time nomad” in my interviews). This is why I feel that asking “how long have you been on the road full-time” is preferable to asking someone how long they’ve been a full-time nomad: it makes it clear that we’re asking the person about their movement, rather than their identity.

Now that I identify as a vehicle nomad myself, it’s easier for me to notice these habits in my work, and to see the sedentarist assumptions I was originally making about nomadism. At the outset of this research project, I thought that being a nomad was something that you started when you went on the road, and stopped when you came off of it. Just like the people who ask why traditional British nomads don’t just settle down like everyone else, I hadn’t clued in that nomads are nomads, whether they’re moving, settling temporarily, or settling permanently (Kabachnik 2009). However, after conducting my field research, I learned that nomadism wasn’t
just a style of movement; it was a lifestyle that involved sets of representations and practices, as well. And I think that this is why some of my participants claim the term “nomad” as an identity: for them, vehicle nomadism isn’t just a style of movement. It’s a type of mobility.

However, what’s important to remember here (as I pointed out in my Methodology chapter) is that almost none of the academic research that has been done on nomadism has been conducted or written up by actual nomads. That’s not to imply that a nomad’s approach to research would automatically be better or more authentic; it merely means that in existing research on nomadic communities and individuals, there has been little opportunity for scholars like me to be made aware of the assumptions we might be making about nomadism, and more importantly, to have those assumptions checked. Even so, I have to admit that a sedentarist assumption I made when I designed one of my interview questions—a question that caused me some frustration during my fieldwork and the analysis stage of my research—ended up being quite useful, because it showed me where a sedentarist metaphysics wasn’t able to capture something very important about my participants’ mobility.

*Mobile Homes can’t Break Down Permanently: How focusing on Place got in my Way*

“If something happened where your vehicle broke down and couldn’t be repaired, would you continue living in it?”

I thought it was such a straightforward question when I designed it. After all, converting a vehicle can be a lot of work, and by the end of it, you’ve created a special home that’s unique and cool, one that reflects your personality. So I figured that participants would be attached to their homes, and that most of them would continue living in their vehicles if they broke down.

Indeed, the nomads I spoke to were attached to their vehicles. Most of the interviewees’ vehicles had names, and a couple of the vanlifers even spoke about their vans as though they
were living entities. “[S]he’s more than just a home,” said Roy, referring to the Volkswagen Westphalia that he and his partner Jiselle lived in, “[s]he’s a part of our family” (Interview 8, p. 26). “I don’t want Debbie to get jealous,” said Walrus Drummer, referring to his own van conversion, “you know how it is” (Interview 7, p. 3). Even in cases where the van didn’t have a name yet, these sentiments still came through:

Timmy Toothpicks: If, if truly, your heart is where your home is, well then, I’m good, because my heart is right here. I drive her every day.
Me: Does your van have a name?
Timmy Toothpicks: No, I haven’t come up with one yet.
Me: [laughs]
Timmy Toothpicks: It is, it is a “she,” though, I just, I haven’t, uh, figured out what her name is yet. (Interview 9, p. 21)

In an exchange with Sinn Sage, I even revealed that when my mum had proposed that I sell Lola and upgrade to a better vehicle when I got back from the field, I had balked at the idea (Interview 5). Lola wasn’t a thing that I could just convert and sell!

Given the way that interviewees seemed to feel about their vehicle homes, you can probably imagine my surprise and confusion when, in response to my question about whether they’d continue living in the vehicle if it broke down, most of my participants gave noncommittal or ambivalent responses. “Um…depends on where we broke down,” Charlie replied (Interview 2, p. 42). “I guess it would depend on where we are,” Duke Silver echoed (Interview 4, p. 54). “[I]f there’s some place safe to park […] yeah, that’s totally an option,” said Heather (Interview 1, p. 19). Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War’s response was the most confusing of all:

Sinn Sage: Yeah, I mean I wouldn’t,
Drake Man O’War: Um.
Sinn Sage: I wouldn’t keep living in it, *parked somewhere.*
Drake Man O’War: *I, I would honest,* I would honestly strip a lot of it down, and, and put that into a new project. And I would have, y’know, some of this, definitely, in the new place. (Interview 5, p. 89)
Strip *Squanchy* down?! What?!! These answers were so detached!! *Where* was all the passion these vanlifers expressed when they’d talked about their vans before? Where were the feelings of attachment they’d expressed? I just didn’t know what to make of it all.

Worse still, in half of the interviews, participants wouldn’t even engage with the question on its own terms. “I think we would find a way to fix it, personally,” said Ashli Towel (Interview 4, p. 54). Jiselle and Roy were similarly resistant to engaging with the idea of a breakdown:

Roy: I mean, I don’t think of any, I can’t think of any scenarios where it, where it would break down that would be
Me: Mm-hmm.
Jiselle: *Unfixable.*
Roy: *Unfixable.* I think we would go to *great lengths to keep her going.*
Jiselle: *Great lengths, to fix it.*
Me: Mmm.
Roy: Y’know.
Jiselle: And we have. (Interview 8, p. 34)

Timmy Toothpicks was similarly resistant to the question:

Timmy Toothpicks: […] if just like the motor fell out of it, of course. Because I’m not financially strapped, I would fix it. So, it is a *brand new* van, so that’s kind of a little, y’know, that question may be more relative to somebody with an older van, or something like that.
Me: Mhm, mhm.
Timmy Toothpicks: But uh… I would, I would probably have to invest the money to get it running again. (Interview 9, p. 21)

Regardless of how long they’d been on the road, in half of the interviews, vanlifers insisted that in the event of a breakdown, they would find a way to fix the van. They wouldn’t even engage hypothetically with the idea of their vehicle being permanently immobilized. And in the cases where the question was answered, participants usually answered that it depended on where the vehicle broke down. In the field, these responses were really frustrating for me. Almost all vehicles break down eventually, so why wouldn’t my participants answer my question as it was written? And why, when these nomads seemed to be so attached to their vehicles, would their decision to keep living in them ‘depend’ on where they broke down? None
of the other interview questions in my script had given me this kind of headache…why wouldn’t my interviewees answer this one properly?

What’s amusing about the whole situation is that now that I’ve been on the road for a couple of years, I can tell you that if you asked me that same question today, I’d answer it in the exact same way as my participants.

Sure, Lola’s my home, and I love her deeply. I talk to her, I care about her, and there’s many a night when I curl up under my covers and look around the beautiful space that I’ve created for myself, and I feel very lucky, and very grateful. Lola and I have traveled back and forth across North America three times in the last two years. She’s covered thousands of kilometers of ground between Whitehorse, New Mexico and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. She’s the only home I’ve ever had that I nobody can kick me out of or take away from me, and she’s fully mine. But deep down, I know the day will come when she has to be taken to the wreckers, and the thought brings tears to my eyes. Still, as much as Lola means to me, I wouldn’t continue living in her if she broke down permanently.

Why?

Because a home that doesn’t move isn’t a home to me.

I need to be able to hit the road and not have to rely on hotels for accommodation. I love living in a van. And now that I look back on the way that my participants responded to the question about permanent breakdown, I understand why they answered the way that they did. Because just like my participants, I’m going to keep finding a way to fix Lola until the engine drops out of her, because she’s my ticket to amazing adventures. She’s my independence. And yes, just like my interviewees have said over and over again, she’s my freedom.
What I realised about this question, retrospectively, is that it is a great question, because the frustration I experienced in the field (and afterward) in response to the answers I was getting is what ultimately made me aware of the assumptions I’d been making about what made a vanlifer’s vehicle a home—assumptions grounded in a sedentarist metaphysics, where understandings of the home as a place are privileged over other understandings. I’d assumed that my participants would stay in their vehicles if they broke down because they were special places that interviewees had taken great care to shape in the ways that they desired. But by honing in on the place attachment my participants felt for their vehicles, I was missing out on an important aspect of their mobility.

Interviewees were attached to their vehicles; however, I suspect that it wasn’t the space that they created in their vehicles that mattered to them so much as the vehicle’s ability to take them on exciting adventures, liberating their mobilities from constraining routines and schedules. Once a converted vehicle lost the ability to move under its own power, it lost the ability to provide participants with the freedom they associated with their mobile lifestyle…so why would they stay in it? Interestingly, because my question about breakdown had been grounded in a metaphysics that prioritized the home as a place (rather than as a part of their mobility), my participants engaged with the question in ways I wasn’t able to understand until long after I’d returned from the field. What this frustration eventually taught me was that focusing on the van (or the school bus) as a place failed to fully capture the bond that these vanlifers and skoolies shared with their vehicles. Based on the data from my interviews, it appears that the sense of place attachment participants felt for their vehicle homes would remain strong so long as the vehicle remained mobile; however, the day the vehicle stopped moving under its own power,
their sense of *movement attachment* would push them on to another vehicle, or another form of nomadism.

It was rather fortunate that I asked this question in the way that I did, though, because it opened up an opportunity to discuss how a sedentarian interpretation of the home as a place, and my focus on place attachment, was getting in the way of understanding what my participants’ homes actually meant to them. I think that in future research, engaging with concepts like *home* and *movement* using a mobile metaphysics might help us to reconfigure our understandings of these concepts, and to expand our knowledge about what a home *is* and *does* for different types of people.31 I also think that it may be beneficial to further explore the concept of *movement attachment*, as a study done by Shubin and Swanson (2010) suggests that “the commitment that most Travellers feel towards possible mobility and change” could be understood in this way (p. 921). What the emergence of the concept of *movement attachment* suggests is that disengaging from a sedentarian metaphysics may help us to create and develop new theoretical approaches that can more fully capture certain aspects of mobility. And, as the next sections may suggest, pushing back against a sedentarian metaphysics could help us to change ways of thinking outside of academia, as well.

**Changing How We Think about Sedentarism**

Being labeled a nomad, whether by a local towns-person, an academic, or a government official, has never been a neutral enterprise consisting of mere description or typology. Rather, it is a discursive action resulting in the reproduction of the sedentary—nomad binary, with the settled person resting comfortably atop the hierarchy. The sedentary way of life is not just a depiction of certain practices either, but is a normative claim. The sedentary way of life is the hegemonic norm, made all the more powerful by the fact that it is seen as natural and taken for granted.

