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# Vandwelling in the United States: a nomadic subculture on the margins of society

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Lucie Joncour

# Vandwelling in the United States: a nomadic subculture on the margins of society



<https://rvlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/cheapRVliving.jpg>.

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# Table of contents

<b>List of illustrations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>I- Living on the road: a financial and personal journey</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Chapter 1. Theoretical overview</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Recreational vehicle living and vandwelling	13
2. Subcultural studies and nomadism	15
3. The method section	17
<b>Chapter 2. Economic circumstances</b>	<b>19</b>
1. The Great Recession and foreclosure crisis	19
2. Housing affordability crisis and economic inequalities	21
3. Data and and demographics	23
<b>Chapter 3- Vandwelling: from homelessness to freedom</b>	<b>25</b>
1. Transitioning from a house to a home on wheels : technical issues	25
2. Vandwelling is a state of mind	30
<b>II- Spaces and places inhabited by vandwellers: a nomadic lifestyle</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Chapter 4. Online community</b>	<b>35</b>
1. Collective identity and “we-ness”	35
2. Solidarity and individualism	37

<b>Chapter 5. Spatial practices adopted by vandwellers: a nomadic lifestyle</b>	<b>39</b>
1. “Home is where you park it”	39
2. Nomadism: a subsistence strategy	41
3. Workamping	42
4. Outdoor activities: camping and boondocking	45
<b>Chapter 6. Vandwelling: between restlessness and settlement</b>	<b>49</b>
1. The American West and restlessness	49
2. The wilderness and territorialization	51
3. Real life gatherings : The Rubber Tramp Rendez Vous and Quartzsite	52
<b>III- Vandwellers are indispensable outcasts</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Chapter 7. Vandwellers are locked in conflict with the dominant culture</b>	<b>59</b>
1. The interdependence between nomads and the market	59
2. Anti-nomadic and anti-homeless views	62
<b>Chapter 8. Resistance strategies</b>	<b>65</b>
1. Conceptualizing resistance	65
2. “Everyday resistance” to counter an hegemonic process	66
3. Quartzsite, a “free space”?	68
<b>Chapter 9. Activism and revendications</b>	<b>71</b>
1. Citizenship and politics	71
2. Intentional community	73
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>79</b>

# List of illustrations

## Illustration 1

*Foreclosed home in Detroit, Michigan.* Photo from Bruce Gilden's *Foreclosures* (Browns Editions, 2013).

## Illustration 2

*Common van models used for conversion.* Found on the Facebook group "Vanlife and nomad singles".

## Illustration 3

*Type of RV campers.* LemonBin Vehicle Guides: <https://lemonbin.com/rv-types/>.

## Illustration 4

*Van in Boca Campground, California.* Over the Hill Sisters: <https://www.overthehillsisters.com/2019/06/boca-campground.html>.

## Illustration 5

*Pioneers in a covered wagon pulled by mules, near Colby, Kansas in 1879.* Kansas Historical Society: <https://www.kshs.org/archives/208412>.

## Illustration 6

*Vans forming a circle in Quartzsite, 2010.* Birding Rvers: <http://birdingrvers.com/2010/01/quartzsite-2010.html>.

*“All he needed was a wheel in his hand and four on the road.”*

*On the Road, Jack Kerouac, 1957*



# Introduction

Nomadism has had a long history in the United States. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Apaches, Comanches and Sioux set the patterns of nomadic movement that became characteristic of the American West. The outdoors and the road later became a symbol of escape, the wish to flee from a life that does not hold much promise to find better tomorrows. In 1920, because of the Great Depression, the Okies had to hit the road to look for better opportunities: “The road became their home, and movement their medium of expression,” writes John Steinberck in *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>1</sup>

In the twenty-first century, a new traveling tribe has drawn on this itinerant tradition. The members of this community, known as *vandwellers*, embrace *vandwelling* as a way of life. A vandweller is “America’s modern-day vagabond, the twenty-first century’s tramp and hobo, drifter and gypsy,” writes the nomad Ken Ilgunas in his memoir *Walden on Wheels*.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, vandwelling refers to the use of a van as a dwelling. However, it is important to note that the definition has widened and is now used to describe people who live in various types of vehicles such as vans, cars, school buses, and recreational vehicles. There is a distinction between those who live in their vehicles but stay in one location (such as parking lots) and vandwellers (referred to as nomads) who wander around. My research focuses on full-time nomadic vandwellers (also referred to as *full-timers*) that is to say those who are permanently living on the road, and not returning to a sedentary lifestyle.

Life in a van is often associated to social media and the #VanLife, which was created by photographer Foster Huntington in 2011. If you search #VanLife on Instagram right now, you will find over 12 million images of people living in luxury homes on wheels, parked close to picturesque landscapes. Nonetheless, the truth behind living in a vehicle is far more complicated than one might expect: there is an important distinction between a fashionable lifestyle, and a means of economic subsistence. Indeed, for more and more Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, living in a vehicle has become necessary. This is why the term vandwelling, rather than vanlife, is used in the title of this Master’s thesis. Vanlife is a marketable term associated with the glorified lifestyle on social media, whereas vandwelling covers the realities of the ground. Bob Wells, a well-known figure in this community, popularized this

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<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, (Las Vegas: Amazon Publishing, 2013), 14.

way of life in his book *How to live in a car, van or RV, and get out of debt, travel, and find true freedom*, which is part of the main corpus. He has served as a valuable advisor to Americans who have been compelled to embrace nomadism due to economic hardships. The emergence of this group of nomads tends to be understood as a consequence of an enduring social and economic crisis which stems from the Great Recession in 2007: in the peak years of the financial crisis, as many as ten million Americans lost their homes and among them, some had to hit the road. The United States has now been facing an affordable housing crisis which makes it difficult to pay for traditional housing, hence the wish to be free of debts by living in a vehicle. The difficulty with studying this way of life is to grasp the primary factors motivating mobility. For some, the focus is one economic necessity, whereas others emphasize psychological motivations and a love of adventure. During my research, I came to the realization that vandwelling is often the result of the desire to travel combined with economic circumstances of precarity. Many of the vandwellers I talked with claimed to have a “traveling bone,” and saw the economic and the poor economic and housing state as a motivator to hit the road. Nomads under study act as self-determining individuals animated by a strong sense of resilience and restless spirit: “Vandwelling is not only a way to survive, it is a way to thrive,” stresses Bob Wells.<sup>3</sup>

*Nomadism* and *subculture* are two key terms which will be used to frame and make sense of vandwelling. Nomad is derived from the Greek word *nomos*, which means to pasture. It refers to a group of people who wander from one place to another along with their herd of animals in search of food, supplies and land. According to the historian Khaldun, the very nature of nomadic existence is the negation of building because many nomadic communities have no designated *home*.<sup>4</sup> Vandwellers exceed the conventional definitions of pure nomadism. Indeed, they move within a defined territory both for subsistence and leisure. They have to find work to make ends meet, but they also enjoy the freedom to park wherever they want, be it in the desert or national forests. Moreover, nomads on wheels value the concept of home, one that is on the *move* and *unsettled*: “Home is where you park it,” says a famous adage in this community. Another essential concept used to contextualize vandwelling is “subculture”. Indeed, vandwellers gather around ideas and practices which set them apart from a larger collectivity which is positioned as normal and dominant. They share the same vocabulary (boondocking, workamping), annual rituals (the Rubber Tramp Rendez-Vous), symbolic places (Quartzsite in Arizona) and a strong sense of community. What is peculiar

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Wells, *How to Live In a Car, Van or RV: And Get Out of Debt, Travel, and Find True Freedom* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

about this subculture is that it is physically spread out (they are scattered around the United States), but densely connected through social media (Facebook, YouTube and blogs).

The point of this paper is to demonstrate that vandwellers are forming a subculture on the margins of the American society. The margins refers to people who exist (figuratively not physically) at the edges of society. Vandwellers share a degree of outsider status, both in their intellectual aspects (values and norms), and physical location. They live at the periphery of a larger group, receiving less economic and social consideration from the state. The question which arises is whether nomads are structurally marginalized or instead if they *choose* their outsider status. This subculture can be understood as the result of a violent and unequal economic system. However, nomads also act as self determining individuals who construct their identity and sense of belonging at the periphery of a capitalistic state they are disillusioned with. The line between rejecting the system and being rejected by it is thin.

The first part of this thesis will shed light on the background of the Americans who became nomads. I will delve into economic circumstances that can explain such a choice: how did the economic and housing crisis lead to the emergence of a modern-day nomadic community? Many nomads also want to experience personal unique journeys, and see vandwelling as more than mere financial necessity. I will examine what it involves to transition from a house to a home on wheels, in terms of legal and technical issues.

The second part will help make sense of vandwelling as a lifestyle. It is essential to study the way nomads, who are anchored in a tradition of restlessness and settlement, live in regards to their social and territorial practices. They move within urban and rural settings for work, subsistence and leisure. Besides, social media constitutes a crucial gathering place in order to hit the road in a supervised and more secure way. Although vandwellers are scattered across the United States, they are united by a strong sense of solidarity and friendship.

The last section will examine if vandwelling can be interpreted as a strategy of resistance against the dominant society. In a system characterized by widespread capitalism and sedentarism, resistance is made difficult. However, vandwellers are indispensable outcasts, because in their daily opposition they tell us something about the limits and dysfunctions of American society at large.

## **PART ONE**

# **Living on the road: a financial and personal journey**



The first part sets the context for the study of vandwelling. The theoretical overview, for starters, aims to introduce the concepts and questions that guided the research. The circumstances that caused Americans to choose a nomadic lifestyle are examined in chapter two. Finally, chapter three delves into the technical components of this marginal lifestyle, examining what it involves to live in a vehicle on a daily basis.

## Chapter 1. Theoretical overview

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the key terms that constitute the research question and summarize the current state of the literature on the topic.

### 1. Recreational vehicle living and vandwelling

A number of existing studies have examined how the invention of the automobile changed the way Americans interacted with their landscapes. Van lifestyle and camping are products of the twentieth century. Places once distant and remote were made accessible with the construction of highways. Phill Patton's *Open Road: A Celebration of the American Highway* covers the history of roads and the way they have shaped the American identity. In the same vein, *Home on the Road* (2001) by Roger B. White investigates the popularization of the motor-home between 1920 and 1960. Previous research have investigated RV (Recreational Vehicle) living, the most notable being *Over the Next Hill, and Ethnography of RVing Seniors in America* by Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts. Their study proves that RVers are mostly retired seniors who have traded their house for a recreational vehicle, to better enjoy the freedom of being retired. One method employed by the ethnographers is participant observation, which involves living with the people one is studying, doing what they do, while at the same time trying to maintain objectivity. This study explores the way RVers form a subculture by challenging the mainstream values of "rootedness". *Home is where you park it*, by Kay Peterson tells the history of the Escapees RV Club, the oldest and largest RV membership organization in the world. Celia's Forget *Vivre sur la route: les nouveaux nomades nord-américains* is one of the few French studies on the topic of modern nomadism in the United States. The ethnologist has spent several years with nomads, paying specific attention to full-timers, who constitute an heterogenous group. She explores the semantic distinctinction between itinerancy and nomadism.

Only a few studies have examined the matter of vandwelling directly. In my research I rely on sources produced by vandwellers who share their experiences, as well as studies led by journalists and scholars who have immersed themselves in this community. Bob Wells, born in 1955, is said to be the pioneer of modern vandwelling. After going through a divorce, he could not afford to pay for rent. He decided to move in a box on wheels,

On my way to work every day I drove past a parking lot that had a box van with a “For Sale” sign on it. One day I was on my way home worrying about my finances and the idea popped into my head, “Why don’t I buy that van and move into it?” The idea struck me as crazy, but I didn’t really have any alternative, I was pretty close to being homeless, so I pulled in to look at the van.<sup>5</sup>

Bob Wells has two internet presences: his blog *CheapRVLiving.com* and his YouTube channel *CheapRVLiving*, which he created in February 2012. He provides useful advice on how to live on the road. Ken Ilgunas regards Bob Wells as a practical adviser: “If Henry Thoreau was my philosophical mentor, Bob Wells was my practical practical adviser. I’d been reading his how-to vandwelling website, CheapRVLiving.com, for months, learning everything I could.”<sup>6</sup> Bob Wells explores various technical aspects of transitioning from a house to a home on wheels in his book *How to Live in a Car, Van, or RV* (2012). Other nomads have been influential in this community, among whom Ellis Lavonne, with the blog *The Complete Flake*, or Susan Rogers with her blog *RV Sue and Her Canine Crew*. Narrative journalist Jessica Bruder has made significant contributions to this subject by publishing *Nomadland* in 2017. She explores the life of senior Americans who had to hit the road after they had lost their jobs, savings and homes in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis,

There have always been itinerants, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the third millennium, a new kind of wandering tribe is emerging. People who never imagined being nomads are hitting the road. They’re giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call “wheel estate” - vans, secondhand RV’s, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bob Wells, *How to Live In a Car, Van or RV: And Get Out of Debt, Travel, and Find True Freedom* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom* (Las Vegas: Amazon Publishing, 2013) 237.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland* (Great Britain: Swift Press, 2021), 8.

She spent three years traveling around the United States, immersing herself in the lives of vandwellers. The book is full of interviews of nomads, among whom Linda May, Charlene Swankie and Bob Wells. *Nomadland* has been adapted into a movie by the producer and director Chloé Zhao in 2020. The film is a tale of restlessness set in the American West, featuring Fern played by Frances McDormand. She is unemployed after the shuttering of Empire, a mining town in the Nevada desert in 2011. She embarks on the vandwelling journey and encounters real life nomads during gatherings.

