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### The Poverty of Simplicity: Austerity, Alienation, and Tiny Houses

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**ABSTRACT:** Tiny houses – stand-alone, fully functional dwellings generally between 100 and 400 square-feet – are increasingly popular in the United States. The degradation of working class life wrought through neoliberal policy and then punctuated by the Great Recession propels this popularity. Next to traditional houses, tiny houses are significantly cheaper. Those among the middle stratum of the working class have sought out tiny houses as a means to ease their financial anxiety. Rather than merely a newer form of cheaper housing, an entire lifestyle movement has emerged around tiny houses. Anti-consumerism is the keystone to this lifestyle movement. For enthusiasts, environmental destruction, their indebtedness and financial precarity, their stress and alienation from work and life, in short, their lack of happiness or sense of purpose, originate in overconsumption. Tiny houses, because so few commodities can fit inside them, become a tool by which dwellers facilitate anti-consumerist lifestyle. Decreased consumer spending not only helps dwellers save money, it also proceeds, through the discourse of minimalism, as a spiritualistic method of practicing and signaling the virtues of prudence and self-restraint. With more savings and fewer expenses, enthusiasts endeavor to avoid alienating work and hasten retirement, leaving more time for hobbies and leisure. Because tiny houses are cheaper, they can be owned more quickly outright, and ownership permits dwellers a sense of economic security and feeling “at home.” Homeownership allows dwellers to customize or even build their tiny home, offering an opportunity for un-alienated, self-affirming labor of a bygone era. Given that they typically require less materials and energy to build and maintain than a traditional house, tiny houses, and the anti-consumerism they embody, shrink dwellers ecological footprint.

Drawing from interviews and textual analysis, I argue that the tiny house movement is essentially one of working class retreat as it attempts to navigate several contradictions of the

capitalist system. When it comes to these contradictions – capital’s need to pay workers as little as possible despite their need for social reproduction, to dehumanize them at work notwithstanding their humanity, to isolate workers through competition no matter their innate sociality, to despoil the environment without thought of future survival – all of them come to rest on the shoulders of the working class itself. Like recurrent movements throughout American history, in the face of economic crises and rising inequality the tiny house movement proposes anti-consumption as protean savior. And just like its historical predecessors, the tiny house movement’s anti-consumerism – its call for the working class to embrace thrift as a way of life – has been adorned by and rebranded through the discourse of “simplicity.” Financially enforced asceticism is, upon being dragged through liberal (and now neoliberal) ideology, an opportunity for spiritual transcendence, savvy entrepreneurship, rugged self-reliance, and exceptional individuality.

The tiny house movement’s call to embrace thrift as virtuous simplicity, then, encapsulates a recurrent if sublimated critique of capitalism. It cries out against capitalism’s commercialism, social isolation, environmental destruction, and the overall misery of life due to overwork and insufficient leisure time. All of these symptoms are worthy of critique. But the tiny house movement’s critique is altogether superficial and impoverished. Wedded as it is to a lifestyle politics focused on personal consumption, and thus privileging individual consumer decisions above that of collective political actions, it leaves the root causes of alienation, austerity, and abstract domination – the capitalist mode of production itself – unchallenged. The tiny house movement is thus ultimately more interesting in how it reproduces neoliberal ideology than its desire or capacity to combat it – and how such a sad state of social surrender can so easily be rebranded as a countercultural route to material and spiritual salvation.

THE POVERTY OF SIMPLICITY: AUSTERITY, ALIENATION, AND TINY HOUSES

by

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Dissertation

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There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance at gaining its luminous summits.

- Karl Marx, 1872

I stared at this quote, hanging on the wall across from my “desk” at the dining room table, as I typed each and every word of this dissertation. Marx wrote it to encourage readers of *Capital* to push through the first few “arduous” chapters. Certainly, some of the chapters below will be arduous, but by no means do I promise anything near scientific illumination. No, I reappropriated Marx’s sentiment as encouragement for myself because the paths to completing this dissertation were dreadfully steep and fatiguing.

Thankfully, I had a lot of support along the way. First off, I have to thank Katie Mott, my quarantine comrade and so, so much more for hoisting me up and dusting me off each time I stumbled. To be blunt, it is doubtful I would have finished this project without her love. My mom, Cindy, and brother, Pat, were also a constant font of encouragement throughout this process. They weren’t always sure what the hell I was doing up here for all this time, but they still supported me throughout it.

A big thanks is overdue for my long-time advisor, Don Mitchell. Ignorant of how academia worked and coming into the program unfunded back in 2011, I felt foolish and dolefully out place among pedigreed overachievers. Don, I have to assume, either took pity on me or guessed I just might be able to harness my incensed politics so as to, at least for awhile, hack it in this world. Either way, he made me feel welcome and took me on as a funded advisee as I was contemplating calling it quits. The dissertation has been another thing altogether.

Though neither of us were ready for a dissertation about the tiny house movement, he hung with me. Draft upon draft I grappled with unfamiliar literatures and theories, yet Don always pushed me to improve my thinking and writing. It hasn't been easy, it still isn't easy, and I'm still not sure I belong here, but here we are, nevertheless.

Matt Huber has been a constant source of reassurance, and his excitement about some of my ideas shock and inspire me without fail. His own thinking has played no small part in the arguments I make in this dissertation. If there is an intellectual crutch this dissertation leans on, it has Matt's face on it.

Gretchen Purser is a true friend. I cannot thank her enough for all her encouragement and guidance while writing this dissertation. She always kept her door open, even as she routinely endured me at my most trying moments. Outside this feat and through our collaborative work, she has taught me so much about how academia functions. Every graduate student needs someone like Gretchen in their corner.

My other two committee members, Jamie Winders and Tod Rutherford, have my gratitude as well. Throughout all these years, Jamie has kept me honest and on my toes. She always finds a way to pinpoint some bit of sloppy thinking and drag it out naked into the light. It is both scary and incredibly useful. Tod is a must-have type of committee member, especially if you need good Marxist in the mix. I'm always impressed by his wealth of knowledge and grateful for his all his help across the years.

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## INTRODUCTION

In February of 2007, the “tiny house movement” reached a wide, national audience.<sup>1</sup> Jay Shafer, founder of one of the earliest tiny house construction companies and widely regarded as one of the movement’s pioneers, appeared, with his tiny house, on *Oprah*. “Jay Shafer’s itty-bitty home is an astonishing 96 square-feet,” Oprah narrated. “For Jay, living small is mostly about personal happiness,” she continued. The “luxury” of tiny living, he told the audience after giving a quick tour, is only having what material possessions he needs, which enables him to focus on “the other things I want to do with my life, rather than just paying a mortgage and taking care of a house” (“Tiny Homes, Big Ideas” 2007).

By the end of that same month, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, accounting for increased mortgage delinquency, a sudden decline in stock prices in the United States and China, and suspecting that the economy was overdue for an economic crisis, warned of an impending recession within the year (*CNN* 2007; Twin 2007). At this point, though, the housing bubble of the Great Recession – fueled by subprime mortgages, cheap credit, real estate speculation, and financial deregulation – had begun to reveal itself as foreclosure rates spiked (Jackson 2007; Rucker 2007). The debt of over-leveraged mortgagors had been packaged and repackaged, sold and resold across the global financial sector as a safe source of future profit (Treanor 2008). The overproduction of housing relative to effective demand, that is, the inability for home buyers to realistically afford their homes purchased on credit (i.e. to pay back their mortgages) eventually revealed that financial lenders were overleveraged, owning too much likely-worthless debt. Eager to offset these bundled and unpayable debt obligations, the financial

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<sup>1</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all italicized emphases within quotations are original throughout the manuscript.

sector called in payments, tightening the credit market and crippling productive and retail capital, which in turn initiated a positive feedback loop of disinvestment, unemployment, and still lower effective demand. Though the Obama administration responded with \$29 trillion to bailout the financial industry in 2008, the foreclosure relief effort was much smaller (at \$75 billion) while the programs it funded, ostensibly to keep mortgage payers in their homes, proved to be an abject failure and in many instances even worked to increase foreclosures (Bruenig and Cooper 2017).<sup>2</sup>

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 caused the most intense and longest lasting economic crisis since the 1930s. With only a series of inadequate stimulus funding and relief packages, unemployment rates swelled suddenly with over 30 million individuals losing their jobs while the rate of long-term unemployment doubled its historical high. The already conservative estimations of the pre-crash unemployment rate doubled. With housing tending to be a homeowner's largest asset, household net worth dropped by 18 percent, or by an estimated \$10 trillion – the single greatest cut in wealth since the government began keeping track over 50 years ago (Kalleberg and Wachter 2017, 1). Despite reaching a “mature recovery,” with the stock market and corporate profits surpassing their pre-recession levels by 2014, the crisis is notable for its agonizingly slow recovery for the working class (Shierholz 2014).

While the U.S. economy has added jobs every month since September 2010 and GDP growth has been steady at roughly 2.2 percent per year, the share of the population that is employed has yet to fully recover ten years after the end of the recession. Indeed, the general pattern in the labor market has been rising inequality, inadequate labor demand for many years,

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<sup>2</sup> This \$29 trillion took the form not of congressionally-approved taxpayer money from the Treasury, but rather “in the form of loans and asset purchases” funded through the Federal Reserve’s capacity to add money to the currency supply (Wray 2011, 1).

and stagnating wages for the poorer and middle strata of workers (McCorkell and Hinkley 2019). As recently as 2016, the unemployment rate returned to pre-recession levels (even as real labor force participation stayed behind) (Shambaugh and Nunn 2020). Household wealth, though, has remained below its 2007 levels, especially for victims of subprime lending – the poorer strata of a multi-ethnic working class disproportionately staffed by Blacks and Latinos (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The popularity of tiny houses, though likely buoyed and legitimized by Shafer’s *Oprah* appearance (Nonko 2016), emerged in and spread through this landscape of economic anxiety. These downscaled dwellings typically cost considerably less than full-sized, traditional houses and, due to this, offer a chance at homeownership without a lengthy – and financially risky – mortgage (Anson 2014; Ford and Gomez-Lanier 2017). They are, in this sense, quite cleverly “built for” the current conjuncture. Much the same could be said for other forms of cheap housing that have become more popular in the Great Recession’s wake, like efficiency and “micro” apartments (Clark 2015), manufactured homes (Passy 2018), small condominiums (Olick 2015), or just living with several roommates (Fry 2018). But unlike with tiny houses, there is no studio apartment, manufactured home, mini condo, or pro-roommate “movements” out there with a broad following of enthusiasts and spokespersons proselytizing through

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<sup>3</sup> The recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and, crucially, the inadequate policy responses to it, hit the global capitalist economy – already defined by choppy waters – like a tempest. At the one-year anniversary of virus hitting the United States (March 2021), and despite a recent bump in growth since February 2021 due to increased vaccination, the economy still has 9.5 million fewer jobs than it did just before the pandemic (February 2020). Hitting low-wage service workers the hardest, 25.1 million workers, or 14.7 percent of the workforce, have endured job losses, a reduction in pay, and/or a reduction in hours (i.e. underemployment) (Gould 2021). The first week of March 2021, to put this into perspective, was the 50<sup>th</sup> straight week wherein total initial unemployment insurance claims were greater than the worst week of the Great Recession. Currently, there are 16 million more unemployment insurance claims in March 2021 than there were a year prior (Shierholz 2021). The pandemic has also intensified the growth of inequality, with American billionaires’ wealth increasing by \$1.3 trillion – or 44 percent – since March 2020 (Collins 2021). Much of this intensification is attributed to capital gains via a bullish stock market, often directly resulting from America’s largest corporations enriching shareholders through mass layoffs (MacMillan, Whoriskey, and O’Connell 2020).

festivals, books, memoirs, podcasts, reality television, movies, and documentaries. In contrast to these other forms of housing, for dwellers tiny houses are something much more meaningful, they constitute a “movement” of like-minded individuals who often view their tiny house as an expression of their countercultural moral and political values. These values are encapsulated within the concept of “simplicity,” or “simple living.”

### **Research Questions and Parameters**

In light of this exceptional nature of tiny houses, this dissertation sought to answer the following questions. What is the tiny house movement? How does buying or selling or personally constructing this novel and niche form of housing constitute the basis of anything like a “movement”? Since “movement” implies some ideational coherence among its enthusiasts – a coherence beyond buying a cheaper house, what ideas and practices constitute such a coherence? What are the political-economic roots of tiny houses as a movement? What, finally, does this tiny house movement actually promise politically?

These questions drove my dissertation research. What follows below is the first comprehensive and critical engagement with tiny houses as a social phenomenon. For this reason, I will not be presenting a typical review of tiny house related scholarship. I do this for a few reasons. In the first place, there is a dearth of serious research and analysis of the tiny house movement. There simply is not yet much academic analysis out there to review. Secondly and as will be evident below, most tiny house scholarship originates from academics and others who are already deeply supportive of and personally invested in tiny house movement. Even if they are not tiny house dwellers themselves (though many are), their accounts – though having some useful empirics and insight – are almost always boosterish. In the end, these academic

assessments are little different from what you will find in a tiny house blog, a tiny house builder's webpage, or a book penned by tiny house spokespersons. Thirdly, my research questions do not simply seek to expose what the tiny house movement is in and of itself. Rather, I interrogate tiny houses as a *symptom* of much broader historical, ideational, and political-economic trends in the United States. I am, in other words, seeking to establish a baseline for future critical research on tiny house and related "micro housing" developments. For all these reasons, I primarily treat the handful of related tiny house academic publications as primary documents, textual clues revealing the justifications behind what makes moving into a tiny house appealing to so many. That said, my research questions demanded that I deeply engage with literatures on political economy, class, consumption, housing, social reproduction theory, and ideology.

There are (at least) a couple silences or gaps within the dissertation worth addressing. Perhaps most notable is my lack of engagement with tiny houses as a mode of managing the most degraded fraction of the working class: homeless people. Indeed, my initial research and fieldwork sought to understand the relationship between tiny houses and poverty governance. Unfortunately, at that time there were in fact very few such developments that provided actual tiny houses, that is, fully functional and independent houses. At time of writing, only a few more have been developed. As geographer Krista Evans (2020) has documented, most so-called "tiny houses" for homeless people are scantily different from repurposed garden sheds or makeshift shelters that – even before the popularity of tiny houses – were often typical of homeless encampments (Herring and Lutz 2015; Speer 2017; NLCHP 2017; Speer 2019). It quickly became apparent that phrasing such structures as "tiny houses" is part of an effort to associate these outwardly tiny house-appearing shelters with actual tiny houses, to euphemistically bank

on the “middle class” image and concomitant cultural cache of the broader tiny house movement with all of its positive press and heartwarming reality television shows.

Also missing is a discussion of tiny house builders. Given this dissertation’s focus on Marxist political economy, analyzing the *production* rather than only the *consumption* of tiny houses seems an obvious move. I avoided it for two “good” reasons and a “bad” one. First, many if not most tiny houses are constructed by do-it-yourself enthusiasts themselves – no builders necessary. Second, the tiny house building industry is quite small given just how niche the commodity remains. As the tiny house movement matures, there are fewer and better-established builders with a functioning online presence. But, at least during my research (2018-2019), the landscape of building companies was highly diffuse and chaotic and even the few databases offered by tiny house enthusiasts referenced companies that, upon further research, had often ceased to exist. And the “bad” reason: I simply did not have enough time to accomplish an in-depth exploration of this part of the tiny house movement, at least not within the given parameters of an un-funded dissertation while constantly working as a teaching assistant and adjunct professor (to afford my tiny, energy inefficient apartment). Like those I studied, I too am ruled by the abstract forces of capitalist domination.

## **Research Methods**

My findings derive from interviews and textual analysis supplemented by attendance at a tiny house festival and a short stay in a tiny house on wheels. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 minutes to two hours, though they averaged out at about one hour apiece. Altogether, I spoke with 30 individuals at this level of depth. Among these, 20 were tiny house dwellers, two were of people currently constructing their tiny house, and one person planning to soon live in a

tiny house. I also spoke with two officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and a key tiny house spokesperson who did not, at the time, actually live in a tiny house. The remaining five people had valuable things to say about the state of affordable housing, but those discussions focused on “tiny houses” for the homeless.

I initially sought informants in February 2019 and then recurrently up until December of that year. Despite this relatively lengthy period, and perhaps reflective of how small, diffuse, and unorganized the tiny house movement is, it proved exceedingly difficult to find and then complete interviews with actual tiny house dwellers. Nevertheless, interview informants were contacted in two main ways. I mostly relied upon soliciting interviews by posting my institutionally-approved solicitation statement among several tiny house related Facebook groups. Upon becoming a member of these groups, I first got permission from the group administrators to solicit interviewees (none turned me down). Those interested in speaking either contacted me through Facebook’s messaging feature or by email. From here, we exchanged and signed interview consent documents, after which all such interviews were conducted over the phone. When just starting research, my interview questions were quite generic, aiming to merely get a better sense of what people thought of their tiny house, its related “lifestyle,” and the politics or values of the tiny house movement. As themes emerged with each interview and from my ongoing textual analysis, interview questions became more pointed; I sought to uncover just how much overlap there was between the tiny house movement according to published texts and those of everyday dwellers. The overlap was robust. The opinions of dwellers typically reflected the commentary in articles, blogs, videos, podcasts, and so on.

After getting to know my informants through these phone interviews, I sought to initiate “snowball sampling,” that is, asking each informant if they personally knew anyone who is also a tiny house dweller, someone aspiring to “go tiny,” or simply an enthusiast. In the end, snowball sampling resulted in only two more informants. In every case, interviewees agreed to be audio recorded. I subsequently transcribed interview audio myself and then coded according to theme using ATLAS.ti software, organized appropriate excerpts, and eventually combined them with the themes and quotations of my textual analysis.

My second method was textual analysis of relevant tiny house related media. The first task of my research included collecting and organizing hundreds of articles and stories about tiny houses, from those receiving national coverage to those only covered by local presses. Generally, these offered an external analysis of tiny houses and the tiny house movement written by journalists, not enthusiasts or dwellers. To better understand the perspective of those in the movement, I undertook an exhaustive review of several of the most popular and active tiny house blogs: [tinyhouseblog.com](http://tinyhouseblog.com), [thetinylife.com](http://thetinylife.com), [tinyhousegiantjourney.com](http://tinyhousegiantjourney.com), and that of the Tiny House Society. I also reviewed a handful of tiny house dwellers’ memoirs; well-known books by spokespersons; several architecture and design books within and outside the tiny house canon; and just under 50 issues of *Tiny House Magazine*.

Some of the best information on the tiny house movement comes through video and audio. To that end, I listened to every episode of the *Tiny House Podcast* (2015-2018) and every episode of the *Tiny House Lifestyle Podcast* (2018-present). Although I listened to them all, many episodes focus on the details of design, architecture, and construction. I therefore reserved note taking to those episodes discussing the motivations for, and history and legality of, tiny

house living. I took a similar approach to serialized tiny house documentary YouTube channels, namely Living Big in a Tiny House, Tiny Home Tours, and Tiny House Expedition. Whereas podcasts typically have well known spokespersons as guests, these video episodes regularly feature fairly unknown tiny house dwellers. Though a significant portion of each 20-30 minute episode is occupied by the tiny house tour, its design and decoration, at times they capture the biographies and personal motivations of dwellers. Given the difficulty of finding interviewees, these short documentaries provided another avenue to get the perspectives of dwellers who were not also spokespersons or authors. Full-length tiny house documentaries offer something similar, though they tend to profile a single or only a handful of dwellers. I watched and took notes on the following documentaries: *We The Tiny House People* (2012); *TINY: A Story About Living Small* (2013); *Microtopia* (2013); *Living Small: A Tiny House Documentary* (2014); and *Small is Beautiful: A Tiny House Documentary* (2015). Lastly, I made sure to watch at least two episodes from ten tiny house or tiny house adjacent reality television series: *Tiny House Nation*; *Tiny House World*; *Tiny House, Big Living*; *Tiny House Hunting*; *Tiny House Hunters*; *Tiny House Builders*; *Tiny Luxury*; *Tiny Paradise*; *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*; *How to Live Mortgage Free with Sarah Beeny*.