-Kabachnik 2009, p. 467

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31 As an example, Dufty-Jones (2012) has written an interesting article discussing how a politics of mobility can be used in research on housing.
What the rise of the mobilities paradigm makes apparent is that most researchers—even those who study mobilities—have been trained to see the world through the lens of a sedentarist metaphysics. That being said, one of the benefits of shifting into a mobile metaphysics is that it helps to reveal the politics that we’re overlooking when we approach the world in this way (Cresswell 2006; Dufty-Jones 2012). However, as Kabachnik (2009) points out, sedentarist norms are hegemonic, and the fact that they’re taken for granted does tend to make them more powerful. In many cases, we might be using the language of a sedentarist metaphysics without even realising it (as I did in my interview questions). So how can we shift out of this hegemonic way of thinking, when we might not always be aware that what we’re doing or saying is perpetuating sedentarist norms?

I’m not sure that this is a question I can really answer; however, one of the reasons I employed a mobile metaphysics in this thesis project is because I did want to challenge sedentarist ways of thinking. And as strange as it may seem, a useful way to do this may be to encourage the reader to—for the rest of this chapter—think of *sedentarism* as a form of discrimination. Consider it a thought exercise, if you will. Because as the following section will demonstrate, sedentarist attitudes, policies, and legislation do have tangible—and sometimes, even harmful—consequences for vehicle nomads (as the literature on nomadism in Britain has already demonstrated). However, in the existing literature on vehicle nomadism, these consequences—while they have been critiqued—often aren’t engaged with in ways that expose the impact they’re having on individual nomads at a personal level. That is the goal of the following section.
“Houseless, not Homeless”: On Sedentarism and its Negative Impacts

In Lockeian (and in Jeffersonian) terms, to dwell in movement is an unacceptable, uncivilized, irrational contradiction: you are improving neither the physical land nor yourself, and, by extension, you’re failing to advance the national interest. What counts as productive, legitimate, bureaucratically authenticated residence thereby becomes inextricable from the politics of visible self-improvement and the civilizational spectacle of the nation.

-Rob Nixon (2011, p. 165)

Man: You see someone like that, sittin’ around, you don’t know what their frame of mind is, so…you know, I’m guessin’ that’s why you should have a, actual dwelling where you live, is, y’know, people don’t know who it is, and—
Reporter: Have you bothered to stop and talk with him, and ask him who he is?
Man: No, I haven’t, I’ve waved at him once.

-Tubbs 2014, 26:50-27:07

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It was late September of 2017. My student loan was very late coming in, and my savings had been exhausted while I was on the road doing fieldwork. I was hard up for money and didn’t want to go to my family to borrow funds, so I decided to go to the local food bank to help tide me over until my loan came in and I could go buy groceries.

It was my first time using the food bank, and although I’d been there with a friend once or twice before, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. Eventually, I was led into a small side office by a blonde woman wearing a shiny turtle necklace…from what I could tell, she was responsible for interviewing new cases. Sitting down in a seat on the other side of her desk, I watched as she pulled out a file folder and some sort of intake form, and started filling it out as I responded to her questions. When she asked for my address, naturally, I replied that I lived in my van.

Nodding, she scribbled the letters “N.F.A.” on the front of my folder.

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32 One of the reasons why my discussion of sedentarism is being included in this chapter on practices (rather than the chapter on representation) is because I wish to highlight how one of the necessary practices of vanlife (parking to sleep for the night) is negatively impacted by sedentarist legislation and sedentarist ways of thinking. Moreover, while sedentarism does impact the way that vanlife is being represented by people who don’t practice it, this dimension of representation is difficult to explore using my existing interview data.
If my brain had had an engine, it would’ve backfired.

N.F.A., of course, stands for “No Fixed Address”—and in social services speak, it means you’re homeless. To be coded and read in this manner was distressing, as I did have a home—one that I was really fond of, and that I’d taken great care to build. I just didn’t have an address. I tried to explain this, but it didn’t really matter…the food bank system had coded me in the same manner that it would code someone sleeping rough on the street, despite the monumental difference in our material realities.

Later, when I reflected on the encounter, I remembered that a few of the vanlifers I’d met during my fieldwork were wearing t-shirts with the phrase “Houseless, not Homeless” emblazoned on the front. The phrase had taken on a different meaning for me, now that I’d personally come up against the implicit assumptions and social norms that bound the word “home” to fixed physical structures like houses and apartment buildings. This was when the irony of the word ‘fixed’ in the term “No Fixed Address” started standing out to me, because it wasn’t my lack of a home that had gotten me coded as ‘homeless’ at the food bank—it was the fact that my home was mobile, and thus, couldn’t be labeled with a number and a street name. Fixity, at the food bank, was associated with being “homed.” Mobility was not.

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When I tell people that I live in my van, the immediate response is almost always a compassionate “oh, I’m so sorry!” (at which point I hurriedly explain that I live in my van by choice). It still catches me off-guard, though…the fact that people automatically assume I’ve come to live in my van through some sort of terrible economic tragedy…the fact that they assume nobody would want to live in something other than an apartment or a house. It’d be funny, if not for the fact that even after I explain, I still sense that they don’t really believe that I
can be happy living in my vehicle. But I suppose that’s why they call them norms. It’s why the people I go to visit ask me questions like “are you sure you don’t want to sleep in my guest bedroom?” as if they’re doing me a favour by not letting me sleep in my own bed. I understand that they’re trying to be kind, but for me, it’s a little frustrating. It’s as though people refuse to believe that my home is just as welcoming and comforting as theirs is because it’s small, or because it deviates from what people think a ‘home’ is supposed to look like. Perhaps I should get one of those “houseless, not homeless” t-shirts that the other vanlifers are wearing.

As I mentioned in the previous section, I don’t feel that my participants were unaware of the ways in which their homes undermined the association between fixity and being homed. Indeed, there were times when interviewees engaged with the concepts of ‘home’ and fixity in ways that were quite profound. “Like, you, you…are the house, not where you are located,” said Charlie (Interview 2, p. 38). Another insightful comment emerged in Medusa’s interview, when she told me “I got jury duty, and it’s like ‘I’m not there.’ And technically, am I a Seattle citizen? I don’t know, I don’t live there. But like, my address is there” (Interview 6, p. 38). Over and over, vanlifers in the sample undermined normative associations between home and fixity in interesting ways. When I asked Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War whether you needed to have certain things completed in a vehicle before living in it, or if you could just throw a mattress in it and take off, their reply was one that I feel many geographers would find intriguing:

Drake Man O’War: I feel like that’s the way it starts. When [...] you make it seem like a home—in any way, shape, or form—you know, you put blankets on the, on the ground, you know, and to some people, that’s home. Me: Mm-hmm.
Sinn Sage: *Yeah, if you have a pillow and a blanket, and sleep in it.*
Drake Man O’War: *Because maybe you just moved into a place, and your, your stuff hasn’t gotten there,
Me: Right.
Drake Man O’War: but you have the pillow and blanket that you brought from wherever you called home. [...] You put that into your, your space, that is now your new home. Y’know, whether all of your stuff’s there or not. (Interview 5, pp. 76-77)
In a rather humorous excerpt, one of the vanlifers indicated that he was actually quite deliberate in his undermining of normative associations between homes and fixity, using it as a ‘screening tool’ for prospective dates:

Walrus Drummer: And, and, y’know, and bein’, bein’ uh…uh…y’know, bein’ a, an extremely handsome single young man, myself-
Me: [laughs] Such a burden.
Walrus Drummer: Yeah.
Me: [laughs]
Walrus Drummer: Uh, the hardest part, y’know, it’s like, y’know, uh, when I’m meeting, uh, the ladies, there’s that in—there, it really ta—y’know, “hey, you wanna go back to my place?” I’m like…“Uh, yeah, it’s parked right there, baby.” […] so, that, y’know, kinda throws them. Um, which is good, because it’s also like, a filter. (Interview 7, p. 5)

Although this excerpt provides a somewhat light-hearted and playful take on coming up against sedentarism, other vanlifers emphasized the logistical headaches it could cause. “[L]ife, and this world, is definitely not set up for this lifestyle,” Medusa acknowledged:

Medusa: Um, like, we were kinda talking about it. Like, it gets a little…weird, like, when people ask you like, where you’re from, or you have to like, you have to fill in an address somewhere. And it’s like…“I don’t have an address.” So, sometimes I feel like I’m lying, when I put, [laughs] fill in my dad’s address. But it’s just…that’s the way you get around the system. You just have to have like, a mailing address, […] even if you don’t live there. (Interview 6, p. 37)

Likewise, when I asked Sinn Sage and Drake Man O’War about the difficulties they encountered during their first few months on the road, they explained that getting Sinn Sage’s bank to accept and accommodate their nomadic mobility had been a royal pain:

Sinn Sage: […] my bank kept uh, shutting off my card.
Drake Man O’War: Oh, god, that credit card fuckin’ thing!
Sinn Sage: [laughs]
Drake Man O’War: Paying with plastic was a pain in the ass!
Sinn Sage: Yeah.
Me: Mmm.
Sinn Sage: It kept doing that, over and over and over, and honestly, that only just stopped this year.*
Drake Man O’War: *And we kept telling them, “we’re on a trip. This is what we’re doing.”* […] “We will be on a trip for the next, I dunno, *year and a half.”*  
Sinn Sage: *I told,* every time I’d call them and say yeah, like, they’d be like “well, for how long?” And I’m like  
//Drake Man O’War: I dunno!//  
Sinn Sage: “This year. For the whole year.” And they’d be like “well, where are you visiting?” And I’m like
Drake Man O’War: “All the places.” \[*laughs*\]
Sinn Sage: “literally check off every single state.” \[*laughs*\] I will be travelling through every single state. Please stop turning off my card.” \[*laughs*\] (Interview 5, pp. 52-53)

The questions from their bank—well, *for how long?* and *where are you visiting?*—reflect a set of underlying assumptions about how people move: travel is supposed to be truncated (rather than full-time), and it’s supposed to follow a predictable route (instead of being open-ended). The embeddedness of the bank’s assumptions about mobility is likewise reflected in the amount of effort Sinn Sage had to expend to get them to stop turning off her card.