## 2. Subcultural studies and nomadism

My point is to show that vandwellers are forming a subculture because they have their own system of values, their own social networks and symbols. A large number of existing studies in the broader literature have examined subcultures. This tradition has its roots in the Chicago School of sociology, which housed the early pioneers of the field in 1892. The “Chicago School” is used to refer to several generations of sociologists who shared perspectives on urban life, social problems, gangs and deviance. Nels Anderson contributed to the field by publishing *The Hobo: The sociology of the homeless man* (1923), a study of marginalized homeless groups. The term “hobo” refers to a homeless individual who moves from city to city and relies on seasonal physical labor for a living. Vandwellers follow in the footsteps of the hobo tradition, moving from job to job and defying the idea of home in the process.

Mirra Komarovsky, president of the American sociological association from 1973 to 1974, gives the following definition of a subculture,

The term subculture refers to cultural variants displayed by certain segments of the population. Subcultures are distinguished not by one or two isolated traits - they constitute relatively cohesive cultural systems. They are worlds within the larger world of our national culture.<sup>8</sup>

A subculture constitutes a “cohesive cultural system”. There is a sense of shared identity around certain ideas, practices and customs. Subcultures can be differentiated on their mode of relationship to the surrounding culture (from indifference to conflict). The last point is of interest for my study. Indeed, subcultures challenge what is considered mainstream in a perceived “conventional” society. Individuals who differ from the norms foregrounded by the

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<sup>8</sup> Mirra Komarovsky. “Research into Subcultural Influences On Personality”, in *Culture and personality*, eds. S. S. Sargent and M. W. Smith (New York: Viking Fund, 1949), 143-159.



dominant culture are considered deviant and can be discriminated against. When it comes to vandwellers, they embrace a nomadic lifestyle which challenges homeownership and sedentarism. What is at stake is whether vandwelling culture is more than a subculture and can be considered as a counterculture, a term which was introduced by sociologist J. Milton Yinger in 1960.<sup>9</sup> The point of my research is not to give a final answer to this question. Countercultures are subcultures that have reached an irreconcilable level of conflict with the dominant culture. They are more change oriented and oppositional. I have chosen to refer to the term subculture in the title of my work. Indeed, within the vandwelling community there is little active resistance to mainstream culture. Nomads escape from the larger society they denounce but do not rebel against it. In fact, this nomadic subculture could not exist on its own without the outside world and its non nomadic societies. It would be more accurate to say vandwellers engage in a sort of counter hegemony process in an attempt to deconstruct hegemonic authority through daily acts. As theorist Williams Raymond has written,

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits... Moreover, it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has constantly to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified.<sup>10</sup>

Vandwellers draw on a tradition initiated by the members of the Beat Generation, who embraced mobility as a form of resistance. In my research, I also use the term community, which I find to be more neutral. Vandweller David Asbill observed that the term subculture could be interpreted in a negative way: “To me, I think subculture has a connotation of ‘lesser than’, whatever you’re talking about, subject being vandwelling”. By contrast, community does not suggest the presence of a parent culture, as the prefix “sub” in subculture implies.

Finally, this Master’s thesis looks at the field of nomadism, that is to say a way of life in which a community has no permanent settlement but moves from place to place usually within a defined territory. In his book *Nomads and the Outside World*, Anatoly M. Khazano points out that the term “nomad” has been used to describe two basic tendencies. On the one hand, nomads can be defined as all those leading a mobile way of life independent of its economic specificity. In a general sense, anyone who does not have a permanent home can be considered as a nomad. On the other hand, scholars have described nomads as extensive and mobile pastoralists. That is why nomads, in the generally accepted meaning, are farmers who migrate together with their cattle. Khazanov has suggested that nomads are dependent on the

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<sup>9</sup>John Milton Yinger. “Contraculture and subculture”, in *American Sociological Review* 5 (1960), pp. 625-635.

<sup>10</sup>Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature* (Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 1978), 112.

outside world for critical resources. French theorists Deleuze and Guattari have made seminal contributions to this branch of anthropology, by studying the way nomads interact with the territory in *Mille Plateaux* (1980), translated as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Over time, an extensive literature has developed on the Americans who adopted a nomadic lifestyle for economic reasons. Richard Grant's book *American Nomads: Travels With Lost Conquistadors, Mountain Men, Cowboys, Indians, Hoboes, Truckers, and Bullriders* explores different traveling subcultures.

### 3. The method section

My research is closely related to the field of netnography, a branch of ethnography pioneered by Robert Kozinets which considers the description of online communities in regards to the language, culture, and social structure.<sup>11</sup> For the current work, it is important to point out that social media is one of the most informative resources available in terms of the modern-day vandwelling community. Nomads are scattered around the United States, that is why they interact primarily via digital platforms. I analyzed information from YouTube videos, Reddit (a network of communities where people share their interests and hobbies), and most importantly Facebook groups (public and private). To my knowledge there are at least forty Facebook groups dedicated to this lifestyle, the most famous one being "Vandwellers facebook, live in you van", counting more than 12 000 subscribers. Online communities constitute the place where vandwellers come together for a shared purpose around a common identity and interest.

Kozinets provides guidelines on how to carry out a netnographic research. The first step suggested in chapter 5 is to find online communities that relate to the research focus. I naturally turned to the Facebook group "Vandwellers facebook, live in your van," because I had heard it was the most popular among nomads. I joined six Facebook groups shortly after that, including:

- "Nomads helping nomads network"
- "Single Vanlife: United States"
- "Free BLM - Nomads of North America- Boondocking Vans and RVs"
- "Mid Atlantic Nomads"
- "Solo Women Vandwellers"
- "Gypsy Road Musical Community"

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* (Sage Publishing, 2019).

The next step was to fully disclose my presence in those online communities. To this purpose, I designed a qualitative survey which I posted on the groups to clarify my intentions as a researcher. The survey received 164 answers. 80% of the respondents are full-timers, which means that they consider their vehicle as their home. The survey contained a series of predetermined questions to obtain in depth information about vandwelling lifestyle:

- In which of the following places do you usually stay when traveling from place to place?
- Where do you prefer to stay when you are parking for a week or more?
- What advice would you give to someone who is considering living in a van?

The responses were really helpful since they introduced me to new terminology, such as *boondocking* or *workamping*. I distributed the answers to the questions above in the body of my work. Besides, one method employed in digital ethnology is participant observation. In my case, it involved reading messages, following links, posting comments and interacting with vandwellers. I engaged in personal conversations with ten nomads, four of whom agreed to have their identities used: Dave Hill, David Asbill, Montana Jesse and Mary Ellen Telesha (author of *A Women's Guide To Nomadic Freedom in the Modern Age*). One administrator of the group "Gypsy Road Musical Community" sent me this enlightening message which guided my research and my way of approaching nomads: "The economic issues are horribly depressing. If they've left them behind, it's unlikely they want to drag that up again. Ask people how nomad living has made their lives better." They invited me to reframe my questions in a more positive light, rather than focusing on financial hardship. Finally, my project sparked a variety of reactions from vandwellers. They seemed delighted to find an audience interested in this way of life. Some thought my project was reading too much into this lifestyle, examining aspects they had not considered: "To be honest, I don't think anyone cares if Quartzsite is more a place or a space, you are overthinking this! We are happy nomads, that's what matters," wrote a vandweller. Throughout my research I had to find a balance between maintaining objectivity, taking a step back on what nomads told me, and taking into account their emotions and judgements.

## Chapter 2. Economic circumstances

There is a difference between choosing to live in a van, having the financial freedom to do so safely, as opposed to those who live in a vehicle because they have no other option. “Vehicle residency is one of the fastest-growing forms of homelessness,” according to Sara Rankin, director of the Homeless Rights Advocacy Project at Seattle University. This chapter digs into the economic factors that can lead to vehicle-residency. I will cover three aspects: the 2007 Great Recession, the housing affordability crisis, and the Covid epidemic.

### 1. The Great Recession and foreclosure crisis

In 2012, the American singer Bruce Springsteen painted his hometown as a desolate area of land in a song called “Death to my hometown,” from his album *Wrecking Ball*,

The marauders raised in the dark  
They brought death to my hometown, boys  
Death to my hometown

They destroyed our families, factories  
And they took our homes  
They left our bodies on the plains  
The vulture picked our bones

He sings about the consequences of the 2007 “Subprime Crisis” in the United States. During this crisis, also known as “The Great Recession,” towns were transformed into valleys of ashes: families were destroyed, factories were shut down and houses were foreclosed. According to Jessica Bruder, the emergence of modern vandwellers is a product and effect of the ongoing social and economic crisis arising from the Great Recession of 2007, which was caused by a housing collapse. It may help to have an overview of some historical background. In June 2002, President Bush delivered a speech in Atlanta to HUD Employees on National Homeownership Month. He declared: “I believe that when somebody owns their own home, they’re realizing the American dream. (...) And I want that pride to extend all throughout our country.” The American government is thus committed to making homeownership more accessible to all. That is why in the mid-2000, there was an expansion of mortgage credit, including to borrowers who previously would have had difficulty getting mortgages. In the second phase, the house prices increased dramatically, driven by more speculation. Many

households were no longer able to make mortgage payments as required, which led to a “Foreclosure crisis”. A foreclosure happens when a borrower can no longer afford the mortgage payment, and thus the mortgage lender (most of the time banks) seizes and then sells the home to recover losses: “In the peak years of the foreclosure crisis, from 2007 to 2012, almost one American adult in twenty lost a home because of inability to afford the mortgage payments,” wrote the authors of *Foreclosed America*.<sup>12</sup> The Great Recession displaced Americans from their homes and neighborhoods, hence the difficulty to have conventional and reliable data,

The foreclosure crisis is a crisis of invisibility. Many people who lose their homes to foreclosure, will, at least temporarily, be unavailable for any conventional survey sample, because such samples are typically drawn from lists of residential addresses or landline telephone numbers. Because conventional survey methods begin by sampling households, people who do not have fixed membership in a household - whether because they are “doubling up with friends or family, moving to another city, couch-surfing, living in shelters, or living in motels or some other informal dwelling arrangement - can simply disappear from our statistical view.<sup>13</sup>



Illustration 1. Foreclosed homes in Detroit, Michigan.  
Photo from Bruce Gilden's *Foreclosures* (2013).

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Isaac and Christopher Niedt, *Foreclosed America* (Stanford: Stanford Briefs, 2015), 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

Furthermore, the crash wiped out retirement savings, making the elderly particularly vulnerable to the crisis. Americans in their retirement years have been pushed to work longer. A number of them went out on the road, either working or looking for a job.

## 2. Housing affordability crisis and economic inequalities

A decade after the 2007-2009 financial crisis, safe housing still constitutes a concern in the United States. The country is facing an affordable housing crisis which makes it difficult to pay for rent and mortgage,

If you asked a stadium full of people to close their eyes and imagine what the American dream means to them, a large percentage of the crowd would be thinking of a home. A ranch house in the suburbs, a fortieth-floor condominium in Manhattan, a one-bedroom apartment. (...) Around the world and country, that dream is under threat. In the United States, the homeownership rate for young adults is at a multi-decade low, a quarter of tenant households spend more than half their income on rent.<sup>14</sup>

According to a research from Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies from 2021, the number of middle-income renters who pay more than 30% of their income for housing has increased significantly.<sup>15</sup> The housing crisis has had an impact on college students as well: up to 14% of college students have experienced housing insecurity at some point.<sup>16</sup> The most prevalent problem college students have to face is not being able to pay their rent, mortgage, or utility bills in full. In his memoir *Walden on Wheels, from Debt to Freedom*, Ken Ilgunas describes how, after graduating from the University at Buffalo, he became a nomad to pay off his \$32,000 student debt. In order to save money, he decided to reduce the cost of housing. He did not become a vandweller right away - he first hitchhiked across the continent in search of work. Once he was out of debt, he moved into a 1994 Econoline van and enrolled in a Master's program at Duke University, determined to use the van as his new dorm.

Rising rent can set the stage for mobile living, but it is not the only factor to be considered. Indeed, the difficulty to pay for housing is often the consequence of life circumstances, such as divorce, unemployment or retirement. During her journey, Jessica Bruder met many retired nomads, who live on Social security and earn money from seasonal jobs. Deany, from the group "Mid Atlantic Nomads," voiced this concern on a Facebook

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<sup>14</sup> Conor Dougherty, *Golden Gates: Fighting for housing in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Center for housing studies, *The State of the nation's housing* (2021), [shorturl.at/acyXY](https://shorturl.at/acyXY).

<sup>16</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, *RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic* (Philadelphia: 2021), [shorturl.at/mqDZ8](https://shorturl.at/mqDZ8).

comment: “While many many folks choose this life, in the US these days, this life chooses them. We have rocketing poverty and abuse of our citizens, many of them elders. Many have no choice but to live on the road.” This message is evocative of the fact that economic inequalities exist both between older persons and the rest of the population, and among older persons themselves. A study led by the National Women’s law center in 2019 proved that social security kept more than 9 million women out of poverty in 2017. Living on the road is seen as a cost-effective solution.<sup>17</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic is also of interest. Because of the sanitary crisis, millions have suffered a significant loss of income, making it difficult to pay for housing. In response to the consequences of the sanitary crisis, Bob Wells filmed a series of videos untitled “You Got A Eviction Notice?! 9 Vital Steps to Move Into and Live in a Car, Van, or SUV”. The description of the video reads,

In Summer of 2020, we are right in the middle of a Pandemic and record unemployment—with a completely unknown future. I’m afraid that one of the likely results of all this is a rise in unemployment, and people being evicted from their homes and forced to live in their vehicles on very tight budgets.<sup>18</sup>

The pandemic played a role in the high rates of housing insecurity and homelessness. The question which naturally arises is how many individuals are vandwellers.

