Home on the Road: Women, Mobility, and Space in Van Life

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I argue that representations of the road created by and about solo female van life travelers reimagine the male-coded American road as a more gender inclusive landscape, pushing back against the gendered divisions of public and private, casting women as mobile, and challenging traditional renderings of the home and domestic space. By situating contemporary van life narratives within the framework of Doreen Massey's work on space and gender as well as the presentations of the road in the literary canon, I argue that solo female van-lifers use storytelling to place women onto the road as active participants and, in so doing, meaningfully alter the image of the road in the American collective consciousness. Through an examination of traditional understandings of public/private and inside/outside space, I posit that van life subverts these dichotomies, reconfiguring the landscape of the road and reimagining the boundaries between the home and mobility.

KEYWORDS: Van Life, the American road, gender, space, separate spheres, mobility

Introduction

On October 3, 2011, Foster Huntington posted a photo of a DIY truck camper to Instagram with the caption, "Vehicular respect #vanlife" (Huntington). The post was meant to be a joke—the "semi-ironic" #vanlife, a tongue-in-cheek reference to rapper Tupac's "Thug Life," expressing the less glamorous moments of van dwelling (Huntington qtd. in Cottell). Earlier that year, disillusioned with his corporate job, Huntington left New York to live in a 1987 Volkswagen van and document his travels. Soon, the hashtag became a mainstay in his posts, sparking not only a photo series and two book deals, but also a lifestyle movement: van life (Bergstrom, Cottell, Barber, Pocock, May).

In the years since, van life has become a part of the American lexicon as a growing number of people have hit the road and social media under its banner. Though originally semi-ironic #vanlife has turned sincere, coming to designate photos and videos that depict an alternative style of living and traveling in converted vehicles (May 56). Despite its name, van life includes a range of vehicle dwellings, from truck-bed campers to renovated school buses. Yet while the choice of vehicle itself is fluid, van life is distinctly separate from the oversized tow-behind campers and large motorhomes that frequent established campgrounds (Barber). Instead of short-term vacations to manicured campsites where vehicles serve as temporary dwellings, van life is a para-nomadic lifestyle in which the van functions as a primary home over an extended period, marked by mobility and a choice to break from traditional careers and

homes (May 57; Barber). Unlike typical visions of long-term vehicle dwelling which have largely been the purview of homelessness, poverty, and forced migration, van lifers have intentionally rejected more traditional housing options and instead repositioned vehicle dwelling as an intentional and even aspirational choice. As such, van life is largely the product of a certain degree of privilege which enables vehicle dwelling to be positioned as a desirable alternative lifestyle wherein ongoing mobility is considered a positive goal.

Yet, while van life is characterized by mobility through tangible space, as its origin on Instagram and popularity online via self-narrativization suggest, van life identity and community are ultimately constructed and maintained through storytelling. As Jessica Bergstrom writes, "[t]he defining feature of the #vanlife movement is that the offline, physical commitment to living in a van and the online, social media presence are reliant upon eachother [sic]" (1). Thus, van life is not only constructed through the lived experiences of the road but also by their storied publication where embodied acts and their narrativization work together to create meaning. This requisite storytelling is evident through the remarkable pace at which not only physical engagement in van life has grown (López) but also the way in which van life content has increased across social media (May; *FeedSpot*).

However, unlike historical depictions of the road that favor men's voices, the most popular van life narratives prominently feature stories by and about women, as influencer databases show (*FeedSpot*). Canonical characterizations of the road—such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), and older precursors like Horace Greeley's 1865 exhortation to "Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country"—have positioned the road as a distinctly male space, where mobility belongs to men and women and the home are framed as antecedents to these ventures. In contrast, van life, through its emphasis on storytelling and the proliferation of women creators, crafts a new vision of the American road, mobility, and space.

Out of this increase of van life storytellers, a significant figure emerges: the solo female traveler of van life. The solo female van lifer lives and travels alone in her van either some or all of the time, sharing her experiences on the road using keywords like "solo" and "alone" to categorize her perspective—a perspective that is immensely popular, frequently garnering top views and followers/subscribers across social media sites. Indeed, the frequent use of keywords like "solo" and "alone" in titles and captions as well as the comparative popularity of content published with and without these terms by top creators suggests that these keywords attract heightened interest, lending them a clickbait-like quality. Yet it is not just mobile women themselves who attract interest, it is also their homes. While stories about solo female travelers' lifestyles generally draw large audiences, narratives about their vans often generate the highest engagement and are frequently their initial viral stories. Although

interest in vans as dwellings is not exclusive to solo women, the focus on women van lifers' domestic spaces highlights the unique merging of traditionally opposing concepts: mobility, domestic space, and gender.