For the nomads that I interviewed, the assumption that everyone has a fixed address (for things like banking, voting, and renewing a driver’s license) was a bit easier for them to work around. Most of the interviewees indicated that they simply used a family member’s address, or signed up for a mail-forwarding service. Counts and Counts (2009) found that their participants did this sort of thing, as well: “most RVers choose a mail-forwarding or voice-mail service to keep in touch with their families” (p. 204). Even one of the participants in a study on Scottish Gypsy Travellers acknowledged this practice, saying “[m]y van is registered to my grandmother’s house and so is my license and that gets me by. If I am stopped…I give her [fixed] address and that gets me by but for any people that have not got an address like that, it’s very difficult for them” (Shubin 2010, p. 504). To use a more famous (although fictional) example, for those who are fans of the movie *Blues Brothers*, you might recall that whenever Elwood had to provide an address, he got around it by writing down “1060 West Addison Street” (the address of Wrigley Field) (Weiss & Landis, 1980).

In a lot of cases, the assumption that all people have—and reside at—a particular address may be more reflective of statistical likelihood than it is of sedentarian thinking (since the vast majority of people *do* live at a ‘fixed’ address). However, when this assumption is built into
legislation, it can have consequences that you can’t always get out of by writing down “1060 West Addison Street.” One of the consequences that has caused particular frustration for me, as a vanlifer, is the creation of laws regulating so-called “vehicle vagrancy” (Snider 2013). As Large Marge explains, “[m]ost county—counties and states don’t allow for people to live in vehicles” (Interview 10, p. 1). “We’re all lumped together, and so we’re considered vagrants and loiterers. And most laws allow for vehicles to be parked less than 72 hours in any one spot […] so there’s a lot of harassment” (ibid.). In these comments, Large Marge reveals how legislation around “vehicle vagrancy” targets one of the central mobility practices of vanlife: parking somewhere to sleep for the night. And I say that it is ‘central’ because all human beings need sleep, and a vanlifer can only drive for so long before they need to pull over and go to bed.

Figure 21: No Sleeping in Vehicles. Sign posted outside the Visitor Center in Fort Collins, Colorado (Murray 2017).
Figure 22: No Overnight Parking. Sign posted at one of the local big box stores in my hometown (Murray 2017).

Figure 23: No Residing or Camping. Sign posted at the edge of Shipyards Park in Whitehorse, politely suggesting that if I sleep in the wrong place, the police can come and fine me and take my stuff (Murray 2018).
Angus Bancroft (2000) has noted that “[t]he forms of exclusion and [the] ordering of marginal populations…[can be] understood…as an intimately spatial form of regulation” (p. 41). However, understanding parking legislation in this way (i.e., as a form of spatial regulation that excludes people who live in their vehicles from particular spaces at particular times) is more in line with a sedentarist metaphysics than a mobile one. As I want to stay grounded in a relational ontology, I’m going to discuss these laws in terms of how they regulate mobility (as opposed to how they regulate space).

Much like the nomads of the British Isles, full-time vehicle nomads in North America must contend with parking legislation that makes some of their mobile practices more difficult to engage in (Figures 21, 22, 23). For example, whenever I’m on the road, I’ve had to accept that unless I’m at a Wal-Mart, when I park somewhere for the night, there’s always the chance that someone is going to come knocking at my side door in the middle of the night and force me to keep moving (this is probably why Wal-Mart was mentioned in six of the ten transcripts I brought back from the field). And I’m not alone in worrying about this: in half of my interviews, participants mentioned getting “knocked on.” This exchange between Large Marge and I (as well as another vanlifer who joined us midway through the interview) is particularly illustrative:

Me: […] what is your best memory from your first few months on the road?
Large Marge: Hmm. [pauses] I don’t know that I had a “best,” I mean, it was fucking hard. My first three months, I was crying all the time, because I was getting harassed all the time.
Me: Really?
Large Marge: And I was just like…it’s different than with yours [speaking to Vanlifer 2], where you can park anywhere, and nobody really bothers you because of what you’re doing, but I had people knocking on windows, I had- //Vanlifer 2: Because mine’s smaller?//
Large Marge: And it’s not a bus. They know I’m living in this.
Vanlifer 2: Yeah.
Large Marge: Yours doesn’t look like somebody’s living in it. (Interview 10, p. 8)

Medusa similarly described challenges around parking:
Medusa: And this, I dunno if this like, is part of your question or anything, but, um, so since we’re like, fairly new on the road, I think that we’re sort of just getting our feet under us in terms of like, figuring out where we can park? And where is like, legal and safe and all those things and so that, like, adds right now, like a kind of stressor just, if we’re in a city where we don’t know anything about the city,
Me: Mm-hmm.
Medusa: or the place, and we’re like “I don’t know if we can park here. Where are we gonna park?” (Interview 6, p. 18)

In cases where a vanlifer has parked somewhere they’re not supposed to, local folks can call the cops…and they do. Indeed, in two of my interviews, interviewees talked about getting knocked on by the police (Interview 2; Interview 3). This was one of the reasons why, when an officer knocked on my van at three in the morning in Alliance, Nebraska, I wasn’t terribly surprised (see Literature Review for excerpt).

At times, I can’t help but wonder why a burgundy van with a bazillion bumper stickers and solar panels on the roof would be threatening to anyone. I can only turn to Kendall (cited in Niner 2004) for an explanation:

[Nomads] oppose attempts at spatial and social exclusion and have the ability to cross into, for example, “middle class space”...They challenge “our” way of life because they have a different lifestyle which is “alternative” to the established (and by inference) “normal” way of life. Living the “normal” lifestyle previously made the “in” group feel comfortable, now, with the appearance of ”strangers”, they feel threatened and are likely to retaliate in order to defend that lifestyle. (p. 153)

As Large Marge’s comments about being harassed have suggested, these forms of retaliation hit vehicle nomads where they live, and Large Marge is not alone in this:

Primrose: Yeah, we’ve had a cop knock on the door and say a neighbour called because it looked, it’s a, there’s a suspicious vehicle.
Ludwig: Yeah.
Me: Mm.
Ludwig: Parked outside, yeah. It’s an old, sketchy van, y’know. Um,
Primrose: So,
Ludwig: So, there’s not really much *we can do about that.*
Primrose: *No, I like to have a place to go,* I like to have a campsite or a parking lot.
Ludwig: Yeah.
Primrose: I like to feel safe.
Ludwig: Yeah. And I, I d—
Primrose: There’s nothing worse than having, like, going to bed and like, not knowing if you’re gonna get knocked on.//
Me: Yeah.
Ludwig: Yeah, like, not, yeah, goin’ to bed and not bein’ like, allowed to be there. Or like, not being welcome, is a very bad feeling. (Interview 3, p. 34)

These comments are evocative of the concept of the *abject other*, the being who threatens or contaminates the area around them simply by being present; the being who must immediately be pushed out. Vanlifers’ (and skoolies’) practice of sleeping in a vehicle marks our mobility as being different from the mobilities of local residents—as ‘other’—and in response to this otherness, police and local residents may show up to move us on.

Because van nomads and skoolies don’t conform to normative expectations of what automobility should look like (e.g., how vehicles are ‘supposed’ be used), there are people who code our practices as suspicious or threatening (the term “vehicle vagrant,” for example, is indicative of the former) (Snider 2013). Vehicle nomads in Britain are particularly subject to this kind of sedentarist discrimination, as evidenced by the fact that there are “No Gypsy/Traveler” signs for pub doors, and the fact that they are subject to “violent hate crimes, both symbolic and actual, as well as the structural and institutional varieties of discrimination” (Kabachnik 2009, p. 462). As Large Marge’s experiences indicate, these sedentarist attitudes about who belongs and who doesn’t belong can also expose vehicle nomads to harassment, as evidenced by a photograph recently posted to Instagram by another skoolie (Figure 24). The message that accompanied the photo was as follows:

One thing that I learned pretty quickly about #buslife is that not everybody sees what I see in this bus. Some people think it’s crazy, or creepy, or just downright stupid! One of my neighbors has called the cops so many times that the officers gave me their card to display in my window. (They don’t respond to her calls now)

That resistance from average people is the reason why the bus community is so important. Online, or on the actual road; getting encouragement and reassurance that what we’re doing doesn’t make us crazy or creepy or stupid is something that I really appreciate.
So thank you. To everyone who’s supported and encouraged me while I got this project off the ground, I couldn’t have done it without you!! (buslifeadventure 2018)

As Henderson’s (2009) article on the politics of parking in San Francisco suggests, parking legislation (either *de facto*, or in the form of passive-aggressive post-it notes) “is not just about parking; it is also [...] about how the city should be configured and organized, and for whom” (p. 71). The use of the term “vehicle vagrant” to describe myself and my participants in connection with practices of parking is particularly telling in this instance, because if you’re labeled a “vagrant,” it’s a way of saying that you don’t belong. Parking legislation can also make it harder for vehicle nomads to practice their mobility safely, as even in cases where towns have acknowledged how dangerous it is to force a driver who is falling asleep behind the wheel to keep searching for a safe place to park, legislation often only allows for a few hours of rest.
before moving the person on. It’s one of the reasons I try to stay out of cities when I’m on the road…although I’ve started seeing “no overnight parking” signs at rest areas, as well (Figure 25).

![No Camping At Rest Areas](https://example.com/no_camping_sign.png)

**Figure 25: No Camping at Rest Areas.** Unless you’re a commercial trucker, in which case you can sleep there for 10 consecutive hours. Anyone else has to leave after 3 (Murray 2017).