The collection, organizing, and coding of these sources occurred over several steps. At the outset of my fieldwork, I was not looking for any specific theme or research angle. I simply sought to better understand what was happening with the “tiny house movement,” though always with an eye toward class, social reproduction, and political economy. By using “tiny house” and “tiny home” as Google Alerts, I received a weekly account of any recently published material that had to do, at whatever depth, with tiny houses. Otherwise, I sought out articles or other media through internet searches, at times facilitated by library databases, or merely trawled the

internet for credible information (established news sites, popular blogs, well-known articles etc.). From here, I converted relevant articles, posts, etc. into PDFs and thereafter coded the text by using ATLAS.ti software. From here themes like “American Dream/Nightmare,” “tiny house environmentalism,” and “tiny house austerity,” among others, emerged over dozens and dozens of texts. For each text that had an in-depth commentary on tiny houses – including documentaries, podcasts, and video episodes – I took summarizing notes and captured quotations that were the most emblematic of these previously recognized themes. After this, I re-coded each note using Evernote (a notetaking and organizing software that permits “tagging” notes by theme). These processes gave me several texts with rich material for each of the initial research themes. I drew from these notes to compose each chapter and the sections therein.

Supplementing interviews and textual analysis was a short, three-night stay in a tiny house on wheels (THOW) Airbnb and spending three days attending the 2019 Annual Tiny House Festival in Colorado. I was overly acquainted with very small apartments, but the THOW Airbnb was even smaller (i.e. tiny) at just 200 square-feet. I employed this method less as a means to answer the above research questions than to help me better understand some of the perspectives of tiny house dwellers. That said, I sincerely hoped to uncover some of the emotional or spiritual contentedness promised by simplicity and minimalism, but I left empty handed. The festival was more immediately informative. I was able to attend six lectures across two days and witness a gathering of dwellers, builders, and enthusiasts. Participant observation at the festival revealed two things about the tiny house movement. First, it is fundamentally indistinguishable from tiny house builders and sellers. While “festival” connotes an informal and collective celebration, it much more resembled an outdoor trade show. The space was dominated by tiny house models for sale, with accompanying brochures and attending salespersons ready to

give brief tours and answer questions for serious potential buyers – not necessarily curious researchers. There were also a wide variety of trailers for sale that could be only used for short-term, glamorous camping. And one salesperson selling yurts. Less than a dozen vendors were also present, offering anything from solar panels to compost toilets to advice on how to get one's tiny house certified and insured. On the opposite side of festival grounds were about ten converted and customized vans and school buses (or "skoolies") parked haphazardly, their dwellers giving tours to the curious passersby. What was glaringly absent from the festival were tiny house dwellers and their actual lived-in tiny houses on wheels. With all the tiny houses present being models, I spoke to four tiny house builders, four people residing in skoolies and vans, and three people camping on the festival grounds in trailers and/or sheltered pick-up truck beds for about five to ten minutes. Otherwise, I participated just like other attendees: touring models, school buses, vans; briefly talking with vendors; and listening to lectures. (Plans to attend the 2020 festival in Georgia were undone by the pandemic.)

Through this research, I got a much better sense of the distinctions between tiny houses as represented on reality television, marked as they are by carefree vacation homes and/or daring designs, and the much more mundane realities of making a fairly drastic life change for the purpose of seeking spiritual and financial control. This dichotomy between popular representation and reality, of course, shaped my initial perceptions of the tiny house movement. Drawing from reality TV housing shows, lighthearted news segments, culture and lifestyle magazines (or newspaper sections), photographs on social media, the occasional podcast or glossy coffee table book, tiny houses appeared to be adorable, fascinating, and forgettable – a flash-in-the-pan gimmicky waste of memory space. To an extent, the typical tiny house sales pitch only supports such a dismissive reaction. Like a midnight infomercial, enthusiasts

breathlessly urge you that normal sized house or apartment are, in reality, big and garish, wasteful, out of date, too much to manage, a financial nightmare to maintain, and inefficient. For those watching from their living room couch, this message makes one need a tiny house just like they need a kitchen knife that can cut through sneakers. Drawing from these jejune media representations, I have to admit, I held an unsympathetic view of the tiny house movement at the outset. “We do not,” Kim England (1994, 84) reminds us, “parachute into the field with empty heads and a few pencils ready to record the ‘facts.’” Rather, researchers “arrive” in the field with a host of preconceptions molded by their biography. These preconceptions thereafter proceed as a lens, highlighting some social relations and pushing others nearer to the shadows. Researchers end up interpreting some set of facts sympathetically and not others.

Writing on positionality and reflexivity tends to deal with how social scientists can more ethically study people who have less power than themselves. Reflexivity often has the goal of guiding researchers so they do not speak over the thoughts of more marginalized groups of people, so researchers recognize their biases and then allay them. Although models for studying “elites” exist (K. England 2002; Petintseva, Faria, and Eski 2019), I found nothing written about “studying up” when that “up” is only the middle stratum of the working class. Indeed, there is little at all written about how one’s class or economic position functions to determine one’s positionality vis-à-vis research subjects (Mellor et al. 2014). As tiny house enthusiasts tend to be college educated professionals, there was of course some commonality between myself and those enthusiasts I read, interviewed, watched and listened to (less so for those who appeared on reality TV). This was especially the case for those struggling to claw away their debt. Yet they all had enough wealth in time and money to make this debt-reducing shift to tiny house living. As much as I am critical of the tiny house movement’s ideology of simplicity compensating for the

working class' economic retreat, I resented the fact that I did not have the financial capacity to partake even if I wanted to. On top of all this, enthusiasts' moralizing assumption that debt and poverty were deserved repayment for a lack of consumer impulse control added insult to the injury. I thus had the task of studying those who indirectly spoke down to myself and those in a similar position.

Fortunately Marxist theory demands a wider, less personal perspective on class relations and the production of ideology. Despite subjective and ideological divisions between the lower- and middle-stratum, the tiny house movement, just like the related trends personalizing individual austerity, is quintessentially of and for the working class. Academics working with justice in mind cannot, on the one hand, protest against mounting wealth inequality and the hollowing out of economic security while, on the other, viewing the plight of the better off stratum of the working class as irrelevant and purely elitist, as just another instance of the "middle class" or "PMC" haughtily signaling their virtue. Simply put, by interrogating my positionality throughout this research, I came to appreciate the yearning for justice within the tiny house movement's *jouissance*, to approach it from a place not of sympathy but of class solidarity, to be less a carping critic than a critical comrade.

### **The components of the tiny house movement**

If we break the tiny house movement down to its most elementary components, what remains is a physical structure of a tiny house and an ideational commitment to anti-consumerism, the basis of "simplicity." Tiny house anti-consumerism takes four forms or, given that they typically overlap, four emphases. Each of these components are reactions to the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. The tiny house movement is therefore a social and spatial

innovation originating in the contradictions endemic to the capitalist mode of production. Below, I offer a quick review of these components, which correspond with four of the dissertation's empirical chapters. Before I move on to how certain contradictions produce each of the four elements of the tiny house movement, it is necessary define what I mean by "contradiction."

### *Contradiction*

There are two basic ways in which the concept of contradiction is used in the English language. The commonest and most obvious derives from Aristotle's logic, in which two statements are held to be so totally at odds that both cannot possibly be true. The statement "All blackbirds are black" contradicts the statement that "All blackbirds are white." If one statement is true, then the other is not. The other mode of usage arises when two seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present within a particular situation, an entity, a process or event. (Harvey 2014, 1)

This latter, dialectical version of contradiction holds two opposing forces as part of a single process. Rather than simply describing logical inconsistencies or, further, conflict between different social tendencies or groups, contradiction, Ollman (ibid., 15) writes, "is understood here as the incompatible development of different elements within the same relations, which is to say between elements that are also dependent on one another." The dialectical relation between the working class and the capitalist class, for instance, is defined by several contradictions. The objective economic position of each class produces an antipathy of interests, namely a struggle over the production and distribution of surplus value, or social wealth, embodied in useful goods. Capitalists, compelled by the "coercive laws of competition," must endeavor to draw out as much surplus value from the production process as possible under prevailing status of class struggle (Marx 1976, 433). The greater the exploitation of workers (and nature), the greater the profits. Workers, conversely, are compelled – for the sake of their own survival and humanity – to fight against their exploitation, to draw out as much surplus value for the working class

(Harvey 2014, 208). Both of these elements – the workers selling their capacity to labor and the capitalist holding the means of production – are in a dialectical and contradictory relation with one another because they are inextricably bound together as the basis of the production of useful goods, commodities.

Even when such conflict appears resolved, though, the dialectical method reveals that, unless the underlying basis of this contradictory unity is resolved, it is bound to reappear somewhere, at some time, in some form. In this manner, and instead of accrediting change to a random external event, dialectical thinking “attributes the main responsibility for all change to the inner contradictions of the system or systems in which it occurs” (Ollman 1992, 16). It is such conflict – produced through underlying contradiction – that repeatedly updates opposing social forces and tendencies via a recursive set of reactions (i.e. changing society itself). Such contradiction should not be misunderstood as merely an infinite “give-and-take,” however, with incessant compromises ultimately constructing equilibrium. Contradiction can and does, under certain social conditions, erupt into genuine crisis, but it can also be temporally and spatially forestalled through social innovation or resolved through revolutionary action (Harvey 2014, 4).

### *Tiny house spiritualism*

I refer to the first and most prevalent emphasis as “tiny house spiritualism.” Enthusiasts understand abstaining from consumption as a therapeutic, moral and spiritual endeavor. Simplicity, in this spiritual form, entails a set of ideas distinguishable from the far more popular notion of “minimalism” only insofar as the former gestures specifically toward domestic *living* space while minimalism can happen in other places, such as one’s office. Minimalism entails getting rid of “unnecessary” material objects in a space and then maintaining that “decluttered”

space by not filling it up again. From this process, adherents claim, one essentially declutters their mind and their life. For enthusiasts, people's lives and the spaces they inhabit are akin to a "junk drawer." Just as loose pens and old receipts befuddle those hastily searching for a lone AAA battery, too many household objects jumble the path to finding personal happiness and spiritual transcendence. Enthusiasts derisively refer to all such inappropriate objects – presumably cheap, forgettable, rarely used, and irrationally prized – as "stuff." For tiny house minimalists, to put it differently, inanimate commodities – their purchase, use, and spatial arrangement – have the power to alter human consciousness, to uplift or depress the essence of their humanity in mind, body, and soul. The route to tiny house salvation hinges upon buying the right sort of commodities and sorting them in the right way within the right sort of house.

Tiny house spiritualism, closely bound up with minimalism and the therapeutic practices of mindfulness, is, I argue, produced by the contradiction between marketplace agency and domination. On the one hand, the capitalist marketplace, or the "sphere of exchange," is defined by legal equality and permits a degree of individual freedom. Once people enter the space of the market, their objective class position (capitalist or worker) and the accordant social domination dissolves as they become either buyer or seller, individuals who voluntarily enter into exchange relations for mutual benefit (Marx 1976, 178). The place and sphere of exchange is one of relative individual agency, which can manifest as playful expression. In the sphere of exchange, the capitalist market, Harvey (1990, 102–3) argues,

We are "free," as it were, to develop our own personalities and relationships in our own way, our own "otherness," even to forge group language games, provided of course, that we have enough money to live on satisfactorily. Money is a "great leveler and cynic," a powerful underminer of fixed social relations, and a great "democratizer." As a social power that can be held by individual persons it forms the basis for wide-ranging individual liberty, a liberty that can be deployed to

develop ourselves as free-thinking individuals without reference to others. Money unifies precisely *through* its capacity to accommodate individualism, otherness, and extraordinary social fragmentation.

On the other hand, this individual consumer agency exists under, and is held together through, the abstract domination of an anarchic capitalist market. Agency exists, but it is *dominated* agency (Roberts 2017). People are compelled to abide the commodity price signals of an unplanned and largely unpredictable marketplace. Commodities, though products of human labor exchanged by human beings, come to act independently of human beings, and in fact come to dominate their behaviors. People must, for the sake of their own survival, follow the market's commands; they are "entirely determined by society" (Marx 1973, 248).

It is this inversion of social power that Marx (1976, 165) terms "the fetishism of commodities." The religious connotations of "fetish" are important here. Religion, Engels (1964, 148) argues, "exist[s] as the immediate, that is, the sentimental form of men's relation to the alien natural and social forces which dominate them, so long as men remain under the control of these forces." He continues:

In existing bourgeois society men are dominated by the economic conditions created by themselves, by the means of production which they themselves have produced, as if by an alien force. The actual basis of the reflective activity that gives rise to religion therefore continues to exist, and with it the religious reflection itself. And although bourgeois political economy has given a certain insight into the causal connection of this alien domination, this makes no essential difference. Bourgeois economics can neither prevent crises in general, nor protect the individual capitalists from losses, bad debts and bankruptcy, nor secure the individual workers against unemployment and destitution.

The spiritualized anti-consumerism of the tiny house movement is an example of such a sentimental relation to abstract domination. In lieu of overtures to a supernatural being so as to achieve deliverance from hardship, tiny house enthusiasts seek salvation as virtuous, that is,

prudent and self-restrained, consumers. And as opposed to waiting for reward in the afterlife, enthusiasts literally cash in on their marketplace sacrament here and now.

The sphere of exchange, because it is a place of individual consumer agency where one can choose to buy or abstain, is thus simultaneously the place of possible economic – and thus spiritual – salvation or damnation. A catechism of self-help literature supports tiny house dwellers as they reckon with, and struggle to personally overcome, their overconsuming and materialistic lifestyle. Just as their clarification comes from the individual effort of critical self-reflection, those stuck in the “American Nightmare” of debt-causing big houses with lots of stuff, and the corresponding “rat race” of full-time employment, ultimately only have themselves to blame. Even if America’s “consumer culture” first led someone astray, it is their personal responsibility to adopt minimalist living. This element of the tiny house movement – the tiny house spirit – is the topic of chapter four.

#### *Tiny house austerity*

In chapter five, I discuss the second most popular emphasis: “tiny house austerity.” Instead of enthusiasts framing their anti-consumerism as righteousness, for many dwellers it mostly about reducing their debt through thrifty budgeting and seeking new avenues of remuneration. The movement’s anti-consumerism, in other words, manifests as the way for financially anxious and indebted to regain economic stability and a measure of control. Just as the overconsumption of commodities weighs heavy on the mind and spirit, so too does it hang like an albatross around the necks of individual consumers, pulling them downward into a cage of indebtedness. This cage, enthusiasts argue, is almost always ostentatious and self-made, the result of people being socialized into overconsumption and, crucially, lacking the forethought and moral fortitude to

resist market temptations. Indebtedness, even when it clearly derives from structural events like the Great Recession, still reveals a previous weakness to overconsumption. Such overconsumption does not only include basic, more short-term commodities, but the overconsumption of housing, particularly oversized – or non-tiny – housing. Dovetailing with the minimalist regimen, the physical structure of the tiny houses – its limited space – urges dwellers to throw out junk and avoid filling it up again. Conversely, bigger houses, like bigger junk drawers, encourage the accumulation of stuff, stuff that not only causes less spiritual clarity, but also more debt and economic insecurity.

I argue that the tiny house movement is produced through the contradiction between production, or work, and social reproduction. There are numerous and ever-changing definitions of social reproduction (Winders and Smith 2019). Here, I define social reproduction as comprising the labor necessary to realize the use-value of commodities for the biological as well as social reproduction of the worker. Social reproduction thus entails the actual consumption, or using up, of commodities rather than their simple purchase. For example, buying eggs and a skillet is occurring in the sphere of exchange. Using that skillet to scramble those same eggs to the point of edibility constitutes social reproduction. Making purchases generally takes place in the sphere of exchange, a store, for instance, while social reproduction typically occurs at home. Social reproduction, though, need not be as immediately utilitarian as cooking food. Marx (*ibid.*, 287) spoke of the worker's "sphere of consumption" as including their "sphere of pleasures," or the working class's "share of civilization."

The tiny house movement calls for a shrinking the working class's share of civilization so as to save money and escape indebtedness. In a sense, the tiny house movement does the

capitalist's job for them because the less workers need – or demand – for their social reproductive activity, the less capitalists will have pay them. Herein, though, rears a contradiction. On the one hand, and in order to stay competitive, capital has a “constant tendency,” Marx (1976, 748) notes, “to force the cost of labor back towards this absolute zero.” If workers can do with less, the capitalists are only too eager to oblige. On the other hand, there is an unavoidable limit to the reduction of wages required to maintain the working class's means of subsistence. The working class, the bearer of labor power, holds the sole commodity capable of producing more value than what the capitalist paid for it. Decent wages are necessary, therefore, for “the production and reproduction of the capitalist's most indispensable means of production: the worker” (ibid., 717). Of course, tiny house dwellers are not intending to degrade their wages and living standards further. Rather, their self-imposed asceticism is ultimately an effort to abide by, to make do, on the reduced pay, reduced worker benefits, and lack of state support and public goods.

### *Tiny house de-alienation*

The next-most common and third emphasis is that of “tiny house de-alienation.” The overconsumption of commodities causes indebtedness. To pay off this debt (or keep overconsuming), requires people to overwork themselves and delay retirement; the geographical scale of domestic social reproduction determines the temporality and intensity of workplace production. And with more time and energy devoted to work – to maintaining a junk drawer lifestyle – there is less time and space for more meaningful personal reflection, leisure, hobbies, and social interaction. Tiny houses are not only an instance and instrument of anti-consumerism. They also can be, for many, a way to engage in self-directed, non-waged labor through do-it-

yourself (DIY) design and construction. Tiny houses thus offer an outlet of creativity and craftsmanship, an outlet that regularly gestures toward nostalgic return to a frontier past wherein every family, with the help of the benevolent and egalitarian small-scale community, built their own house from the ground up. The tiny house movement, in this manner, promises an escape from a troubled modern world of mass production and mass consumption.

Of Harvey's (2014, 264) *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, "The Revolt of Human Nature: Universal Alienation" is the last and, he argues, one of the most important. At its basis, alienation refers to how capitalist economic rationality and competition inserts itself within essential and historically well-established individual activities and social relations. There is, in other words, a contradiction between "human nature," or what Marx termed their "species being," and capitalist rationality. Though the worker is the most indispensable part of the means of production, capital endeavors to discourage those portions of human personality that are unproductive. It thereby threatens the social and psychological needs of human beings, and as such their capacity and will to remain productive. Humans' natural capacity to perform labor, cooperate, and reap its benefits has been hijacked by capital. Work becomes as activity not of individual self-creation and subsistence or collective betterment, but of denigration for the sole sake of enriching capitalists. Divorced from the means of production, people may only reproduce themselves through purchasing their means of subsistence (commodities) from capitalists – and then only to the extent their wages permit. These alienated relations of production echo throughout social relations. "An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the produce of his labor, from his life-activity, from his species being," Marx (1978b, 77) argues, "is the *estrangement of man from man*." "Competition is the completest expression of the battle of all against all," Engels (2009, 3) attests. "This battle, a

battle for life, for existence, for everything, in case of need a battle of life and death, is fought not between the different classes of society only, but also between the individual members of these classes. Each is in the way of the other, and each seeks to crowd out all who are in his way, and to put himself in their place.” This is discussed further in chapter six.

### *Tiny house environmentalism*

In chapter seven, I discuss the least common emphasis, that of tiny houses as environmentalism. Enthusiasts envision tiny houses, because they are an instance and instrument of anti-consumerism, to be part of the environmental movement, comprising “tiny house environmentalism.” According to enthusiasts, environmental destruction and climate change is primarily caused by personal overconsumption. Tiny houses are also environmentally friendly because their construction demands less materials. Many enthusiasts, furthermore, attempt to build their tiny houses using materials that are sourced locally, salvaged and repurposed, and are environmentally cleaner to produce. Solar panels, compost toilets, and efficient appliances are also fairly common. Although environmentalism is rarely the initial justification for dwellers to embrace the tiny house lifestyle, it remains an important animating feature of how enthusiasts envision themselves to be part of a social movement. Most enthusiasts, when justifying tiny houses in terms of spiritual minimalism, tightening belts to pay-off debt, or as a means to reduce their time at the workplace and enjoy leisure, understand these choices as a personal, inward-focused endeavor. When it comes to tiny houses’ environmentalism, and thus – by extension – their own environmentalism, though, dwellers see themselves as anti-consumerist-cum-environmental activists through “lifestyle activism,” spreading the word to others that the tiny house lifestyle is both possible and an easy way to reduce their carbon or ecological footprint.