In this paper I argue that by narrating their experiences on the road, solo female van lifers reimagine the male-coded American road as a more gender inclusive landscape, push back against the gendered divisions of public and private space, present women as mobile, and challenge traditional renderings of the home and domestic space. First, I briefly explore the mythologies and narratives that have shaped the collective image of the road, arguing that these constructed images can be reimagined. Then, I analyze the ways in which solo female van-lifers use narrative to place women on the road and posit that they have meaningfully reconfigured the gendered landscape of the space. Finally, I examine traditional understandings of public/private and inside/outside space in an American context and discuss the way that van life subverts these dichotomies to forge a new relationship between home and the road.

Mapping the Road

In American literature, culture, and mythology, the road has been an enduring theme with roots stretching back to the country's inception. From the first frontier writings through contemporary literature, the impulse to leave stability in favor of carving one's own path through mobility has been central to the formation of a national identity as movement and expansion have historically been essential for defining America as a place and Americans as a people (Ganser 14). Yet, while renderings of the road have been central to American identity, prominent narratives associated with the road have almost exclusively centered male experiences. As Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach observes, the American dream of independence through mobility has, "[f]rom its literary origins in Melville, Whitman, and Poe" always been bound to masculinity: "in the popular mind, the myth of freedom is associated with sturdy pioneers in Conestogas, brave men in whaling boats, and at least one irrepressible young boy on a raft" (34). In depictions of the frontier, patriarchal pioneers journey into dangerous terrain to control, divide, and "civilize" it (Ganser 84-85). Male cowboys, outlaws, runaways, frontiersmen, stagecoach drivers, and marshals on horseback serve as the figures that populate American images of the road, constructing a universalized "white male experience of the West" (Kolodny qtd. in Ganser 84-85). Once the automobile rolled onto the scene, masculinity and mobility on the road had been successfully linked. This image of men on the road was further codified in the American psyche with the publication of *On the Road*, where an "all-male community" hits the road as an act of "renegade masculinity" (Ganser 84-85). By the time that Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* hit the screen, men on the road were merely a matter of course, entrenched through multiple centuries of reification.

Because these ubiquitous road narratives almost exclusively depict men performing and asserting their masculinity through mobility, the road has been imagined as distinctly male space. According to Doreen Massey, space is "the product of interrelations [… and] constituted through interactions" (*For Space* 9). Rather than having a single, innate identity, space is defined by the way that humans, entities, and objects interact in it from mundane actions to broader structures of power. As a result, space is in a constant state of construction, "always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey, *For Space* 9). These understandings of space can be produced not only through embodied enactments but also via fanaticized, imagined, and representational depictions of space (Rose 247). Space, then, can be viewed as a shell in/onto which meaning is placed by way of literal enactments as well as representations of bodies and their interactions, and the road is no exception.

Since spaces are relationally constructed, they necessarily reflect the gender norms and power dynamics of the social framework in which they exist and regulate the acceptable behaviors there. Of course, these homogenous enactments of/in space depend upon compliance and segregation, and, therefore, attempt to control representations of identity and limit spatial access. This regulation of space and mobility is perhaps best illustrated through the public/private distinction—a notion that could be replaced by mobile/immobile due to its reliance on the regulation and limitation of movement through space—as spatial access and articulations of identity are enabled or restricted based on assumptions about gender that reinforce patriarchal control (Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* 179). By associating masculinity with public space and expansive movement and femininity with the home, domestic spaces, and restricted movement, men are linked to dynamic space and mobility, while women are confined to static space and passivity by virtue of their assumed gender. This spatial segregation reinforces a cycle wherein gendered spaces are created through enacted or depicted social constructs and these norms are then used to validate and perpetuate further gendered rules and restrictions.

Consequently, while the road is often imagined as "democratic" and "open to all" (Campbell 282), through its popularized depiction as "manly terrain" (Ganser 85) women have been all but omitted from the road entirely, typically only appearing in these narratives while men pause in stationary space and/or for male sexual gratification. As Dettelbach writes, "the male does the 'driving' (car as vehicle, car as penis), [and] the more passive female is usually exploited" (66). Although attempts have been made to insert women onto the road as active participants, these stories have largely remained outside the purview of critical studies, the literary canon, and widespread popularity. Even as Ganser's extensive study, *Roads of Her Own*, deeply engages with women's road narratives, the texts she examines have yet to be inducted into the standard literary canon. The obvious exception to this generalization is Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise*; yet it can be argued that despite its criticism of patriarchy and

its depictions of freedom through mobility, *Thelma & Louise* ultimately functions as a cautionary tale, reifying women's spatial boundary crossing as fundamentally incompatible with life in American society (Ganser 87).