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<sup>17</sup>National women’s law center, *Poverty and Economic security* (April 2019), [shorturl.at/jqANV](https://shorturl.at/jqANV).

<sup>18</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), “You Got an eviction notice?! 9 Vital Steps to Move into and live in a Car, Van, or SUV. Part1.” July 27, 2020, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMmuxtM8Y>.

### 3. Data and demographics

One of the difficulties in studying marginally housed persons is the lack of data: “full-time travelers are a demographer’s nightmare.”<sup>19</sup> Several factors contribute to the difficulty in obtaining quantified data on vehicle-dwellers. Indeed, nomads must be officially domiciled somewhere, which is why they are statistically blended with the rest of the population. Nevertheless, we can attempt to provide figures, even if they are not entirely accurate. According to the RV Industry Association, 11.2 million households own an RV. Full timers, who live on the road permanently, represent 1,5% of total RVers.<sup>20</sup> Based on my calculations, we can estimate there are around 180,000 full timers who live in RVs on the road. A similar observation was made by the Census Bureau in 2019, which estimated that more than 140,000 people lived in vans, recreational vehicles, or boats. The underlying difficulty, which should not be overlooked, is that being a vandweller does not depend on the type of vehicle in which one resides. Vandwellers can use a car, a van, an RV or even a school bus as a residence. Furthermore, not all those who live in cars, vans, or RVs call themselves vandwellers. As we will discover in chapter 3, vandwelling is in fact, a state of mind.

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<sup>19</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> RV Industry Association, *Full Timers* (2022), [shorturl.at/deinG](https://shorturl.at/deinG).





## Chapter 3- Vandwelling: from homelessness to freedom

Transitioning from a house to a home on wheels requires many administrative procedures. Chapter three delves into what it involves to live in a vehicle on a daily basis, in regards to legal and technical matters. Vandwellers are marginally housed persons. Because of the lack of security and stability, this nomadic lifestyle is rooted in precarity. However, the freedom of this lifestyle frequently outweighs the issues they must deal with on a daily basis. Nomads are victims of an economic context, but they also act as active and resilient individuals. In other words, living in a vehicle is not only a means of survival, it is also a means of thriving.

### 1. Transitioning from a house to a home on wheels : technical issues

It is necessary to grasp why living in a vehicle is viewed as a viable option for individuals facing economic insecurity. The goal is to spend as little money as possible in order to live as cheaply as possible. Bob Wells identifies two major factors that make it cheaper to live in a vehicle rather than a traditional house. For starters, vandwellers do not have to pay rent or mortgage payments. Moreover, the second biggest expense, food, can be free when living in a van. He explains that most larger towns have Rescue Missions or Soup Kitchens that hand out meals for people in need. All things considered, living in a vehicle is a good way to get out of debt. Not having a fixed address means having to face technical and legal issues,

While I love the freedom of living on wheels, I have to admit it does create some problems. Our society revolves around people living in a stick-and-brick home. Mail, telephone, television, and the internet all assume you live at a fixed address. If you don't, things become much more difficult. That became especially true after the fall of the Twin Towers on 9-11. The Patriot Act set in motion new rules and regulations that tie our identity to a physical address.<sup>21</sup>

One of the first steps is for vandwellers to choose their state domicile. Domicile is a legal term that refers to the state where a person lives, pays taxes, has a driver's license, obtains health insurance and registers their vehicle. In other words, the state domicile has legal control over a person. Generally speaking, people choose the place where they have a permanent home as a domicile. It becomes more confusing when a person has no permanent house, which is the case for vandwellers. In fact, a nomad can choose any state they want for

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<sup>21</sup> Bob Wells, *How to Live In a Car, Van or RV: And Get Out of Debt, Travel, and Find True Freedom*, 104.

a domicile. Nonetheless, several factors make some states much cheaper than others. Some states, for example, do not have income tax which is a good way to save money each year.<sup>22</sup> Vehicle registration and insurance costs might differ significantly. All things considered, Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, and Texas are the cheapest places to live in and are frequently picked by nomads. Moreover, those states have mail services that forward mail and packages to nomads on the road.

In any nomad's journey, the choice of the dwelling constitutes a very important decision, because it determines many aspects of this lifestyle, including the amount of space and comfort they have, where they part, and the cost of fuel. Vandwellers do not constitute a homogenous group when it comes to housing. They live in different kinds of vehicles which do not offer the same facilities and space. Vandwellers can be divided into three groups: those who live in vans, those who live in recreational vehicles<sup>23</sup>, and those who live in cars.

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<sup>22</sup> An income tax is a charge imposed by a state on the annual gains of a person, corporation, derived through work, business pursuits, and other sources.

<sup>23</sup> The RVIA defines a RV as a motorized or towable vehicle that combines transportation and temporary living quarters for travel, recreation and camping.

## COMMON VAN MODELS USED FOR CONVERSION

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**GMC SAFARI**



**DODGE RAM VAN**



**CHEVY EXPRESS**



**FORD E CLASS**



**FORD TRANSIT**



**SPRINTER**



**CHEVY ASTRO CAMPER**



**VW KOMBI BUS**

Illustration 2. Common van models used for conversion.

## TYPES OF RV CAMPERS



Illustration 3. Type of RV campers.

The question that naturally arises is whether vandwellers can be considered as homeless people. In other words, does the vehicle they live in fall in the scope of a dwelling meant for human habitation? This matter has to be considered under two angles. First, under an exterior point of view, that is to say the way nomads are labeled according to official texts. Secondly, the way they perceive themselves. Sociologist Peter H. Rossi defines homelessness as “not having customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling.”<sup>24</sup> The U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) categorizes vehicle residency as “unsheltered homelessness”: “an unsheltered homeless person resides in a place not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, or on the street.” There have always been controversies about whether people living in vehicles counted as homeless people. What about vandwellers? Most nomads consider their vehicle to be a shelter because it provides them with a roof over their head. The second requirement for it to be considered housing is if the vehicle has all the basic requirements of a dwelling unit (a bathroom, cooking facilities and sleeping area). This criterion is not always met, once again, depending on which type of vehicles nomads live in. A number of vandwellers live in vans that have been modified with basic amenities such as solar panels, a bed platform, some form of toilet, sink, and storage space. “Build it, don’t buy it. The life experience gained from making a functional home out of raw materials is like a college degree on valuable life skills,” wrote a nomad in answer to the question “What advice would you give someone who is considering living on the road?” A number of books have been written on how to design and convert a vehicle into a mobile home, such as Michael Lynwood Wilson's *How To Use A Van, Car, Truck, or SUV as an Off Grid Tiny Home*. Vandwellers are likely to be classified as homeless because a vehicle transformed into a mobile home does not give the same amount of safety and stability as a residence meant for human habitation. Mary Ellen Telesha explained that a sense of flexibility and perseverance are required to live in a mobile abode,

Adjusting to a nomadic life was a challenge at first, our bodies are used to temperature controlled environments, running water, light and energy at our fingertips. Just being outside more is an adjustment in metabolism. If the desire is there for life on the road, it also has to be matched with perseverance and flexibility. It does get easier mentally after a while but it’s still more challenging than living in a house.

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<sup>24</sup> Peter H. Rossi, *Down and out in America: The origins of homelessness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10.

Although nomads save money by living in a vehicle, this lifestyle is not cheap as there are many other expenses to take into account. Vandwellers have to pay for repairs, insurance for the car, cell phone and internet access and miscellaneous expenses. Gas prices have climbed in recent months, making it difficult for nomads to make ends meet. In response to the question, “What advice would you give to someone who is considering living in a van?” a nomad insisted on the importance to be prepared monetary as well as mentally,

Living in a vehicle means you are a rolling earthquake! Just be prepared that something will always happen. Sometimes minor things, sometimes major. Sometimes multiple things in a single day. Sometimes really good things sandwiched between disheartening things. But it’s a wonderful life as long as you’re prepared. This preparation is monetary as well as mentally. You will have emotions so learn to deal with those. You will meet wonderful, kind people. But you will also encounter people who are not so fine. Life as a nomad is not just one big party. There is so much maintenance. And the dust!!! Oh my heavens there is so much dust. But peanut butter makes everything better.

Moving from a fixed abode to a home on wheels requires a resilient spirit.

## **2. Vandwelling is a state of mind**

Vandwellers who are on the road due to economic circumstances are motivated by a sense of resilience, which has been defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant sources of stress such as financial stressors. Nomads on a financial journey are capable of bouncing back from difficult life events and make their journey enjoyable. “It’s a harsh reality but you learn to love it. You should expect challenges, it’s a hard life, but doable and enjoyable,” remarks Nora on Facebook. Bob Wells produced a series of videos featuring nomads who live in small spaces and embrace a frugal lifestyle. For example, the description of the video called “Living in a Car on 800 dollars a month” reads,

Dee is living in her car on \$800 a month. She tried renting an apartment but found it impossible. After paying rent, she had so little money left over her quality of life was tragically low. But, by living in her car, all that money is available for her to live and thrive on so she isn't just surviving and enduring life. She's done a brilliant job of making the car livable by taking out some seats, let's see how...<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), “Living in a Car on \$800a Month”, Avril 12, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0EoyTzcFOI>.

This series of videos is noteworthy because it shows that vandwellers exceed the conventional definitions of homelessness. Most vandwellers consider themselves houseless and avoid the label homeless. They do have a home, which is their vehicle, where they can eat and sleep. Or else, they want to create a distance between themselves and the undesirable state of being unhoused. According to Bob Wells, homelessness is a state of mind. Being homeless does not depend on which vehicle a person lives in, it depends on the state of mind of the person,

A vandweller may be living in the exact same type of vehicle as the homeless guy and have the same economic situation (...), but the vandweller wants to be there. To him it may be unpleasant right now, but it is an adventure that he is glad he is having.<sup>26</sup>

Homelessness echoes negative self-concept and a sense of hopelessness, whereas vandwelling and houselessness are associated with optimism and thriving. We need to take a step back and evaluate Bob Well's suggestion. Regarding homelessness as a state of mind might be taken as a form of privilege. Generally speaking, vandwellers do not experience the same kind of poverty as homeless people. Vandwellers, in a sense, plan their homelessness by purchasing a van or another type of vehicle after realizing they can no longer afford a sedentary lifestyle, whereas "real poverty is having no way out," points out Ken Ilgunas,

I had to admit that I was not homeless in the way that he was homeless. The nature of my experiment prevented me from experiencing poverty in its most extreme and authentic form. No matter what, I had food to eat and a warm place to sleep every night.<sup>27</sup>

Economic variables are not the only ones to consider. Indeed, there is a degree of self-determination in the way vandwellers resist the manipulative pressures of mass society. They are not just passive about the situation, they are actively involved,

Neither could imagine spending the rest of their lives servicing a loan worth more than the value of their house. So they bought a 2003 Cardinal fifth-wheel trailer and hit the road. "We just walked away," Anita said. "We told ourselves, "We're not playing this game anymore."<sup>28</sup>

Middle-class Americans emerge in response to contradictions in their parent culture: a society that promises the American dream while reproducing inequalities. Moreover, the desire to

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<sup>26</sup> Bob Wells, *How to Live In a Car, Van or RV: And Get Out of Debt, Travel, and Find True Freedom*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 283.

<sup>28</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 56.



travel and the quest for diverse experiences combined with the economic circumstances of precarity can draw into vandwelling,

I figured that living in my van and adopting a spartan lifestyle would help me graduate debt-free. But there was more to it than mere financial necessity. I also thought that these next few cash-strapped months might give me an opportunity to experiment with a new way of living.<sup>29</sup>

Nomads David Asbill and Dave Hill claimed to have a traveling bone and regarded the current economic and housing conditions as a drive to get on the road,

I did it because I now control my life better. Not total financial freedom but I am going to see America because I have a traveling bone. So, long story short, instead of paying taxes and upkeep, instead of constant repairs, instead of living so far out in an undesirable area of the country, I retired to see America. (David Asbill)

My mortgage was a little more than I could handle, and I always liked traveling, so I sold everything, and bought this Gypsy wagon, and have had a pretty good time overall! (Dave Hill)

A number of nomads identify their motivation as a love of the road and a need for variety. This is the feature that most vandwellers have in common, wanting to escape from the predictability, even boredom of contemporary life: “I’ve always been an alien. I guess most nomads feel that way, or take the leap to remove themselves and change their way of thinking and living,” points out Montana Jesse.

As a result, it is clear that the question of choice is delicate. The dichotomy between those who choose van life and those who are victims must be overcome. This part showed that the primary factor motivating mobility is often the combination of economic determinism and a freedom of choice, in other words being able to discriminate between all possible opportunities and exercising the options that are most in line with what nomads truly want in life. Vandwellers act as creative and self-determining individuals who gather around distinctive practices that will be discussed in depth in the part that follows.

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<sup>29</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 235.