Just as the contradiction between production and social reproduction, and that between capitalist rationality and human nature, threatens to erode the conditions necessary for the reproduction of capitalism – by destroying the working class’s ability and drive to keep producing a surplus for capital – the same holds true the contradiction between the capitalist mode of production and nature. “Nature is necessarily viewed by capital,” Harvey (2014, 250) points out, “as nothing more than a vast store of potential use values – of processes and things – that can be used directly or indirectly (through technologies) in the production and realization of commodity values.” It is in the interest of individual capitalists to exploit nature, just as it exploits the working class, to the fullest degree possible. This tendency, of course, risks destroying the very conditions necessary for the accumulation of capital. “The warming of the atmosphere,” for example, “will inevitably destroy people, places, and profits, not to speak of other species life,” O’Connor (1997, 166) explains.

### **Lifestyle and the class character of the tiny house movement**

These four contours constitute the tiny house movement. Though its environmentalism gestures toward social and political concerns, the popularity of tiny houses and their justifying rationales are not, ultimately, a social or political movement. Rather, it is a type of “lifestyle movement,” an individually practiced set of behaviors centered around stylized and virtuous anti-consumerism and a particular way of using and relating to physical commodities (see Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). It is held together by these four discursive commitments in a diffuse yet enduring a network of likeminded individuals who, feeling that they are a part of something beyond themselves – and something that is explicitly critical of “mainstream society” – encourage a sense of embattled cohesion through mutual support, encouragement, and advice to

help people in their “journey” to “live tiny.” This lifestyle movement proceeds as the symbiosis of physically minimized living spaces and the ideals of minimalist – or simple – living. At this convergence, environmental footprints, debt, and time at work contract as leisure time and dignity expand. The pace of life slows down, stress melts away, and people can devote themselves to hobbies and their social life. Dwellers’ happiness grows as their time spent working and consuming decreases. Tiny houses promise a measure of individual economic control amidst the contradictions of capitalism and abstract domination.

Just above, I have been working from a tripartite conceptualization of capitalist social relations and their corresponding geographies.<sup>4</sup> The first and most obvious sphere and/or space is that of exchange. These relations, as mentioned, are ones of formal equality and voluntary exchange. One’s relation to the commodity form is that of a buyer or a seller, including exchanging money for use-values or exchanging one’s future capacity to labor for subsequent wages. Commodities are bought for the sake of one’s means of subsistence, to fulfill needs. Buying commodities for individual wants and needs stands in contrast to the purchasing of commodities – like labor power and other means of production – with the goal of capital accumulation (Marx 1973, 284). Once one returns home from the marketplace, they enter the sphere of social reproduction. Here, one relates to commodities as a user. After one renders commodities useful through social reproductive labor, the worker can return to the sphere of

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<sup>4</sup> This tripartite conceptualization, I suggest, is the properly Marxist one. Marx’s discussion of the distinction between production and exchange is fairly well known. While the sphere of exchange is one of equal market license lacking coercion of domination, forming the basis of liberal equality, unequal power relations and, in the end, unequal exchange (or exploitation) define the “hidden abode of production.” Here is Marx (1978d, 274) on the relationship between the sphere of exchange and that of consumption, what we now term social reproduction: “If commodity A is exchanged for money B, and the latter then for commodity C, which is destined to be consumed – the original object of the exchange, for A – then the using-up of commodity C, its consumption, falls entirely outside circulation; is irrelevant to the form of the relation; lies beyond circulation itself, and is purely of physical interest, expressing no more than the relation of the individual A in his natural quality to an object of his individual need. What he does with commodity C is a question which belongs outside the economic relation.”

exchange or workplace. As noted, the workplace is a place of domination and exploitation. Here, the worker's capacity to labor is being realized by capital for the sake of producing exchange-values. As the worker's capacity to labor is used up so is the life force of the worker herself.

Whether scholarship focuses on social reproduction or consumption, these two processes are typically counterposed to that of production. Social reproduction scholarship highlights the social and spatial division between home and work (Winders and Smith 2019). Research on consumption, similarly, stresses social and spatial division between work and the market (Shah et al. 2007). To properly understand the parameters of the tiny house movement, though, requires the above tripartite model. This is so because the tiny house movement relates to each sphere in specific way. Essentially, tiny house enthusiasts seek to reduce the amount of time they spend at work, and thus reduce their time as a usable commodity themselves. The avoidance of work matches their desire to increase their time at home, engaging in the self-directed social reproductive labor necessary to satisfy the worker's wants and needs. Tiny house enthusiasts seek to accomplish this social, spatial, and temporal reconfiguration of their day to day life through recalibrating, but usually minimizing, the amount of money spent on commodities within the sphere of exchange, which then enables them to devote less time in the marketplace selling their labor power to capital.

The tiny house movement appeals to the financially anxious middle stratum of the working class. For the lowest-paid stratum, those regularly at risk of eviction, of food insecurity, and of being unable to afford the most basic commodities necessary for their social reproduction, further reducing their spending is out of the question.<sup>5</sup> No matter the amount of savings, few

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<sup>5</sup> Such poverty, though, is certainly not seen as a barrier to the welfare system's goal of counseling the poor to further reduce their consumption (Hennigan and Purser 2020).

would have the capability to reduce their time at work. Indeed, many workers cannot get enough hours as is even as they always remain at their employer's beck and call (McCallum 2020). Tiny houses, though significantly cheaper than typical single-family homes, also require, as I discuss further in chapter one, several thousands of dollars in savings given the prevailing dearth of affordable financing options. The tiny house movement is, in other words, a voluntary endeavor reserved for those wealthy enough to partake, for those workers whose labor power is skilled and coveted enough by capital that they can afford to stylize their purchases and their methods of social reproduction. Most scholars, no matter their theoretical or political perspective, generally refer to this grouping as "middle class." In common vernacular, class is often just an identity, one often constructed around what physical commodities and commodified services they buy – their lifestyle (Metzgar 2005; see Dowling 2009). In this understanding anyone, no matter their relation to the means of production, can simply decide to become middle class through practicing a "middle class" lifestyle. Marxist theorists of the middle class rightly criticize this identity-based framework as neglecting the objectivity of class, that is, that people either work for a living or live off the labor of the working class.

Marxists primarily criticize these theories because they neglect the role of production and the exploitative realities of work in favor of a definition relegated within the sphere of exchange and determined by gradations in wealth. Reacting against these theories of class, Marxists instead aim to define the middle class by its position deep within the hidden abode of production: the labor process itself.<sup>6</sup> This theorization conveys its Marxist chops by defining middle class occupations in terms of *power* (Zweig 2012; E. O. Wright 1979; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich

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<sup>6</sup> "In order to understand the semi-autonomous employee category – the contradictory class location between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie – we need to look at the characteristic labor process of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat," Wright (1979, 204) argues.

1979).<sup>7</sup> In this framework, certain occupations – generally those that require a college education – have more power over the labor process than the definitely-disempowered, poorly educated working class.<sup>8</sup> Although obviously not as powerful as capitalists, people in these somewhat-powerful occupations, who thus have somewhat autonomously-direct labor processes, are what render the middle class, PMC, petty bourgeoisie, etc. as a *class* with its own, unique relationship to the means of production and, because of this relative power, its own interests that are separate from and often antithetical to both the working- and capitalist class alike (see Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979, 12; Zweig 2012, 19; Szymanski 1979, 53). Simply put, the middle class orders around the working class and the capitalist bosses around everybody. This is the essence of several Marxist arguments in favor of categorizing the middle class as its own class.

This conceptualization, then, denies the bifurcated, orthodox understanding of class – working class versus capitalist class – as determined by whether or not one owns the means of production, who sells their labor power and who buys it up as capital. Many Marxist class theorists look not to the position of labor under capitalism in general, to that *abstract labor* which defines value (and captured so much of Marx’s focus), but rather to differing *concrete labor*. As such, they come to define the middle class according to sets of occupations. Purely

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<sup>7</sup> The Ehrenreichs (1979) also single out the professional middle class due to its function of reproducing the ideological and social conditions of capitalism. The PMC, in this manner, labors within the superstructure, not the working class base, of the capitalist mode of production.

<sup>8</sup> Several occupations hold this relative power. According to Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979, 12), in their highly influential essay, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” there are “professional” and “managerial” middle class occupations. These occupations are middle class because the labor is mental rather than manual and they are paid through yearly salaries rather than hourly wages. Using this definition, they propose many occupations that fit the bill, including: “teachers, social workers, psychologists, entertainers, writers of advertising copy and TV scripts, etc.”; “registered nurses, welfare case workers, engineers, engineers in routine production or inspection jobs at the lower end, middle levels of corporate and state bureaucratic managers at the upper end”; “scientific managers, lawyers, financial experts, engineers, experts, professors.”

understanding the middle class via their place within a concrete labor process, and forthrightly distancing themselves from theories that trivialize class as mere cultural and consumptive practice, these Marxist theorists replace gradations in income with gradations in workplace autonomy and power. Class as a social relation to the means of production gives way to class as a matter of location within a particular capitalist firm.

Given their relationship to the means of production, the better paid fraction of workers, I argue, remains part of the working class. No matter what level of autonomy, skill, or wealth, all non-capitalists are bound by the common experience of exploitation and dependence on capital for their livelihood. It is not at all clear that this common experience of the working class's domination and exploitation would be eclipsed by whether one works with cars rather than spreadsheets (see Wood 1999, 38). All workers get hired to serve the interests of capital more than their own, and they all have to work for their survival.<sup>9</sup> Work is fundamentally a *coercive relationship*, and to deny that due to some notion of "autonomy," or because skilled labor can personify capital through its indirect disciplining of workers, is ultimately reminiscent of neoliberal ideology; it ignores this dependence on capital and reimagines workers as autonomous entrepreneurs inspired by their "calling" (Weeks 2011).

This singular focus does not consider how the working class must come to work because both the means of production and the means of subsistence have become privatized, enlisted into

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<sup>9</sup> An "extended circle of enjoyments...no more abolishes the exploitation of the wage laborers, and his situation of dependence, than do better clothing, food and treatment, a larger *peculium*, in the case of a slave. A rise in the price of labor, as a consequence of the accumulation of capital, only means in fact that the length and weight of the golden chain the wage-laborer has already forged himself allow it to be loosened somewhat" (Marx 1976, 769).

the accumulation of capital (Marx 1976, 274; Bhattacharya 2017, 76; Lebowitz 1992).<sup>10</sup> Nor, relatedly, does it bother to understand that wage levels – what Marx (*ibid.*, 769) terms “means of payment” – determine the working class’ “means of subsistence,” their condition of social reproduction. Such wage levels determine one’s power to attend school and learn skills, demarcating what Marx (*ibid.*, 135) terms “simple average labor” versus more “complex” or “intensified simple labor.” For the latter, a “smaller quantity of complex labor is considered equal to a larger quantity of simple labor,” thus enabling some strata of the working class to achieve superior wages and “extend the circle of their enjoyments, make additions to their consumption fund of clothes, furniture, etc., and lay by a small reserve fund of money” (Marx 1976, 769).<sup>11</sup>

Marxist purveyors of middle class as a class ultimately, then, go too far in their opposition to culturalist understandings. Zeroing in on the labor process, they overlook anything before or after the workday. Conceptualizing class through the tripartite demarcation of capitalist relations permits, I argue, a more thorough theorization of class relations. Considering the sheer power of money (income, wealth) for social reproduction, as well as the intimate and recursive connection between concrete occupation income, and education/skill (Metzgar 2005, 199), I suggest that theorizations of class should include concrete *and abstract* labor. But they must also pay attention to the economic realities of the sphere of exchange and that of social reproduction. Skilled labor tends to fetch a higher price given its relative scarcity, and skilled labor has to be

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<sup>10</sup> “The historical conditions of its [capitalist mode of production] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labor power” (Marx 1976, 274).

<sup>11</sup> Unlike gradations of autonomy, Marx (1976, 809, 822) determined fractions of the working class by their level of subsistence, separating “the badly paid strata of the British industrial working class” who are not getting enough food or shelter from the “best paid section of the working class,” or “labor’s aristocracy,” that have less desperate means of subsistence.

attracted by higher wages.<sup>12</sup> A higher income lends these workers a greater level of agency within the sphere of exchange, and thus more latitude to stylize their means of subsistence or social reproduction. Movements like that of tiny houses, which view the sphere of exchange as the path to enjoying social reproduction and avoiding work, accordingly, attract this better-paid stratum of the working class. The so-called middle class is thus better understood as middle stratum of the working class whose relatively skilled labor enables it to both “extend the circle of their enjoyments” and boss around other workers, potentially reducing their workplace alienation. Given the middle stratum’s place within production and reproduction and their corresponding, practical experience of capitalist social relations as a whole, it stands to reason that it develops its own subjective set of ideas, institutions, geography, and methods of social reproduction that differ from the less skilled, more poorly paid fractions of the working class struggling to simply make ends meet. This middle stratum is the basis of the tiny house movement. I revisit this discussion in chapter three.

### **The past, present, and future of the tiny house movement**

The tiny house movement is, I argue in this dissertation, an innovative social, spatial, and temporal recalibration of the middle stratum’s daily life as it navigates the capitalist mode of production’s contradictions, contradictions that have become heightened over the last half-century of neoliberal reforms and then punctuated by the Great Recession. Though relatively

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<sup>12</sup> “The standard of the average needs and the average civilization of the workers has become very complicated by reason of the complications of English industry, and is different for different sorts of workers, as has been pointed out. Most industrial occupations demand a certain skill and regularity, and for these qualities which involve a certain grade of civilization, the rate of wages must be such as to induce the worker to acquire such skill and subject himself to such regularity. Hence it is that the average wages of industrial workers are higher than those of mere porters, day-laborers, etc., higher especially than those of agricultural laborers, a fact to which the additional cost of the necessities of life in cities contributes somewhat” (Engels 2009, 91).

small, niche and, at times, a bit ridiculous, the tiny house movement has, with its promise of economic freedom, spiritual contentedness, less work and more play, nevertheless and understandably gripped the attention of many Americans, even if they have not yet become “tiny people” themselves. But the tiny house movement is not, in its essence, completely of our current political-economic and ideational conjuncture. As I explore in chapter two, the popularity the tiny house lifestyle is but the latest iteration in a long line social projects in United States history that, in their reaction to the contradictions of capitalism, resort to preaching anti-consumerist discourse. By consuming less and saving more, these tiny house predecessors have sought to skirt the abstract domination and alienation of capitalist social relations through adopting economic thrift, practices that are recurrently recast as “simplicity” or “simple living.”

By looking at this history, we can better guess at the tiny house movement’s future. None of these several past movements, to put it briefly, have succeeded in their ostensible mission of turning the US populace from its alleged profligacy. Calls to simplicity and thrift, indeed, emerge not during national orgies of overconsumption, but rather at moments of economic and political tumult. They provide a graspable avenue of realizing some sense of security and psychological contentedness through saving money and/or nostalgic escapism. The language of simplicity, in this manner, adorns and sentimentalizes alienation and poverty. In so doing, it distracts from the root cause of powerlessness amid abstract market domination. As they recast the negative effects of capitalist contradictions as resulting from individual and moral weaknesses, calls for simple living effectively function as stabilizing force, a mode of social regulation necessary to support this mode of production. Over and over, these movements call upon the working class to reduce its social, physical, and intellectual needs and wants, thus – intentionally or not – becoming handmaidens of the capitalist class.

Given that these simplicity movements remain bound within the spheres of exchange and social reproduction, only guiding individual consumer behaviors, they neither intend nor are able to stop the reproduction of poverty and alienation. As such, poverty and alienation remain. When that poverty and alienation intensifies, a new call for simplicity and thrift swells, gains momentum, crests, and then crashes upon the breakers without leaving much in its wake. In a decade or two, an updated version proudly rears its head, counsels anti-consumerism, loses its temporary relevancy, and crashes down once again. Wave after wave after wave, though superficially distinctive, remain essentially the same. As such, they all have met the same end. The tiny house movement, then, is not the first movement calling for personalized poverty as simplicity. If the working class continues to retreat in the face of their own degradation in the name of pious simplicity, it won't be the last.

## CHAPTER 1 – THE BASICS OF THE TINY HOUSE MOVEMENT

Tiny houses are generally defined as a detached dwelling between 100 and 400 square feet. The vast majority are tiny houses on wheels (or THOW), and are closest to manufactured housing, though smaller and more mobile (see E. Sullivan 2018). As such, they are built atop a trailer and, when needed, towed by large trucks. Under current regulations, the maximum dimensions of THOW in the United States is 13.5 feet tall, 8.5 feet wide, and 40 feet long, coming out to 340 square-feet (“Road Limits for Tiny Houses on Trailers” 2010). More and more are factory built, though builders offer varying degrees of customization and completion. Do-it-yourself (DIY) builds, which many hardcore adherents see as a defining feature of the tiny house movement, remain a significant presence and by far receive the greatest media coverage. Constricted by codes and zoning laws, a much smaller portion of tiny houses are set into a foundation. Such site-built tiny houses are either accessory dwelling units or built on private land in unincorporated rural counties with less oversight and regulations. Aesthetically, many tiny houses, particularly those on foundation, are constructed to look like typical suburban housing, with gabled roofs and miniature front porches. Most tiny houses, though, are built more aerodynamically and look much closer to a single-wide manufactured house (a long rectangle) than a Victorian cottage or woodsy cabin.

Other designs overlap with the tiny house movement’s smaller is better ethos and regularly appear at tiny house festivals and trade shows. There are “container homes” constructed from erstwhile shipping containers (at most 320 square feet), old school buses converted into recreational vehicles playfully called “skoolies,” or those living the “van life” in full-size vans made fairly habitable through adding small appliances and bedding. Finally, there are dozens of tiny house villages for the homeless, though in reality many of such “tiny houses”

are little more than small rooms, shacks, or garden sheds that lack nearly all conveniences of contemporary housing in the United States, such as plumbing, electricity, a kitchen, or a bathroom. A few, though, do offer more austere versions of a typical tiny house (Evans 2020). Nevertheless most in the movement, as judged from interviews as well as social media discussions, embrace such villages as a positive development.

Such small dwellings, as all forthrightly clear-eyed advocates will assure you, have been around for a long time – back “all the way to Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond” (Tempest 2017) or even “back to the first days humans spent in caves” (Nonko 2017). Enthusiasts trace their origins back to Lloyd Kahn’s 1973 publication of *Shelter*.<sup>13</sup> Primarily a book of architecture, Kahn provides short captions to a photo collection of small-scale, often-ancient dwellings, from house-cars to tree houses to teepees and thatched roofs while highlighting a very basic “how-to” construction guide.<sup>14</sup> *Tiny, Tiny Houses; or How to Get Away From it All*, marks another point on the tiny house timeline – and an important one given that its title inspired the naming of these small dwellings. Published by Lester Walker in 1987, the book provides basic blueprints, photographs, and short contextualizing captions describing the historical geography of each type of home.<sup>15</sup> Architect Sarah Susanka’s 1998 *The Not So Big House: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live*, is another important book for advocates. Selling approximately 400,000 copies, an

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<sup>13</sup> *Small Houses of Distinction* (1938), edited by Horace Coon, is another photo collection of small houses. It includes floor plans and short descriptions of 42 small houses across the world, such as: a New England House on Modern Lines, a House and Garden in Suburban New Jersey, a Japanese Manner, Peasant Houses in the Danish Isles, an Adobe house in Santa Fe, and a Cape Cod Cottage. For whatever reason, tiny house advocates have not inducted Coon’s volume into the canon.

<sup>14</sup> “This book is about simple homes, natural materials, and human resourcefulness” Kahn (1973, 3) explains in his very brief introductory remarks. “It is about discovery, hard work, the joys of self-sufficiency, and freedom. It is about *shelter*, which is more than a roof overhead.”

<sup>15</sup> Over forty “tiny houses” altogether, Walker’s book features everything from 300-square-foot tenement apartments to earthquake refugee shacks to George Bernard Shaw’s writing hut and, more relevantly, small houses pulled on a trailer (L. R. Walker 1987).

updated edition was republished in 2008. As with Kahn and Walker, Susanka captions countless blueprints and photographs of smaller houses, explaining the theory behind each design. Her overall message is that people sacrifice quality for quantity when they purchase a typically-sized suburban home – and this tendency in fact robs those from truly feeling *at home* (Susanka 2008).<sup>16</sup>

If this series of architectural and design books were the chrysalis of the tiny house movement, then Jay Shafer, who the *New Yorker* lionized as “the brainy misfit behind the tiny-house trend,” is surely the butterfly. Shafer built his own tiny home in Iowa and, two years later, founded the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company (Wilkinson 2011). In 2002, Shafer and three of his colleagues, Shay Salomon, Nigel Valdez, and Gregory Johnson founded the Small House Society, featuring blog posts and links to resources. The web-based “society” is a “cooperatively managed organization dedicated to the promotion of smaller housing alternatives which can be more affordable and ecological” (“Small House Society” 2008).<sup>17</sup> The movement really took off – at least in terms of its presence in popular media – in 2007 when Shafer and his tiny home appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Nonko 2017).