However, the forms of discrimination encountered by my participants weren’t just institutional; they could be personal, as well. As my comment about people “offering” me their guest rooms might suggest, vanlifers can also be subjected to microaggressions by people embedded in sedentarist ways of thinking:

Ashli Towel: Well, I think the biggest thing that I always run into is every single family member calls this a “trip.”
Duke Silver: Yeah, I was gonna say that too. [laughs]
Ashli Towel: Yeah, and like “how is your trip going?” And things like that, and, it’s like, y’know.
Me: As though it’s temporary.
*Duke Silver: Yeah.*
*Ashli Towel: Right, right, right. Yeah.* (Interview 4, p. 16)
In Ludwig and Primrose’s story about staying with their friends (the ones discussed in the anecdote about Jeopardy being turned up over Ludwig’s Grateful Dead music), this aggression was more direct:

Primrose: […] we had a fight. We had an actual confrontation, and I don’t do confrontation, I just sat there and ate it. And she just said all these terrible things to me. And I was just like “this isn’t like—” [laughs]
Ludwig: “This isn’t about me.” [laughs]
Primrose: Nope! Like, this is, y’know, “all these things that you’re talking about, like…have nothing to do with us.” (Interview 3, p. 25)

RVers encounter these forms of resistance, as well; for example, Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson (2013) observed that “while the majority [of RVers in the sample] felt they were supported by the family in their decision to RV, a small number recognized that their behaviour was viewed in a negative light and was [considered] contrary to cultural norms” (p. 55). Although none of my participants mentioned vandalism, sometimes attacks on vanlifers’ homes do happen, as well. In July of this year, a vanlifer in Squamish had acid poured on her vehicle twice in two weeks when she was parking at her boyfriend’s house in a residential neighbourhood (Hennig July 22, 2018). Another vanlifer had the word “squat” spray-painted on their vehicle (ibid.).

My interviewees and I have encountered and experienced sedentarist attitudes and sedentarist policies in different ways, with varying degrees of impact. Based on what my participants told me, institutional barriers like the address requirement seem to be fairly easy to navigate; however, legislation that actively targets the practices of vehicle nomads can have more of a negative impact. As a result of the way that parking regulations impact my own mobility practices, I’ve had to train myself to search for “no overnight parking” signs whenever I pull in to sleep for the night. And while many would argue that the installation of these signs is all about regulating space, for me, their tangible impact lies in the way that they regulate my mobility.
Yet, some forms of regulation are a bit more direct than a “no overnight parking” sign. As I mentioned in my chapter on methodology, since purchasing my van, I’ve been detained five out of the last six times I have crossed the border from Canada into the United States. Each time it happens, I have to park my van in the lot so it can be searched, and I have to go into a building to be processed, which generally takes anywhere from 30 minutes to two and a half hours. I believe they call this procedure “document control.”

One of the most frustrating experiences I’ve had with this process was when my partner was turned away from the Alaskan border in August of 2018 (I was allowed in this time because I had a letter from my employer, but I obviously wasn’t going to leave him behind). The border guard told us that it was fine for us to live “unconventionally,” but that if we wanted to cross the border, we had to prove that we were conforming to certain sedentarist norms. We had to have receipts indicating that we paid rent and/or hydro bills at a fixed address, and/or proof of employment through deposit slips, and/or a letter from our employers showing that we were employed and had to return to our jobs by a certain date (Figure 26). Basically, if we wanted to cross the border, we had to pretend to be what we weren’t: sedentary.

Based on an excerpt included in Counts and Counts’ (2009) ethnographic work *Over the Next Hill*, Canadian RVers are subject to these kinds of expectations, as well:

> [American immigration officials] interpre[t] ‘residency’ as a *residence* in Canada and require that such residence be permanently attached to the ground. They have made it clear they will not accept a movable or mobile RV under any circumstances whether on a lot to which you hold title or on a lot you own in an RV park. They do not accept an address which shows a box number only, but must have a street address. They also do not accept residency with a relative unless you have rental and utility receipts. They will accept a mobile home on your own lot or in a mobile home park provided it is permanently attached. (Jim and Joyce Johnson, cited in Counts & Counts 2009, p. 122)

Counts and Counts (2009) have noted that RVers (and presumably other types of vehicle nomad) who wish to “spend several months of the year in the US must satisfy American immigration
requirements for Canadian residency which, ironically, are more stringent than are those of the Canadian federal or provincial governments” (p. 122, emphasis added). I’m guessing this is probably why, when my partner and I handed our passports over to the guard at Canadian customs and explained to him that we’d been turned back from the Alaskan border because we didn’t meet the residency requirements, he held up our passports with a quizzical expression, as if to say “well, what the hell do they call these?”
Figure 26: Intentions and Ties. A checklist of the documentation that I need to bring with me when I try to cross the United States border in my van. Although I’ve been told that I don’t need to bring all of them, I try to bring as many as I can because I’ve already been denied entry to the United States once (see Appendix for full-size copy) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.).

Sedentarism isn’t benign. My findings (and the scholarly literature on mobile populations) have shown that the policies and attitudes fostered by a sedentarist metaphysics can—and do—have negative impacts on real human beings, at a personal level. We vanlifers
aren’t the abstract nomads of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, who can challenge the status quo by parking wherever the hell we like. Nor are we moving through spaces that are “un-mediated by laws and controls,” as my experiences at the U.S. border probably suggest (Adey 2010, p. 60). If we miss a “no overnight parking” sign (as I did in Nebraska), the police can come knocking, or people can post passive aggressive post-it notes on our windshields. Or in places like Squamish, people may even feel justified in dumping acid on your vehicle (Hennig July 22, 2018).

If I could go back and do my interviews again, I would include a question about the issues that vanlifers have had around parking, because it’s in carrying out this particular mobility practice that the impacts of “vehicle vagrancy” laws and other sedentarist forms of legislation appear to be felt. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until I started living in my van that I even started noticing “no overnight parking” signs; however, once I started noticing them, I started seeing them everywhere. Although it’s possible to understand these signs as a form of spatial regulation, approaching them through the lens of a mobile metaphysics helps to convey how they regulate mobility, forcing vehicle nomads—who don’t adhere to normative understandings of what automobility is supposed to look like—to keep moving.

**Conclusion**

There are a number of mobility practices that my participants engaged in as a part of their way of life. An important step that interviewees took in making the transition from their pre-nomadic mobilities to their current ones was to store, sell, or donate material belongings. As my participants noted, their mobility involves living in less than 200 square feet, and as part of that, you don’t have the room to be acquisitive. This may be why some of them referred to the act of purging belongings as more than just a pragmatic behaviour, representing it as a rejection of social norms around consumerism.
Although interviewees represented their pre-nomadic mobilities as busy and tightly-scheduled, the moment they became full-timers was not always one of jubilation. The vehicle nomads I interviewed often experienced doubt, fear, or a sense of “what did I just do?” when they first hit the road, although a few of them indicated that this feeling went away fairly quickly. Even so, my participants acknowledged that their way of life—while rewarding—brought its own distinct challenges, and that it wasn’t something that just anybody could take to. This was one of the benefits of having a unique community to which they belonged—a “tribe” that offered mutual help and moral support, and in times of doubt, confirmation that living in a vehicle wasn’t ‘crazy.’ And although a few of the nomads I spoke to had saved up money before taking to the road, most of them were engaging in different types of employment as part of this mobile way of life, either by settling temporarily to work, or by working remotely from the vehicle.

Where the distinctiveness of interviewees’ mobility practices truly emerged was in their discussions of the differences between vanlife and tourism. Participants contrasted their open-ended, serendipitous, and flexible mobility with tourist mobilities that they represented as tightly scheduled and constrained by the need to “get back” to sedentary life. My interviewees, on the other hand, saw themselves as being free to take it slow, chasing adventures as they found them and choosing their routes based on novelty and fun, rather than speed and efficiency. They pointed out that the practice of sleeping in their vehicles also liberated them from the need to search for accommodations, which meant that they didn’t have to alter the speed or direction of their mobility based on where the hotels were located. Furthermore, they were able to get up and go at a moment’s notice without having to pack a bag; indeed, everything they needed was in the vehicle with them.
The ways in which my participants differentiated their mobility from tourist mobilities problematizes binary distinctions between ‘home’ and ‘away’ (or ‘home’ and ‘vacation’) that are rooted in a sedentarist metaphysics. For the vehicle nomads I spoke to, “home is everywhere,” and their day-to-day practices did not tend to mark a separation between travelling and everyday life. Moreover, the practices of tourists were described in terms reminiscent of those used to describe the lifestyles that interviewees had left behind: fast-paced, busy, and tightly scheduled. These terms also echoed through their discussions of routes: back roads were favoured over interstates, because back roads offered opportunities for fun and adventure, while interstates were described as stressful and boring.

My participants loved their moving homes, often giving them names, and in some cases, talking about them as though they were living entities. Debbie, Squanchy, Claire, PeeWee, Manatee…most of the vehicles that belonged to my participants had names that were as unique as their drivers. And yet, when I asked interviewees what they would do in the event of a permanent breakdown, their answers were evasive or ambivalent. It was only after living in my van for a while that I began to comprehend that the concepts of place and place attachment weren’t taking me far enough as a way of understanding how participants related to their vehicle homes. And while this resulted in a little bit of frustration when I was in the field, it ultimately helped me to see that place wasn’t a concept that fully conveyed what my participants’ homes actually meant to them. The difficulties I encountered also showed me that even though I was actively trying to ground my research in a mobile metaphysics, some of the questions I asked my participants were shaped by sedentarist assumptions about nomadism, homes, and movement.

And, as Cresswell (2006) suggests, if these ways of thinking never left the pages of people’s interview guides, that would be fine. However, as he indicates—and as my findings
have shown—sedentarist metaphysics influences attitudes and policies beyond the ivory tower, and it has tangible (and sometimes harmful) effects on flesh-and-blood nomads. Large Marge mentioned having to deal with constant harassment as a result of not being able to hide the fact that she was living in her vehicle, while multiple other participants made reference to getting ‘knocked on’ (in two cases, by the police). And, as I’ve already mentioned, I’ve been knocked on by the police as well, and I’ve been detained multiple times at the United States border.