## **PART TWO**

**Spaces and places inhabited by vandwellers: a  
nomadic lifestyle**



Vandwellers taking to the road in the United States are forming a subculture on the margins of the sedentary state. What is at stake here is the way vandwellers get together to form a community. They are not only taken as individuals, coming from different backgrounds as explained in the first part. In response to the housing and economic crisis, they have formed a distinctive community which is made visible in the way they inhabit spaces, both virtual and physical.

## Chapter 4. Online community

Vandwellers exist in physical and virtual places, and such places impact the emergence and experience of this nomadic subculture.<sup>30</sup> Lately, the electronic space has become a crucial and determinant online gathering point for modern nomads. Before discussing the physical spaces vandwellers inhabit (like the wilderness), it is important to highlight the importance of the virtual scene. While being scattered across the United States, nomads interact primarily via social media.

### 1. Collective identity and “we-ness”

How did the modern vandwelling subculture emerge? The birth of this community can be understood as the result of the interaction between individuals with similar problems of adjustment. According to sociologist Albert K. Cohen, subcultures form when a group of people share a common problem or experience. If those individuals are in effective interaction with one another, they may come up with a solution to their problems which is not institutionalized and therefore has not received acceptance and validity in society.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to vandwelling, these interactions have first taken place on virtual scenes. On his blog, Bob Wells explains the 2008 housing crash was a turning point for the emergence of this online community,

What leapt out at me was the number of people who are coming to vandwelling because their lives have been devastated by the terrible recession we are in. (...). I first became aware of this in 2008 when the traffic to my website suddenly jumped to a tremendously higher number of hits. Then I started getting emails almost daily from people who had lost their jobs, their savings were running out and they were facing foreclosure on their home. They knew that

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<sup>30</sup> Ross Haenfler, *Subcultures the basics* (New York: Routledge, 20147), 119.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

very soon they would literally be homeless and they were writing to me for advice on how to live in a vehicle.<sup>32</sup>

Since 2008, many Facebook groups have been created in response to the growing numbers of vandwellers. Gathering online is a necessity because these Americans come from different cities and states. In other words, social media transgress immediate physical distance. It is essential to understand how nomads get the internet on the road. One is through a wi-fi hotspot, in other words a physical location where people may obtain wi-fi access, such as coffee shops or fast-food restaurants. The other one is through cell towers, which are mobile device towers where an antenna and other electronic communications equipment are placed to enable mobile devices to function (data and voice). Every major highway in America has cell towers on it.

One can talk about an “online community” because vandwellers form a group of people held together by a common interest (vandwelling and traveling) and common economic and housing difficulties. Moreover, this digital group is characterized by two main components: a sense of identity and a strong solidarity. The notions of community and identity are closely related. Social movements theorist David Snow wrote that a collective identity “is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of we-ness and collective agency,”

Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of “one-ness” or “we-ness” anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined set of “others”.<sup>33</sup>

The names given to Facebook groups dedicated to vandwelling reflect this sense of “we-ness”. We can think of the groups “Gypsy Road Musical Community”, or “Rubber Tramps”: by calling themselves gypsies or tramps, participants have a sense of shared identity and see themselves as different from the others, the sedentary, who embrace a mainstream lifestyle. We can already sense the nomads’ desire to establish themselves outside of a larger group that has marginalized them. They are looking for acceptance in another kind of community. Identity is something that is constantly shaped by an individual and their surroundings, it is not static. After spending some time on Facebook groups and through

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<sup>32</sup> Bob Wells, “Thriving in a Bad Economy”, CheapRVLiving (blog), 16 September 2012, <https://cheaprvliving.com/kb/thriving-in-a-bad-economy/>.

<sup>33</sup> David Snow. “Collective identity and expressive forms”, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (London: Elsevier Science, 2015), 174-180.

interactions, members shape their sense of belonging by learning specialized vocabulary and rules. Indeed, vandwelling subculture has its own set of idioms and vocabulary that demonstrates insider knowledge, defining the line between insiders and outsiders. David Asbill explained to me that online communities constitute a great source of documentation: “Online, most folks have been helpful in helping me understand the importance of getting a good night’s sleep, tent and sleep systems, travel, safety, starting fires, eating in your van, about everything you can think of.” Being in digital spaces is a way of feeling a connection to other subculturists and shaping one’s knowledge.

## 2. Solidarity and individualism

The online vandwelling community is animated by a strong sense of solidarity. Cooperation is crucial because paradoxically, vandwellers are loners. This contradiction was observed by Mary Ellen Telesha in a conversation we had,

Ideally the most important feature is a strong sense of self, the feeling that you are capable of problem solving, and can persist when times get tough, as they will. From that individual sense of strength comes the nomad community. Most of us wouldn’t hesitate to help out a fellow nomad if the need is genuine. For the most part nomads are a band of people that will have each other’s backs.

Most nomads travel alone, which makes it crucial to have people to rely on if they encounter a problem. This is the reason why it would be incorrect to think that communities which exist virtually are less significant than non-virtual spaces.<sup>34</sup> In fact, online interactions have real life-consequences. For example, the Facebook group “Nomads Helping Nomads network,” created in October 2020, illustrates the sense of solidarity that animates itinerants. The description of the group reads: “Nomads helping Nomads is a place for travelers to offer or ask for help. We focus on active issues like breakdowns, flat tires, and off road recovery.” Moreover, several groups are reserved to specific regions in the United States. It is the case for “Mid Atlantic Nomads,” created in October 2021: “This group is to help nomads on the eastern coast. If you are or planning to be on the east coast as a nomad, then this group can help you with members from the area.” We see here the importance of physical places, even in virtual places - it is easier to find help in the Mid Atlantic, being part of a group called Mid Atlantic.

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<sup>34</sup> Ross Haenfler, *Subcultures the basics*, 124.

There are online communities whose members share common traits. This is the case for the group “Black Nomads- Black people with MotorHomes/Vehicle Campers” and “LGBT Nomads”. Some are sex based, like “Solo Women Vandwellers” or “Lesbian Nomads”. These private and public groups show the importance of safe spaces for nomads who are discriminated against because of their race, sexuality or gender. Mary Ellen Telesha writes about the importance of being part of a digital tribe,

You're not alone on the road. Nomadic women are increasing exponentially, and with the convenience of social media, it's easier than ever to find your tribe. Be willing to reach out and ask for support or help, most nomadic women are more than eager to help a fellow nomad in need.<sup>35</sup>

Being the member of an online community is a way for nomads to approach life on the road in a more serene and supervised way.

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<sup>35</sup>Mary Ellen Telesha, *Wild Women On The Road: A Women's Guide To Nomadic Freedom In The Modern Age* (Kindle edition, 2018), 127.

## Chapter 5. Spatial practices adopted by vandwellers: a nomadic lifestyle

This chapter explores the way vandwellers live, in regards to their nomadic practices. Sociologists Fine and Kleinmann insist on the importance of studying the material elements of a subculture in order to understand its behaviors and values. They write: “The complete picture of any subculture consists of a range of components from the physical and visible (artifacts and behaviors) to the "ideational" (values and norms).”<sup>36</sup> When studying the material components of vandwelling, two angles of analysis have to be considered. A particular emphasis will be laid on the van, as part of the material culture of the vandwellers. It is an object that sheds light on the way nomads consider home and belonging. Moreover, this chapter investigates the singular spatial practices adopted by the members of this group, more specifically “workampers” who travel in search of work.

### 1. “Home is where you park it”

The most important artifact in the van dwelling subculture is the vehicle members live in. One should examine the definition given by Ken Ilgunas: “A vandweller - as defined by vandwellers - is, essentially, a person who lives in a vehicle. The type of vehicle doesn’t matter, so long as the lifestyle is simple and the home has wheels.”<sup>37</sup> He uses the expression “home on wheels,” which is of interest for the study of nomadic spaces. What is the meaning of home for people whose homes are not linked to any particular place? By making one’s abode on the road, vandwellers take an item from the mainstream culture and give it a new meaning. Indeed, in the United States home is traditionally associated with property, in other words a building with lands connected thereto. Homeownership has been encouraged and seen as a way of achieving the American Dream. By associating home with mobility, nomads create their own rhetoric. It makes much sense that vandwellers consider themselves houseless, and not homeless. They do not have a fixed *house*, but their vehicle encompasses many aspects of a *home*. Anthropologist Mary Douglas stresses that home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed place.<sup>38</sup> What is required is a sense of steadiness in time.

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<sup>36</sup> Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman, “Rethinking Subculture: An Interactionist Analysis.” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979): 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space”, *Social Research* 58 (1991), 289.



Therefore, a vehicle can be considered as a home because it constitutes a protective environment from the outside world. Moreover, vandwellers do their best to “feel like home” in their van. As explained by Dorothy and David Counts, most nomads choose to keep meaningful artifacts which symbolize their identity like photograph albums. Dave Hill told me that “home is a state of mind,” and that his home on wheels reflects his love for music: “I travel with my small dog Roxy, my camping gear, and instruments, guitar, fiddle, harmonica and concertina.”

What characterizes home for nomads is also the fact that it is *on the move* and *unsettled*. Every point is a relay which is meant to be left behind as part of a never-ending journey in the United States. Jessica from the group “Nomads helping nomads” sent me this enlightening message: “We make a home out of every campsite that we part at. The first thing I bought to decorate my RV was a sign that said ‘home is where we park it.’ That says it all.” The ability to make a home out of every place they park at is part of the vandwellers’ freedom and marginal spirit. This is why the road also belongs to the concept of a home. Nomads interact with nature as they travel and feel connected to it,

After more than forty days on the voyage, I no longer saw nature and myself as independent entities; rather, I was nature, living among the roots, insects, animals, and storms. Because nature was indifferent to me, I began to feel indifferent to it.<sup>39</sup>

The road becomes the epitome of a dwelling which is not fixed in space, but in time. The question which naturally arises is where vandwellers travel and settle their home on wheels.

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<sup>39</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 153.

## 2. Nomadism: a subsistence strategy

The van is a mobile element which navigates within a physical network. It is made of the road and highway system, and parking sites for vehicles. Nomadic space is characterized by two elements: the trajectory movement, and the destination. However, there is no final destination: every place is a relay along a trajectory. In their study of nomadology, French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari explain that nomads are distributed in an open space that is indefinite,

Even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfill the function of the sedentary road, which is to parcel out a closed space to people, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares. The nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it distributes people in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating.<sup>40</sup>

Nomadic space is smooth because nomads distribute *themselves* in a territory. However, Deleuze and Guattari's statement is to be qualified. Is the nomadic space noncommunicating and indefinite? In fact, vandwellers draw on the tradition of nomadism by moving within a defined territory. This is evidenced by the spatial practices of both *urban* and *traveling* vandwellers.

City vandwellers live in cities, essentially because they have a job in town. Wells has enumerated different parking lots where vandwellers *can* stay at night but not without risk (*can* in that case has to be understood as something possible but that is in fact illegal in most cities) : hour Restaurants (like Denneys), residential areas, big box stores (such as Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Home Depot), auto repair shops, hospitals, motels, churches and industrial complexes. Many nomads get gym membership in order to shower.

Traveling vandwellers move within urban and rural settings. There are two major trends: "destination boondocking" and "long-term boondocking".<sup>41</sup> On the one hand, destination boondocking means "spending the night in free areas such as parking lots, truck stops, and roadside rest areas while en route to a destination". When traveling from place to place, many vandwellers like to stay in Walmart stores, because the cooperation provides overnight parking for nomads. Moreover, they can refill their supplies on food and water before continuing their journey. In remote areas, itinerants can get water from convenience stores or water vending machines. Long-term boondocking, on the other hand, means parking

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<sup>40</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (Seattle: Wormwood Distribution, 2010), 44.

<sup>41</sup>Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), 246.

for days or longer in free or inexpensive areas. The Bureau of Land Management, an agency within the United States Department of the Interior, manages different types of lands where nomads can park for free, among which Public Lands, and Developed Recreation Areas. National forests are managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Nomads rely on cartography to find where to park. For example, the US Public Land application, displayed on phones, offers access to detailed maps of all Public Lands in the United States.

While living on wheels gives nomads more flexibility, it does not allow them to move boundlessly. They have to find safe parking to sleep and rely on points to find food and water. It is past time to delve deeper into what nomads do on the road. They gravitate around landmarks that constitute their cosmology - from national forest to Amazon warehouses - for both work and leisure.