Enthusiasts tend to concern themselves less with the exact size and shape and more with understanding of tiny houses as an expression and container of tiny living *mindset*. There is a particular ideology that forms the basis of the tiny house *movement*, so described, which is something much more recent. According to one of its main websites and blogs, [thetinylife.com](http://thetinylife.com),

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<sup>16</sup> Pivoting upon the success of this first book, Susanka has become something of a franchise with the publication of eleven related titles while going on speaking tours and hosting workshops (“Sarah Susanka: Architect and Author” 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Offering a newsletter, related resource links, newsfeed, and the potential to become a dues-paying member (the purpose of which is unclear), the website is one of the most established in the tiny house movement.

the tiny house trend “has become a social movement” propelled by “people...choosing to downsize the space they live in, simplify, and live with less. People are embracing the tiny life philosophy,” it continues, “and the freedom that accompanies the tiny house lifestyle. The tiny house movement is about more than simply living in a small space (although, a small house is certainly part of it).” This “more than” includes: “environmental consciousness, self-sufficiency, life simplification, sound fiscal plans, life adventures” (“What Is The Tiny House Movement? Why Tiny Houses?” 2020).

Beyond these already-ambitious goals, advocates likewise understand tiny houses as the keystone for reestablishing “community” (LaVoie 2014; Harrell 2014); fortifying familial and romantic relationships (Hulleman 2014; Berzins 2013; J. Becker 2013a; Padgett 2014; A. Morrison 2014; Johnson 2008); attaining “financial freedom” (Waldman, n.d.; Engberg 2016); reconnecting people with primeval shelter (Odom 2013; Anson 2014; J. Goff 2015; Hussey Jr. 2016); delivering affordable housing (Wilson 2015; Keable 2017; Mazza 2019b); “disrupting” traditional housing models (Nelson and Schneider 2018; Lind 2020); reducing debt (Waldman, n.d.; Spesard 2012; Vesterfelt 2013; Felix 2015); escaping work (E. O’Connor 2015; Boyink 2016; Haslett 2019); enabling do-it-yourself empowerment (L. Smith 2012; Stephens 2020b); addressing homelessness (Lundahl 2014; Quandt 2015); reigniting the “American Dream” (Rowell 2014; Vail 2016; Gay 2017); hastening retirement (Kaufmann 2015; Rieland 2018), eradicating stress (J. Becker 2013a; Wyatt 2017); rejecting consumerism (Hulleman 2014; Anson 2014; T. Harris 2018a); helping the environment (Saxton 2019a); and even losing weight (Johnson 2008).

The tiny houses movement, as I explore in more detail below, is essentially one of lifestyle – of getting rid of certain commodities, buying the right ones, and relating to those commodities (including one’s house) in specialized and enduring ways. Being a loose and disorganized assemblage of individual enthusiasts principally connected via commonly-held consumption practices and shared media, the “movement” has no direction or leadership outside the informal commentaries proffered by the tiny house movement’s best-known intellectuals, authors, and spokespersons. Ultimately, the tiny house movement entails (1) advertising or raising awareness about the multifaceted power of tiny houses – listed out above – to positively affect individuals and society, (2) the acts of building, selling, and buying tiny houses, (3) supporting fellow dwellers and enthusiasts with advice and assistance, (4) lobbying for tiny houses’ legalization.

### **The legal geography of tiny houses**

There are relatively few places where one can permanently live in a tiny house. Tiny houses’ broad illegality, in other words, is a key defining feature of and the utmost barrier to the growth of the movement. Artifacts of Progressive Era reformers targeting cramped tenements in turn of the century US cities and, later, standardizing New Deal housing policies (Kelly 1996), zoning laws (where a building can exist) and building codes (how buildings must be constructed) bedevil the tiny house movement. When it comes to zoning, tiny houses simply offer too little floorspace to be legally habitable full-time in the vast majority of US municipalities. In addition to restrictions targeting exploitative landlords, zoning restrictions have been put to use for less progressive reasons, such as imposing minimum space requirements to increase residential property taxes and, likely more widespread, to indirectly (and legally) exclude the poor through

zoning/pricing out those unable to afford larger houses (Vail 2016, 362–63). Basic residential building codes – with their demand for minimum ceiling height of 6 feet and 8 inches, at least one window as emergency exit, and basic plumbing for a minimum of one bathroom – are less commonly a roadblock for tiny houses’ legality, though they can jeopardize those preferring the truly rugged and austere version of tiny house (McGee 2018). Even without pushing the limits of habitability, various other coding requirements – such as handrails, minimum stairway width, stairway landing size, loft headspace, etc. – can put tiny houses outside the law (“International Residential Code (IRC), Appendix V: Tiny Houses, Public Comment” 2015).

Though mobility is pitched as a positive, most tiny houses are on wheels because existing laws prohibit such small structures from operating as permanent residential dwellings (while such a tiny square footage is considered appropriate for temporary dwelling in recreation vehicles). This illegality, in turn, determines the rural and suburban geography of tiny houses. According to Morrison, a professional builder and advocate who teaches tiny house seminars across the country, “easily upwards of 90 percent of tiny-house owners are living illegally, when it comes to zoning. A very small minority live in R.V. parks, though they usually have a limit on how long you can stay,” he said. “A friend or family’s backyard, or land in the country, is much more common” (quoted in Prevost 2017). My own discussions with tiny house dwellers generally accord with Morrison’s assessment. A handful relied on the generosity of friends with private land outside metropolitan areas, while many owned rural plots themselves. Most others resorted to RV or mobile home parks on the city’s outskirts. It is no exaggeration to say that the

question of “Where can I park my tiny house?” dominates the attention of builders and dealers hoping to sell their products as well as consumers and DIY builders.<sup>18</sup>

As with tiny house builders, there is no comprehensive quantification of just how many tiny house communities there are across the country. According to a crowd-sourced list compiled on the website SearchTinyHouseVillages.com, there are 235 such communities across the United States and into Canada (particularly British Columbia). An imperfect list, the vast majority of these are merely *planned* communities and/or have little or no information regarding the site or cost. Only 51 of these 235 communities advertise details and monthly rental costs, which seems a much more reasonable baseline estimate. Most of these villages, again, are located in suburban areas and are generally indistinguishable from typical RV sites wherein users rent lots and pay to “hook-up” utilities. They have merely been opened up to – and advertised for – tiny houses on wheels (D. Sullivan 2021).<sup>19</sup> Beyond the municipal scale, the tiny house movement exists fairly

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<sup>18</sup> Social media has emerged as the medium of tiny house dwellers (or those aspiring) searching for private land to park. The private Facebook group Tiny House Hosting, “designed to help connect landowners with tiny house people,” has nearly 17,000 members – almost double the estimated number of tiny house dwellers in the US. Typical posts read, for instance, “Looking for a space to rent/own for my tiny home. Prefer Washington state;” “Land Wanted - Nashville/Surrounding - Need to find a plot of land to work on my build for long term parking. I need access to power and water (no dumping) and 1000sq ft of flat land to do the build on. Ideally someone who has a lot of acres and doesn't mind letting someone use a small section to this project and agree on a monthly fee for the next year;” “I'm thinking of buying a tiny home. Any ideas where to park it in Weld, Larimer, Adams or Arapahoe counties in Colorado?” Most responses to such queries direct the person to a tiny house friendly RV or mobile home park in the general area while others – much more rarely – let group members know of their own plots of land that can be used or rented: “LFR [land for rent] in N Boulder for one Tiny House. Very convenient location to grocery store, coffee houses, downtown, CU, bus lines, etc.... Thriving garden in place. Must have a compostable toilet. Price includes utilities and Wi-Fi. First, last and \$300 security deposit;” “My wife and I are retired have a large ranch that is on the Kings River in Northwest Arkansas close to Fayetteville/Bentonville Area. We would gladly entertain a long term Tiny Home on wheels. We currently have one on our place now and a few RVs.” Otherwise, desperate tiny house dwellers can check websites like mytinyhouseparking.com to search lone plots on private land, in RV parks, or in “tiny house communities” – though the vast majority of such communities appear to be on land zoned as, and hardly distinguishable from, typical RV parks.

<sup>19</sup> Take Delta Bay, prized as northern California’s “first legal tiny house community.” Starting in 2015, the “community” rests on 12 acres along the banks of the San Joaquin River, combining tiny houses on wheels, standard RVs, houseboats and “floating homes” (Charnock 2019). Flush with amenities, Delta Bay markets itself as a resort, privileging tiny houses as “vacation homes” rather than full-time residences (“Tiny Houses - Delta Bay” n.d.). Nevertheless, reports suggest that some tiny house dwellers are year-round (KPIX 2018). Tiny houses on wheels (for financing and zoning purposes, recreational vehicles) likewise characterize Circle Pond Tiny Home Community in the rural, unincorporated area of Ruskin, Florida where people currently rent one of eleven lots (of the eventual

evenly across the United States. To the extent that clusters neatly exist, the “tiny house friendly” states are grouped among Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont in the northeast; Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, and the Carolinas in the southeast; Michigan and Minnesota in the Midwest; and then everywhere west from Wisconsin to Louisiana, but especially the states of Texas, New Mexico, and Oregon (McGee 2018).

Some tiny house developments come much closer to the image of the miniaturized suburban neighborhood the terminology suggests: a group of fully functional, owner-occupied, one-household tiny homes permanently set into a foundation. These tiny houses tend to be legally categorized as accessory dwelling units or a “smaller home or apartment located behind the principal dwelling on the same property lot.” In other words, their legality depends upon their connection to a full-sized house of which they are an “accessory” unit (Vail 2016, 373).<sup>20</sup> ADUs therefore tend to exist in suburban areas. Other non-RV tiny house communities, meanwhile, have been developed in urban areas specifically for lower-income individuals using government or nonprofit funding.<sup>21</sup>

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22) to park their tiny house on wheels for \$450 each month among a 4.5 acre lot (including a pond). Unlike Delta Bay, Circle Pond excludes traditional RVs (“Sustainable, Affordable Plans for Circle Pond Tiny Home Community” 2019). Like Delta Bay, Circle Pond is seen as something of a model, with its “edible landscaping,” plans for a “compost area, chickens and maybe some goats,” which ultimately earned it the local Sustany Foundation’s 2019 Sustainable Business Award (Kindle 2019). Other such notable sites include Airstream Village in Las Vegas, NV, Orlando, FL, Lemon Cove, CA (D. Sullivan 2019) and LuxTiny, a luxury tiny house on wheels “village,” in Lakeside, AZ (“Tiny Home Community” 2017).

<sup>20</sup> The Village in Flat Rock, NC, an erstwhile RV park, is one such example, and it might just be the largest tiny home development in the United States. Indeed, the site itself even has six, internal “neighborhoods,” each set around shared amenities. Costing between \$95,000 and \$140,00, there are 126 occupied tiny homes (handful are on wheels), with another 134 units in the planning stage that can be purchased outright (Walter 2019). Reno, Nevada’s tiny home development, Tiny Ten, is another community selling tiny houses on foundations. The site, a project of “a development company specializing in small homes, adaptive reuse, and infill” includes ten homes with 15 residents just outside the city’s urban core. Currently, all ten homes have been sold, their cost ranging from \$210,000 to \$259,000 (Budds 2018b). Countless other companies purport to offer “tiny house communities,” yet a surprising number – surprising given them being featured on tiny house related websites – in fact provide short term rentals and/or include models that far surpass tiny house square footage of tiny houses (see D. Sullivan 2020a).

<sup>21</sup> In chapter 5, I discuss these nonprofit and/or state-subsidized tiny house developments.

The onerous and contorted legal geography of tiny houses has predictably resulted in a concerted effort by the maturing tiny house industry. With initial funding from the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, in 2016 construction companies and related developers founded the Tiny Home Industry Association (THIA), a 501(c)(6) nonprofit trade association. The chief goal of THIA is to standardize the industry and legitimize tiny houses by highlighting their positive effects. The primary means by which THIA hopes to accomplish this is through lobbying for alterations in zoning and building codes. “Most of the country’s local building codes have been adopted from the International Residential Code (IRC) for one- and two-family dwellings,” Emily Nonko (2016) of *Curbed* explains. As such, THIA pushed for an added appendix – Appendix Q – to be added to the IRC that specifically addresses tiny houses on foundation. Through this lobby, in 2018 the Appendix Q was added to the IRC, but it is now up to states or municipalities to adopt the Appendix so as to legalize tiny houses on foundations. Progress on its adoption has been underway across the US for years, and dozens of municipalities and some states have thus adopted the Appendix (“Appendix Q: Tiny Homes On a Foundation” 2019).

Even when the updated IRC is adopted, the legal landscape of tiny houses – wheeled or not – remains circumscribed by zoning laws. Pressured by the industry as well as advocates, numerous cities and states have adjusted zoning regulation to ease the presence of tiny houses, most of which come in the form of permitting ADUs on the same lot as a full-sized home though (“What Are the Rules Where I Live?” 2011).<sup>22</sup> In term of square footage, not all ADUs would

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<sup>22</sup> The American Planning Association (2020) offers a fuller definition: “An accessory dwelling unit (ADU) is a smaller, independent residential dwelling unit located on the same lot as a stand-alone (i.e., detached) single-family home. ADUs go by many different names throughout the U.S., including accessory apartments, secondary suites, and granny flats. ADUs can be converted portions of existing homes (i.e., internal ADUs), additions to new or

qualify as a tiny house, though “Jr. ADUs,” as termed in recent amendments to California’s existing ADU legislation, can be as small as 150 square-feet.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, several municipalities have eased restrictions on tiny houses on wheels (“#LegalizeTiny: Tiny House Advocacy News” 2020). As the continued struggled to find legal places to park or build indicates, though, the THIA and other lobbyists have their work cut out for them.

### **The size of the tiny house movement**

The media presence of tiny houses is, considering how few actually live in them, oversized . Home and Garden Television (HGTV) alone has brought its blend of idyllic petty bourgeois property speculation to the tiny home movement with (by last count) no less than eight reality TV series.<sup>24</sup> FYI, another US cable channel, offers two series dedicated to all homes tiny: *Tiny House Nation* and *Tiny House Hunting*. Netflix offers a related Britain-focused reality TV series, *How to Live Mortgage Free with Sarah Beeny*, which couples financial “hacks” with downsizing one’s home by living in houseboats, repurposed school buses, shipping containers, and so forth. The attention of documentarians has likewise been captured by tiny homes, with four full-length films.<sup>25</sup> These tiny house-specific documentaries are accompanied by more general ones that

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existing homes (i.e., attached ADUs), or new stand-alone accessory structures or converted portions of existing stand-alone accessory structures (i.e., detached ADUs).”

<sup>23</sup> A recent report by FreddieMac (2020) estimates that there are “1.4 million distinct ADUs” across the United States. Though often touted as a “a flexible free-market housing solution,” evidence suggests that ADUs’ potential to provide affordable housing is merely theoretical: smaller dwellings *could* demand lower rents (Coppage 2017). When lower average rents are highlighted in these studies, most of it comes down to landlords who charge their tenants no rent whatsoever, thus drastically pulling down the average rental costs. This also suggests that most ADUs house family and friends (“Do ADUs Provide Affordable Housing?” 2014). ADUs are, conversely, posed as surefire means to increase property values, with one Portland-based study of only 14 properties concluding that they added 25 to 34 percent to the property’s value and a 51 percent boon to resale value (M. J. Brown and Watkins 2012). Increased property values then render these same residential areas even less affordable.

<sup>24</sup> *Tiny House, Big Living*; *Tiny House Builders*; *Tiny Luxury*; *Tiny House Hunters*; *Tiny House Jamboree*; *Tiny Paradise*; *Mighty Tiny Houses* (New Year’s special) and, finally, *Tiny House Arrest*. According to HGTV, these tiny shows attract 5 million viewers per week (Shafrir 2016).

<sup>25</sup> *We the Tiny House People* (2012), *Tiny: A Story About Living Small* (2013), *Living Small: Tiny House Documentary* (2014), and *Small is Beautiful: A Tiny House Documentary* (2015). This does not include the ongoing,

nevertheless highlight tiny houses.<sup>26</sup> The popularity of self-help trends like minimalism and mindfulness is very closely tied to recognition of tiny houses.<sup>27</sup>

Although enthusiasts are less prevalent in the podcasting world, with currently only one operating in the United States and Australia each,<sup>28</sup> tiny houses make it up with a slew of dozens and dozens of books (practically beyond counting), the vast majority published since 2010, including some devoted to specific tiny house aspects, like how to cook in a tiny house, but most offering How-To guides on building a DIY tiny house. Many others, of the more architectural/coffee table variety, offer pages after pages of glossy tiny house photographs in sublime rural settings and sample floor designs (these sorts of books span both popular press and those published in academic presses by architects). Less common but more popular are memoirs of individuals who decided to “go tiny” or start their “tiny adventure” (Heavener 2019; D. Williams 2015; Shafer 2009; Johnson 2008). These tend to provide autobiographical material with, to varying degrees, life advice on why they – and you – should embrace the tiny house lifestyle. There are also several tiny house books for children.<sup>29</sup> In addition to books, tiny houses

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low-budget and plodding *Living Tiny Legally* documentary series, which combines interviews with boosters, dwellers, and builders along with a detailed look at several, municipal-scale pushes for tiny house friendly zoning.

<sup>26</sup> Such as the award winning documentary at 2016 Eco Film Festival, *A Simpler Way: Crisis as Opportunity*, the similarly local-film-festival-acclaimed *Minimalism: A Documentary about the Important Things* (2016), and *Vanlifers: Portrait of An Alternative Lifestyle* (2017).

<sup>27</sup> For instance, the 2014 bestselling self-help book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, along with its reality Netflix TV offshoot, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019). Tiny houses and related lifestyle trends have been celebrated in fictional films, too, such the *Lifetime* network’s made-for-TV horror film, *Tiny House of Terror* (2015) and the unintentionally-horrifying *Downsizing* (2017), the blockbuster flop starring Matt Damon. There is also an undated but undoubtedly recent horror novel, *Tiny House*, by serial e-book author Alexie Aaron.

<sup>28</sup> The long-running (since 2015), US-based *Tiny House Podcast* was defunct as of 2019, seemingly supplanted by *Tiny House Lifestyle Podcast*. The Australia-based *Let’s Talk Tiny Houses*, meanwhile, began as of May 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Including: *Big Adventures of Tiny House* by Susan Bernardo, JaNay Brown-Wood’s *Grandma’s Tiny House*, and a *Tiny House Coloring Book* by Michael Janzen (all published in 2017).

have been featured in *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, *Mother Jones*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and of course *Oprah*, among others.<sup>30</sup>

Tiny houses' media presence is larger than their material impact. Outside of reality TV shows, though, people do actually live in them. Just how many is hard to discern due to the fact that the US census does not track their usage. Even the self-proclaimed tiny house lobby, the American Tiny House Association (ATHA), lacks estimates on the number of tiny house residents. The only estimate that currently exists places tiny house dwelling at 10,000 people. But that figure – no matter how many times it is cited – is unverified and solely attributed to “Ryan Mitchell, founder of The Tiny Life, a website devoted to tiny houses, and the organizer behind the annual Tiny House Conference,” as featured in single *New York Times* column (Leong 2017).

Without any solid numbers on just how many people have taken the tiny plunge, the next best thing is to understand how their popularity has changed. Simply looking at the square footage of sold housing, there is reason to believe that tiny houses are a fading trend. A recent *Realtor Magazine* article explains:

Even the priciest places – where homeowners are the most likely to downsize and save on costs – are not favoring tiny homes. Tiny homes comprised only 2 percent of all home sales in New York City and San Francisco over the last eight years, according to a new study from PropertyShark, a real estate data website. Homes under 1,000 square feet made up less than a quarter of all sales in both cities, too...Tiny rentals, on the other hand, may be more popular. Micro apartments and tiny homes are most popular with short-term renters, such as students and young professionals, the study found. (*Realtor Magazine* 2019)

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<sup>30</sup> Like everything else, tiny houses hold a decent orbit in the blogosphere. “Kent Griswold, who runs the Tiny House Blog” claimed, in 2010, that it attracted “5,000 to 7,000 visitors a day” while the Small House Society website had about “1,800 subscribers, up from about 300 five years ago” (AP 2010).