However, because meaning in and access to space are constructed through ongoing use as well as socially and culturally defined constructions—particularly those surrounding gender relations and articulations of power—the gendered definitions of space, and thus, the road, are ultimately unstable. "[F]ar from being dead or fixed" (Massey, *For Space* 14), space is dynamic and thus holds the potential for disruption and reinterpretation as changes in performances, relationships, and authority provide the possibility for reconstructing social and cultural definitions of space. As a result, just as spaces come to be gendered, they can also be contested and reinvented. Thus, despite long-standing American portrayals of the road as a masculine terrain and mobility as the domain of men—reinforced through centuries of embodied engagement, storied reification, and the exclusion of other genders—the gendered space of the road and its enactments of mobility are ultimately insecure. Instead, despite its prior codification, the road is "lively" and "open" (Massey, *For Space* 14), ever ready for reinterpretation and reimagination.

(Re)Constructing the Road

In narrating their experiences living on the road and distributing their stories to widespread audiences, solo female van lifers are—implicitly and explicitly—employing the instability of space to construct new images of the American road. Because road narratives can be understood as an articulation of the road's ability to philosophically challenge established views and destabilize convention (Campbell 284), solo women's depictions of the road not only contribute to the American road story tradition but also have the power to shift the way that the road is imagined and create a more inclusive landscape. By inhabiting, moving through, and narrating the road as a space, solo women redefine the myth of the open road, questioning, challenging, and revising its symbolic status in American culture, which has long been formed by the recurring image of the male adventurer's escape from domestic life (Ganser 14). As these solo women place themselves alongside the imagery and mythology of the American West, engage with their male predecessors on the road, and position themselves in relation to identifiable figures of mobility, they at once situate themselves into the established landscape of the road and also reimagine it as a place where, they, too, belong. As Hille Koskela writes, "[b]y daring to go out, […] women produce space that is more available for other women. Spatial confidence is a manifestation of power. Walking in the street can be seen as a political act: women 'write themselves onto the street'" (qtd. in Ganser 72). In other words, by hitting the road and publishing their stories, solo female van lifers transgress the seemingly fixed gendered boundaries of public/private and mobile/immobile. In doing so,

they confront the limits of what is deemed acceptable 'female' behavior and contest the spatial boundaries that aim to keep them in place, often directly naming socially constructed constraints that have historically restricted women's access to meaningful mobility. These mobile women not only claim their own spatial agency, but they also pave the way for other women travelers. Thus, the road narratives of solo female van lifers discussed in the subsections that follow engage in this act of recreating the road as a space that women can, do, and will access.

Alone on the Road

In the memoir *nowhere for very long: an unexpected road to an unconventional life* (2022), Brianna Madia[1] lays claim to the road, grappling with the social constructs that bind women in place, situating herself alongside figures of mobility, and claiming mobility as a solo woman. Though Brianna starts her van life journey with her former husband, she opens her book with a prologue depicting herself alone with her dogs in her van, Bertha. Through opening lines that muse about "cattle," "trail horses," "prickly pear cactus," and "junipers" (Madia 8), Brianna immediately grounds her narrative in the desert aesthetics of the American West. By describing her remote location "west […] of the town of Moab" on a "dirt road […] forty-eight miles from pavement," with "the nearest mechanic shop 190 miles away" (8), she implies her own isolation and mobility. Despite being temporarily stuck, she ends her call with the towing service not with fear or feelings of entrapment but emphasizing her own agency:

> When I hung up, I felt strangely calm. I suppose when there had been two of us standing roadside with this broken van, there were sharp words and blame to throw around. […] He would say it was my decision to live in this fucking thing anyway. And it was. It was my decision. And now it was just me left to reckon with it. Perhaps that sense of calm came from the realization that there was no longer anyone there to say *I told you so* (8-9; emphasis in original).

Even as Brianna acknowledges that van life was once a shared endeavor, she asserts that both her past choices and current solo status are decisions she made independently. By positioning her participation in van life as fully her choice, even when partnered, Brianna frames her journey and narrative as hers alone. As Brianna reflects on imagined scenarios with her former husband, she is relieved to be by herself, establishing her memoir not as a sad reminiscence but as the origin story of her solo life on the road. This ownership over her own mobility, even while coupled with a male partner, reframes the conventional image of men as the drivers of

[1] Since the authors discussed in this paper function as autodiegetic narrators and some lack publicly available last names, I refer to them by their first names for clarity.

mobility and instead unequivocally places Briana in the driver's seat, both literally and metaphorically.

Indeed, as the prologue continues, Brianna expresses that, though unplanned, solo van life was always her fated path:

> I never would have imagined that I would end up alone, but perhaps it was inevitable. […] In many ways, Bertha was the most important thing in my life, and I chose her over the things that probably should have mattered more. But there was something about that van that felt like a critical extension of myself. […] It was a representation of the risks I had taken. It was some sign of success that I had done it. I had escaped the mundane confines of the "American Dream" (11).