Although I can do little at the present time to check sedentarist attitudes and legislation out there in the world, it’s my hope that by challenging the reader to think of sedentarism as a form of discrimination, I can help to orient people differently towards sedentarist metaphysics in general. Viewpoints that assign moral worth to fixity or discriminate against particular groups on the basis of their mobility are viewpoints worthy of critique, and although it’s difficult to undermine a metaphysics that’s so decidedly hegemonic, it’s my hope that I’ve at least made my readers more aware of the impact that this way of thinking can have outside the walls of academia.
CHAPTER 6
Conclusion

As long as there is gas in the tank and a running engine you have the freedom to turn left down that dusty road or continue on toward other unknowns. For those addicted to somewhere different, VanLife offers up endless change and a catalyst to let go of those little modern conveniences that make life so comfortable.

Somewhere between great days with rad new friends at camp and broken down rainy ones spent huddling in a parking lot, we learn to find balance from our own discomfort. There is no grand destination just the love of constant movement and experiences that will shape and define you.

-Message on the back of a “VanLife” sticker, illustrated by Kayla Edgar

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The Adventure Van Meet-up in Golden, Colorado, was a bit different than the other vanlife gatherings I had attended. Held in the parking lot of a ski shop, many of the vans on display were high-end sprinters that looked like they’d just rolled off the showroom floor. There was no real spot for a campfire or an impromptu jam session here; however, it was still obvious that these vans were homes that people cared about. In the entryway to one of the sprinters, a sign proudly proclaimed “Beer: It’s what’s for dinner,” and in another, a net full of fresh fruit hung above one of the countertops. Sitting down for an interview after the event, I asked a vanner named Timmy Toothpicks how he’d gotten into vanlife.

“So, about five years ago, I dated this woman who...who, her ex-boyfriend had a van, like a Westphalia, and they used to go out and um, just spend their weekends, or maybe week trips here and there, and she said it was awesome! So, she said ‘boy, wouldn’t it be nice to live in a van?’ And that kinda planted the seed—this was, like I said, five years ago—that kinda planted the seed.”

Taking notes, I nodded.
“And then, the perfect storm hit. I was living in downtown Denver, my lease was up, I only wanted to live in Golden, Colorado, and I couldn’t find an apartment to rent, or a house, or anything like that. And at the same time, I had been researching vans to actually live in, but not thinking it was gonna happen. And it was the perfect storm. My lease was up, I couldn’t find another place to live, I found a van online that I liked. And the next day, all of a sudden, here I am. I’m, I’m living in a van full-time.”

Taking notes as Timmy Toothpicks spoke, I gave a nod, then looked up as he continued his story.

“[B]ack when I started this, I actually had, I had, I had a job where I had to be in the office every day,” he explained. “[…] So, I was living in my office parking lot for the first year that I was, that I was supposed to be nomadic, but I really wasn’t,” he explained with a laugh. “[…] So there, there was a show back in the day, and people tell me about it—I remember it, but I never watched—called Trapper John, M.D. ?”

I burst out laughing and nodded in acknowledgement, having heard enough jokes about Trapper John on the show “Mystery Science Theater 3000” to get the reference.

With a chuckle, he continued: “like, he’d be on his lawn chair on the roof of his RV, out in the parking lot of the hospital or something like that? […] So that was me. That was really me. […] I wanted to go places, but my job left me tied down […] [s]o when I, when I wasn’t working for that company any more, the main goal of my next job was going to be 100% remote […] [s]o I could do what I, what I’m doing today. And wanted to do.”

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When I first started my research with vanlifers, I knew that I’d probably be using concepts from the mobilities literature to help me make sense of my findings, as these concepts
were developed to help scholars retain (and engage with) the social and political aspects of movement. Mobilities scholars theorize movement as a social practice called *mobility*, which is said to be made up of physical movement, representations, and practices (Cresswell 2010). This way of thinking pushes back against sedentarist metaphysics, a way of thinking about the world which foregrounds concepts like fixity and place, and can even go as far as assigning these concepts a positive moral value. This association between morality and fixity can have negative repercussions for nomads and other mobile populations, which makes the mobilities paradigm particularly useful for those who seek to criticize understandings of movement that code mobile ways of life as deviant or threatening. By shifting into a mobile metaphysics, which reduces or removes the ontological priority we assign to concepts like fixity and place, we may be able to better explore the politics that are overlooked or silenced by sedentarist ways of thinking.

There are two primary ontological frameworks that emerge from the mobilities literature: Urry’s (2003) mobilities and moorings framework, and Adey’s (2006) relational politics of mobility. In a mobilities and moorings framework, fixity is retained as a concept, and mobility is understood in terms of its dialectical relationship with networks of fixed infrastructural moorings (e.g. roads, airports, gas stations). In Adey’s (2006) relational politics of mobility, however, fixity is reconceptualised as relative immobility, and mobilities are described in terms of how they relate to one another (and to relative immobilities). In this ontology, things like airports and cities, which are normally understood as ‘fixed,’ are viewed instead as convergences of intertwining movements. Even though fixity is not retained in this particular framework, this understanding of mobility is still compatible with relational conceptualizations of place that have been advanced in the discipline of geography.
That being said, based on the research question that I was trying to answer, place (as an epistemological tool) was not incorporated into the relational ontological framework that I used for my analysis. Again, this wasn’t meant to suggest that place isn’t a valuable lens for analyzing the results of research with vanlifers; only that some aspects of my participants’ mobile way of life weren’t as easily explained when I tried to use place as the lens for understanding them. And, as I’ve mentioned in previous chapters, this is one of the reasons why the mobilities paradigm was developed: to help researchers retain and engage with important aspects of their participants’ mobile social worlds. This is also why I avoided characterizing vanlifers’ current mobility in terms of the homes and cities that they left behind; and instead, used a relational ontology to discuss how vanlifers departed from pre-nomadic mobilities that were bound by routines and schedules, and entered into mobilities that were more open-ended and flexible.

Using mobility as the primary epistemological lens for my analysis also helped to keep my work grounded in a mobile metaphysics; namely, a metaphysics that assigns ontological priority to movement, and takes it as the conceptual starting point for understanding mobility. This metaphysics does have a political dimension, as studies of mobility that focus on rootedness and place have occasionally carried over into what Cresswell (2006) calls moral geographies, where things like fixity, public space, and rootedness are discussed as though they are intrinsically beneficial for everyone. This isn’t always the case. As scholars have already observed, these moral geographies and sedentarist ways of thinking don’t just stay within the walls of academia; they are hegemonic, and they help to promote attitudes and forms of legislation that discriminate against nomadic populations. And, as I discussed in my previous chapter, sedentarist attitudes and legislation do impact many of my participants (as well as me) at
a personal level, making it more challenging for us to engage in some of the practices of vehicle nomadism (like parking to sleep for the night). Attitudes fostered by moral geographies and sedentarist metaphysics are what lead to us getting knocked on, harassed, and kicked off of sites. It’s a politics of mobility that mobile metaphysics can help us to uncover and engage with in a meaningful way.

Employing a mobile metaphysics can also help us to uncover valuable information about how different groups of nomads represent and practice their mobility. In particular, a focus on mobility helps to draw out the emphasis that vehicle nomads throughout the literature—and in my own research—have placed on the concept of freedom. Although the ‘freedom of the road’ trope has been critiqued by scholars, it doesn’t appear that anyone has actively sat down with flesh-and-blood nomads to determine what they actually mean when they use the word freedom in reference to their mobilities. This is unfortunate, as engaging more directly with this concept and unpacking how vehicle nomads relate to it reveals something important: regardless of age, context, or culture, people who live on the road full-time are representing their mobility in similar ways. When they use the word freedom, they don’t seem to be drawing on the abstract or idealized notion of the ‘freedom of the road’ that emerges in films and popular culture; rather, they appear to be advancing personal definitions of freedom that set their past and present forms of mobility (however caricatured) in contrast with one another. Deconstructing the way that the word freedom is used in my transcripts and in the literature indicates that vehicle nomads are using the term freedom to describe their liberation from social norms, schedules, and routines, and their ability to pick up and go whenever they like. When you consider that representation is a key component of mobility, uncovering a shared representation in multiple different groups of
nomads is valuable, because it raises questions about why different mobilities are being described in these similar ways.

In my own research, participants represented their mobility as a lifestyle that embodied this kind of freedom, liberating them from pre-nomadic mobilities that were described as more time-restricted, faster-paced, and far less interesting. Their nomadic mobility also involved certain practices, like purging belongings, occasionally parking at Wal-Marts for the night, and sometimes, going without a shower for a few days. But it was also a mobility that interviewees felt brought them an improved sense of mindfulness and physical well-being, and one that opened their schedule up to include practices like journaling, cooking meals, and doing yoga. It was a slower mobility, they claimed; one in which the speed and direction of their movement were not constrained by a reliance upon hotels for accommodations. As a result, whenever they weren’t on their way to an event, my participants felt free to select the routes that appealed to them, often choosing to meander along back roads instead of speeding along the interstates.

However, even though my interviewees emphasized the freedom that this way of life brought them, a few of them openly acknowledged that their way of life wasn’t as idyllic as people’s social media accounts might lead you to believe. Vanlife, they said, came with certain challenges, and in some cases, a degree of “shakeout” (Interview 10, p. 8). Two of the couples had been knocked on by the police, and one participant discussed having to deal with constant harassment when she first started out in her school bus. Even so, my interviewees’ mobility was something to which they were profoundly attached, because they felt that it gave them the freedom to pursue the paths that they chose in life, rather than the ones they felt society was telling them to follow.
My participants’ mobility, to a certain extent, also problematized and dissolved the binary
distinctions between ‘home’ and ‘away,’ and ‘home’ and ‘vacation.’ Except in cases where they
were travelling overseas (and sometimes even then), whenever interviewees travelled
somewhere, their home went with them, which meant that they never had to pack a bag or book
accommodations—everything they needed was already on board. This meant that the idea of
‘home’ and ‘away’ as two separate concepts wasn’t as applicable to my participants’ mobility, as
they often told me that “wherever I go, I am home” (Interview 9, p. 19). Whereas travel may be
marked as ‘other’ to everyday mobility for people in fixed dwellings by practices like booking
accommodations and packing a bag, it seemed that travelling wasn’t something ‘other’ for many
of my participants. It was just something they could hop in the front seat and do if they wanted
to.