Meanwhile, only 1 percent of all real estate sales came from dwellings of 500-square-feet or less (“Tiny House Statistics 2020: Market Size & Industry Growth” 2020), which by itself does not at all suggest that such abodes were tiny houses. But even these suspect numbers only offer a small glimpse into what is happening with tiny homes’ popularity. Although most “tiny people” would not consider micro or studio apartments as part of the movement, the lack of rental information remains important. Tiny homes have other characteristics that both limit and hide their use. Given the penchant for DIY building, home sales cannot reveal the actual landscape of tiny houses across the country. The common illegality of tiny houses complicates this further, meaning that their owners “tend to keep them secret and move them around” regularly so as to avoid unwanted attention (Wilkinson 2011). Finally and most importantly, it is not at all clear if these estimates include tiny houses on wheels (the dominant, go-to tiny house design), which are generally classified as recreational vehicles (RVs), or accessory-dwelling units (ADUs), another common means of tiny house dwelling categorization.

Some assessments suggest that tiny homes’ popularity is significant and poised to increase. Even though the registered purchases of tiny houses might be a very small percentage, “data show that most consumers are looking for something more modest. Homes between 1,000 and 2,000 square feet get the most views on realtor.com, about 50% more than 2,000- to 3,000-square-foot homes – and the gap is increasing, judging from data in the past two years” (Pan 2015). According to a survey by the National Association of Home Builders, 53 percent of adults are amenable to purchasing a small (<600 square foot) house while 63 percent of millennials would consider a tiny or small house (Quint 2018). Analyzing listings at TinyHomeBuilders.com, Kulp (2017) found: “Despite their niche appeal, tiny homes are selling.

Last spring was a particularly hot season: Median days on market in April reached an all-time low of 110, down 18 percent from the previous year.”

Still others argue that the tiny house movement is expanding through a quick look at their presence in social media and the growing numbers of tiny house builders. “Tiny houses are everywhere,” says Carras (2019) of *Fast Company*. “They’ve received heavy coverage in the media, and there are millions of followers on dozens of pages on social media.” She further notes “the prolific growth of tiny house manufacturers.” Whereas their broad popularity on social media does not in itself reflect a mounting number of tiny house dwellers, the growth of tiny house manufacturers suggests something much more substantive. Unfortunately, Carras does not provide much evidence for such prolific growth in builders save one article about the IPO of a manufactured home builder that now dabbles in tiny houses (see Renaissance Capital 2018). Although by no means exhaustive, a review of the most comprehensive online collection of tiny house builders does corroborate Carras’s assertion of a fairly sudden and widespread growth of the construction industry. Rather than a collection of all current manufacturers, the list compiled by *Home Builders Digest* only includes the “best” 110 tiny homebuilders.<sup>31</sup> Of these 110, only 52 provided the year of their founding on their company website. Of that 52, all but five were founded before 2010. One was founded in 2008, three in 2007, and, finally, one in 1999 – the well-known Tumbleweed Tiny Homes founded by Jay Shafer. Despite this quantitative ambiguity, the number of tiny houses has undoubtedly grown in the past couple decades. So much is evident given the dozens of “tiny house communities” across the United States (Thorsby

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<sup>31</sup> It is unclear when the list was initially researched or published, but several websites for listed builders were, as of summer 2019, defunct.

2019; D. Sullivan 2019) as well as their popularity as hotels and AirBnb rentals (Shahani 2015; Hunter 2015; Robinson 2017).

### **Barriers to the tiny house market**

The price tag of a tiny house varies widely, and much of it depends on the amount of free time you have and how comfortable you are in a toolbelt. Enthusiasts argue that tiny houses can be built for as little as \$8,000, so long as the construction and design is do-it-yourself (DIY) and many construction materials are salvaged. According to Ryan Mitchel (2019) of thetinylife.com, the average cost of a DIY-designed and constructed tiny house ranges between \$10,000 to \$30,000, including \$3,500 to \$5,500 for the trailer alone. For those not engaging in DIY design, many tiny house builders sell blueprints. Jay Shafer's Tumbleweed Tiny Homes, for instance, sells four such blueprints at \$759 apiece, estimating that these models can be constructed by oneself for \$10,000 using recycled materials. To aid in getting started, Tumbleweed also offers a two-day DIY construction workshop for \$799 and an accompanying how-to DVDs for another \$60.

Tumbleweed, as with other builders, will meet customers halfway through selling "Barn Raiser shells," or fully-framed tiny houses with sheathed exterior on a trailer. On average, these shells range from \$10,000 to \$35,000. Tumbleweed sells one such shell for \$15,700 that promises to "save 100-plus hours on build time" (D. Sullivan 2020b). Another company, the generically-named Tiny Home Builders, likewise sells detailed plans for \$197 to \$347 and can be paired with a softcover building guide, an "eWorkshop," and 8.5 hours of DIY video instruction. Their shells, meanwhile, range from \$26,000 to \$46,000 each ("Tiny Home Builders" n.d.). In addition to either being skilled or confident enough to fully construct a tiny

house, DIY builds require tools, regular assistance from others (lifting, leveling, balancing, etc.), a space in which to construct the house and, most crucially, hundreds of hours of spare time.

The average cost of a built tiny house is about double that of a DIY job. Drawing from 2017 price data from 25 tiny-house building companies across 13 different states, Sullivan (2020b) found that the median cost in the US for a tiny house was \$59,884. While most place the average between \$30,000 to \$60,000, one tiny house website (extrapolating from Realtor.com data) claimed the average house on wheels cost \$46,300 while those on a foundation averaged \$119,000 (Morneau 2020). Costs vary dramatically depending on which features are included, “such as board-and-batten siding, front steps, replacing a window with a side door or adding a screen door to your front door. Other options, such as dormers, skylights, a polyurethane-sealed interior or propane electric light energy for off-the-grid living, add to the cost significantly” (Fontinelle 2020). To use Tumbleweed as an example again, the company’s finished tiny houses on a trailer, which range in size from 164- to 225 square-feet, come in a variety of designs and floor plans. At 174 square-feet, the cheapest model costs \$57,000. The most expensive model, at 225 square-feet, sells for \$77,000. Writing in *Curbed*, one of the publications most focused on tiny house news, Jenny Xie (2017) highlights “5 impressive tiny houses you can order right now” from assorted builders. At the low-end, and as a “starter tiny home,” is the \$39,900 102-square-foot “The Nugget” from the Ohio-based company, Modern Tiny Living. “The Sturgis” from the company Cubist Engineering offers something more high-end. Featuring a “drop-down Queen bed, tile backsplash, West Elm modular sofa, 4-foot by 8-foot configurable ‘obsession space’ (for use as a child’s nook, gear display, wine cellar, etc.) built-in maple cabinetry, [and] Shou sugi ban hand-brushed cypress siding,” the Sturgis starts at \$99,000 (Xie 2017). More luxurious tiny houses can cost as much as a half-million dollars (Garfield 2016).

Trends suggest that tiny houses are becoming bigger, more expensive and more luxurious. Although tiny houses boast humble beginnings, in other words, they are getting less and less simple (Pan 2015). “Buyers are increasingly seeking larger dwellings with top-of-the-line appliances and high-end finishes, and having builders do the labor for them,” Naomi Snyder (2019) of Realtor.com reports. “Luxurious tiny homes with composting toilets, solar panels, and insulation for year-round living can now go for more than \$200,000” and as more builders emerge to cater to a wealthier clientele, financing is becoming easier and prices are rising. As such, builders themselves are retooling their offerings. For example, the cheapest house sold on Modern Tiny Living, which once featured “The Nugget” model for under \$40,000, is now \$69,000 (its most expensive is \$100,000). Whereas Tiny Home Builders and Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. typically sold blueprints and shells at about 20 feet long and 8 feet wide, more customers are asking for 30- and 40 feet long plans (Snyder 2019). Although some of this growth in costs and size are attributed to tiny houses simply becoming more mainstream and thus attracting a broader, wealthier demographic, much is attributed to the use of tiny houses as vacation homes (Tardiff and Stamp 2018), hotels (Shain 2018), and Airbnb rentals (“50 Tiny Houses You Can Rent on Airbnb in 2020!” 2020) where the affordability of pared-down tiny houses is much less of a concern.

Even low-cost DIY tiny houses include additional expenses. The most glaring of which is a place to park it. Given the legal obstacles to dwellings of such squat square footage, most tiny houses on wheels have to rent land in rural or suburban RV parks, which could cost between \$500 and \$1,500 each month for a spot (D. Sullivan 2020b). Some RV parks, though, can exclude tiny houses. The other option is buying land yourself. According to Realtor.com, “the average cost of a plot of land to build on averages \$3,020 per acre” (Alterman 2019). More

importantly, building on land requires one to pay for a building permit, plumbing (around \$1,000) and/or rooftop solar panels (\$3,500) as well as vehicle powerful enough to tow it (Heidenry 2016). Otherwise, a tiny homeowner may rent land from a traditional homeowner for several hundred dollars per month or, if the home is exceptionally mobile (most are not), a tiny house could legally park at campgrounds for days or weeks at a time.

Financing has gradually become easier as tiny houses have become better known. Still, one cannot finance a tiny house purchase through a 30-year mortgage at about 3 to 4 percent interest with its accompanying tax write-offs (Howley 2020). There are several reasons for this. First and given their novelty, there is no established set of criteria upon which to appraise the property. Typical site-built housing appraisals draw from square footage to make evaluations. This is obviously a hurdle for tiny houses, as their square footage is low yet the value *per* square foot is drastically higher than a more traditionally-sized house. Host of reality show Tiny House Nation and tiny house spokesperson Zach Giffin estimates that tiny houses typically cost about \$300 per square foot (see Boone 2014). “The average cost per square foot is more because you’re consolidating everything into a small space,” Giffin adds. Conversely, the median price per square foot for a contractor built house in the US was just \$101.72 (Earley 2018). Lenders also base appraisals on evaluations of similar properties sold in the previous year, but because the tiny house market is so small and the houses often idiosyncratic, too few equivalents exist for rigorous comparison. Second, for one to mortgage a tiny house it must be on a permanent foundation on owned land, an impossibility for a THOWs legally categorized as a “modified trailer” (Earley 2018). Finally, the relatively low cost of a tiny house renders a mortgage uneconomical for banks. “When you apply for a mortgage, the lender has to spend time running your credit, evaluating your application and underwriting the loan. The process of approving and

funding a loan requires the same amount of effort whether you borrow \$60,000 or \$600,000,” Bond (2018) explains. “But since most banks charge origination fees of 0.5 percent to 1 percent of the total loan amount, it isn’t cost-effective unless they’re lending a sizable chunk of change. In fact, banks will usually only consider a mortgage of at least \$50,000.”

There are other ways to finance a tiny house purchase, though none as economical as a traditional mortgage. If the house is road-ready, you can finance the purchase through an RV loan. Although such loans can be as low as 4 percent for the perfect borrower (thus comparable to traditional mortgage), it is not uncommon for subprime borrowers to pay as high as 15 percent (Sumrak 2017). RV lenders can be wary of those who live in their THOWs fulltime. “You can see why,” Sumrak (2017) explains. “It is hard to enforce a loan agreement with a nomad, not least because of the inherent difficulties in finding him or her. So some lenders may not deal with permanent RV dwellers at all.” RV loans likewise prohibit setting a tiny house into a foundation, something which those with their own land often prefer as some zoning restrictions can make it difficult to park an RV at a designated campground for more than 30 days at a time (Earley 2018).

In addition to mobility being costly and annoying, tiny houses are by definition not built like an RV. While RV design pivots upon lightweight materials properly distributed to increase fuel efficiency, builders construct tiny houses with fairly typical, heavyweight materials that cannot withstand long hauls on the highway. Shingles fly off and drywall cracks. Further, to qualify for such a loan, one’s RV must also be certified by the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (an “RVIA certification”). Only recognized manufacturers who have passed extensive testing of their vehicles (or tiny houses on wheels) can be RVIA certified. Because of

this, few builders sell pre-certified tiny houses on wheels while DIY tiny house builders are out of luck (“5 Things That No One Will Tell You About Tiny House RVs” 2016). (Tumbleweed Tiny Houses is one such certified builder currently offering 23-year loans at 6.75 percent interest for those who qualify.) The next best financing option for those who already own a standard house is a home equity loan. Using your mortgaged house as collateral, the APR would on average come out to 7.6 percent and the interest would then be tax deductible (Fontinelle 2020). Another, worse financing option is simply a personal loan untied to collateral (an “unsecured loan”). Those with a steady job and excellent credit might pay as low as 10-12 percent, but those with poor credit will have to pay back their principal with up to 32 percent accruing annually (Song 2020).

Though tiny houses may be a way to build wealth via increased savings, their place in the vehicle-house netherworld render them poor investments. Since the vast majority of *legal* tiny houses are on wheels rather than set into foundation on the owner’s land, “you can’t really expect [a tiny house] to appreciate in the way you can expect property to appreciate,” Giffin explains (quoted in Earley 2018). In other words, it is the monopolizable quality of landed property that adds to much of the value of a house in a foundation (Marx 1981, 908). As with any other structure, the wear and tear of a house’s use steadily decreases its value, something that can be mitigated through regular upkeep or reversed through improvements. In this manner, THOWs follow vehicles (including RVs) in their steady depreciation since purchase, though it is possible that they depreciate more slowly than RVs or other standard automobiles (“Do Tiny Homes Appreciate or Depreciate in Value Over Time?” 2018). Boosters have countered such cloudy assessments of the marketplace by highlighting that “Homes less than 500 square feet are appreciating twice as fast as the overall market” (Kulp 2017). Yet, this only suggests that the

prices of small homes *on foundations* are increasing relatively quickly. It does not pertain to tiny houses on wheels, which are a paradigmatic of the movement and regularly as small as 150 square-feet. Others point to the fact that the listed prices of tiny homes have increased. Between 2016 and 2017, for instance, “the median list price of tiny homes was \$119,000, up 19 percent” while “overall market median list price is up just 9 percent” (ibid.). As mentioned above, such an increase could easily be attributed to the fact that tiny houses have become larger and the materials more expensive rather than a spike in demand or, less likely still, that THOWs appreciate in value like traditional homes set in foundation.

### **Who lives in tiny houses?**

Given the limited financing options, buying a tiny house outright would often require between \$30,00 to \$60,000 in accumulated savings. Only buying a shell would still cost at least \$20,000, a process requiring tens of thousands of dollars – and hundreds of hours of free time – for subsequent DIY construction. Although the average US household has almost \$9,000 in savings (Martin 2019), only 40 percent could afford an unexpected \$1,000 expense (Nova 2019). Other studies suggest a more dire financial situation, estimating that 45 percent of Americans have no savings whatsoever while another 24 percent have less than \$1,000 saved and are scraping by paycheck-by-paycheck (Huddleston 2019). One-third of households are still in thousands of dollars debt from borrowing money to cover previous financial emergencies (Leonhardt 2018). By aggregating household savings accounts as well as checking, money market and call accounts and prepaid debit cards, research found that the median balance of all cash on hand tops out at \$5,300. On average, only households with incomes above the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile had \$10,000 in total (Perez 2021), meaning that most Americans could not even afford the cheapest DIY tiny house

builds projected at \$8,000. Fewer still would also have the time to search for and salvage cheap construction materials; the workspace on which to legally build the tiny house for months or years at a time; the free labor of capable friends and family; and the design and construction skills necessary for such a cheap DIY build.<sup>32</sup>

The tiny house movement, then, is generally for those with above-average wealth in terms of money – to say nothing about the inordinate wealth of time necessary for DIY construction. According to a well-known study (and widely shared infographic) compiled in 2013 by Ryan Mitchell of *The Tiny Life*, the average per capita income of dwellers is \$42,038 (how this relates to retired dwellers is unclear) (R. Mitchell 2013), nearly \$8,000 above the US per capita average (“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States” 2019).<sup>33</sup> When it comes to savings, 32 percent of dwellers have at least \$10,000 stashed away. Sixty-five percent have no credit card debt at all and 89 percent bear less debt than the average American. Tiny house dwellers are also an exceptionally well-educated bunch, reportedly being twice as likely to have a masters degree than the average American (R. Mitchell 2013).<sup>34</sup>

Although my questions focused on the motivations and politics of the tiny house movement rather than income or other demographic characteristics of informants, throughout each of the 22 interviews conducted with dwellers it was clear that all could easily be categorized

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<sup>32</sup> “In my own experience,” Anson (2014, 294), herself a tiny house dweller, writes, “I was only able to finance my build by redirecting school loans and complete it with the help of over 30 different friends and family. Whether it be through such ‘re-purposed’ monies, existing savings, friend or family loans, assuming a would-be ‘tiny-houser’ had access to funding, they would still need tools, workspace, and time. Claims of economic mobility available through tiny house living unfortunately depend on some level of *preexisting* economic mobility.”

<sup>33</sup> Despite reaching out to Mitchell and *thetinylife.com* myself – for years several others have as well – about from where and how these statistics were gathered, so far there has been no clarification. As is, the study only cites “[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).” This means that completely accurate comparisons between Mitchell’s unspecified pre-2013 data and my more recent census data are impossible to make.

<sup>34</sup> By 2019, about 13.1 percent of US adults hold an advanced degree (“Number of People With Master’s and Doctoral Degrees Doubles Since 2000” 2019).

into “the middle-class,” that fuzzy-edged socioeconomic and cultural category generally referring to those with a college education, a degree of financial comfort, and/or those with professional or managerial occupations (see Metzgar 2005). The handful of academic assessments of tiny house dwellers have come to similar conclusions (Anson 2014; Carras 2018; Shearer and Burton 2018; T. Harris 2018a; Mangold and Zschau 2019). Outside economic characteristics, two-fifths of all dwellers are over the age of 50 and 55 percent are women, according to Mitchell (2013). Fourteen of the 23 dwellers and would-be dwellers who I spoke to at length were women and four were either retired or preparing to retire. Millennials too are said to comprise an oversized percentage of dwellers (Hoffower 2019). Three of my informants were born in the 1980s or later. It is also well known among involved enthusiasts that the tiny house movement is also overwhelmingly white (Waldman 2019). I did not ask those I interviewed their ascribed racial identity, though only three self-identified as nonwhite while the remainder, who I either spoke with in-person or through tiny house Facebook groups (with their profile pictures available), could easily pass as white. This lack of ethnic or racial diversity was likewise apparent at the tiny house festival I attended, though its location in the semi-rural landscape of Colorado likely played a part in this. Nearly all tiny house spokespersons, authors, and those dwellers featured in documentaries are white.

## **Conclusion**

The tiny house movement is in its infancy. Currently, the popularity of tiny houses on social media, television, documentaries and so forth outshines their real world adoption. The width of this gap between representation and reality is, though, hard to ascertain. And much of this ignorance stems the fact that tiny houses, whether they be on wheels or foundation, are, for the

most part, illegal across the United States. Tiny house dwellers occupy interstitial spaces in suburban and rural locales, places where they can either reside within those laxer laws or surreptitiously outside it. The lack of legal space is thus a bottleneck for the tiny house movement, one enthusiasts hope to pry open by establishing tiny house communities. Yet whether clumped together in the open or singularly hidden away, these same legal limitations remain. The potential for tiny houses to infiltrate urban areas, with the dream of them colonizing small spaces for urban infill, likewise remains limited by the same suite of legal obstacles, with micro apartments proceeding in tiny house's stead (Cater 2015). The newness and illegality of tiny houses constrict the possibility of rendering them more affordable through better financing opportunities.

These geographical and financial limitations determine who can afford to live in tiny houses and assume the lifestyle. While tiny houses are growing in size and expense, cheaper options like do-it-yourself design and construction, or middle of the road options like purchasing shells then doing the rest on your own, demand surplus time, space, and energy on top of having proficiency in all facets of home construction and design (just on a smaller scale). For these reasons, the tiny house movement remains of and for the middle stratum of the working class, for those who have the time, money and/or credit worthiness to stylize their house as an expression of their anti-materialistic values and virtuous self-discipline.