In this passage, Brianna conveys both a sense of destiny and agency in her life on the road. By combining the words "inevitable" and "chose," she suggests that she is somehow preordained to engage in van life alone while also reaffirming it as her desired life. In describing her van as "a critical extension" of herself, she claims ownership over the mobility and access that her van affords while also communicating the notion that she, like the van itself, belongs on the road. By calling her van a symbol of the "risks [she] had taken" and a "sign of success," Brianna both acknowledges her break from traditional women's roles and redefines success on her own terms. This notion is further emphasized as she expresses that she has "escaped" the "American Dream," rejecting the traditional roles and values that would conspire to keep her in place.

As Brianna pushes beyond the boundaries of acceptability, she encounters increasing social pressure to conform. Describing her time living solo in her van in Salt Lake City, Brianna writes,

> [M]ost of the time, people couldn't quite put their finger on what exactly it was that I was doing wrong. [Yet] societal implications held strong. There seemed to be a broad understanding that I was failing to comply with the guidelines of a civilized world. Even children, in all their innocence, would stare mystified as I sat cross-legged in pavement parking lots, washing my hair in a metal dog bowl or hanging clothes out to dry on my passenger door.
>
> I was breaking the rules. Rules we all learned before we even realized we were learning them (80).

Through her reference to others sensing she is breaking rules without knowing what they are, Brianna highlights the implicit social regulations that exist beyond legal enforcement yet nevertheless govern acceptable behavior. Through the actions she highlights as being socially

incongruent, she implicitly suggests that the perception of wrongdoing is not just tied to the acts themselves but is also informed by her location in space. Sitting on the ground is not always socially unacceptable, but doing so "in pavement parking lots"—a space designated for vehicles—is; washing her hair is not usually frowned upon, but doing so "in a metal dog bowl"—bringing a private act into public space using an incorrect tool—is; and hanging clothing to dry is normal in private spaces but seen as out of place on her "passenger door" in public, where she again uses the wrong implement in the wrong space. Yet, by stating that these regulations are "learned before we even realized," Brianna highlights that these spatial rules and the roles they attempt to enforce are not innate but rather socially constructed, and, therefore, malleable.

Thus, as Brianna narrates her ventures, she actively redefines the space she occupies and the mobility she employs by positioning herself as belonging on the road. On her first solo endeavor out into the desert, Brianna goes to Robber's Roost. Notorious as a hideout for Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and other members of the Wild Bunch "between their famed horseback train heists and daring bank jobs in the late 1800s," Robber's Roost is a remote "two hundred sixty-five square miles of cell-service-less, four-wheel-drive, high-clearance roads that end mostly in old mines and towering cliff edges" (100). And Brianna falls "in love with the Roost for the reasons […] those famed men did—it was, and still is, a hideout of sorts" (Madia 100). By choosing a place linked to "Wild West" history and prominent outlaws as her first solo destination, she situates herself within American mythology and aligns herself with figures of mobility. Although she does not engage in illegal activities like her predecessors, by aligning her own reasons for loving Robber's Roost with the outlaws', she roots her own motivations for mobility in American lore and situates her narrative as a continuation of the space's storied existence. Likewise, by using the shorthand "the Roost," she creates familiarity, suggesting that she, too, belongs there. As she drives further off the highway, Brianna describes,

> Bertha's tires clattered loudly over […] deep ruts, jagged rocks, and washboard bumps […] alone on dirt roads. […] It didn't take long before I began to knowingly shift my hips with the rocking of her axles, like a cowboy learning to move with his horse. We were one entity rolling together (101-102).

In this passage, Brianna emphasizes that she is alone as she navigates difficult terrain. Yet rather than positioning her solo status as a challenge to overcome, she renders herself capable in her mobility. By comparing her shifting hips with a "cowboy," Brianna associates herself with yet another figure of mobility, further grounding her narrative in the context of the road tradition. By describing herself and her van as "one entity,"—a recurring notion throughout

the memoir—she reinforces her sense of belonging on the road and in the scenic terrain that accompanies it.

Through Brianna's depiction of becoming a solo female van lifer and asserting her place on the road, she challenges the predominately male image of the road in the literary canon. As she narrates her experiences living in and traveling across public space, she contributes to an alternative rendering of the road as a more gender-inclusive landscape. As she confronts societal expectations, she challenges the conventions that have excluded women from the road, suggesting through her storytelling that these constructed fictions can be rewritten. By positioning herself in relation to figures of mobility and tying her identity to her van she bolsters her claims to the road and situates her narrative as being in conversation with popular images and mythologies of mobility in the American West.