### 3. Workamping

Vandwellers adopt spatial practices which anchor them in an American itinerant tradition. This is mostly the case for workampers, people who work while living full-time or part time in a vehicle. They belong to a long tradition of itinerant workers, among which Hobos and Tramps. Hobos were nomadic workers who roamed the United States taking jobs whenever they could, mostly because of periodic or lasting recessions. In 1893, thousands of men were left unemployed in western cities because of the depression. As a consequence, they became transient workers, moving between short-term laboring jobs. Mark Wyman, in *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and The Harvesting of the West*, explains that the automobile's intrusion in the mid-1920 was a turning point for hoboes,

Changes were coming rapidly, and it was even becoming rare to see large numbers of men languishing around a country town after a job was finished. Now the men could drive straight to a farm, get to work, and when finished head up the road to another harvest job.<sup>42</sup>

In a similar way, workampers rely on nomadic behavior in order to make money, sometimes following economic or social crises. After the 2007 housing crash, some observers drew parallels between modern workampers and Okies. How come this comparison? The term "Okie" refers to migratory farm workers from the state of Oklahoma, who left the midwest during the Great Depression and the droughts of the 1930s and 1940s. Most of them migrated to California to look for employment and better opportunities. John Steinbeck, in *The Grapes*

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Wyman, *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (Hill and Wang, 2010), 444.

of *Wrath*, depicts the Okies way of life, for whom “the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression.”<sup>43</sup> Because of the 2007 financial crisis, Americans in their retirement years have been pushed to work longer: “The new normal is working longer,” explains Monique Morrissey, economist for the Economic Policy Institute. Workampers can find jobs around the country thanks to websites with names like “Workers on Wheels” or “Workamper News”. Natalie Flores-Henley and Levi Henly, an elderly couple, give the following definition of workamping in the introduction of *Seasonal Workamping for a Living: How We Did It*,

Workamping is a way of life for RVers who have taken to the road (...). Single, couples, families, and roommates can be classified as workampers by having a job, or volunteer assignment while residing in a motorhome, travel trailer, fifth wheel, conversion bus or van.<sup>44</sup>

A popular category of workamping is work at campgrounds. Camp hosting involves maintaining the campsites mostly by picking up trash and cleaning outhouses. Ken Ilgunas explains that the crew he worked with was heterogeneous, formed by college students as well as drifters,

During the busy summer tourism season, Coldfoot's population tripled to thirty-five. Typically, the crew is made up of college students and recent grads who work to pay tuition or their debts, but there are also a few middle-aged, carny-like drifters who make life out of seasonal work, jumping from camp to camp every few months.<sup>45</sup>

The workampers I have spoken with insisted on the fact that working at campgrounds combines the thrill of adventure with the need to make money. They can look for work in a region that interests them: “I took a job as a host at a city operated park in Idaho, I thought it would give me the opportunity to see a different part of the country, and meet new people. So far, it has been enjoyable, and I look forward to the months ahead,” Dave Hill explained. A category of workampers, known as snowbirds, move depending on the seasons. Their goal is to find the best weather possible year-around. During winter months, they usually find work in southern states, while during summer, they work in the northern ones. Itinerants can earn money by working at Amazon warehouses in addition to camphosting. The CamperForce

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<sup>43</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 170.

<sup>44</sup> Levi Henley and Natalie Flores-Henley, *Seasonal Workamping for a living, how we did it* (Kindle edition, 2020), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 37.

program provides full-time and part-time seasonal jobs at their warehouses around the United States for RVers,

We've worked at a total of two Amazon facilities and had a different experience each year. The first year we were in a robotic facility, and in the second year, we were in a legacy facility. (...). Our crew of at least fifty was a combination of CamperForce participants and full-time or seasonal local workers.<sup>46</sup>

In 2021, there were a total of 26 CamperForce sites across 14 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. According to Bob Wells, working at Amazon for the holidays is a good way to make very good money, and vandwellers are given a free campsite reducing their expenses to a bare minimum.<sup>47</sup> Workampers can find jobs for the beet sugar industry as well. The Sugar Beet Harvest happens every year from September to early December in northern states like Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota and Michigan. The harvesters do not set foot on a farm: they work for the sugar company which receives the beets from the farmers. It is a really demanding job, which requires a nomad to stay on one's feet twelve hours a day. Jessica Bruder gives a vivid description of beet harvest,

For beet producers throughout the Red River Valley<sup>48</sup>, the first two weeks of October are a race against the weather. Borrowing military jargon, they call it a "campaign". The battle starts at midnight on October 1. Farmers rush to pull beets from the fields before the ground freezes, hoping temperatures stay cool enough to stave off rot.<sup>49</sup>

Bob Wells has discussed the advantages of this job: "The money is awfully appealing and you can live on that for at least six months, take all winter off. I know a lot of people who take the whole winter off and boondock in the desert, come out to Quartzsite, spend time with friends, and then do the circuit again."<sup>50</sup> The mention of *boondocking* and *Quartzsite* is of importance in the study of nomadic spaces. Indeed, vandwellers also embrace nomadism as an outdoor activity practiced for freedom and leisure.

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<sup>46</sup> Levi Henley and Natalie Flores-Henley, *Seasonal Workamping for a living, how we did it* (Kindle edition, 2020), 32.

<sup>47</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), "Working at Amazon for the Holidays: Jobs for Nomads", November 28, 2016, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHo3MzO7xMA>.

<sup>48</sup> The Red River Valley is a valley in the Red River of the North basin located in central North America.

<sup>49</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), "Jobs for Nomads Part 3: Working the Beet Harvest", November 15, 2016, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdJqYbxPkG0>.

## 4. Outdoor activities: camping and boondocking

Phoebe S.K Young discusses the history of outdoor activities in *Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement*. She investigates the birth of the modern recreational ethos mixing leisure with nature between the 1880s and the 1940s. John Muir was an influential figure in the history of outdoor activities. In the opening line of his bestselling book *Our National Parks* (1901) he writes: “Going to the mountains is going home.” Vandwellers draw on this tradition to find themselves at home in the outdoors. Indeed, their lifestyle revolves principally around camping, which has been defined as,

the use of park land for living accommodation purposes such as sleeping activities, or making preparations to sleep (including the laying down of bedding for the purpose of sleeping), or storing personal belongings, or making any fire, or using any tents or... other structure... for sleeping or doing any digging or earth breaking or carrying on cooking activities.<sup>51</sup>

Nomads take up residence outdoors, usually using their vehicles and tents. A distinction has been made between “recreational” and “non recreational” camping. On the one hand, recreational camping has been defined as an activity practiced for enjoyment and leisure. By contrast, non recreational camping involves homeless individuals who seek to use public land or national forests as a long term residency. In his study of long-term users of public lands, sociologist Southard classifies homelessness into three broad categories: “Voluntary nomads,” those who choose to live in the forest and to embrace a nomadic lifestyle; “economic refugees” are individuals and families who are exposed to economic precarity and have recently become homeless; and “separatists,” described as “antisocial individuals”.<sup>52</sup> According to a national study of U.S Forest Service law enforcement officers in 2019, transient retirees are the most commonly encountered type of non-recreational campers across all different forest types. Transient retirees are described as “retired individuals living in recreational vehicles either because they cannot afford a permanent home or have voluntarily adopted a nomadic lifestyle.”<sup>53</sup> Vandwellers, either by choice or economic factors, are used to living on Public Lands.

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<sup>51</sup>Parks, Forests, and Public Property, 36 C.F.R §7.96 (1996).

<sup>52</sup> Dee Southard, “Uneasy sanctuary: Homeless campers living on rural public lands”, *Visual Sociology* 12 (1997), 47-64.

<sup>53</sup> Johsua Baur, “Social impacts of homelessness and long-term occupancy on national forests and grassland.”, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 184 (2019), 71.

Traveling vandwellers are familiar with “boondocking,” also known as dispersed camping. It is a term that means camping in a van in a place that does not have hookups-water, sewage or electricity. Therefore vandwellers are strictly relying on what they have in their vehicle (water tanks, electricity in batteries or solar capabilities). Boondocking is preferred to staying in a traditional campground because it is less expensive,

For the last four years, I have lived almost exclusively in forest, mountains and deserts on public land without paying a penny for it. In the cold of winter I stay on BLM land in the desert Southwest, and in the heat of summer I move up into the mountains in the National Forests.<sup>54</sup>

Many vandwellers insist on the freedom that goes with this outdoor activity: “Boondocking means the freedom to move around at will, meeting new people, or stay totally alone. I get to see many places I couldn’t go to if I lived in an apartment,” explained Don. A similar observation was made by Kay and Joe Peterson in *Survival of the Snowbirds*,

From Indian to pioneer to present day RVer, “boondocking” has been synonymous with freedom.

- freedom to park where you want without worrying about security
- freedom from hookups that tie most RVers to established campgrounds
- freedom from having to decide in the morning where you will spend that night because you must make a reservation
- freedom from having to back into tight places and unhitch
- freedom from having to leave because someone else has set your checkout time<sup>55</sup>

This list echoes Isaiah Berlin’s essay *Two conceptions of liberty* (1958), which examines the concepts of negative and positive freedom. On the one hand, negative freedom is freedom from external interference, in other words the absence of obstacles external to the agent. Boondockers are free from time and having to stick to a schedule. Positive freedom, on the other hand, is the freedom to control one’s own life. In that case, vandwellers are free to park where they want - once again to a certain extent. Boondocking necessitates a strong sense of flexibility and independence.

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<sup>54</sup>Bob Wells, “Boondocking”, *CheapRVLiving* (blog), March 10, 2014, <https://cheaprvliving.com/kb/boondocking/>.

<sup>55</sup> Kay and Joe Peterson, *Survival of the Snowbirds* (Livingston: TX Rovers Publications, 1991), 11.



Illustration 4. Van in Boca Campground, Tahoe National Forest, California.

Polish thinker Radkowski regards sedentarism as centered around homocentric points.<sup>56</sup> The house and the workplace constitute the starting point and ending point of all movements. In nomadism, the patterns are quite flexible and do not revolve around one single site. This is why vandwellers can be identified through their movement out of the domestic home, into a home that fluctuates along their journey. However, as perplexing as it may seem, the nomad is also the one who does not move. This idea was brought forward by Deleuze and Guattari: “The nomad distributes himself in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space, that is his territorial principle. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement.”<sup>57</sup> To make sense of this paradox within nomadism, I will look at the way vandwellers draw on an American tradition of both settlement and restlessness.

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<sup>56</sup> Georges-Hubert de Radkowski, *Anthropologie de l’habiter, vers le nomadisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, 44.





## Chapter 6. Vandwelling: between restlessness and settlement

The study of vandwelling requires an historical framework. The purpose of chapter 6 is to demonstrate that vandwellers are part of a long American legacy of settlement and restlessness. This heritage is manifested in the way they use and create space when they camp or organize real life gatherings in the wilderness.

### 1. The American West and restlessness

It is necessary to adopt an historical perspective to better understand the heritage vandwellers embrace. Put in a simple way, American identity is built on the idea of expansion and restlessness. Historian Patricia Limerick has examined the correlation between the vast spaces which characterize the American territory, and the presence of restless nomadic tribes. In other words, geological and geographical conditions set the stage for nomadic movement.<sup>58</sup> A similar observation was made by Mike, a nomad whom Richard Grant interviewed: “ Look at this country. It wasn’t made for settling down in. It’s too big and dry and wide-open. The Lord intended man and beast to move about in a country like this. The Comanches knew it, the cowboys knew it, the buffalo knew it.”<sup>59</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the westward expansion became one of the defining themes of the United States. This idea has been most notably studied by Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, he delivered his “frontier thesis,” to the American Historical Association in Chicago. He claimed that the frontier was “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, conquering the wilderness was central for civilization and social development to exist,

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.<sup>61</sup>

The “Great West” has been perceived as a pure space, open to human action. However, it is important to point out that the myth of the empty land was part of a national narrative which obscured the presence of native Americans and led to violence against them. As settlement

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<sup>58</sup> Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> Richard Grant, *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads* (Great Britain: Abacus, 2003), 18.

<sup>60</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Penguin Books, 2008), 9. First published in 1920.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

proceeded westward, forests were cleared for farms, towns and cities. Ken Ilgunas points out that the first American mobile home was the “horse-drawn Conestoga wagon that transported and housed pioneers migrating West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”<sup>62</sup> This idea of expansion has been the subject of thorough writing by Alexis de Tocqueville. According to the French philosopher, the American people is characterized by a “restless temper,”

A restless temper seems to me one of the distinctive traits of these people (...) Through a singular inversion of the usual order of things, it's nature that appears to change, will man stay immovable. The same man has given his name to a wilderness that none before him had traversed, has seen the first forest tree fall and the first planter's house rise in the solitude, where a community came to group itself, a village grew, and to-day a vast city stretches.<sup>63</sup>

This extract is of interest in the study of vandwelling. Indeed, to a certain extent, nomads follow in the footsteps of the settlers who moved West.



Figure 5. Pioneers in a covered wagon pulled by mules, near Colby, Kansas (1879).

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<sup>62</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 356.

<sup>63</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Phillips Bradley (New York: A.A Knopf, 1945) 2: 136-37.

## 2. The wilderness and territorialization

Chapter 5 examined vandwellers in terms of their use of *space* as they travel. It is worth studying the way they create *place*, as they camp or settle. The practice of boondocking, also known as dispersed camping, will be considered in this new angle. Boondocking is often seen as an unforgettable experience in the wilderness, and the use of such a term is of interest in the study of space. Put in a strict way, wilderness is defined as “the land which the foot for man has never trod.”<sup>64</sup> The 1964 Wilderness Act, which created the National Wilderness Preservation System, offers a more flexible definition, that being,

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, a land which has been trodden can still be considered as wild, as long as humans do not remain. It raises an important question: what do vandwellers refer to when they talk about the wilderness? First, let’s not forget the tendency of the wilderness to be a state of mind: it is not much what the wilderness is, but what humans think it is.<sup>66</sup> Nomads call wild an area that is in fact explored, mapped and known. Moreover, they introduce an artifact of human development (a vehicle), which moves it slightly toward the civilized pole. One could argue nomads embrace the process of territorialization and deterritorialization introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deterritorialization has been defined as “the movement by which one leaves the territory,” whereas territorialization is the movement by which one settles in a territory.<sup>67</sup> To better understand this concept one can draw on the difference between a nomad and a migrant,

The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity, points for him are relays along a trajectory.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th ed (Yale university press, 1982), 4.