## CHAPTER 2 – SIMPLICITY AND THRIFT IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

The rich industrialist was horrified to find the fisherman lying beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

“Why aren’t you out fishing?” asked the industrialist.

“Because I have caught enough fish for the day.”

“Why don’t you catch some more?”

“What would I do with them?”

“You could earn more money. Then you could have a motor fitted to your boat to go into deeper waters and catch more fish... Then you would be a rich man like me.”

“What would I do then?”

“Then you could sit back and enjoy life.”

“What do you think I’m doing right now?”

- John Lane, *Timeless Simplicity* (2001)<sup>35</sup>

A grasshopper, half-starved with cold and hunger, came to a well-stored bee-hive at the approach of winter, and humbly begged the bees to relieve him with a few drops of honey. One of the bees asked him how he had spent his time all the summer, and why he had not laid up a store of food like them.

“Truly,” said he, “I spent my time very merrily, in drinking, dancing, and singing, and never once thought of winter.”

“Our plan is very different,” said the bee: “We work hard in the summer to lay by a store of food...but those who do nothing but drink, and dance and sing in the summer, must expect to starve in the winter.”

- Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (1899)<sup>36</sup>

As the exact opposite of the industrialist, the fisherman wants and consumes little so he can work less. And unlike the bees, the grasshopper consumes much but works too little. While the grasshopper starves for its laziness and lack of forethought, the luxury-seeking industrialist overworks himself. Each parable, one of simplicity and the other of thrift, advises – like the bees and fisherman – soberly balancing production and consumption. There is, though, a distinction between the two parables. On the one hand, the grasshopper fails to produce enough to last it through winter because it consumed too much in the moment. On the other hand, the fisherman, who likewise does not spend all day catching a winter surplus, who also lives in the moment, just

<sup>35</sup> This parable is adapted from the writing of Heinrich Böll (1995, 628).

<sup>36</sup> This parable is adapted from *Aesop’s Fables* “The Ant and the Grasshopper.”

goes on smoking his pipe. Herein lies a distinction between thrift and simplicity; while thrift pertains to a world of animalistic scarcity, simplicity only happens amid pre-existing abundance. For the grasshopper, a lack of work ethic means death, for the fisherman, simple living.

If we pluck these parables from fiction, the class character of simplicity and thrift reveal themselves. Thrift for the poor, simplicity for the better off. Simplicity and thrift are both born of bourgeois ideology as this ideology grapples with, in its own superficial manner, the abstract domination of the market and its structural contradictions. These discourses both navigate constant uncertainty of whether one has worked hard enough to ensure their survival or, to put it differently, of whether one is jeopardizing their survival through consuming beyond their means. For the poor, their own poverty is preponderant and urgent. For those better off, those with more money and thus more social power, their economic anxiety, their own level of poverty, is comparatively subordinate in their daily life. In this position, simplifiers flatter themselves by transforming undemocratic and unmeritocratic outcomes of political economy into individual decisions of morality. Simple living is therefore reserved for those who have enough to get by (Shi 2007, 3), who, in our case, have some abundance of money or time to purchase or build their own tiny house.

In this chapter, I offer a brief historical geography of simplicity movements throughout the United States. Throughout, we will see how simplicity regularly devolves into preaching thrift. Geography is inextricable from such simplicity/thrift reforms. Thrift, we should remember, comprises frantic and often undignified actions to forestall and/or escape outright destitution. For early reformers, places of poverty – shanty towns, tenements, and even urban space itself – reproduce destitution. Part of their answer was to produce new spaces of work and social

reproduction capable of teaching simplicity as thrift, hard work, and moderate working class politics: charity-run boarding houses and tenements, austere worker housing, and detached suburban housing often located outside the city center. As wages increased, as the better paid working class became “middle class,” suburban housing offered a sense of power even as it eventually produced, for simplifiers, a stultifying, isolating, and overly materialistic lifestyle antithetical to “the simple life.” Those who were more alienated fled these “mainstream” spaces and relations altogether (communes, transiency, etc.). Subsequently, suburban housing symbolized the apogee of “overconsumption” resulting in environmental destruction. Simplifiers thus need a new geography of home and social reproduction. Enter tiny houses.

David Shi (2007, 191), in his foundational and unparalleled history of American simple living, notes that reformers call for simplicity “during periods of economic decline, political crisis, or moral excitement.” Simplicity thus arose, in varied forms, I argue, as a fretful curtsy to abstract market forces. In some cases, this anxiety manifests itself as more efficiently managing the working class (from grasshopper to bees) and, occasionally, berating those with grandiose wealth (the rich industrialist). In others, reactions include a wholesale rejection of the alienating nature of capitalist production and exchange. For the latter version, one may lessen their interaction with capitalism through reducing their consumption (the fisherman). In either case, a simplifier takes capitalist social relations for granted even as she rebels against their shadows. As such, they either aim to allay the most violent iterations of capitalist contradictions through technocratic fixes, or proffer personal escapism to evade it all. As with bourgeois socialism, simplicity movements “want to maintain the basis of all the evils of present day society and at the same time want to abolish the evils themselves” (Engels 2005, 56).

## Republican simplicity

The current partisans of simple living trace their lineage to Aristotle, Epicurus, Diogenes, Buddha, and Jesus. Those in the United States tend to also fold in the Quakers, the Amish, and even Gandhi, among others (Alexander and McLeod 2014, xv). My discussion here begins during the late-colonial and early republic era. Drawing from the requisite thrift of early colonists, which evolved into the Puritan-tinged “Christian simplicity,” the 1730s witnessed the Great Awakening, a religious revival movement that regularly extolled the morality of thrift, as spending on consumer goods meant less money for the church and charity (Witkowski 2010, 239).<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Franklin ([1732] 1900, 19–20), meanwhile, offered a secular call for frugal living in his widely popular *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, warning readers:

You may think, perhaps, that a little tea or a little punch now and then, a diet a little more costly, clothes a little finer, and a little more entertainment now and then can be no great matter; but remember what Poor Richard says...“Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship”...You call them goods; but if you do not take care they will prove evils to some of you.

During the 1750s, wealthy colonists – merchant capitalists, financiers, landowners – could afford luxury imports from Britain (Zinn 2003, 48), initiating the “Industrious Revolution” wherein colonists began working longer to purchase novel commodities (Breen 2004).<sup>38</sup>

Immediately prior to and following independence from Great Britain, optimism and enthusiastic republican ideals proliferated throughout the country. Although rarely defined, at its

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<sup>37</sup> The Puritan ethic of simple living argues that “man was but the steward of the possessions he accumulated. If he indulged himself in luxurious living, he would have that much less with which to support church and society. If he needlessly consumed his substance, either from carelessness or from sensuality, he failed to honor the God who furnished him with it” (E. S. Morgan 1967, 5).

<sup>38</sup> With an economy defined by a proliferation of merchant capitalist, artisanal guilds, and agriculturalists who increasingly produced for a local market, the vast majority of workers were either intensely exploited indentured servants or enslaved Africans. Only a small segment of “free” wage laborers existed (Zinn 2003, 48).

simplest American republicanism referred to a disdain for monarchy and landed aristocracy while supporting a relatively more democratic government “of the people,” with more radical notions suggesting some level of political and economic equality. In this milieu, small-time capitalists and highly skilled workers criticized the rich for their outstanding display of luxury – a sign of waning republican and civic values. Republicanism, with its hope for more equal political footing, crashed against the stark inequality of its political economy. The latter won out, as capitalists deployed republican ideals of property ownership and “free labor” to justify – as market license – labor exploitation as a greater scale (Shi 2007, 99). By the mid-1800s, those preaching simplicity shifted their focus from the luxurious rich to the consumption habits of the poor and working class as domestic manufacturing grew (N. Harris 1981). Between 1800 and 1860, the percentage of workers earning wages rose from 10 to 40 percent (Newman 2008, 26). Massachusetts textile mills, for instance, were explicitly designed so as to not replicate the misery of urban English mill towns. To avoid degenerative urbanity, these factories were constructed within the “sublime and beautiful countryside,” as one promotional job advertisement described it (Shi 2007, 93). With more than half the workers being just 12 or younger, the appropriately-labeled “mill girls” comprised the workforce – thousands working across at least thirty-two mills operating in Lowell alone.

The mill girls were promised excellent working conditions and supervised moral discipline in dormitories (Newman 2008, 26). But when textile prices fell with overproduction in the 1830s, owners cut wages. The mill girls reacted, becoming unionized and publicizing what were in reality poor working and living conditions (G. Wright 1983, 64). Strikes occurred annually between 1834 to 1837. Mass firings, threats, impoverishment and exhaustion defeated these labor actions in turn (Zinn 2003, 229–331). Following this unrest, a committee came to

investigate the mills' conditions, ultimately proposing that the young women and girls needed to cut their social reproductive costs (the expense of food, shelter, clothing, etc.) to match their reduced wages while adopting "simplicity" and petty bourgeois values (G. Wright 1983, 65). The committee concluded that open class struggle could be reduced through "the progressive improvement in art and science, in a higher appreciation of man's destiny, in a less love of money, and a more ardent love for social happiness and intellectual superiority" (quoted in Shi 2007, 96). Yet even as capitalists pushed "republicanist" propaganda to foster quiescence, they recognized that such ideals were, in reality, incompatible with the coercive laws of capitalist competition. "So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them," one mill owner at the time bragged, "I keep them, getting out of them all I can" (quoted in Shi 2007, 95). As large-scale manufacturing grew, capitalists and their governmental representatives realized the profitability and inevitability of expanding productive capital, and enforcing wage labor upon erstwhile craftsmen and farmers. "The same moral rationalizations were no longer needed," Wright (1983, 68) explains. "The ideology of industrialism no longer had to celebrate the image of an ideal community, preparing healthy young people for their futures as dutiful farmers and housewives."

Yet the ideology of "industrialism," as Wright terms it, was still an unfinished project. Proletariat and petty bourgeois artisans were still appalled at unprecedented levels of wage labor and corresponding economic strife – all of which was enlarged and made palpable via urbanization. Amidst the panics of 1819, 1829 and then 1837, which resulted in violent food riots and mass unemployment in urban centers, people confronted these seemingly unexplainable economic estrangements by turning to religion (Zinn 2003, 221; Shi 2007, 107; McGerr et al. 2019, 346). But people also pivoted toward a skeptical embrace of capitalism. The petty

bourgeoisie came to recognize the appeal of its social relations, which, governed by abstract market forces rather than concrete political decision from above, promised a sense of randomness and a measure of freedom via economic license (Roberts 2017; Heath and Potter 2004, 21). Part of this embrace included a growing celebration of personal responsibility and an ideology of meritocracy. They came to understand the capitalist economy – particularly in urban settings – as providing unprecedented economic opportunity but also a potentially-corrupting test of character. The working class, in this framework, suffered because it failed this test of moral character by falling prey to urban vice. Petty bourgeois reformers took it as their mission to rectify this deficiency (Shi 2007, 107).

One such morality lesson in republican simple living depended upon proper homeownership. For many, a home's architecture and location provided a straightforward, apolitical solution to urban working class unrest. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had both argued that familial homesteading reproduced the republican virtues of equality, property, and individualism (Hayden 2002, 21). Andrew Jackson Downing, who perhaps did the most to translate this rural and agricultural ideal into suburban homeownership (K. T. Jackson 1987, 65), saw the private home as an answer to capitalist expansion and its concomitant secular values. But these houses were to be intentionally *simple*. "A house built only with view to animal wants will express sensuality instead of hospitality...gaudy and garish apartments will express pride and vanity," Downing wrote (quoted in K. T. Jackson 1987, 63–64). Another architect of the era echoed Downing in this regard, suggesting that plain, unassuming, functional houses would check "our passions for luxuries of all kinds" (quoted in Shi 2007, 106). Meanwhile, several publications instructed middle stratum women on simplicity, including *Godey's Lady's Book* (founded in 1837); Catharine Beecher's 1841 *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* and *The*

*Domestic Receipt Book*, published in 1841; and Lydia Marie Child's manual for homemakers, *The American Frugal Housewife* (Witkowski 2010, 241).

Simple housing and individual homeownership, then, composed the republican ideal of an independent, propertied citizenry. Yet as this ideal grew stronger it crashed upon the political economic realities of industrialization and urbanization (G. Wright 1983, 26). While reformers preached simple living, the working class endured crowded tenements, often without windows, running water, heat, or indoor plumbing – an urban ecology that claimed thousands of lives through disease (Hayden 2002, 20). The poorest fractions of the working class slept in doorways, alleys, poorhouses, and shantytowns (M. B. Katz 1996; DePastino 2005). By 1867, 20,000 dwelled in Manhattan shantytowns alone. Thousands more took refuge in smaller makeshift settlements near docks and Brooklyn factories (L. Goff 2016, 55). Rather than the longevity of these shantytowns and tenements showcasing the unworkable relations of commodified housing amid commodified labor, the state and charities presumed the architectural forms themselves facilitated deviancy. Razing such housing, many thought, would eradicate crime, disease, and the long term poverty of those evicted (J. F. Bauman 2000, 7). Instead, such working class housing simply reappeared elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

### **The romantic simplicity of Henry David Thoreau**

Whereas reformers redrew rather than resolved the geography of working class housing, another petty bourgeois reaction called for socially and spatially distancing themselves from the reality

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<sup>39</sup> “No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else and often in the immediate neighborhood” (Engels 2005, 95).

of working class life. Enter the transcendentalist movement, a collection of poets and philosophers centered in Concord, Massachusetts throughout the mid-1800s. As with republican homeownership, transcendentalism – itself a part of the larger romantic movement – reacted negatively to urbanization, industrialization, and, above all, class conflict. To transcendentalists, the apparent greed of capitalists and the loud and militant demands of the working class were equally appalling (Newman 2008, 38, 41). These thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau among them, hoped to “transcend” rational thought through spiritual self-reflection through avoiding the sphere and space of exchange. Transcendentalists, the theory went, could accomplish this escapist strategy by cutting back on their consumption of commodities and, to the extent possible, refusing to commodify their capacity to labor. Without such distractions and the dehumanizing effects of the commodity form, the theory went, they might discover more profound spiritual truths (Shi 2007, 127). In this manner, transcendentalists sought “to look beyond the often brutal realities of class society into a realm of moralizing abstractions” (Newman 2008, 43).

Thoreau offers the best example of how transcendentalism manifested in practice. Thoreau’s writings also warrant greater attention here given that he “remains the most conspicuous and persuasive exponent of simple living in the American experience” (Shi 2007, 140) and is the anointed “patron saint” of the tiny house movement (Anson 2014; J. Goff 2015; Diguette 2017). Thoreau raised his famous cabin at Walden Pond in 1845, itself a basic reconstruction of a shanty he bought off a poor Irish family laboring on a nearby railroad (Thoreau 1995, 45). Thoreau lived in his cabin/shanty repeatedly until its deconstruction two

years later.<sup>40</sup> Eventually completed and published in 1854, his book, *Walden; Or, a Life in the Woods*, drew from this experience. The cabin itself has become an American icon of self-reliance, and Thoreau's image as individualistic, independent, self-reliant, with a deliberate modesty molded by wild scarcity and upheld by unbending principle, the same traits of the fabled American frontiersman but with the cultural cache and grooming of a patrician intellectual (L. Goff 2016, 2).

Tiny house enthusiasts are right to commemorate Thoreau. Reacting to the rapid industrialization of the northeast, the waning of artisanal production, and the corresponding economic crises and working class upheaval, Thoreau offered a wide-ranging critique of capitalist alienation, though he does not use those terms (Newman 2008). Just one year prior to Thoreau's stint at Walden, Marx offered his own critique in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Both Marx and Thoreau ridicule the pretensions of capitalist society, especially the degrading and often deadly character of work within it. Both, likewise, lamented how the structure of capitalism dehumanized its subjects, left little room for individual self-creation and meaningful socialization.<sup>41</sup> But whereas Marx's criticism of capitalist alienation was

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<sup>40</sup> Thoreau's isolation at Walden Pond has, like much else, been exaggerated. As he describes it, Thoreau regularly departed the woods for nearby Concord throughout his writing experiment: "Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating either from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and which, taken in homeopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs" (Thoreau 1995, 248).

<sup>41</sup> "What is alienated, for both Marx and Thoreau," Lynd (1968, 96) argued, "is not only part of the workingman's product but the human capacities, energies, potentialities which should express themselves in joyful labor. As they saw it," he continues, "the essence of man's oppression in 'civilized' society is that man's characteristic activity, productivity, becomes (to use Marx's terms) 'self-sacrifice' and 'mortification' rather than (to use Thoreau's terms) a 'pastime.'" For example, in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels (1978, 479) write: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an *appendage of the machine*, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him" (my emphasis). Compare this with a passage from *Walden*: "The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops. *But lo! men have become the tools of their tools.* The

material and historical, Thoreau's was individual and metaphysical. For Marx, capitalist alienation is about the unequal distribution of social power, the fact that the abstract law of value determines the conditions of people's everyday lives and sets severe limits on individual agency. For Thoreau, alienation emerges when one is too embedded in commercial relationships altogether, when a person depends on commodities for survival or becomes a commodity themselves (Diggins 1972, 579). Accordingly, Marx's social solution to alienation was overcoming wage labor through the collective action of a working class revolution towards a classless society (i.e. communism). Thoreau's solution, meanwhile, meant personally avoiding laboring for someone else and limiting his commercial relations so that he may alone unearth solace in undistracted reverie. "Innocent of the nature of power, ignorant of the realities of social change, and indifferent at times to the spectacle of human suffering," Diggins (1972, 582) argues, "the American poet chose to interpret the world rather than change it, to renounce the evils of industrialism rather than to help abolish them or bring them under control." Like Emerson and other transcendentalists, for Thoreau it is only through individual meditation, through turning inward upon the self rather than outward in solidarity, that one may overcome alienation.

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man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry has become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven" (Thoreau 1995, 56; my emphasis). Famous French diplomat and observer of American society Alexis de Tocqueville came to similar conclusions about the nature of wage labor, which surely tempers the supposedly exceptional bond shared by Thoreau and Marx. Visiting in 1831, he was impressed by the presence of independent, petty bourgeois producers (artisans, small farmers, shopkeepers). Yet he also came to witness the onset of de-skilling through an increased division of labor and the specter of alienation, writing: "When a workman is unceasingly and exclusively engaged in the fabrication of one thing, he ultimately does his work with singular dexterity; but at the same time he loses the general faculty of applying his mind to the direction of the work...in proportion as the workman improves, the man is degraded...he no longer belongs to himself, but to the calling that he has chosen...the science of manufacture lowers the class of workmen, it raises the class of masters" (quoted in Brecher 1972, xi).

The basis of Thoreau's much-lauded simplicity originates in this disdain for and avoidance of commercial relations. Just as housing became the pivot for republican simplicity, so too was it for Thoreau.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the former understood simple housing as the means to maintain bourgeois virtues, Thoreau – like modern tiny house enthusiasts – saw small, low-cost yet proper rural housing as the architecture of socioeconomic deliverance. Consider one of his better-known passages on simplicity, frugality, and housing that is often quoted in tiny house literature:

Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have... Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less? (Thoreau 1995, 107)

Here Thoreau criticized the wealthy for their lack of simplicity. However, when speaking to the working class, his high-minded simplicity collapsed into paternalistic thrift. Having been caught in a downpour one day, Thoreau took refuge in the shanty of another working class Irish family, the Fields. John Field, Thoreau (1995, 368) recounts, undertook “bogging” a nearby plot “at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with manure for one year.” Thoreau endeavored to school the bogger in simplicity, boasting that he too “lived in a tight, light, and clean house,” but it likely cost less in rent than that paid by the Fields. (Thoreau was lent the land in-kind by

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<sup>42</sup> Indeed, there is continuity between republican simplicity and the transcendental thought of Thoreau. The latter likewise understood conspicuous consumption as not only degrading the character of individuals, but the entire country: “The nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain” (Thoreau 1995, 58). Meanwhile, Thoreau offers a secular and individualistic counterpoint to the religious utopian communities that were the contemporaries of *Walden*. Ironically, then, and despite Thoreau's antipathy toward “commercial society,” his philosophy celebrated the liberal egoistic individualism of capitalist social relations. Although his tract against commercialism and consumerism annoyed New England elites, transcendental thought was tolerated given that it posed no threat to capital.