A New Image of the Road

Van life road narratives by and about women have, arguably, transformed the landscape of mobility, and, as the opening video in Natalie Lynn's "indie travel documentary series" *Borderless* suggests, paved the way for a younger generation of solo women travelers to hit the road. In her video "I Spent My Life Savings To Travel In A Van," Natalie narrates her decision to hit the road and frames her journey as a coming-of-age story. Yet, her inspiration comes not only from road figures like Christopher McCandless—the oft-cited folk hero of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, who rejected his family wealth, journeyed to Alaska, and attempted to live off the land, ultimately leading to his death—but notably from the women van lifers shaping a new image of the American road, whom she directly credits as her inspiration. The video opens with a close-up of Natalie opening a house window and stating, "So recently I've realized […] more than 80 percent of my life has been spent in the exact same spot" (Lynn 0:00-0:18). The camera widens to show her in a beige-grey suburban house, and after she closes the window, transitions to her opening a map of the US and zooming in on her location in Oregon before cutting to various locations across the American West, showcasing topography, roads, and waterways as she expresses, "it feels kind of limiting to spend my entire life in the same place when there's so much more to go see and do outside the borders of my hometown" (0:20-0:34). Through this opening, Natalie implicitly engages with the notion of public/private space, pushing back against the potential vision of life bound in place. Although she does not explicitly address gendered constructions of domestic space and mobility, her visual comparison of her suburban home and the map juxtaposes normative society with expansive movement. By referencing going beyond the "borders" of her hometown, she highlights the sociocultural expectations that pressure her to stay in place and replicate the middle-class conventions her beige-grey family home embodies—corporate careers, nuclear families, and stability—and positions mobility as transgressive.

As she presents van life as her means of mobility, she cites narratives that inspire her to hit the road. The sequence begins with her typing "what is van life?" into Google, followed by a series of clips and images cut together to answer her question (2:30-3:24). In quick succession, Natalie compiles a montage of van life media, including clips from Hannah Lee Duggan, Jennelle Eliana, and Mariah Alice, a news segment interviewing women living in their vans, as well as Pinterest inspiration pages (2:30–3:24). Because Natalie frames this sequence with the question, "what is van life?" she positions these references as a definition of van life, and, by extension, the road. While men are included in her portrayal of van life, solo women dominate her characterization, and, when men appear, they are typically on the road with female partners or friends. Although this definition of van life is tailored to Natalie's narrative consumption and desire for representation, it nonetheless demonstrates the ready availability of women's stories of mobility, their central role in van life, and its portrayal of the American road. Though Natalie cites Christopher McCandless as an influence later in the video, she highlights women travelers as her primary inspiration for mobility, demonstrating how their narratives have reshaped the cultural vision of the road from a male-centric perspective to a more inclusive landscape where women can and do belong.

Natalie's introductory video to van life, then, demonstrates the way that solo female van lifers have reconstructed the road through both their literal occupation of the space and their ongoing acts of representation through narrative—a body of work to which Natalie also contributes. Because Natalie's video and documentary series broadly exist within a context of women on the road, even as Natalie expresses "I have no idea what I'm doing with car stuff" (Lynn 4:02-4:05), she seems assured in her own belonging, emphasizing both in the opening and ending of her video that her life on the road was fated. While Natalie's narrative addresses the rejection of conventional life paths and their gendered implications, her sense of belonging allows her to focus less on crossing gendered borders and more on her transition from youth to adulthood. As she concludes her video by referencing the "next episode of *Borderless*" (13:44-13:48), she frames her journey on the road as uninhibited and without barriers. This notion of borderlessness in Natalie's opening episode and beyond, whether representative of Natalie's experiences or merely an aspirational goal, implies an active breakdown of the public/private boundaries that have barred women from meaningful mobility, narratively constructing a more open road, and situating women as being at home there.

Building Home on the Road

Solo female van lifers' narratives not only reshape the public space of the road but also construct a unique image of domestic space. While public space and mobility have been understood as male, the "home and hearth […], designated and devalued, in dominant

discourse, as the private" sphere, have historically been associated with women (Ganser 21). Even as women "now choose or are expected to engage in either full or part-time paid employment," women remain "primarily responsible for domestic labor over and above" their other work (Mallett 276) and thus remain tied to domestic space. This association between women, private space, and the home has "been a powerful" tool in "the general discourse of women's and men's 'proper places'" (Ganser 68-69), used to regulate spatial access and belonging. Implicit in this rendering of the home as private and static is a binary distinction between the inside and outside world (Mallett 71). This inside/outside dichotomy uses the physical boundaries of the home to delineate spatial borders that reinforce beliefs about gender and patterns of behavior, confining to or releasing from the "limitations and order of spaces where they have defined roles and commit their attention to specific tasks" (Stevens 74). As a result, the home, particularly in road narratives, has functioned as a static foil to the active space of the road.

Van life reimagines the dichotomy of the home and the road by converting vans into homes, merging the road and domestic space, and positioning this intersection as a "central focus" in their narratives (May 64). By presenting van living as a long-term, intentional choice, van life challenges the conventional American understanding of home—entrenched in middle-class privilege—as bound to stable structures and rooted in place. As a result, Lawrence May writes,

> a handover occurs between society's cohesion and the radical departure of Vanlifers' ambitions: everyday domesticity is enabled, and celebrated, but in its relocation away from bricks-and-mortar to four-wheeled homes a crucial boundary is also established between the digital nomadic lifestyle and society's conventions (63).