<sup>65</sup> U.S, Statutes at Large, 78, 891.

<sup>66</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus, capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 508.

<sup>68</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, 44.

Nomads occupy space according to the principle of movement. When vandwellers camp on a site, they territorialize a space, but it is not meant to last. From the moment they decide to leave and hit the road, they are no longer fixed to a territory. If we come back to the comparison which has been made between vandwellers and pioneers, we can say that they are driven by different motives. For the early pioneers, wilderness was something to be conquered, cleared and settled. By contrast, nomads never settle in a territory in a sedentary way. According to sociologist Ken Gelder: “Subcultures territorialise their places rather than own them, and it is in this way that their modes of belonging and their claims on place find expression.”<sup>69</sup> When vandwellers gather in real life, the wilderness becomes a place where nomads can express their sense of belonging.

### **3. Real life gatherings : The Rubber Tramp Rendez Vous and Quartzsite**

Vandwellers defy the dichotomy between “online” and “real life” by using social media to plan face to face gatherings. During the year, many events are organized, including:

- The Midwest Vanlife Gathering (Camp Manitowa, Southern Illinois)
- The Keweenaw Overland Adventure Retreat (Trails End Campground, Michigan)
- Black Nomads Meet (Villa Rica, Georgia)
- Open Roads Fest (McCall, Idaho)
- The Rubber Tramp Rendez-Vous (Quartzsite, Arizona)

First and foremost, real life gatherings bring to light two essential components of this community: solidarity and friendship. To prove my point, I will look at the Rubber Tramp Rendez-Vous (RTR) in particular, as well as the case of Quartzsite, in Arizona. The Rubber Tramp Rendez-Vous is a two week event that traditionally takes place in Quartzsite desert in January. It is the largest nomadic gathering in the USA. Bob Wells, who is the founder of this meeting, writes about it in his book,

In 2010 I decided to follow the footsteps of the Mountain Men and created the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR). A yearly gathering in the winter in Quartzsite, Arizona where vandwellers could gather, make friends and celebrate our wonderful lifestyle. (...) Just like the Mountain Men before us, we instantly formed bonds of friendship that transcended anything we had ever known before.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Bob Wells, *How to Live In a Car, Van or RV: And Get Out of Debt, Travel, and Find True Freedom*, 40.

He makes an allusion to the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous which took place between 1825 to 1840. During those annual gatherings, mountain men would meet to sell furs.<sup>71</sup> Bob Wells acknowledges his heritage by following in “the footsteps of the Mountain men.” This is evocative of the fact that subculturists have a sense of their history. Solidarity is built on a shared sense of belonging, as well as cultural and geographic proximity. During the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous held in January 2022, classes were offered on general safety, vehicle maintenance, and camping for free.<sup>72</sup>

Significantly, vandwellers share a degree of outsider status when they gather in the wilderness. To make my point I will focus on the desert town named Quartzsite. This place is known for the RTR but also for being a meeting place for nomads when winter comes,

It’s early winter in America (...). But in a small town in the Sonoran Desert, the sun shines and afternoon temperatures climb into the seventies. The annual migration to Quartzsite has begun, with tens of thousands of nomads streaming in from all over the country. They reunite around evening campfires, telling stories from the year that’s nearly over, making plans for the one about to begin.<sup>73</sup>

Quartzsite is a small Arizona desert town close to the Californian border. During winter months, the population increases from 4 000 to over 750,000 vehicles. The Bureau of Land Management has set aside six areas for dispersed camping around Quartzsite, among which “La Posa Long-Term Visitor Area,” where visitors can stay for as long as seven months. It is worth noticing the way nomads create place when they gather in the Sonoran Desert. What is the difference between space and place? On the one hand, *space* is often understood as an abstract area which sets the stage for certain kinds of human activities.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, *place* constitutes a geographical location that has been given meaning by people: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”<sup>75</sup> In the case of Quartzsite, what begins as a desertsic space becomes a place as it is occupied, used and given meaning by nomads. How is it given meaning? First, vandwellers arrange themselves in various spatial formations, the most emblematic one being the vehicles arranged to form a closed circle.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For further discussion of this Mountain Rendezvous, see Gowans, *Rocky Mountain rendezvous: a history of the fur trade rendezvous, 1825-1840*.

<sup>72</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), “Highlights from the 2022 RTR- Rubber Tramp Rendezvous” January 24, 2022, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV53QjcvNHo>.

<sup>73</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 243.

<sup>74</sup> Haenfler, *Subcultures the basics*, 119.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas F. Gieryn, “A Space for Place in Sociology.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 463-496.

<sup>76</sup> Deane Simpson, “Nomadic Urbanism: The Senior Full-time Recreational Vehicle Community.” *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*: 34-46.



Illustration 6: Quartzsite, 2010

The closed circle can be interpreted as a way to create a boundary between those belonging to the community and those who do not. Furthermore, vandwellers practice communal activities. One of the most common is singing around the campfire. I was able to get in touch with Jesse Lassandro, who is part of the Facebook group “Gypsy Road Musical Community”. He sent me a song he composed by himself, called “Gypsy Road”. He performed this song during the “Nomadness gathering,” which was held in Ehrenberg Arizona in December 2021.

## “Gypsy Road” by Jesse Lassandro

I want to go  
where nobody knows my name  
I've got to go  
where nobody knows my name  
live is a life  
that will never be the same

I want to ride  
that gypsy road  
I've got to ride  
that gypsy road  
live is a life  
like i've never known before

I want to ride  
that different highway  
I've got to ride  
that different highway  
some may say it's the wrong way  
but it's my way

I want to ride  
that gypsy road  
I've got to ride...

the hardest is the leaving  
and the easiest is to go  
just want to ride  
that gypsy road

I want to ride  
that gypsy road  
I've got to ride...

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Jesse Lassandro

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- all reprints must be previously approved by author



“Around a fire one night I sang the song. It was well received I think because the song speaks to the counterculture, those that want to get off the accepted treadmill. Nomads are this way,” pointed out Jesse. This song reveals a lot on this subculture, or *counterculture*, as suggested by Jesse. He makes a significant reference to gypsies. Common perception often associates gypsies to poor and unreliable individuals. Many vandwellers, on the contrary, honor the gypsy spirit, which is the epitome of freedom and independence. It may seem counterintuitive to sing about riding a gypsy road while seated in the wilderness and surrounded by other nomads. This is evocative of the fact that nomads are also *those who do not move*: “The nomads inhabit these places, they remain in them, and they themselves make them grow, for it has been established that the nomads make the desert no less than they are made by it.”<sup>77</sup> Nomads have not let go of commitment to family, rather, it is a logical, rather than biological one. Nomads are bound to a family not by common bloodline, but rather by webs of connection and commitment, through mutual affection and affinity.

By embracing a non-conformist sense of belonging, nomads venture off the beaten path. They make the wilderness and are made by it. The previous two segments have established that vandwelling is often the result of life circumstances. By becoming vandwellers, these Americans transform their disadvantaged status into a chosen outsider status that becomes part of their identity. Their movement away from the domestic home translates a wish for better opportunities and a will to belong to a logical family- both online and in “real life,” while preserving their independence. Frederick Turner saw the wilderness as a “fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man’s struggle for a higher type of society.”<sup>78</sup> Are vandwellers animated by the will to reform the society they escape from? Even though nomads have built a nomadic identity at the periphery of a larger group, it does not mean they reject everything this dominant system has to offer. The final section will demonstrate that, despite their hostility to the mainstream ethos, nomads cannot completely break free from it.

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<sup>77</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H Holt and Company, 1920), 4.

## **PART 3**

**Vandwellers are indispensable outcasts**



Vandwelling subculture constitutes a relatively cohesive system made of distinctive spatial practices. Nomads live on the margins of the sedentary state but does it mean they try to resist and fight against the dominant society they escape from? The third part will show that resistance is made difficult because vandwelling subculture could not exist without the sedentary state, its economic, political and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, nomads embrace an *everyday resistance*, to stray from the values hold by the mainstream culture. The question which naturally arises is where vandwellers stand on the political spectrum. Vandwellers are indispensable outcasts, because in their opposition they tell us something about the American society at large.

## **Chapter 7. Nomads are locked in conflict with the dominant culture**

The second part depicted nomads as active individuals, who gather around a distinctive subcultural identity outside the sedentary state. However, it would be utopian to think nomads can completely escape from mass society and what it involves. Indeed, they are linked to the dominant society and its coercive power for two main reasons. First of all, nomads are workers involved in the capitalist machine. Besides, they have to face a system of ideas (representations, stereotypes), and practices which stigmatize them and put severe limits to their freedom and endanger any attempt at resistance.

### **1. The interdependence between nomads and the market**

Vandwellers are both the victims and products of the current economic system. First victims, because a number of them have been affected by the Great Recession and the resulting economic and housing crisis. Many nomads share a feeling of apathy towards the system which has turned them down. Ellis Lavonne, who became a nomad in 2013, stresses this idea on her blog *The Complete Flake*,

I found my people: a ragtag bunch of misfits who surrounded me with love and acceptance. By misfits I don't mean losers and dropouts. These were smart, compassionate, hard working Americans whose scales had been lifted from their eyes. After a lifetime of chasing the American Dream, they had come to the conclusion that it was all nothing but a big con.<sup>79</sup>

This extract throws light on the self-defeating nature of the dream (“a big con”), which promotes personal achievement and a certain quality of life while economic circumstances prevent it from becoming possible. Sarah Churchwell, professor of American literature and humanities has stressed the correlation between capitalism and the American dream.<sup>80</sup> The praise of material wealth and personal achievement has influenced the emergence of mass society and production. It is no wonder why vandwellers have framed the capitalist system as oppressive and dehumanizing, as well as incompatible with a nomadic mindset. Bob Wells has written several posts on the unfairness of the American Dream and how he feels “morally obligated to be friction against it,”

I am morally bound to break any laws that try to force me back into that system. I'm equally morally bound to contribute as little as possible to a system that dehumanizes humans, horribly pollutes the planet, and cares nothing for future generations.<sup>81</sup>

This post engages nomads to fight against a dehumanizing and corrupted system. It echoes an idea brought up by Jessica Bruder that vandwellers are “conscientious objectors from a broken, corrupting social order.”<sup>82</sup> The phrase “conscientious objectors” is of interest. Indeed, it translates to a refusal to perform certain acts required by a government when they are deemed to be incompatible with one's religious, political or philosophical views. It would be a limited interpretation to think that vandwellers wholly oppose the corrupting and broken system they denounce. In fact, while going against the ethos of capitalism, most nomads have to be part of it to make ends meet, which would make any kind of resistance non viable in the long run.

Nomadism is often understood as a subsistence-oriented economy, based on the exploitation of resources. Vandwellers, even though they call themselves nomads, do not constitute a *nomadic society*. Indeed, they are not economically self-sufficient as they rely on

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<sup>79</sup> LaVonne Ellis, “Looking back”, *The Complete Flake* (blog), 29 June 2016, <http://completeflake.com/looking-back/>.

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 13.

<sup>81</sup> Bob Wells, “The morality of Full Time Van Dwelling and RVing”, *CheapRVLiving* (blog), May 25 2016, <https://cheaprvliving.com/kb/morality-full-time-van-dwelling-rving/>.

<sup>82</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 204.

the goods produced by the global economy for their subsistence. This is why vandwellers do not fight against the market: if they were to do so, it would jeopardize their financial status. One can draw on the difference between vandwellers and indigenous ethnic groups to better understand this specificity. For example, anthropologist Levi has studied the way the Raramuri, an indigenous ethnic group in Northern Mexico, founded a solid economic base which allowed them to be self-sufficient, and therefore was used as a way to resist the hegemonic economy.<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, there is an interdependence between the market economy and vandwellers. Nomads are needed because they keep business running by working in restaurants and factories. Reciprocally, nomads need to work and be part of this system, given their precarious situation. The case of Amazon, a company founded by Jeff Bezos in 1994, is enlightening to better understand this interdependence. Amazon is the largest employer of nomadic vandwellers: “Jeff Bezos has predicted that, by the year 2020, one out of every four work campers in the United States will have worked for Amazon.”<sup>84</sup> During popular RV shows like Quartzsite, recruiters are here to offer jobs to nomads, which is quite meaningful, because in a sense, capitalism meets the desert. The CamperForce program, created in 2008, targets the elderly who live on the road by offering seasonal jobs during the winter peak. Their precarious situation, along with their mobile nature, make them useful assets to labor. The exploitation of workcampers is an important theme in Jessica’s Bruder *Nomadland*. She has followed two workcampers, Chuck (73 years old) and Barb Stout (60 years old),

When Barb and Chuck showed up in Quartzsite for the first time, they were still recovering from their three-month stint at CamperForce. Like their coworkers, they’d faced a triple trial there. First came physical exhaustion. (“Muscles I never knew I had are shouting at me after ten hours of lifting, twisting, squatting, reaching,” Barb reflected.) Then came Kafka-style madness. (After forty-five minutes spent hunting for a bin with enough room to stow a product, Barb had to repeat “breathe, breathe” to stay sane in the warehouse, which she nicknamed “Amazon.”) Last came flat-out survival: the stress of subzero temperatures in an RV built for warmer climes. (The rig’s water supply got cut off after a filter froze and burst. Then its pump broke. Chuck lost a day of work getting repairs done.)<sup>85</sup>

This extract draws on a Marxist intertext in the depiction of vandwellers as alienated units of production. They are deprived of their creative abilities and converted into machines. In

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<sup>83</sup> Jerome Levi, “The Bow and the blanket. Religion, identity and resistance in Raramuri material culture”, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 54 (1998): 299-324.