Emerson.) Thoreau explained to the desperate family – with an infant whom he described as starving – that if they would only spend less money on tea, coffee, butter, milk, and meat, the “honest, hard-working if shiftless” John and his little child laborer could take some days off (ibid., 368).<sup>43</sup> “If he and his family would live simply, they might all go a-huckleberrying in the summer for their amusement,” the poet opines. Unfortunately, Thoreau surmised, the Fields were stuck in the “culture of an Irishman,” lacking the “arithmetic” (i.e. budgeting) required to save for their own piece of land. “Through want of enterprise and faith men are where they are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs,” Thoreau sighs (ibid., 369,374). Considering such interactions, as well as Thoreau’s broader misanthropy (he devotes pages explaining why philanthropy “does not agree with my constitution”), Schulz (2015) concludes that *Walden* “is not a paean to living simply; it is a paean to living *purely*, with all the moral judgment that the word implies.” To be fair, Thoreau was not the first to collapse the distinction between simple and moral living. Nor is he the last.

### **Progressive simplicity**

Violent clashes between the working- and capitalist class: the Great Upheaval of 1877, the eight-hour movement into 1886, the Pullman Strike and Coxey’s march on Washington in 1894 and the most intensive and extensive wave of labor militancy in US history, occurring in 1919 overseen by a weak and laissez faire state, defined the Gilded Age (Brecher 1972). The overlapping Progressive Era (1890–1920) – a wave of legal reforms that enlarged the state’s role

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<sup>43</sup> Compare Thoreau’s judgement with the lamentations of a contemporaneous Northamptonshire manufacturer about his over-spending employees: “Labor is one-third cheaper in France than in England; for their poor work hard, and fare hard, as to their food and clothing. Their chief diet is bread, fruit, herbs, roots, and dried fish; for they very seldom eat flesh; and when wheat is dear, they eat very little bread” and “their drink is either water or other small liquors, so that they spend very little money” (quoted in Marx 1976, 748). Elsewhere in *Walden*, Thoreau (1995, 58) advises cutting meals. “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” he urges. “Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one.”

in society – emerged as a reaction to these battles; progressives, not unlike Robber Baron philanthropists, maintained a faith in scientific expertise to assuage open class conflict while maintaining industrial, urban capitalism. Though historians struggle to define the politics of progressives (i.e. were they on the right or the left?) (see McGerr et al. 2018, 600; Dailey 2018, 61), those with an eye toward political economy recognize that progressivism was always a mode of class *management* (Zinn 2003, 350).

Indeed, progressive ethos and progressives themselves emerged with the rise of so-called “scientific management,” that is, the conscious attempt to use methods of “science” – or capitalist rationality dressed in the trappings of science – to maximize relative surplus value at even larger scales.<sup>44</sup> Progressive management went beyond the workplace. As middle managers became indispensable to an ever-more competitive market, other, new high skilled labor – social work, medicine, urban planning, policing, dietitians and academic social science – professionalized and consolidated through appeals to accredited know-how outside the reach of most working class people (M. B. Katz 1996, 186). This growing fraction of better paid workers came to comprise the “middle class.” They shared the relative wealth of the waning petty bourgeoisie but, unlike the latter, this class stratum of professionals lacked capital of their own. Their skills, like all non-capitalists and despite their pretensions, were regularly if indirectly drawn into the project of capital accumulation even as many held highly critical views of “greedy” industrialists, exploitative landlords, and corrupt politicians (see Polacheck 1991).

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<sup>44</sup> So as to cheapen the cost of labor power, increase exploitation, and better control workers, industrialists centralized production under a single roof and transferred all expertise and planning to industrial engineers/middle-managers while automating production through mechanization. In this manner, scientific management endeavored to transform skilled craftsmen into deskilled wage workers who were easily replaceable, nearly-mindless “human machinery” (Braverman 1998, 61), to produce an entire working class incapable of furnishing the necessities of social reproduction without the coveted knowledge of experts.

“Their message to the capitalists,” Ehrenreich (2020, 158) argues, “was that nonviolent social control would in the long run be more effective than bullets and billy clubs. Mines and mills did not have to be hotbeds of working-class sedition; they could be run more smoothly by trained, ‘scientific’ managers.” To help make their appeals, Progressive Era reformers – especially the moralizing “Scientific Charity” efforts (M. B. Katz 1996, 74; Cruickshank 1999, 48) – frequently drew upon the established rhetoric of simple living (and thrift), calling for “discriminating consumption, uncluttered living, personal contentment, aesthetic simplicity (including an emphasis on handicrafts), civic virtue, social service, and renewed contact with nature in one form or another” (Shi 2007, 176).<sup>45</sup>

To be sure, calls for simplicity fell upon the middle stratum themselves. Workers across the wage spectrum found the labor-process time-consuming and stressful, and they eagerly sought tactics to carve out time for leisure. Bourgeois reformers argued that such a respite required a thrifty use of time and money (ibid., 177). Charles Wagner’s *The Simple Life* is perhaps the best example of such thinking. Widely sold, Wagner became a minor celebrity in the United States through his nostalgic outline for spiritualized self-help. He explicitly targeted “our complex lives” – the title of his first chapter – as the foundation of discontent. The simple life for Wagner (1904, 153, 13), was a “state of mind” that has forsaken the “madness of comparison,” as such envious acquisition leaves us all “loaded with external goods and miserable in spirit.” Another voice box of these calls was *Ladies Home Journal*. Founded and edited by moral conservative yet ardently progressive Ed Bok, the magazine targeted women as moderators of moderation through “how to” guides (Bok pioneered this version of self-help literature),

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<sup>45</sup> The commercialism and consumption habits of the very rich also came under harsh and popular attack (Cashman 1988), perhaps best represented by Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, originally published in 1899 (Witkowski 2010, 243).

eventually becoming so popular that Teddy Roosevelt invited Bok to the White House.<sup>46</sup> Bok's *Ladies Home Journal* boasted an entire section to "How Much Can Be Done with Little," featuring articles "How to Live Cheaply" and "How We Live on \$1000 a Year or Less" so as to convey, like all self-help guides, that honest living was "an applied ideal accessible to all" (Shi 2007, 181–85). Fitting with the theme thus far, Progressive Era simple living likewise demanded simple home architecture. Finding Victorian design "repellently ornate," in 1895 *Ladies Home Journal* began publishing designs for generally cheaper, plain and functional homes while arguing that "simplicity is the only thing that ornaments." Too many commodities – "useless rubbish," as Bok called them – caused nervous, distracted mothers incapable of raising good children (Shi 2007, 185).

### **Early twentieth-century simplicity**

Calls for simple living blossomed into the National Thrift movement from 1900 to 1929.<sup>47</sup> Though strongest in the northeast, it eventually reached a nationwide audience. Like the Progressive movement in general, its supporters – mostly wealthy, white, and Protestant men and women – ranged from zealous populists to charitable organizations like the YMCA to big business. The movement spread through books, articles, pamphlets, short stories, school lesson plans (in coordination with the American Federation of Teachers) and even cartoons that stressed "the importance of savings, conservation, planning for the future, budgeting, self-control, efficiency, homeownership, self-help, and generosity" (Yarrow 2014, 12). Outside this media,

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<sup>46</sup> "Like many Americans of the turn of the century, Bok was inspired by the writings of Charles Wagner, a French Protestant clergyman noted for his emphasis on Christian simplicity," Shi (2007, 183) explains. "Wagner's book, *The Simple Life* (1901), was widely reviewed and quoted in the American press, so much so that President Roosevelt invited Wagner to the United States in 1904. In speaking of *The Simple Life*, Roosevelt claimed that he knew of 'no other book...which contains so much that we of America ought to take to our hearts.'"

<sup>47</sup> This national push for thrift, then, took hold at the same time as the mass production of the Roaring Twenties, the much discussed expansion of advertising and consumer spending – as well as consumer debt.

the National Thrift movement formed local Thrift Committees across the country, published *National Thrift News*, hosted annual conventions, and supported Thrift Weeks corresponding with Benjamin Franklin's birthday. In 1919, even the National Federation of Labor passed a resolution to support the Thrift movement (Yarrow 2014; Witkowski 2010).<sup>48</sup> With the start of World War I, thrift spread further as it became patriotic: buy war bonds, not commodities!

After the Great Depression, and with at least 25 percent national unemployment, widespread homelessness and hunger, the National Thrift movement waned. Teaching thrift to the expanded pool of impoverished Americans struck many as callously out of touch, though stalwart conservative commentators kept it up (Yarrow 2014, 126).<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, New Deal policies eventually embraced the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, or using stimulus packages to stoke effective demand, which would then facilitate production and job growth. Widespread thrift, or the act of saving rather than spending, became antithetical to the New Deal; it became people's civic duty to consume (L. Cohen 2003, 54). "When you buy cigars you help provide incomes for farmers, labor, salesmen, dealers, and yourself. Buy now," one National Recovery Association placard insisted (quoted in Hulme 2019, 91).

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<sup>48</sup> Progressives also sought a spatial fix. Rural landscapes promised a reunion with nature, which itself promised with a slower pace of life, a nostalgic geography where class conflict and commercial relations evaporate in the sunny baptism of republican citizenship. Homeownership, of course, was another strategy of declassing. World War I initiated these two tactics – homeownership and suburban living – as a model of class compromise, of reforming and assimilating the working class. The war effort demanded productive, cowed workers, and the housing proposed overlapped with reformers' hope to solve the labor and housing questions simultaneously (Karolak 2000, 60). Initially shanties and barracks housed war industry employees. They were later deemed inadequate for two reasons. First, capitalists preferred debt-financed homeownership for their workers. "Get them to invest their savings in their homes and own them," gushed one such industrialist. "Then they won't leave and they won't strike. It ties them down so that they have a stake in our [the company's] prosperity" (quoted in Karolak 2000, 67). Second, shantytowns and barracks – unlike detached, single-family suburban houses – were improper vectors of bourgeois values (ibid.).

<sup>49</sup> FDR reserved his moralizing to the wealthy. "Let us," he remarked in his 1932 nomination speech, "be frank in acknowledgement of the truth that many amongst us have made obeisance to Mammon, that the profit of speculation, the easy road without toil, have lured us from the old barricades" and toward "loose thinking, descending morals, an era of selfishness" (Roosevelt 1932).

The New Deal did not only laud consumer spending. It also expressed a rural nostalgia of independent homesteaders, which appeared to offer a reprieve from the capitalist market's anarchic, abstract furor. Rexford G. Tugwell, head of the 1935 Resettlement Administration, which sought to relieve struggling farmers and resettle unemployed urban workers in rural areas, later remarked:

There was a kind of homesickness – historic homesickness...for the simpler days of the past when such terrible troubles were still unknown. This was imaginary too; but it had reality in people's wishes. The village of the past, and small, self-sufficient communities in which face-to-face relations were the rule, where there was such self-sufficiency that independence of the outer world was nearly complete – these were the utopias that many tired and discouraged urban dwellers pictured to themselves. People in these circumstances had been immune to unemployment; and, if they had been poor, they still had had shelter and food. (Tugwell 1960, 261)

The New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, Tennessee Valley Authority, the Department of Interior's 1933 Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and the subsequent Resettlement Administration, were all manifestations of this sentiment. Together they reflected an earnest belief that rural and small-scale production – much of it intentionally promoting subsistence farming, handcrafts, and tight-knit, homogeneous, semi-egalitarian and cooperative communities – could allow the country to return to its rural and republican roots prior to the atomization and class conflict endemic to urban and industrial capitalism (Conkin 1959).

### **Suburban Simplicity**

The anti-urbanism of these New Deal policies was likewise present in the bourgeois reformers' push for suburbanization. The state's unprecedented economic interventions for the New Deal policies and then again for World War II production, as well as fears of another economic crisis occurring postwar, enabled the long-held suburban ideal to become a reality – for the white

working class, at least. “Between 1940 and 1960, the share of households owning their own homes rose from 44 to 62 percent” (Fetter 2014, 329). Subsidies to suburbanization were comprised of the Federal Housing Authority, the Home Owners Loan Corporation and, following World War 2, the “GI Bill,” which further eased homebuying for returning veterans. These policies provided direct and indirect subsidies to capital and home buyers through providing government-backed mortgages. Not only did this make it “easier and cheaper for speculative builders to secure working capital from private institutions,” it also aided wealthy-enough consumers to have a lower down payment, borrow the rest at lower interest rates, and pay their mortgages over a much longer period of time, rendering residential property “a safer investment for all concerned” (Radford 2000, 115). Altogether, these policies, aided as they were through massive highway construction bills, facilitated the rapid suburbanization of the US landscape.

In 1935, the FHA insured 23,397 single or multifamily home mortgages; by 1950 that figure had risen to 342,576 units. After declining through mass foreclosures during the 1930s, home ownership skyrocketed from 43.6 percent to 61.9 percent between 1940 and 1960. The vast number of housing starts was a *constant* in the postwar period – from 216,000 in 1935, to 1.3 million in 1947, to 1.6 million in 1955. (Huber 2013, 81)

The private suburban home became not only a family’s most expensive (and debt-financed) purchase, it also became “the privileged site of individual consumption” requisite of Keynesian policy (Aglietta 2001, 159). Homeownership required buying several appliances (washer and dryer, lawnmowers, etc.), furniture, and other households goods so as to make social reproduction – now intensely privatized and individualized, without shared facilities or in-unit family/friends to ease care work and household upkeep – somewhat feasible for the home-bound housewife. Given suburbia’s low-density, sprawling landscape and its distance from traditional

downtown spaces of production, suburban life required families to purchase the next-biggest consumer durable: a car.

It is this intensified mediation of social reproductive labor by machinery and technology to which Huber (2013, 19) calls the “real subsumption of everyday life.” “Life” here for Huber refers to existence outside paid labor, one’s “home life” or the sphere of social reproduction. This is analogous to when capitalist *productive* relations become thoroughly mechanized and the direct exploitation of labor by capital is obscured. Instead, it increasingly appears that capital – encased in the mechanical components of the means of production – is by itself capable of producing surplus value. “The value-sustaining power of labor,” Marx (1976, 1020) explains, “appears as the self-supporting power of capital; the value-creating power of labor as the self-valorizing power of capital.” In terms of *reproductive* relations under capitalism, the technology and machinery of the household became less commodities of exploited labor to be consumed for the sake of social reproduction and more as a subsequent, value-adding additions to the home, itself conceived as a wealth-producing investment.

In this manner, the economy of the individual family comes to resemble that of the individual small business owner: the business owner increases labor productivity through technical investments, the homeowner increases the use- and exchange-value of their house and land through the purchase of mechanical inputs (i.e. appliances) and other improvements. It is this material resemblance that interpolates homeowners as “entrepreneurs” themselves. The household itself, moreover, is further imbued as the site of reproductive labor. By making use of commodities purchased in the market, one’s labor power can become more “valuable,” that is, more skilled and properly acculturated, through a well-curated home environment, where an

adult's earning capacity and a child's earning potential result from "investments" in their so-called "human capital" (G. S. Becker 1975).

Although Huber does not frame suburbanization in precisely these terms, his analysis usefully traces a connection between alienation, fetishization, and individual power vis-à-vis capitalist relations. If alienation and fetishization derive from a genuine lack of power relative to abstract market forces, the "complexity of our lives," then suburbanization and homeownership can be interpreted as a genuine if limited vehicle for becoming "empowered" within this domination. "By extending the productive forces of capital...to the reproductive forces of everyday life," Huber (2013, xv) argues,

a specific stratum of American workers could now live, think, and feel an individuated sense of *power* over the geographies of everyday practices. Life appeared to some as a coherent space of privatized freedom – the house, the car, the family, the yard – that was entirely produced by and reducible to one's own life choices and entrepreneurial efforts. This way of life became synonymous with capital – an entrepreneurial life of choices and freedom to *make* a life for oneself.

Engels' (2005, 62) *The Housing Question* likewise highlights this *sense* of power that comes with homeownership in his critical interrogation of Dr. Sax, an English philanthropist. The worker who rents his dwelling, Sax argues, is "helplessly exposed to all the changing circumstances of economic life, and in constant dependence on his employer." But with homeownership, the disempowered worker, "would thereby be rescued to a certain extent from this precarious situation." In fact, Sax fancifully argues that "he would become a capitalist and be safeguarded against the dangers of unemployment or incapacity to work."

Engels levies the same criticism of Sax, Proudhon, and other bourgeois socialists as Marx had in his *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Just as Proudhon located the kernel of economic inequality

in unequal commodity exchange, bourgeois socialists like Sax claim that homeownership would liberate the working class from the tyranny of slumlords. By becoming homeowners, workers would thus escape exorbitant rent of rapidly industrializing cities – an instance of unequal exchange – they endure as tenants. Engels criticizes this focus on exchange relations because it does not grasp the totality of the capitalist mode of production, of how the productive sphere, the workplace, is the real site of “unequal exchange” (i.e. exploitation) and the reproduction of poverty.<sup>50</sup> Working class homeownership cannot therefore alter class relations and, in cases where workers are bound to their homes through ownership and/or mortgage debts, it can in fact hold them in place even if local work disappears and working conditions degenerate (Engels 2005, 43–44). Working class mobility, in this sense, is necessary to escape peonage and dependence on only a handful of capitalists for survival.

Suburban homeownership is a means to manage class conflict and ease economic anxiety. It offered the middle stratum property while distancing it from poorer working class neighborhoods. Homeownership, at least when workers’ wages were adequate, became a powerful if inadequate counterweight of stability and control against the chaos and precarity that defines capitalist social relations. It also incorporated numerous themes historically popular with simple architecture: relatively inornate and functional homes set within a semi-rural, nonproductive and largely non-commercial landscape. These neighborhoods were surrounded by a homogenous, ostensibly classless community of people who nevertheless acquired a semblance of unalienated social reproductive labor and/or leisure-based creativity through family- and household-based social reproduction (R. A. Walker 1981, 391, 397). Further, ownership of both

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<sup>50</sup> Capitalist social relations themselves also produce landlords who have “not only the right, but, in view of competition, to a certain extent also the duty of ruthlessly making as much out of his property in house rent as [they] possibly can” (Engels 2005, 58).

the home itself and the land underneath furnished a homestead-like notion of independent self-reliance reminiscent of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond.

### **Countercultural escapism**

Reflecting on the postwar economy's continued prosperity during this "Golden Age" of capitalism, the raising of working and living standards, and the 800 percent increase in consumer credit between the Second World War's conclusion and 1957, *Newsweek* magazine remarked:

"Never before have so many owed so much to so many. Time has swept away the Puritan conception of immorality in debt and godliness in thrift" (quoted in Shi 2007, 249–50).

Following the national thrift that came with World War II, the Keynesian call to consume flourished. Calls for thrift among the working class subsided, mass consumption became "a mainstream and state-sponsored activity." Ed Bok's thrifty housewife gave way to a "modern device-loving, consumer-housewife" as "the epitome of the good Keynesian pleasure-seeking shopper" (Hulme 2019, 88). This mass consumption and suburbanization came to define the birth of the "middle class" in the 1950s.

Many suburban women, though, balked at their isolation, sexually-prescribed labor and identity, and dependence on an earning husband (Hayden 2002). Men likewise revolted against suburban domesticity and the responsibility of breadwinning in jobs that "seemed to be robbing men of their autonomy and initiative" (DePastino 2005, 234). Simply put, suburban life was too feminine and work was too alienating, robbing men not only of their time and energy (as with all labor) but also their masculinity and independence. It is this masculine discontent with postwar status quo that propelled the Beats, that small collection of male writers and artists in the decaying skid rows of New York and San Francisco who "would eventually emerge as the most

important counterculture in postwar America” until the late 1960s (ibid., 235). The Beats, though, were not a radical or necessarily leftist movement as they focused their ire on the country’s newfound “consumerism,” not class exploitation or property relations (Ehrenreich 2020, 19). Author Jack Kerouac, perhaps the best-known among the “Beats generation,” for instance, called for:

A world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume. (Kerouac 1958)

The enforced asceticism of the impoverished skid row dweller, financially incapable of achieving a stereotypical suburban house, middle stratum standards of social reproduction, or accessing a decent job, represented not failure but rather a purer, less alienated and isolating mode of life (DePastino 2005, 235).