Van life, then, engages with typical renderings of home but transposes them into a new context. Indeed, van life reimagines the home as a site of mobility, merging the long-held road narrative duality of the road and domestic space, the vehicle and the home, and writes into existence a new vision of home on the road through the widespread publication of narratives. This marriage of opposites is particularly notable for solo female van lifers, as the domestic space that has traditionally confined women in place is now enabling their mobility.

Her Home on the Road

This emphasis on the van as both a site of domesticity and a vehicle for mobility is broadly represented in van life narratives, particularly through van tours. In Anna's (@TinyWayfinders) video "Van Tour | Solo Female Vanlife in Transit Camper Conversion With Oven & Home Theater | Ep.1" she positions her van as both a tool for mobility and a thoughtfully designed home. The video opens on a view of mountains with a road in the foreground filmed through the moving van's windshield (@TinyWayfinders 0:00-0:10). Though the opening only offers a

glimpse of the van's front pillar, it emphasizes both the van's and by extension Anna's mobility and engagement with the landscape of the road. After this framing segment, Anna introduces herself, her dog Sterling, and her "wonderful home on wheels, Firefly," a "2015 Ford Transit" named after her favorite sci-fi show, inserting a clip from the show as emphasis (0:10-0:41). Through this introduction, Anna simultaneously highlights her van's vehicular functionality via its make and model while also designating it a "wonderful home," implying that dwelling in a vehicle-turned-home is intentional and positive. Additionally, by naming her van Firefly and including a clip from the show, Anna ties herself and her van to the American space Western TV show, *Firefly*, which tells the story of a band of renegades, reminiscent of cowboys and outlaws, as they move through a futuristic American frontier and navigate perilous obstacles (*Firefly: The Complete Series*). This intertextual reference situates her video within narratives of American mobility, invoking the frontier and its implicit ties to westward expansion as well as the conventional figures of mobility such as pioneers, cowboys, bandits, and marshals.

Anna then describes her van's specifications—a "high roof and extended body"—while showing photos from before its conversion, explaining that she bought it as "an empty cargo van" and "built her out over […] about three […] months" (0:45-1:00). Though she could have bought "something already built out" she describes how she ultimately decides to convert her own van based on her other experiences with "tiny living" on the road (1:01-3:00). By reflecting on her past mobile dwellings and how they influenced her van build, Anna reinforces her history of belonging on the road and emphasizes the way that her own interactions with her van exist at the intersection of creating a home and traveling in a vehicle. Anna follows this description with photos of herself and a friend constructing her home in the back of the panel van, gradually turning the empty white area into a habitable domestic space. Through her descriptions of the van's vehicular characteristics and images from before its modifications, Anna emphasizes its intended function as a tool for mobility. Yet even in doing so, she also highlights features that make it a suitable home—its "high roof" suggesting headroom and its "long body" indicating sufficient space for long-term occupancy. As Anna transitions to the tour of the built van, she highlights the boundary crossing nature of converted vans, navigating the intersection between vehicle and home and the ways in which they inform and impose upon one another. This balance between constructing domestic space and retaining vehicular mobility is clear as Anna describes building the van, noting, "[t]he van is a very difficult thing to build out. There are no right angles, […] you can't use a level" (4:19-4:27). Because the van structurally houses her domestic space, the van's mobility-centric design shapes the construction of her dwelling: instead of right angles, there are aerodynamic curves; instead of a stable concrete foundation, there is a suspension system and tires that enable mobility across variable terrain, which impacts the way that the space can be laid out and constructed. Likewise, the demands of the domestic space dictate modifications to the

vehicle. For example, Anna describes installing a skylight over her bed and a vent fan in the living area, which together provide ventilation and a view of the stars (21:14-21:38). Although she does not describe the installation, the skylight and vent fan, essential in her windowless cabin, imply cuts made into the van's roof. To enable these home-centered functions, the vehicle's exterior and interior were permanently modified, the demands of the home superseding the original structure of the vehicle. As she shows the van's transformation from an empty panel van into a customized dwelling, she highlights the constructed nature of home, stressing not only the van's built structure but also her own centrality to its existence as a home. By highlighting her van's features as both a vehicle and a home, Anna blurs the lines between mobility and domestic space, arguing for their coexistence.