Participants also placed a strong emphasis on having the freedom to go when they wanted
go, and less emphasis on where. This is not to say that the where of it all did not matter to
them; indeed, the transcripts were overflowing with the names of cities that vanlifers had visited,
national parks that they had camped in, and areas that they were excited to go and explore. In
one case, two full pages of the interview transcript were devoted to a discussion of all of the
cities and attractions that the couple planned on seeing in the near future. However, relative
immobility was a concern for some of my participants: in four of my interviews, vanlifers (and
Large Marge, the skoolie) indicated that they could only be off the road for a certain amount of
time before they started feeling the need to move again. This feeling, described in Counts and
Counts’ (2009) ethnographic study as “hitch itch,” has been described in the literature as
reflecting a nomad’s desire to control their social environment; however, this was not an
understanding that my interview data helped to support.
One of the most interesting findings that emerged out of foregrounding movement in my analysis was that it helped me to uncover some of the ways in which my participants differentiated their own mobility practices from the mobility practices of tourists. Through my interviews, I learned that my participants understood tourists as engaging in the same mobility practices that they, as vehicle nomads, were rejecting, even though the tourists’ physical movements (i.e., stopping points and routes) might have been identical to their own. Moreover, engaging with participants’ responses using a relational ontology helped me discern that the way in which interviewees were representing tourists’ mobilities was very similar to how they’d represented their own pre-nomadic mobilities. This was an important discovery, as the critiques that my participants advanced regarding tourists’ mobilities and their own pre-nomadic mobilities echo the critiques of *automobilized time-space* that have been advanced in the scholarly literature. However, what’s fascinating about my participants’ critiques, when we compare them to those put forward in the automobilities literature, is that for these vehicle nomads, *fixity* is the root of the problem, and automobility is the solution.

**How Vanlife informs a Discussion of Automobility: Theorizing Mobility Culture**

Automobility is thus a system that *coerces* people into an intense *flexibility*. It forces people to juggle fragments of time so as to deal with the temporal and spatial constraints that it itself generates.

> -John Urry (2004, p. 28)

Medusa: Yeah. Like, being in a house, for some reason—I know this is probably, is like a bigger thing than, than just the house—but it’s part of what keeps the rat race going, in some ways, to me. And like, here, I can kinda step away from it.

Spener: Yeah. [...] You definitely get into like, have to schedule and prioritize every single thing, like, when we’re in, uh, at home, or in a house, or whatever, and like, *fill* your schedule out. And…here, it’s a little more fluid, and

//Medusa: Can’t really do that.//

Spener: “Hey, you wanna go paddle boarding?” “Okay!”

> -Medusa and Spener (Interview 6, p. 33)
As I explained in my literature review, the concept of automobility was originally advanced as a way to understand processes (both spatial and social) that were unfolding in contemporary urban landscapes. It drew attention to the ways in which many urban and suburban spaces were being shaped by car use, and the ways in which practices of car use appeared to be intersecting with (and influencing) practices of human sociality. At its core, automobility was theorized as a form of movement that involved—and was perpetuated by—an accompanying set of social practices. Indeed, when it was first advanced as a term in the literature, automobility was conceptualized as a hegemonic system that was self-sustaining and self-perpetuating, as well as detrimental to the environment, the urban landscape, and urban democracy. Worse still, scholars suggested that the narrative that automobility was a requirement for urban living was being reinforced by the tendency of city planners to design urban space in ways that presupposed automobility. Because urban landscapes were being built in a way that assumed everyone had cars, the assumption that people had to use cars to navigate the urban landscape was consistently being reinforced.

This interpretation of the urban landscape as being shaped by (and for) automobility led scholars like Sheller and Urry (2000) to associate this form of mobility with an automobilized time-space, a realm of human experience in which people are said to engage in “complex, fragile and contingent patterns of social life” that can’t be maintained without an automobile (Urry 2004, p. 29). In this interpretation, drivers race around the city, “cutting mercilessly through slower-moving pathways and dwellings,” using their cars to help them “transcen[d] distance to complete series of activities within fragmented moments of time” (Sheller & Urry 2000, p. 739; Urry 2004, p. 29). These people, it is claimed, run on instantaneous time, relying on the
flexibility that the automobile offers them to meet the moment-to-moment demands created by their busy and tightly-packed schedules (Urry 2004). In this vision, automobility is understood as a problem, and it’s constructed as a coercive system; one in which driving is seen as an instrumental mode of mobility on which people must rely to meet the demands of a schedule that’s made even more demanding by the car-oriented structure of the urban landscape (ibid.).

As Pel (2016) has noted, this kind of mobility has been critiqued by scholars for the ways in which it is said to “undermin[e] ‘normal’ social relations,” insulating the person-in-motion in ways that allow them to opt out of (democratic) interactions with other human beings in urban public space (p. 665). As for the people who practice this mobility, they’re associated with an “SUV model of citizenship,” in which they engage in “privatized, unhindered, cocooned movement through public space,” and “feel they have a right not to be burdened through interaction with anyone or anything they wish to avoid” (Mitchell, cited in Henderson 2009, p. 84).

Now, I’d like you to think about that for a moment. Think about people rushing around the urban landscape, avoiding interactions with other people on their way to wherever they’re going, wrapped up in their own little private world. Think about them hurrying around as they navigate their busy, tightly-packed schedules, cobbling together precious fragments of time as they try to get their errands done. Now, picture the last time you watched news footage of a flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk in New York City, and go re-read the previous paragraph.

If the pedestrians in New York City appear to be engaging in the same (antisocial) practices as the motorists that scholars in the automobilities literature are critiquing, then what does that mean? If we use a relational ontology to compare the mobility of urban motorists in the automobilities literature to the mobility of the urban pedestrians we see in the news, we
might ask why the behaviours that automobilities scholars have critiqued are arising in both of these mobile groups. Is it possible that something’s going on in these coagulations of movement we know as ‘cities’ that’s causing drivers and pedestrians to behave in similar ways?

It’s an interesting question; however, before I engage with it, let’s return momentarily to Sheller and Urry’s (2000) concept of automobilized time-space, in which people’s social relations and employment practices are grounded in notions of instantaneous time (Urry 2004). Think about the picture that the authors painted: a stretched-out urban landscape, in which the requirements of day-to-day life are juggled in tandem with a sociality that hinges on people’s ability to be mobile at a moment’s notice (Sheller and Urry 2000; Urry 2004). A life in which people are rushing around, using cars to help them navigate busy, tightly-packed schedules. A stressful life where, by the end of the day, you probably just want to get home, throw a TV dinner in the microwave, and flop onto the couch to watch Jeopardy.

Sound familiar?

It should. It’s the same (stereotypical) representation of cram-packed mobility that my participants were using automobility to get away from.

But wait…how can that be? How is it possible for vehicle nomads to use automobility to escape the problems that automobility is said to cause?

To answer this question, we need to return to my earlier discussion of the gaps in the automobilities literature. At present, the way in which scholars are conceptualizing automobility is derived almost entirely from the observations we’ve made about the practices and behaviours of the urban (or suburban) utilitarian motorist. And this is a conceptualization within which the existing critiques of automobilized time-space and instantaneous time definitely do make a lot of sense (Sheller & Urry 2000). However, because alternative auto-mobile ways of being (such as
vehicle nomadism and rural automobility) are almost entirely absent from the literature, there hasn’t been much opportunity for us to expand upon this original conceptualization of automobility. What this means is that the way in which automobility is currently being conceptualized does not yet account for alternative practices of automobility that might unsettle our understandings of how automobilized time-space and instantaneous time are perpetuated.

Based on my interview data, my participants appear to be using nomadic automobility to escape the problematic lifestyle that scholars have attributed to the hegemonic practices and structures of an automobility ‘system.’ What is particularly interesting about the critiques that my participants offered is that instead of attributing these hegemonic practices to automobility, they attributed them to relative immobility. This is one of the reasons that I selected the two quotes I used to open this section: if you compare the two statements to one another, a fascinating contrast emerges where you see that the mobilities scholar (Urry 2004) is blaming the temporality of urban life on vehicles, and the vehicle nomads (Medusa and Spener) are blaming the temporality of urban life on fixed housing. This is important to consider, because my participants and the scholars in the automobilites literature appear to be critiquing the same problems; they’re just doing it in completely different ways. Where critical automobilites scholars urge a rejection of private automobiles as a response to the harmful attributes of automobility, my participants have shifted the way in which they relate to private automobiles as their response. What this suggests is that if we investigate the ways in which alternative performances of automobility deviate from (or respond to) the hegemonic and normative practices discussed in the literature, it could actually change how we approach a politics of automobility.
This also raises the question of how positionality plays into understandings of automobility, because based on what vanlifers said in their interviews with me, it wasn’t really urban automobility (as it’s described in the automobilities literature) that vanlifers were trying to get away from. Rather, it was the mobility culture in which they were formerly embedded: a culture in which speed, efficiency, and the ability to get the greatest number of things done in the shortest amount of time were seen as reigning supreme. It was a culture my participants associated with stress and busyness, and jam-packed schedules; a culture that relied on the interstates my participants tend to avoid. A culture in which people “juggle fragments of time to assemble complex and contingent patterns of social life” (Urry 2004).