<sup>84</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

regards to what has been explained, active resistance is undesirable because of the interdependence between nomads and capitalism. Furthermore, the sedentary state places severe restrictions on nomads' freedom.

## 2. Anti-nomadic and anti-homeless views

Western societies are characterized by a widespread sedentarism, which Robbie McVeigh defines as: “that system of ideas and practices which serves to normalize and reproduce sedentary modes of existence and pathologize and repress nomadic modes of existence.”<sup>86</sup> This quote reveals the dual nature of power. On the one hand, the powerful sedentary state seeks hegemony and influence. Nomadic forms of existence, on the other hand, are influenced to think and act in certain ways due to their lack of power. Nomads are ostracized in their daily lives for not abiding by the dominant group's rules.

Anti-nomadic and anti-homeless views have historical and sociopolitical foundations.<sup>87</sup> Since the early modern times, the devaluing of mobile modes of existence has been concomitant with the valorization of ideas about homeland and property. Mobility has been perceived as a threat by authorities because it represents unsteadiness and lack of control. According to the sociologist Jo Phelan, the stigmatization of homelessness is linked to three dimensions.<sup>88</sup> This social problem is more disruptive and visible than other forms of poverty because homeless people are more likely to occupy public spaces. Furthermore, due to the difficulty in cleaning, they are seen as “aesthetically unappealing.” Finally, homelessness is associated in the public mind with mental illness and substance abuse. Social stigma vandwellers experience stems from the fact that they are both homeless and mobile individuals. A typical stereotype of vandwellers in general is that they are gypsy-like, therefore deviant and untrustworthy. It is important to keep in mind that even though vandwellers consider themselves houseless, they are perceived as homeless in the eyes of the law because they do not have a conventional dwelling and a few of them are likely to inhabit public space. Many cities in the United States have ordinances (local laws) restricting or prohibiting vehicle-dwelling. Richard Grant explains that those regulations are one of the reasons why nomads are locked into conflict with the sedentary state and its coercive power,

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<sup>86</sup> Robbie McVeigh, *Gypsy Politics and Traveler Identity* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997) 9.

<sup>87</sup> The rivalry between nomadism and sedentarism can be traced back to the biblical tale of Abel and Cain in the Book of Genesis.

<sup>88</sup> Jo Phelan, “The Stigma of Homelessness: The Impact of the Label “Homeless” on Attitudes toward Poor persons”, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60 (1997): 325.

Thanks to vagrancy laws, begging laws against sleeping in parks, laws against hitch-hiking and riding freight trains - laws, in short, that make it illegal to be poor and nomadic - they are locked into conflict with the sedentary state and its coercive power.<sup>89</sup>

Over 81 towns have passed laws prohibiting overnight parking for RVs and vans, among which San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. For example, in May 2019, the San Diego Council approved a vehicle habitation ban making it unlawful to sleep in a vehicle overnight on residential and city streets. Ellis Lavonne wrote on the consequences of this decision,

I'm having trouble finding a spot to park overnight where the police won't give me a ticket. Since the San Diego city council passed a new law against vehicle habitation that took effect a few weeks ago, RVers and van dwellers like me have been on edge, asking each other what they know, where they park, have they heard anything? Nobody seems to know. (...) This is how things are now, in more and more cities. Homeowners see the growing influx of people in vehicles, and they feel threatened. Not all of those people are respectful and clean, which paints the rest of us with the same brush, and laws get passed. Police crack down. And homeless people are left with nowhere to go.<sup>90</sup>

Vandwellers often come into conflict with authorities seeking to regulate subcultural places. For example, "The Knock" is one of the most terrifying everyday anxiety vandwellers have to face. It is the moment when a police officer knocks at the door of the vehicle and asks the resident to leave the parking spot, usually in the middle of the night. Ken Ilgunas describes the knock as a threat,

As soon as I saw his car through my window, I pulled the blinds down, turned off the stove, and flattened myself on the floor. It was a security guard's patrol car. I wondered, *What was it that gave me away? Did someone see me get into the van? Has someone ratted me out? Please don't knock on my door. Please! Don't knock!*<sup>91</sup>

To avoid the Knock, Bob Wells has come up with "12 commandments for stealth parking in the city" in order to avoid detection by the authorities. For example, he suggests vandwellers to keep the vehicle as neat as possible, to appear presentable and not draw attention. Nonetheless, several nomads have claimed to have experienced the Knock, even when parking in a legal spot. This echoes an idea brought forward by Ross Haenfler, that authorities

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<sup>89</sup> Richard Grant, *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads*, 263.

<sup>90</sup> LaVonne Ellis, "The Dark Side of Vanlife", *The Complete Flake* (blog), 27 July 2019, <http://completeflake.com/the-dark-side-of-living-in-a-van/>.

<sup>91</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 15.



often label subculturists as a moral threat, leading to broader stigmatization.<sup>92</sup> The road can become a place of anxiety, especially for individuals who are doubly discriminated against. Lovell and Paris Lee share their experience as two black full-time nomads on their blog *Finance Kulture*. In 2020, they organized a police safety workshop during the event “Black Nomads Meet” created by Kaledra Holmes and Bruce Edwards. This face to face gathering is meant to bring together black nomads from different corners of the county. The founders explained that it was important to have a separate meetup outside of the bigger events,

We wanted to create a smaller and more intimate gathering for black nomads. We want to be able to let our hair down and create a safe place to express ourselves. We have workshops such as Financial and Police Safety which has definitely been a concern throughout time.<sup>93</sup>

The representation of the road has to be interpreted from an intersectional perspective, meaning the way multiple forms of discrimination combine in the experience of nomads.

We see how complicated it is for nomads to pursue their ideals in a society marked by mass production and widespread sedentarism. They are bound with the capitalist system while attempting to escape from it. However, the next chapter will show that fleeing from the system is not the sole result of economic necessity, but can be interpreted as a form of daily resistance.

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<sup>92</sup> Ross Haenfler, *Subcultures the basics*, 7.

<sup>93</sup>Kaledra Holmes and Bruce Edwards. “Vanlife Gatherings: Black Nomads Meetup”. Interview by Novel Kulture. <https://medium.com/@lovellandparis/vanlife-gatherings-black-nomads-meetup-6cce4cd03849>.

## Chapter 8. Resistance strategies

It has been previously established that vandwellers cannot wholly escape what they oppose. They engage with the space and time where the dominant power is exercised. This paradox does not rule out the possibility of a subversive resistance. Nomads bring to light the dysfunctions of the dominant system and offer new perspectives.

### 1. Conceptualizing resistance

Sociologists Hollander and Einwohner call attention to the two components of resistance which are *opposition* and *action*. The term has been defined as “active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with abusive behavior and control.”<sup>94</sup> Within the nomadic community, vandwellers have different stands on the issue of resistance. There are two major trends. On the one hand, many nomads do not have the feeling they are fighting the sedentary state: “I don’t agree with the word resistance you used. I just think most just need to blow off steam after a rough few years in the U.S and go for the road” explained David. This message reflects a form of indifference. Nomads stay from the values held by the dominant society not because they are in conflict with it, but out of necessity and hope for a better life. Vandwelling is a part of their life and culture, and not a means to rebel against society. On the other hand, some vandwellers are part of a more radical movement. This is the case for Bob Wells, who claims he wants to raise an army of vandwellers to friction against the machine: “I’ll work against it by calling as many others as I possibly can out of that system and in any way reasonably possible being a friction against the machine. I’ll do that with honey and not vinegar.”<sup>95</sup> By writing he will use “honey,” instead of “vinegar,” he is implying he will not use force nor active resistance to fight the system. Instead, one can argue he praises for an “everyday resistance,” a concept that has been theorized by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Everyday resistance is understood as the way individuals undermine power and domination through their routine and everyday actions. Everyday resistance leads us to the sister concepts of counter hegemony and alternative hegemony,

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<sup>94</sup>Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner, “Conceptualizing resistance”, *Sociological Forum* 19 (2004): 534.

<sup>95</sup> Bob Wells, “The morality of Full Time Van Dwelling and RVing”, *CheapRVLiving* (blog), May 25 2016, <https://cheaprvliving.com/kb/morality-full-time-van-dwelling-rving/>.

Any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and oppositions which question and threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural processes must then always include the efforts and contribution of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony.<sup>96</sup>

The dominant culture is not all powerful: vandwellers become active agents who try to shape it differently.

## 2. “Everyday resistance” to counter an hegemonic process

Mobility can logically become the expression of discontent towards a frozen system which gravitates around the cosmology of family, possession, and ownership. Vandwellers draw on a tradition initiated by the members of the Beat Generation, which refers to a group of American writers of the 1950s. In the case of Jack Kerouac, the hobo is no longer a symbol of the excesses of capitalism, but embodies a cultural opposition to the American way of life.<sup>97</sup> Some of the following topics have been discussed before, however they will now be explored in a more dialectical manner by combining the concepts of resistance and subculture.

In *Subculture, the meaning of style*, Hebdige explains how subculturists tend to assert their own meaning on artifacts and ideals promoted by mainstream culture. Nomads draw on this tradition by undermining the base foundation of some concepts and practices associated with the American Dream. In an ownership society, homeownership has been seen as the predisposition for political and personal achievement. By associating home with mobility and frugality, nomads create an oppositional rhetoric. A nomad introduced me to the term “downsized”, which is semantically related to minimalism: “Many nomads have downsized as we say in the U.S due to finances. America is into stuff. People buy things to make themselves happier or appear to be wealthy. Getting rid of stuff is a way of downsizing a person’s life.” Living a fuller and richer life is incompatible with living in a settled home. Living a fuller and richer life, on the contrary, means living free from possessions and valuing life experiences. Ken Ilgunas’s memoir, *Walden on Wheels*, reflects this reality. He makes a reference to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, which is a scathing critique of the industrialization effects: “It is a book about his experiences in which he championed the virtues of simplicity and damned the dangling carrots of civilization: the materialism, riches, and prestige that too commonly led men astray.”<sup>98</sup> In some ways, Ilgunas aspires to follow in

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<sup>96</sup>Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature* (Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 1978), 113.

<sup>97</sup>Tim Cresswell, “Mobility as resistance: a geographical reading of Kerouac’s ‘On the road’”, in *Transactions of the institute of British Geographers* 18 (1993): pp.249.262.

<sup>98</sup> Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels On the open road from debt to freedom*, 103.

Thoreau's footsteps; but he does so by living on wheels and not in a cabin in the woods in Massachusetts. Ilgunas, like Thoreau, expresses skepticism towards American consumer culture and instead celebrates the value of simplicity and self-reliance. He claims that having too many belongings not only necessitates too much labor to get them, but also oppresses us spiritually with worry and constraint. People who believe they need to own things are forced to devote all or their time to labor, resulting in loss of inner freedom. Therefore, vandwelling symbolizes a counter ethos to artifice and capitalism. Vandwellers are both industrial slaves and wanderers. This duality gives birth to an interesting everyday resistance confronting work and nomadic ethics. Wanderers have a distinctive relation to time and movement. Wandering refers to sinuous shapes and discovery, whereas labor is related to gait and coordinated bodily movements. Nomads (when not working,) do not keep track of time, and even have *time to waste*. The American Road becomes the epitome of the self which counters the idea of homogenization and robotisation promoted by mass society,

American roads are a reservation of individuality and privacy. Americans have gone on the road to find American and to find themselves, following the naive Whitmanesque mode. The song of the open road is also the song of the self, a song of elusive identity, of blue skies, blue roads, and the blues.<sup>99</sup>

On the road, nomads can experience a concrete and vivid bond with the natural environment and are free from the rigid frame of work.

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<sup>99</sup> Phil Patton, *Open Road, A celebration of the American highway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 20.

### 3. Quartzsite, a “free space”?

The case of Quartzsite, a symbolic meeting place for vandwellers, helps make sense of the matter of resistance. In addition to what has been explained in chapter 6, we can wonder if Quartzsite constitutes a “free space,” as it has been defined by the authors of *Free spaces: the sources of democratic change in America*,

Democratic action depends upon these free spaces, where people experience a schooling in citizenship and learn a vision of the common good of struggling for change. Free spaces are the foundations for such movements counterculture.<sup>100</sup>

Quartzsite is a setting removed from the direct control of dominant groups, and the control of authority. Vandwellers feel free to oppose, through words and speeches, the dominant group. For example, Bob Wells held a seminar on nomadic philosophy during the 2022 Rubber Tramp Rendez Vous. He explains that movement has now become the “highest value.” He also gave a speech that clearly confronts nomads and those you do not belong to this subculture,

When you tell people you live in your van, I’m sure you have gotten all kinds of reactions from your family, and from your friends, and they think you are so weird, why are you doing that? And I want you to know there really is a good answer: *we* are the sane ones, *they* are the crazy ones!<sup>101</sup>

In a sense, Bob Wells acts like the leader of a tribe, giving instructions on how to behave towards those who are not vandwellers. Meeting in the desert could be interpreted as an oppositional act, yet unrecognized because hidden from view. Therefore, is Quartzsite providing the basis for a counterculture? At the moment, it is not the case. Indeed, when nomads meet in the desert, their goal is not to plan a coordinated effort to reach a common objective. Rare are those who have in mind to reform society through a collective action. Vandwellers are loners who gather out of solidarity and friendship, before continuing on with their wandering lifestyle. Resistance exists to a certain extent but does not take the shape of active actions, like demonstrations or marches. It does not mean the vandwellers’ actions are

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<sup>100</sup>Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: the sources of democratic change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>101</sup> CheapRVliving (Bob Wells), “Highlights from the 2022 RTR- Rubber Tramp Rendezvous” January 24, 2022, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV53QjcvNHo>.

meaningless. In fact David Asbill suggested that nomads are starting to show the path towards a social change and a reversal of power,

Concerning the word you used, subculture, it may be that within the United States it's becoming more of a major culture. Many people are selling their homes and buying vans. They are disillusioned with the capitalist culture and looking for deeper meaning, not willing to do the 9-5 and just work to have material things.