Yet even as the van mirrors traditional home design, its use for mobility is at the forefront of its functionality. For example, Anna's van kitchen, like a typical American home kitchen, includes a gas stove, oven, deep sink, cabinetry, and spice rack, and allows her to engage in typical home activities like storing food, cooking, and washing dishes. Yet Anna's kitchen is equally designed for mobility. As she points out her customized cabinet hardware, "some of my favorite little aesthetic pieces in the van" (14:48-15:19), she shows that her cabinetry is "pretty hard to open, which is great because it doesn't fly open when I'm on the road" (14:55-15:05), a design choice directly related to the mobility of her home. Likewise, her aesthetically displayed spice bottles include "little bumpers on them [… so] that they won't […] crack against each other when I'm bouncing around on back roads" (15:27-15:40). Though not verbally noted, Anna demonstrates the stove's glass cover, designed to secure the grate during transit (17:03-17:13). Anna's sink likewise combines contemporary home design with mobility: its depth allows her to drive without doing dishes (25:18-25:30) while its lid secures dishes during transit and serves as a cutting board to maximize counter space (25:31-25:47). And her faucet holds the dual purpose of an outdoor shower, as she decided not to include a separate room for bathing due to the van's spatial limitations (25:60-26:06). Thus, even as her van incorporates many of the amenities and design choices of stationary houses, it does so within the purview of mobility.

While not all van life vehicles should require this level of customization in order to be seen as legitimate homes, Anna's video highlights the way that van life crosses the invisible boundary between the home and a vehicle. Through her meticulous documentation of her van's features as both a vehicle and a domestic space, she positions her van as being at once the home in which she purposefully dwells and the vehicle that drives her mobility. This duality contributes to van life's expanded cultural imaging of home as a site of mobility, a way for women to move through public space rather than a socio-culturally imbued private space that binds women in place. Furthermore, by emphasizing that, "I designed Firefly by myself" (@TinyWayfinders 4:08-4:10), she highlights both her ownership of her home and her agency

over her mobility—both notions that emphasize her autonomy. By imagining her home as a vehicle for mobility in this way, she contributes to the narratives that push back against the notion that domestic space is in opposition to the road. Rather than leaving home behind in order to participate in travel, this vision of the road that solo female van lifers depict brings domestic space onto the road, challenging the association between vehicles and masculinity, rendering women as active participants on the road, and recapitulating the immobility at the heart of women's traditional relationship to the home.

Blurring Spatial Divides

As van life merges home and the road, solo female travelers integrate their vans into the landscape of the road both literally through mobility and in the cultural imagination through narrative. As Bergstrom notes in her study of van life imagery,

> Frequently, images challenged existing boundaries between the inside and the outside of the van by presenting the van as a part of the view, where the van serves as a lens to look through in order to see the appealing landscape. As a result, making clear cut distinctions between indoor/outdoor and interior/exterior became more difficult to do (67).

Rather than serving as a static backdrop for van lifers' experiences, the landscape is involved in the narrated events (May 65), not only integrating the van with the road but also including this external space as a part of the van/home itself.

Take, for example, Hannah Lee Duggan's Instagram post from 2 August 2020. In the image, Hannah sits on the bed in her van with a book in her lap, looking over her right shoulder into nature. Though the van likely has doors or windows, they are not visible; instead, gauzy curtains hang from the ceiling, framing the view beyond the bed and the slice of green space on the far-left side. Here, her van's thresholds are fluid, blurring the line between the van and the view beyond. Even the van's design appears to break down this boundary. Wood covers the van's ceiling, frames the bed, and constructs the cabinets and shelving, incorporating nature inside. Plants grow throughout the van, visually merging the green interior with the vegetation beyond. Because light travels in from green space, it is the most vibrant aspect of the image, drawing the viewer's eye beyond the van's interior, which is shown in dappled shadow. By looking out into the green space, she highlights it as an active part of her experience rather than a passive backdrop. Furthermore, the journal passage quoted in the caption blurs the boundaries between herself, her life, and nature:

> You, the hollow cavity in my chest. You were there, and now you're not, but I find myself not minding. I fill the spaces with lilacs now and I filter you through wind-shifting leaves

> and send you open palmed back into the sun where you belong- you, always so hard to look at. […] -journals, summer ’18 (Duggan).

Although unnamed, Hannah casts herself as the lyrical “I” by citing her own journals alongside an image of herself. Likewise, though the “you” is not defined, by referring to this other as “the hollow cavity” in her chest, “there” and then “not,” she appears to address someone lost, seemingly a former lover since she does not mind their absence. As she fills the emptiness in her heart with “lilacs” and sifts the other’s remnants through “wind-shifting leaves,” she intimately binds herself to nature as she once did this other. By sending this person back into the sun “where you belong,” she further frames the experience within the natural world, implying her own belonging in nature. Though metaphorical and not directly related to the photo, by placing the passage alongside the visual imagery Hannah seems to intentionally blur the boundaries between her personal experiences, the van, and nature. Through these muddled borders, she breaks down the boundaries of inside and outside space, allowing the public sphere to fade into the private.