Now, it may be tempting to suggest that this is an urban mobility culture that I’m talking about here; however, I’m going to emphasize that we need to stay grounded in a relational ontology for the time being, and stay focused on how mobilities relate to other mobilities, rather than how they relate to place. You’ll see why in a few paragraphs; however, for now I’ll just say that it’s important to keep the focus on mobilities, because if we take the urban landscape out of our discussion of the ‘speed-efficiency-immediacy’ mobility culture, something important is going to emerge.

Automobility, as Urry (2004) notes, is a social structure. It’s a network of technologies and people that intersect to shape people’s practices and social relations in particular ways. This is why Kent (2014) asserts that giving up automobility would “entail not only a change of transport mode, but a change in practices of…working, socialising and parenting” (p. 110). But what if the practices of “working, socialising and parenting” were changed first (ibid.)? It goes without saying that human beings enjoyed productive work lives and fulfilling social relationships for centuries before the car was invented. The major difference was that people
back then *had* no technological way to operate on *instantaneous time*, as Urry (2004) so aptly calls it. This meant that they had no choice but to engage in a slower mobility, in which you couldn’t be expected to become mobile at the drop of a hat. Cresswell (2010) captures this idea to a certain extent with the concept of the *mobility constellation*, which he defines as a “historically and geographically specific formation of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile practices” (p. 17). However, with the rise of the automobile, many people now had the technological means to operate on *instantaneous time*, which meant that faster movement and busier schedules were now a possibility, and for many people, a reality.

Based on the interview data provided by my participants, I would argue that *automobilized time-space* might be less a result of automobility itself than it is a product of cultures that encourage people to engage with life (and the landscape) in ways that prioritize speed, efficiency, and immediacy. And while *I do* agree with Sheller and Urry (cited in Henderson 2009) in the sense that the car can be used to configure patterns of social life in “increasingly environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable patterns of dwelling, production and consumption,” what the alternative automobility practices of my participants demonstrate is that vehicles don’t *have* to be used in this way (p. 72). This is why it is important to consider alternative auto-mobile practices in a discussion of the politics of automobility: although vehicles can be used to perpetuate the unsustainable patterns of social life that automobilities scholars are critiquing, they can also be used to withdraw from those patterns and to create new ones.

Indeed, comments made by my participants tend to suggest that when auto-mobile subjects reconfigure their social and working lives in ways that *remove* the cultural emphasis on speed, efficiency, and immediacy, a different automobility has the opportunity to emerge: a
slower automobility, in which you can take the back roads if you want to, because efficiency isn’t always a priority. An automobility in which the ability to become mobile at a moment’s notice is valued not because it allows you to get more things done faster, but because it allows you to go on spontaneous adventures without packing a bag. And that last point is an important one, because using a vehicle to get as many things done as possible within a tight schedule wasn’t an automobility practice that my interviewees tended to identify with; instead, it was an automobility practice that they associated with tourism.

The ways in which my participants characterized tourists’ mobilities were very similar to the ways in which they characterized their own pre-nomadic mobilities: fast-paced, busy, and tightly scheduled. Although these representations of tourist mobilities are exactly that—representations—they do draw our attention to an interesting aspect of mobility cultures. The fast-paced and tightly scheduled mobility that scholars have critiqued as being damaging to urban democracy isn’t exclusive to urban space: it can be performed everywhere; it merely requires that the driver belong to a mobility culture that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and immediacy. Put simply, your automobility and its accompanying practices are portable. An urban motorist who engages in the automobility practices that scholars criticize can just as easily engage in those same practices when they’re driving through rural areas on a two week vacation.

This is why I said in an earlier paragraph that we needed to stay grounded in a relational ontology for our discussion of automobility: if we use the urban landscape (and its patterns of sociality) as a lens for understanding the fast-paced and tightly scheduled automobility that scholars—and my participants—are critiquing, we may not be fully capturing how that automobility is performed. After all, the busy schedules that automobility is said to facilitate don’t just disappear when you hit the city limits: the person who’s tailgating a city bus in
Toronto today could just as easily be tailgating a tractor in the countryside tomorrow.

Attributing the rise of *instantaneous time* to increasing automobile use and the way that the automobile has shaped the urban environment and urban sociality doesn’t fully explain how fast-paced and tightly-scheduled automobilities get ‘taken on vacation’ with people when they leave the city—and this is where a mobile metaphysics becomes very useful.

As Shubin (2010) points out, “attempts to ‘ground’ movement and root it within specific bounded and fixed framework (*sic*)” can potentially overlook “what only makes sense within performative practices of automobility” (p. 510). This is why research with vehicle nomads, who appear to relate differently to automobilized time-space, is important for automobilities scholarship. Vanlife, as a form of automobility, disrupts current understandings of automobilized time-space and instantaneous time, because it demonstrates that personal automobiles can be used to contest these temporal practices instead of actively perpetuating them. Likewise, my participants’ critiques of tourists’ mobilities remind us that it is possible for people to engage in busy, tightly-scheduled mobilities, regardless of where they are in the world. If you’re embedded in a culture that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and immediacy, a change of place may not always result in a change of mobility practices. However, a sedentarist metaphysics may not always allow us to capture this.

In this thesis, I have discussed some of the ways in which vehicle nomads understand and practice their automobility, in hopes of contributing to a body of literature from which nomadic and rural understandings of automobility have largely been absent. The ways in which my participants represent and practice their automobility differ considerably from the automobility that has been described in the academic literature, both in terms of how the concept of *freedom* is used, and in terms of how concepts like *instantaneous time* are understood. These alternative
understandings of automobility are important for us to engage with if we wish to develop a more nuanced understanding of automobility and its politics. As I mentioned in my Literature Review chapter, descriptions of “speed-obsessed” motorists barreling along “urban freeways” or “stuck behind a slow vehicle while trying to save precious fragments of time” are descriptions of automobility that don’t necessarily resonate with all auto-mobile subjects (Featherstone 2004, p. 8; Sheller & Urry 2000, pp. 747, 754). Then again, it should be acknowledged that slower-moving automobilities, in which drivers can choose back roads over interstates and pull over to sleep without finding a hotel, don’t resonate with all auto-mobile subjects, either. As this thesis project has shown, automobility—like mobility itself— involves complex sets of movements, representations, and practices that are far from universal. And investigating the movements, representations and practices of full-time vehicle nomads in a way that acknowledges their distinctiveness can help us to fill important gaps in the literature on vehicle nomadism, as well.

**How Vanlife Informs a Discussion of Full-Time Vehicle Nomadism**

Quit yer job, quit yer job, and let’s go kick rocks  
Bring the dog, bring the dog, and a clean pair of socks  
Let me out, get me out, get me out of this box  
Get me out of this box, get me out of this box

We’re bound by these tides, back and forth, home and back again  
Wait, let’s rewind, can’t we play this part again  
Ebb and flow, come and go, hit the road, where is home  
I don’t know, any more

-Broken Glass Kids, “Burn the Map”

***

The literature on vehicle nomadism, as I have already mentioned, tends to fall into two dominant categories: research on retired RVers (which tends to study them as a tourism market or as a model for successful aging), and research on nomadism in the British Isles (which tends to focus on the legislative climate in the UK and its effects on traditional nomads). However,
what my research with American vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) has shown is that
representations of being on the road full-time as freedom serve to draw these two distinct bodies
of literature into conversation with one another. And whether you refer to it as “hitch-itch,” a
“calling,” or “itchy feet,” it appears that vanlifers, RV nomads, and British vehicle nomads alike
are discussing the ability to go whenever you like as an important aspect of that freedom.
Regardless of age or cultural context, full-time vehicle nomads in multiple countries have been
describing their mobility in similar terms; it just took a focus on mobility, rather than on age,
tourism, or social justice, to draw that similarity out.

And although the representation of vehicle nomadism as freedom from social norms
around employment and the life course isn’t common in the existing literature, there is a
potential explanation for this trend. To date, most of the existing research on full-time vehicle
nomads outside of the United Kingdom has focused almost exclusively on RVers over the age of
45. This means that the majority of vehicle nomads that scholars have studied have been retired
from employment, and thus, couldn’t really represent their mobility as liberating them from
employment-related norms. Neither would these nomads consider their mobility to be a rejection
of social norms around the life course—namely, those narratives that dictate that full-time
mobility is only appropriate for retired people—since most of them are already retired and
wouldn’t be subject to that narrative anyway (of course, this does not mean that these retired
nomads can’t be critical of these social norms in hindsight, as my experience with Phyllis the
RVer demonstrates). Moreover, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, traditional British vehicle
nomads might not represent their mobility in these terms either, as they may not have been raised
in a cultural context where narratives of young-stationary-employment and old-nomadic-
retirement are actively perpetuated. It would be interesting to conduct ethnographic research
with a group of New Age Travellers in Britain, to see whether they represent their mobility in similar ways to the nomads I interviewed, since they are more recent adoptees of nomadism.

So where does this leave us? If my research with American vanlifers (and Large Marge, the skoolie) has drawn these two distinct bodies of literature on vehicle nomads into conversation, then what does that tell us?

The first thing that it seems to suggest is that if we foreground mobility in our analysis when we are conducting research with nomadic communities, we may be able to identify representations and practices that are held in common between differing nomadic groups. Moreover, it complicates our understanding of full-time retired RVers, because it raises questions about how much their age actually does contribute to their mobility practices. Do they perform a slower mobility because they’re old and retired and have the time to travel like that (Patterson, Pegg & Litster, 2011)? Or does their slower style of movement have more to do with the fact that they’re on the road full-time instead of part-time?