Vandweller's activities are inward-directed but outsiders recognize their pursuit of unconventional paths as a real alternative to capitalism. However, it is important to keep in mind that for nomads under study, life on the road is also due to the combination of social and economic circumstances. The question inevitably arises as to whether nomads undertake actions to enhance their precarious situation and for the prevention of people living in their vehicles.



## Chapter 9. Activism and revendications

Vandwellers are so-called outcasts who are in fact integral to discussions about community and citizenship. Their political and communal activity (or lack thereof) reveal a lot about where they lie on the citizenship spectrum. Resistance was covered in chapter 8 as a means of combating the capitalist system's abusive behavior. This chapter dives more into the issue of activism, examining whether nomads attempt to participate in the political process to revendicate their rights.

### 1. Citizenship and politics

Everyday resistance is achieved routinely but is not politically articulated. The question which arises is whether vandwellers embrace more conventional forms of activism sustained by formal organizations. Indeed, it would be natural to think that because nomads live in their vehicle, sometimes following economical or housing crisis, that they would unite to make their voices heard in order to revendicate the right to a conventional and safe housing, along with more consideration from the state,

Have any of you thought of, or perhaps already working on, forming a political unit to fight for our rights? I would either like to get involved, or help start something. I think the entire vanlife, small house, minimalist living movement is a direct result of politics and big business. I know, no epiphany here. My experience, and from what I've witnessed, you can't fight this system while using the system. However, unity can influence change. A clear thought out message is all that's needed in many cases.<sup>102</sup>

This post on the network Reddit suggests the foundation of a “political unit” for vandwellers to fight for their rights. However, to my knowledge, vandwellers have not yet constituted a political and organized unit. In fact, what characterizes this community, to a certain extent, is the lack of political involvement. This idea has been stressed out by Richard Grant,

More importantly, they have a quintessentially nomadic attitude towards sedentary society: they take what they need from it and then retreat, looking for temporary autonomous zones. They don't pay taxes, they don't vote, they don't consider themselves bound by the social contract.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>U/zeforath. “Van Life politics.” Reddit, 2019. [https://www.reddit.com/r/vandwellers/comments/d9h6eg/vanlife\\_politics/](https://www.reddit.com/r/vandwellers/comments/d9h6eg/vanlife_politics/).

<sup>103</sup> Richard Grant, *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads*, 263.



The allusion to Rousseau's *Social contract* is of interest. The philosopher has coined the expression to define an agreement between a society and its rulers about the rights and duties of each. Those who are bound to the social contract agree with the obligations and functions associated with the state. Before the establishment of the social contract, humans lived in a "state of nature," meaning a state without rules, politics or government. Because man was free from any authority, inequity was seldom noticeable. Richard Grant does not imply that nomads live in a state of nature, but he calls our attention to the fact that nomads, generally speaking, do not feel tied to any political obligations. One needs to go into the question of *why* nomads are less likely to be politically involved. Elements of answers can be found in Arnold's book *Homelessness, citizenship and identity*. The author explains that contemporary citizenship has been shaped by two main components: "economic contribution" and "national identity".<sup>104</sup> The symbol of the house encapsulates citizenship because it represents economic independence and political identity. Homelessness, by contrast, symbolizes a lack of autonomy and the inability to achieve the American dream based on personal enrichment. Therefore, vandwellers can be politically uprooted for not fitting into the conventional characteristics of citizenship. Being homeless makes the act of voting more difficult because nomads cannot always provide a mailing address to register, and thus are less likely to participate in the decision making process. In addition to a structured political marginalization, nomads deliberately choose to stay away from politics. Grace from the Facebook group "Rubber Tramps," voiced this apolitical dimension: "I stay far away from politics. They're all crooks anyway. Many vandwellers feel the way I do." They do not believe the system is going to improve and feel a strong sense of apathy towards political affiliations. However, apolitism is not a position shared by all vandwellers: some of them have not turned their backs on communal involvement and social change.

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<sup>104</sup> Kathleen R Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 17.

## 2. Intentional community

There is a conflict between nomad inclination for freedom and society's requirement for loyalty to community. It is deeply rooted in America's social history that communal commitment gravitates around home, stability and family. By consequence, mobile individuals, who by definition are not settled, are often associated with "the American individualist who flees from home and leaves the values, tradition and community behind."<sup>105</sup> It would be more accurate to say nomads offer a more inclusive perception of community: one that is always on the move,

A great many full-timers do participate in "community service" but it is in a community that changes as they move. Some of them help build houses for the homeless, or they may hitch up and head for a disaster area after hearing on the news that a town has been flattened by a tornado. Many of them belong to...groups that move about North America, building and repairing churches and church schools.<sup>106</sup>

Full timers undertake actions to create social and economic changes that are not limited to a single city or region. Moreover, because they roam around, they are aware of legislation that is passed in several regions and cities of the country. For example, petitions are used by vandwellers to make their voices heard and ask for fair legislation. In 2010, Thomas Jessop, a 14 years-old from Santa Barbara, biked across America to raise money for the "National Safe Parking Program," a charity that offers solutions to those who live in their cars. This young man created a petition untitled "Help the New American middle class homeless, the half-homeless," which was shared on different Facebook vandwelling groups in 2012. The aim of this petition was twofold: raise awareness for the need of safe overnight parking, and to get the half-homeless the help they need to go back into conventional housing. This petition has sparked a variety of responses among nomads, which are interesting to analyze. Many vandwellers agreed with the legislation for safe parking, because it affects them in their daily lives. However, they seemed to reject the idea of rehousing unanimously: "I could back the safe parking part; not so sure about the rapid re-housing, which reads as if they don't want us in vehicles" reacted Calvin. Vandwellers fight for fair legislation for parking, but tend to decline any help when it comes to being rehoused. This position reflects on the idea that full-timers do not consider vandwelling as a short-time solution but a new way of life.

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<sup>105</sup>Robert Bellah et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 148.

<sup>106</sup>Kay Peterson, *Home is Where you park it* (Estes Park: Roving Press, 1982), 3.

Nomads now act as active agents in transforming what is considered hegemonic and are not locked to the traditional conception of a home or community.

In 2021, vandwellers initiated a project of intentional community. This project was carried out by Justin Caraway, the administrator of the Facebook group “Nomad Villages”. He converted his property in Mount Shasta into a cohousing space for vandwellers called Nomad Village. The description of the Facebook group reads,

Cohousing for Vandwellers, people come together and buy real estate together, saving costs, the value of the house increases over time. (...) People also could buy vacant lots to turn into gardens for Vandwellers, the community, with safe parking around the outside of the lot. As a community, we help the homeless buy a nice van, with a gas card for about a year so they can get on their feet. (...) The Public Houses become an escape from the worst of capitalism, where you can bring over a six pack and sit down and meet new friends.

In response to the housing affordability concerns, cohousing is seen as an alternative. Even though it may appear antinomic, the concept of a Nomadic Village does not invalidate the restless spirit that drives vandwellers. We can talk about an intentional community because nomads work cooperatively to create a space that reflects their shared core values. It is meaningful because it shows the will for vandwellers to live by their own rules and purpose. Many nomads no longer believe the economy and housing market will improve their situations by providing more affordable dwellings. Nomads act as self-resilient individuals who take matters into their own hands.

The idea that emerges from this section is that vandwelling subculture constitutes a relatively cohesive cultural system, *within* the larger world of the dominant culture. Nomads are not totally distinct from the cultural and economic patterns of the mainstream group. Solidarity and everyday resistance are the primary means of seeking change, while direct actions are held in reserve. Many vandwellers have no plans to get reabsorbed into mainstream housing. Several factors that have been previously discussed can explain that. Nomads are free from debts, and are free to do activities they would not be able to do if they lived in a conventional house, like camping or boondocking. This freedom is doubled by a sense of hopelessness when it comes to the economic and housing state. Nomads rather rely on their logical family than on dominant groups to enhance their situation.



# Conclusion

Bob Wells regards the Taoist symbol of Yin and Yang as the epitome of vandwelling: contrary forces, taken together, act as co-creators of nomadic existence.<sup>107</sup> The study of this subculture must avoid taking a too binary perspective. Indeed, this thesis has tended to prove that no nomadic way of life is wholly distinct from sedentarism. Moreover, this work has overcome the dichotomy between those who embrace nomadism as a way of thriving, and those who do it as a way of surviving. The balance in studying vandwelling is to consider both the Yin (“shady side”) and Yang (“sunny side”). The aim of this Master’s thesis was to demonstrate that vandwelling subculture is tied to a social and economic context (capitalism, Great Recession, housing affordability crisis), and with characteristics of the American ethos (freedom, thirst for adventure). The testimonies I have collected revive a tendency that was already observed among the hobos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>108</sup> Vandwellers construct their identity at the crossroads of different realities: a sociological reality first, with the emphasis laid on life circumstances, and a romanticized reality with the mythical image of the wanderer carried by the call of the road. The interaction between economic determinism and freedom of choice has been underlined throughout the three parts, with the help of primary and secondary sources.

The first section looks at the financial and personal hardships of Americans forced to live on the road due to housing and economic crises. While vandwelling can begin as a way of surviving, it can turn into a means of thriving. This mental and emotional shift, however, should not be taken for granted. Nomads do not adapt to this lifestyle in the same way because they are on distinct financial and personal paths. Whereas some individuals can plan, in a sense, their homelessness by purchasing a van, some find themselves sleeping in their cars overnight. The ambiguous status of those involved doubles the hybridity of the discourse on vandwellers: some are born travelers who see the housing state as an opportunity to fulfill their travel dreams, whereas some are casualties of the crisis who discover (or not) their traveler’s soul along the way. In both cases, vandwelling is a source of freedom from mortgages, rent and the possessions that come with traditional dwelling places. Nomads are driven to the outskirts of society, if not completely out of it. This is where the ambiguity between rejecting and being rejected by the system emerges. It is undeniable that there is structured economic marginalization as a result of unequal resource distribution. However,

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<sup>107</sup> Bob Wells, “Take a Risk: Balancing Your Yin and Yang”, CheapRVLiving (blog), 17 December 2012, <https://cheaprvliving.com/kb/take-a-risk-balancing-your-yin-and-yang/>.

<sup>108</sup> Alice Béja, “Les hobos américains, au croisement des écritures”, *Sociologie et sociétés* 48 (2016), 77-94.

this structural marginalization is accompanied by the choice of an outsider status. Vandwellers seek acceptance in a *logical family*, at the periphery of a society that has not valued them. The second part explored an interesting dynamic within this nomadic subculture. This community is characterized by a high level of individualism as well as a strong sense of belonging. Nomads gather around ideas (freedom, minimalism), practices (boondocking, workamping), but do not share the same location, except when they gather in real life, as in Quartzsite. Individuals on the margins are more prone to be stigmatized: “The sedentary have always stereotyped nomads as unruly, irresponsible and morally reprehensive - a threat to earth and home, to law and order, and to civilisation itself - while simultaneously envying and romanticizing their lives.”<sup>109</sup> Vandwellers who take to the road are portrayed as pioneers who exemplify freedom and independence. However, they are more likely to be labeled as untrustworthy, dishonest and homeless when they occupy public settings. This is why the final section clarified that being on the margins refers to a philosophical rather than a geographic position. Indeed, subculturists cannot escape from the gaze and frame of the dominant groups. Despite their aversion to capitalism, they are unable to escape the existing economic system since they are caught up in it. Nomads live at the confluence of two roads: a well-traveled capitalist path, and a road *less traveled by*, which they shape with innovative alternatives, like cohousing.

“Not all those who wander are lost,” says a well-known statement in the community. This quote resonates with the idea that just because someone does not have a set abode does not mean they do not have a purpose in life. Nomads pursue a personal journey, free from routine, since “there is nowhere to go but everywhere.”<sup>110</sup> What is remarkable is that nomads, in their uniqueness, reveal something about our society as a whole. Mobility is the result of socioeconomic concerns, and it is progressively becoming a reflection of environmental issues as well. Indeed, Bob Wells anticipates the integration of climate migrants in the community: “If the Great Recession was a crack in the system, climate change will be the chasm.”<sup>111</sup> Whether the focus is on nomads as masters of their own destiny, or rather as victims, they adopt nomadic principles that allow us to question certain practices that revolve around the consumer society, and reassess the importance of solidarity and friendship: “One of the things I love most about this life, is, there’s no final goodbye. We just say, ‘I’ll see you down the road’.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Richard Grant, *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 25.

<sup>111</sup> Zhao, Chloé, dir. *Nomadland* (Searchlight Pictures, 2020).

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