Yet this merging of inside and outside not only brings nature into the home but also extends the home beyond the van’s borders. Take, for example, Annie’s (@annsvan) TikTok video in which she makes “lunch as a single 40 year old woman living in a van down by the river” (caption). At the start of the video, Annie opens the back of her van, sliding out a drawer that functions as a table (@annsvan 0:00-0:03). She then transfers items from her van onto the table—a gas stove, a pan, a pot for water, a bowl of greens, a basket with food supplies, a bowl, and a cup—and her cat jumps from the bed in the van, onto the table, then down to the grass (0:04-0:10). Soon her dog enters the frame, lying on the bed with his nose pointing out into the green space (0:10). Though the sequence is unnarrated, Annie shows her domestic space extending beyond the van. As she starts cooking lunch, her cat, clearly comfortable crossing the van’s borders, jumps onto the table, prompting Annie to laugh and say, “get out” (0:35). By saying “get out” rather than “get off” or “move,” Annie implies that the space the table occupies, though extending past the literal barrier of the van, is “in,” claiming it as a part of her home. Additionally, though passive in the video, the hammock in the background coordinates with the décor in her van, its fringe mirroring the macrame curtains hanging from her van windows, occupying space even beyond the video’s frame. Through captions in the video and description, she emphasizes three key points: first, she engages in a domestic activity, situating herself within the domestic sphere; second, she subverts traditional gender roles by highlighting her age and status as a single woman, operating outside sociocultural expectations; and third, she conceptually extends her van’s boundaries into public space by tying her lunch-making to “living in a van.” Though her table, cat, and other items are temporary fixtures that can return to her van, her depiction of home extending beyond its

walls highlights the fluid, permeable boundaries between inside and outside, public and private.

As the lines between public and private break down, so, too, do the gendered lines of spatial spheres and access. As the imaginary border that separates the home from the road is muddled in both the lived and represented experiences of van life, the gendered associations between women and the home and men and the road are rendered increasingly obsolete. If the home can be both static and mobile, inside and outside, public and private at various points, the lines upon which gendered segregation are drawn can be disrupted. As solo women in van life portray home as mobile and beyond notions like inside and outside, they depict themselves as being at home across a range of spatial configurations. This spatial fluidity holds the potential for renegotiating power relations both on and off the road. Van life, then, not only puts women in the driver's seat, but also demonstrates the potential for elasticity and fluidity surrounding conceptions of home and the world beyond.

Conclusion

Using the imagery, mythology, and storytelling of the road, the solo women of van life simultaneously reinforce the road's centrality to American culture and identity while also reimaging it as a more inclusive space, merging the tangible with the representational as they both occupy literal spaces and narrativize the image of the road with women as active participants. Through these depictions of women's spatial agency and autonomy, they push back against the established geographies of gendered space, emphasizing the ongoing construction of space through narrative, and creating a more inclusive version of the road. Because these solo women's narratives are pervasive, they have, arguably, meaningfully changed the collective image of who can access mobility and engage with the road. Furthermore, these narratives by and about solo female van lifers challenge existing renderings of domestic space and the home, reconstructing the home as a site of mobility, merging the road narrative's long-held dichotomy of the road and domestic space. By merging the home and the road, solo female van lifers are integrating their vans into the landscape of the road both literally as they move through space and in the cultural imagination as they publish widely accessible narratives. This insertion of van dwellings onto the road blurs the boundaries between the imagined private/inside space of the home and the public/outside space of the world beyond as the landscape is not merely a static backdrop that van lifers move through but is depicted as a part of the van's living space. By blurring the distinction between the home and the road in both lived and represented experiences of van life, solo female travelers render the gendered associations between women and domestic space and men and the road obsolete. When considered together, through solo female van lifers' creation of narratives by and about mobile women, they simultaneously reimagine the road

as a more gender-inclusive landscape while also breaking down the imaginary dichotomous boundaries that have historically bound them in place.

Though the analysis presented in this article has focused on gendered space and mobility in binary gendered terms, engaging almost exclusively with presumably cisgendered, straight, white women, it is my hope that this narrow framework will provide a starting place for future research. While solo female van lifers' road narratives have contributed to a more open road, there are additional research opportunities to consider the experiences and stories of gendered space and mobility from other marginalized perspectives, including individuals that do not map neatly onto a binary construction of gender or live as a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth, those with queer sexualities, the disabled community, and individuals who are racialized as nonwhite—to name a few. Likewise, future research could build on my brief introduction to van life's positioning of vehicle dwelling as an intentional and desirable choice to discuss homelessness, class, and capitalism, particularly as it intersects with representations of the road, the home, and who has access to those spaces.

As women are more visibly rendered as participating in mobility on the road and complicating the road's relationship to the home in the popular imagination, they are evolving both the gender conventions of the road narrative genre and the American image of the road more broadly. By transgressing the gendered spatial boundaries that have historically been central to canonized depictions of mobility, women are remapping the road as a more inclusive terrain, envisioning a new image of home on the road.

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