Perhaps the most important thing that this thesis project has taught me is that there seems to be something about individuals who practice full-time mobility that distinguishes them from part-timers. In my own interviews and in the literature, nomads who are on the road full-time have acknowledged that their mobility isn’t appropriate for everyone, and what’s particularly interesting is that Jobes (1984) indicated that most of the part-time RVers in his sample had had the financial and temporal resources to go full-time if they’d chosen to do so...they just didn’t. Investigating the differences between vehicle nomads who are on the road part-time and those who are on the road full-time (in terms of how they understand their mobilities) would be an interesting avenue for future research, especially if it’s grounded in a relational ontology. What is it that discourages people from being on the road full-time if they have the resources to do so?
Given that vanlifers and skoolies have previously been included in studies on RVing, I also feel that it’s important for future research with vehicle nomads to explore the differences between RVing and vanlife/buslife. In previous research, van conversions and converted school buses have been defined as RVs; however, I feel that this decision may have been made prematurely, as Counts and Counts (2009) have indicated that RVers have a distinct subculture, and there isn’t enough research on vanlifers and skoolies yet to suggest whether or not they define their vehicles as RVs, or themselves as RVers. Unfortunately, this was not something that I asked my participants about when I was on the road, because when I did my initial review of the literature and created my interview script, I wasn’t familiar enough with the terms bus conversion and van conversion to pick up on the fact that vanlifers and skoolies had been captured in the studies I’d reviewed.

Personally, I don’t really identify as an RVer, because I don’t tend to camp in the same places as they do and I don’t belong to any of the RVing groups (e.g., SKPs, Good Samaritans). Although I do see RVers at the pump, they’ve never really talked to me, whereas I’ve had a vanlifer roll right up beside me in a gas station parking lot and strike up a conversation while I was hanging my underwear to dry (we actually ended up convoying to Craters of the Moon National Park together). I also recall that during our trip to the Yukon, on the night that my partner and I camped on the Midnight Dome Lookout in Dawson City, two other vans and an RV rolled up beside us, and the RVer was the only one who didn’t come out to join us by the fire. Come to think of it, since I became a vanlifer, I’m pretty sure the only time I’ve ever had an actual conversation with RVers was when a couple pulled in behind me at the sani dump.

These limited interactions have actually made me wonder whether RVers, vanlifers, and skoolies might understand themselves as belonging to different mobility (sub)cultures. I think it
would be a productive avenue for future research, as my own research has primarily focused on the similarities between RVers and my own participants (in terms of how they represent their mobility), and an investigation of the differences between vanlifing and RVing may add a valuable dimension to our discussions of nomadic automobility.

As for the full-time vehicle nomads who were kind enough to contribute to my research on their mobility, what does their future hold for them?

Large Marge: World domination.
Me: World domination. That’s a good goal.
Large Marge: World mobile domination.
Me: I love it. [pauses] That’s what they say, it’s, you shoot for the moon, and then if you miss, you end up in the stars.
Large Marge: Mm-hmm. (Interview 10, p. 23)

Thank you so much, dear reader, for taking the time to read what I have written. And to all of the amazing vanlifers—and the awesome skoolie—who helped to make this project a reality: thank you all, from the bottom of my heart. I couldn’t have done it without your insight and support.

I’ll see you out there on the road, my friends.
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Appendix

Interview Guide for the Master’s project “Mobile ‘Homes’: An Ethnographic Study with American Vandwellers”
By Stephanie Murray

Section A: Introductory Questions

Question 1: Tell me about how you became a vanlifer.

Question 2: There are people who don’t know anything about van nomads at all. If you were to give a really basic definition of what vanlife is, how would you explain it?

Question 3: How long have you been a full-time nomad?

Question 4: In your opinion, is vanlife something that anybody can take to?

Question 4a: Why/Why not?

Question 5: What was the biggest obstacle that you faced in taking up this way of life?

Question 6: What sorts of financial preparations did you make before you moved into your rig (van/car/truck/other)?

Question 7: What other sorts of preparations might a vanlifer have to go through before heading out in their vehicle? (Probe: and why is that particular preparation(s) important?)

Part B: Mobility and Meaning

Question 8: How did it feel when your rig was ready to go and you hit the road for the first time?

Question 9: What does being a vanlifer/vandweller/van nomad mean to you?

Question 10: Are there things that your friends or family who aren’t vanlifers don’t really ‘get’ about your lifestyle? (if yes, probe: What don’t they get about it?)

Question 10a: (if yes) Why do you think that is?

Question 11: When you started out as a van nomad, did you have a detailed plan about the places you were going to go? (Probe: or was it more spontaneous, like “going wherever the wind takes you?”)

Question 12: What is your best memory from your first few months on the road?

Question 12a: Why is that the best one?
Question 13: What complications did you face during your first few months of traveling?

Question 14: I’ve heard that not everybody takes to the nomadic life, which makes me wonder why some people stay vanlifers and others don’t. Do you have a sense of what it is that keeps you moving?

Question 15: What financial strategies do you use in order to stay on the road? (e.g. do you work digitally, or find jobs in places that you go to…?)

Question 16: What impact do fuel prices have on your mobility?

Question 17: What impact does the time of year have on your mobility? (e.g. do you move with the seasons, or avoid certain places in the summer or winter?)

Question 18: How often do you move from place to place?

Question 19: What usually guides your decision to move on to the next place? Do you just wake up one morning and say “it’s time to move on” or…? (Probe: What are the most important factors that you consider when you’re deciding on the next place you’ll go?)

Question 20: How does it feel when you’re on the road between places?

Question 21: When you’re moving between locations, what determines the kinds of routes you take? (e.g. do you use a GPS and let that guide you, or do you plan out a route and take back roads? Do you prefer interstates?)

Question 22: Do you tend to travel alone, or are you usually moving in a group with other nomads?

Question 22a: How does traveling in a group differ from traveling alone? (Probe: does it feel any different?)

Question 23: As someone who moves from place to place in the United States, how would you compare your mobility to that of tourists who might be taking the same routes and going to the same places? (probe for the differences between tourism and nomadism, and what the importance of these differences might be)

Question 24: In what ways does being able to sleep in your vehicle affect the way that you travel?

Question 25: If something happened where you had to give up this lifestyle tomorrow, how would that make you feel?

Question 26a: Can you explain why you would feel that way?

Question 26b: What would be the hardest thing to get used to if that happened?
Part C: Home

Question 27: So what kind of vehicle are you living in right now?

Question 27a: And what were your motivations for getting that particular vehicle?

Question 28: Did you do the interior of your rig yourself?

Question 28a: (If yes) What kind of considerations go into converting a vehicle into a living space?

Question 28b: (If yes) How important is it to you to do your own conversion? (Probe: Like, if someone had a little company where they bought vans and set them up with all the things you needed, would you buy that, or would you still want to do your own conversion from scratch?)

Question 28c: Why (or why not)?

Question 28d: If you were moving into another vehicle, would you want the inside to be designed very similar to the one you have now, or would you design it differently? (Probe: what would/wouldn’t you change?)

Question 28e: Why would you want it to be similar/to make changes?

Question 29: Are there certain things that you have to have finished inside the rig before you hit the road, or can you just buy a vehicle and do all the conversions on the move?

Question 30: If you had a friend who wanted to become a vanlifer, and they wanted your advice before they started looking for a vehicle to convert, what would your advice to them be?

Question 30a: (if they provide advice) And why is that? (why would that be the advice you give them?)

Question 31: I noticed that some of the Youtubers I’ve watched love to do van tours (tours of other people’s vans). Why is that?

Question 32: How would you describe your home to someone who had never seen it before?

Question 33: In your opinion, what aspects of living in a vehicle make it different from living in an apartment or a house?

Question 33a: What’s the biggest difference?

Question 34: Which of your everyday practices changed the most when you became a vanlifer?

Question 35: In your opinion, what aspects of living in a vehicle are similar to living in a house or an apartment?
Question 36: People often state that they feel positive emotions towards the places they live in. How does your home make you feel?

Question 37: If something happened where your vehicle broke down and couldn’t be repaired, would you continue living in it?

Question 37a: (if yes) Would you get another vehicle and start converting it if that happened? 
(If no) Why not/what would you do with it/what would you do?

Question 38: When I told my friends about the research I was doing, a lot of them asked how you get your mail, renew your driver’s license, and other stuff that you usually need a fixed address for. How does that kind of stuff work when you live in your vehicle?

Question 39: How does the concept of ‘community’ work, when you’re on the road like this?

Question 40: Do you do stealth camping with your rig?

Question 40a: (If yes): What is the importance of outfitting your vehicle for stealth camping? 
(If no): Is there a reason you don’t do stealth camping?

Part D: Closing Questions

Question 41: So what are your plans for the next few weeks?

Question 42: How about your plans for the next few years?

Question 43: How long do you think you’ll stay a nomad?

Question 44: Do you have anything to add that might be useful for me to know, or any questions that you felt I should have asked but didn’t?
United States Department of Homeland Security
Customs and Border Protection

Dear Traveler / Applicant for Admission:

At this point in time you do not appear to be clearly admissible to the United States as a temporary visitor for pleasure. In order to satisfy U.S. Officials as to your status and intentions, please provide this office with the indicated items below:

☐ Evidence of Employment (recent pay stubs, employee ID, letter from employer, etc).

☐ Proof of Foreign Residence (recent rent receipts, copy of mortgage, utility bills, etc).

☐ Evidence of Financial Support (bank statements, savings and checking account statements, income tax report forms, etc).

☐ Evidence of Financial Assistance (receipts or government correspondence of unemployment insurance, mother's assistance, welfare, disability, etc).

☐ Evidence of Educational Ties (valid school identification, letter from school officials on school letterhead).

☐ Utility Bills (recent phone, gas, electric/hydro, bills, etc).

☐ Income Tax Return Forms (current and past year).

☐ Confirmed return date (airline tickets, train/bus tickets, date specific).

☐ Sufficient funds for intended trip (cash, traveler's checks, etc).

☐ Contact name of family member, friend, or individual who you, the passengers, is/are travelling to see in the U.S.

☐ Address and/or telephone number where you can be reached in the U.S.

☐ Other items: ___________________________________________

***This list is intended to be used as a guideline only to assist you in returning with the necessary materials to help you sufficiently meet the burden of proof which is incumbent upon you as an applicant for admission to the United States. This list should not be considered to be all-inclusive.

THE FINAL DETERMINATION IS ALWAYS MADE BY AN OFFICER AFTER ALL ITEMS ARE CONSIDERED.