In other words, the Beats saw “voluntary poverty,” as Thoreau (1995, 14) put it, as a precondition for enlightenment and, crucially, as the rejuvenation of American masculinity. Whereas the transcendentalists anxiously sought individual solutions to urban class conflict, retreating to nature, the Beats fled the suburban conformity and bureaucracy of the Cold War era. It was only through a total rejection of postwar affluence, sedentary homeownership, homogeneity, and masculine domestic norms (sobriety, monogamy, fatherhood, breadwinning) that the Beats could embrace what they viewed as a truer, more rugged form of fraternal manhood practiced by the hypermobile, rail-riding hobo. It took such an experience, they believed, to transcend the stultifying suburban materialism and bland consciousness of their

parents and peers and reach anything close to a less alienated, less anxious way of life (DePastino 2005, 236–42).

Though the hippies of the 1960s traded the Beats' individualistic masculinity for communal androgyny (ibid., 242), they shared its object of ridicule: the landscape of affluent suburbia (Ehrenreich 2020, 61). Jerry Rubin, countercultural icon, Yippie co-founder, and future investment banker, put it this way:

Dad looked at his house and car and manicured lawn, and he was proud. All of his material possessions justified his life. He tried to teach his kids: he told us not to do anything that would lead us from the path of Success... And we were confused. We didn't dig why we need to work toward owning bigger houses? bigger cars? bigger manicured lawns? (quoted in Ehrenreich 2020, 62)

Theodore Roszak (1972, 427), influential adult fellow-traveler likewise castigated suburbanites as being “obsessed by greed” and upholding an unbearable “routinization of life.” Counterculture contemporary Charles Reich's (1970, 50) bestselling book, *The Greening of America*, similarly documents “the absence of community and the loss of self” resulting from a drift from the American Dream “shared by the colonists and the immigrants, by Jefferson, Emerson, the Puritan preachers and the western cowboy.”

Like its predecessors, the hippie counterculture viewed “civilization” as a corrupting force that could only be challenged by embracing more “natural” social relations. Much of this had to do with a newfound skepticism with technology under rationalized capitalism (see Ellul 1983; H. Marcuse 1991). For both Roszak and Reich, Heath and Potter (2004, 296) surmise, “the problems of mass society were fundamentally inseparable from the problems of technology,” which was often equated with the “technocracy,” or the “machine-like” nature of bureaucratic society stemming from “Western rationality” and its compulsion to subdue people and the

natural world. “We lost the ability to control our lives or our society because we had placed ourselves under the domination of the market and technology,” Reich (1970, 381) exclaimed. This worldview easily bled into the broader anti-work and anti-consumerism with its castigation of cars, household appliances, computers, and automated production.

The 1960s counterculture drew from previous calls to simplify in response to the alienating features of capitalist production and consumption. The Beats and the hippies confronted an entire society, an entire “mainstream culture,” in need of radical upending. In lieu of organizing for or against specific policies, counterculture advocates sought a psychic revolution. Roszak argued that society’s administrative technocracy must be replaced by “a new simplicity of life, a decelerating social pace, a vital leisure,” including a “low consumption” ethic dedicated to “kinship, friendship, and cooperation” (quoted in Shi 2007, 252). As with the transcendentalists’ and resonant with the Beats message, social awakening – coming back to oneself and human kinship – could be initiated through individual acts of nonconformity, snubbing suburban consumption, fleeing to the countryside, and refusing fulltime employment.

### **Ecological austerity**

“In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God,” President Carter sermonized in his famous 1979 “Malaise Speech,” “too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption.” Carter continues:

Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. (Carter 2018)

Spurred by the backlash against the social and parental “permissiveness” that supposedly encouraged the counterculture’s hedonistic disrespect for petty bourgeois norms (Ehrenreich 2020, 75), monetary inflation and unemployment blamed on pampered unions and welfare recipients (Cowie 2012; M. B. Katz 1996), the 1973 oil embargo crisis, the increasing popularity of environmentalist books like Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* and Malthusian publications like the Club of Rome’s (1972) *Limits to Growth* and Paul Ehrlich’s (1968) *The Population Bomb*, the 1970s were an age of limits. The future of the nation, Carter suggested, could now only be glimpsed through a cage of imposed governmental austerity, and it could only be improved through a rejection of consumer goods and an embrace of existential enlightenment.

The Appropriate Technology Movement was one of the first discrete outgrowths of ecological simplicity, leaving Carter’s religiosity – or at least Christianity – on the wayside but eventually repeating his call for individual austerity. The push for appropriate technology was initially a reaction to the failures of Cold War-era US aid and development programs to forestall communist or even moderately leftist political movements in the “third world” (Pursell 1993, 630). British economist E.F. Schumacher offered a solution: provide these countries with a less capital-intensive form of economic development that could be reproduced domestically. Schumacher’s 1973 book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, endeavored to challenge the “growth imperative” in a world of finite space and resources. He called for a new, vaguely leftist “form of economic organization based on collective ownership and technologies that would create meaningful work for people” (Steinberg 2010, 10). In other words, *Small is Beautiful* provided a vision that could be applied the developed countries as well. Advocates increasingly argued that “pollution, environmental damage, spiraling energy costs, resource depletion, alienation, and other gnawing social ills could be remedied if the right kinds of

technology were widely used.” People could effectively purchase certain commodities (or “vote” with their dollars) and this, through advertisers and leading by example, would initiate “radical social change” (Winner 1986, 62). It is for this reason that Steinberg (2010, 8) highlights the appropriate technology movement as the first full-fledged manifestation of “green liberalism,” that is, “the idea that market forces combined with individuals all doing their part can save the planet,” that “individual (consumer and investor) initiative can rescue the earth.”

Yet the “canonical text” of green liberalism was not *Small is Beautiful*. Rather, it was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a US countercultural magazine published regularly between 1968 and 1972 and occasionally until 1998. Though focused on ecology- and outdoor-minded product reviews, it also included essays on self-sufficiency, sound ecological behavior, and related do-it-yourself projects. “A realm of intimate, personal power is developing – power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested,” the publication’s Statement of Purpose read. As such, the catalog featured products deemed “useful as a tool; relevant to independent education; high quality at low cost; easily available by mail” (quoted in Winner 1986, 65–66). By selling the right sort of commodities, founding editor Stewart Brand and those of his ilk repackaged a sort of middle stratum consumption as pious, purposeful and regenerative rather than frivolous and wasteful. “Individual buyers,” he remarked, “have far more control over economic behavior than voters.” Reflecting on his magazine’s purpose in 1990 interview, Brand maintained adherence to green liberalism, stressing that *The Whole Earth Catalogue* provided “a book of tools for saving the world at the only scale it can be done, one hand at a time” (quoted in Steinberg 2010, 9). Although appropriate technologists “thought global,” then, they proposed remedies that could not even be called “local.” At best they were at the scale of the household, at worst that of the

individual consumer. Lacking a robust and organized constituency capable of instituting lasting change and protecting previous gains (Reed 2001; Dean 2016; Srnicek and Williams 2016), the Reagan era's neoliberal reforms steadily undid much of the environmentalist policy victories of the 1970s.

The neoliberal policies of the Reagan Administration, policies initiated under Carter and then normalized throughout the H.W. Bush and Clinton presidencies, set the material groundwork for the voluntary simplicity (VS) movement of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>51</sup> By the end of the 1980s alone, half of all workers saw their incomes decline (Morin 1991). While wealth inequality had been declining in the postwar years, it regained momentum across both decades, spurred on through regressive tax policies, financial deregulation, anti-union legislation, and downgrading an already inadequate welfare system. The poor got poorer, the rich became richer (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020). These material conditions, combined the “exhausted utopian energies of the '60s,” formed the basis of VS. “Public activism gave way to exploring new ways of living at the grass roots level of society” Heath and Potter (2004, 263) argue. “When they realized that large-scale institutional change wasn't going to happen, countercultural rebels turned inward.” As with previous calls for simplicity, VS thus replicated the subdued and sublimated criticism of wage labor, a sense of workplace “meaninglessness,” as Carter described

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<sup>51</sup> Prior to the 1980s, significant portions of the US populace were explicitly seeking “simple living”: “A 1977 Harris poll found Americans increasingly concerned with ‘learning to get our pleasure out of nonmaterial experiences,’ rather than ‘satisfying our needs for more goods and services.’ According to a study by the Stanford Research Institute, this attitude was particularly strong among young, educated, middle-class people, who were no longer likely to be political activists but at least tended to ‘prefer products that are functional, healthy, nonpolluting, durable, repairable, recyclable or made from renewable raw materials, energy-cheap, authentic, aesthetically pleasure, and made through simple technology.’ These products easily accommodated the new marketing emphasis on ‘leisure products’” (Ehrenreich 2020, 282–83).

it, that ought to be resolved through rational consumption and turning back the clock on working class living standards. Unlike previous movements, though, VS enlisted budgeting and financial independence into its overall roadmap to simple living; one could also get rich by embracing simplicity.

Voluntary Simplicity arguably began with Duane Elgin's publication of what would become "the simplicity bible," *Voluntary Simplicity: An Ecological Lifestyle That Promotes Personal and Social Renewal*, which alone "claimed 10 million dedicated converts to the cause" (Maniates 2002, 200). Politically, the book's message differs little from the individualistic lifestyle politics of proposed by Brand. "The character of a whole society is the cumulative result of the countless small actions, day in and day out, of millions of persons," Elgin argues. Like Ed Bok before him, Elgin's self-help guide offers practical examples of how everyday people can live simply, with middle stratum workers clearly in mind:

- A city-dweller plants an intensive garden and volunteers time to work with the homeless.
- A busy executive begins meditating to reduce stress and, as a result, he finds more satisfaction in the flow of living and is less interested in the old business game of acquiring power, status, and money.
- A suburban family insulates its home, buys a fuel-efficient car, begins to recycle glass, cans, and paper and shifts its diet away from meat and highly processed foods.
- A lawyer learns carpentry as an alternative profession, shops for clothes in secondhand stores, and buys used books. (Elgin 1998, 57–58)

Elgin's voluntary simplicity pushes the revivifying of effects of non- or less-commercial labor (volunteer, manual, creative), nature (or at least gardens), green consumption, and spiritual self-reflection. These practices are the means by which one can independently accomplish (or at least

express) “simplicity” or “transcendence.”<sup>52</sup> “The particular expression of *simplicity*,” Elgin (1998, 24–25) explains, outlining his premise and perspective, “is a personal matter. We each know where our lives are unnecessarily complicated. We are all painfully aware of the clutter and pretense that weigh upon us and make our passage through the world more cumbersome and awkward. To live more simply is to unburden ourselves – to live more lightly, cleanly, aerodynamically.” Mary Grigsby (2004, 48), in her book-length analysis of VS, *Buying Time and Getting By*, defines the movement’s transcendent spirituality in terms of an “ecological ethic,” a viewpoint that “enables simple livers to *feel connection with the enchanted world of all creation* through adopting the beliefs and practices that are the spirit of voluntary simplicity” (emphasis added). Yet again and as the emphasis makes clear, VS emerged as the then-newest manifestation of alienation, of being *disconnected* and *atomized* from natural and human “creation.”

Two other books have come to define VS, revealing its overwhelming attention to financial anxiety over and above its environmentalism. *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence*, written by former investment banker Joe Dominquez and his wife Vicki Robin, is the first of these. Compared to the spiritual tone of Elgin, the book appears wholly mundane. As with countless financial self-

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<sup>52</sup> Elgin sees voluntary simplicity as being “influenced by Christian, Eastern, Early Greek, Puritan, Quaker, and Transcendentalist views.” Speaking of the Puritan influence specifically, Elgin explains: “The early Puritan settlers brought to America their ‘puritan ethic,’ which stressed hard work, temperate living, participation in the life of the community, and a steadfast devotion to things spiritual. Puritans also stressed the golden mean by saying we should not desire more material things than we can use effectively. It is from the New England Puritans that we get the adage, Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without. Although the Puritan tradition tended to be hierarchical, elitist, authoritarian, it also had a compassionate side that encouraged people to use their excess wealth to help the deserving poor. Puritans were not opposed to prosperity itself, but to the greed and selfishness that seemed to accompany excessive abundance” (quoted in Grigsby 2004, 46)

help books, the 9-step program of Dominguez and Robin is an elaborated version of: confront your spending, live more frugally, save money, invest money, reap profits, work less and find happiness. Yet the book establishes its heterodox or countercultural chops through its passionate criticism of wage labor and environmental concerns. “Aren’t we killing ourselves – our health, our relationships, our sense of joy and wonder – for our jobs?” they ask in the first chapter.

We are sacrificing our lives for money, but it’s happening so slowly that we barely notice. Graying temples and thickening middles along with dubious signs of progress like a corner office, a company car, or tenure are the only landmarks of the passage of time. Eventually we may have all the necessities, niceties, and even luxuries we could ever want, but inertia itself keeps us locked into the nine-to-five pattern. (Dominguez and Robin 2018, 5–6)

By saving, investing, and working less, they argue, their readers can break free and “live an authentic, productive, meaningful life,” a way to “make a living so that you end up more alive” (ibid., 4). Attractive in its own right, adherents often refer this avoiding-work component as “downshifting” (Schor 1999; Drake 2000; Kennedy, Krahn, and Krogman 2013).

Comparatively, the authors’ environmental concerns come across as nearly an afterthought. Perhaps unsurprisingly, and much like tiny house enthusiasts, Dominguez and Robin approach environmental concerns primarily in terms of mainstream society’s overconsumption – and overconsumption itself is framed as increasing consumers’ monetary debt to creditors and their debt to the environment. “The notion that it’s right to consume daily bumps into the admonition that we’re deep in debt personally and playing Russian roulette with the environment to boot.” But consuming correctly is itself nearly impossible, they admit. “It seems there is no way consumers can be right. Everything we do exacts a cost from the environment. Even new ‘eco-friendly’ or ‘sustainable’ products are only comparatively less stressful to the earth and by no means benign” (ibid., 22). This revelation, though, does not

inspire a broader critique of those same commodities' production or the much broader economic forces at play in ecological destruction and climate change. Rather, the sober recognition that there is no ethically- and environmentally-pure method of consumption supports a generalized anti-consumerism. To put it differently, Dominguez and Robin both grant the limited sovereignty of consumers while doubling-down on a generalized consumer boycott of all "unnecessary" commodities as the conduit of a new "sustainability ethic" (Dominguez and Robin 2018, 22–23).

Cecile Andrews' 1997 *The circle for Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* is the second book of VS. "The life of voluntary simplicity is a life lived consciously, a decision to live in harmony with life, to show reverence for life, to sustain life," Andrews (1998, 22) explains at the book's outset. "It is a life of creativity and celebration, a life of community and participatory democracy, and a life in touch with nature and the universal life force. It is a life that has a soul; it is a life that allowed the individual's soul to awaken." Andrews argues these issues may be avoided through, first, "hacking away the brambles so that one can seek the trail head." The brambles in this case are, of course, commodities that "clutter" homes and lives alike. Andrews criticizes growing economic inequality on the decline of unions and regressive tax policies (among others). Yet her prescriptions are both idealist – her call for a "new belief system" that would change everything – and ambivalent about working class social reproduction, arguing for reducing wealth – "when you have money, you tend to spend it" – while also suggesting that workers individually "create new sources of income," such as getting another *fulfilling* job, moving into a smaller house, or "returning to our roots" by taking on boarders (Andrews 1998, 177, 196).

Data suggests that those interested in simplicity at the time “hail predominantly from the middle 20 percent of American households” and are generally more educated than the typical American (Maniates 2002, 221). In light of this, and its general ridicule of purchasing luxuries, VS has been criticized as movement reserved for those wealthy enough to choose a safer, hipper, more pious form of poverty (see Vanderbilt 1996). Maniates admits this basis, but argues that this should not lead one down the politically dubious path of simply tossing out VS’s broader denunciation of the meaningless of work and of wealth inequality. Rather, VS should be understood as “a kind of passive resistance to the legacy of ‘Reaganomics’” and increased economic anxiety (Maniates 2002, 215).<sup>53</sup> Grigsby (2004, 54) likewise argues that VS originates in “a sense of insecurity relative to their [VS enthusiasts’] waged work.” Voluntary simplifiers saw their hold on life slipping and reacted by tossing weighty things out – commodities and comforts and homes and cars. In that manner, VS is a rational reaction by a struggling petty bourgeoisie in “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 2020). Yet and contra Maniates, this reality does not radically disassociate VS from other simplicity movements throughout US history. Nearly all calls for simplicity represent a collective sigh in light of stressful, unstable, alienating work and the economic anxiety endemic to capitalism. And nearly all assume that these anxieties and lack of control over their economic fate can and should be resolved through, first, altering their relationship to consumption so as to empower them, second, avoid stultifying and alienating jobs.

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<sup>53</sup> Maniates (2002, 217) prefers this political-economic interpretation over those of academics who “understand the simplicity movement as a reaction to the psychological or spiritual emptiness of plenty.” In so doing, he establishes a false dichotomy between rationales articulated in spiritual terms and those of financial security. As I argued, this spiritual rationale originates *within* and *because of* the financial insecurity and precarious livelihoods endemic to capitalist social relations (Jonna and Foster 2016). Both are products of social alienation.

Building from VS, the “degrowth movement” is the most recent and ongoing iteration of anti-consumption-based environmentalism. Serge Latouche (2014, 212), the degrowth movement’s best known spokesperson, explains how, “like voluntary simplicity, the *path* to degrowth is first and foremost a choice.” Both entail “breaking away from the dominating consumerist culture...a heroic, even rational, choice” to escape the “addiction to the drug of consumerism.” Degrowth enthusiasts have envisioned tiny houses – alone with other “low-level, low-impact, small-scale, decentralized, compact dwellings” (Schneider 2018, 14) – as a practical step towards degrowth (Nelson and Schneider 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Bourgeois socialism, like bourgeois calls for simplicity and thrift, reacted to the onset of capitalist social relations, its concomitant abstract domination and class struggle. But, of course, these reformist movements avoided any analysis that could access its root cause. Comprised of petty bourgeois social reformers, philanthropists, and charities, these individuals “want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom. They desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements” (Marx and Engels 1978, 496). They instead pleaded with capital to institute reforms via the state while paternalistically teaching the working class the virtues of hard work and the dangers of radical politics. In essence, bourgeois simplifiers attempted to create a society from their own experience, an experience where labor could be alienating but was rarely dead-end or deadly, where social reproduction brought choice and lifestyle rather than pinched, desperate austerity. If everyone adopted bourgeois values, if only everyone lived *as if* they were bourgeois, outstanding class conflict would at least ease if not completely go away.

For transcendentalists and their descendants (the Beats, Hippies), philanthropy and other sorts of reform were ineffectual and, thus, ultimately a vane exercise by the wealthy and obtuse. Seemingly unable to effect change, more individualistic simplifiers retreated from commercial relations altogether and, through this, positioned themselves to formulate an even broader societal criticism than Progressive era reformers and thrift-peddlers could muster. They have and continue to levy critiques of alienation in everyday life under capitalism. Yet by doing so these self-reliant renegades reproduced the individualism at the heart of capitalist society and American mythos. Although many might hope their example could lead others to do the same, the wealth required ensured that their versions of unalienating escapism could only ever be achieved by a fraction of society. Indeed, one suspects that this sort of niche exceptionality is part of the point. What results is an “activist” group proceeding without an in-depth critique of capitalist-inspired social alienation, who thus dedicate themselves to beautifying the dividing lines between classes through technocratic reforms and moralized scolding. Those harboring a critique of alienation regularly retreat from society altogether, arguing that true change can only happen individually, and that happiness is a state of mind. Social “revolution” is a do-it-yourself affair.

In light of this, it appears that a marriage of these tendencies could foster a far reaching political project. This would surely be a step in the right direction, but unfortunately neither tendency is yet capable or willing to foster a political-economic critique of capitalist social relations. Those ignoring labor for a critique of consumerism are incapable of entertaining politics outside individual or household decisions. Those who highlight alienating labor still cannot imagine a world without it, rendering escapism the preferred praxis. Although the history of simplicity and thrift movements throughout US history reveal some dynamism, their

uninspiring outcomes are only outshined by their maddening repetition. As we will see below, the tiny house movement does not promise a refreshing break from this cyclical pattern of simplifiers. Although its political-economic context may eventually foretell a more coherent set of radical working class politics, currently it only regurgitates the tired mantras of its predecessors.

### CHAPTER 3 – THE APPEAL OF LIFESTYLE CONSUMPTION

Movements of simplicity and thrift, I argued in the last chapter, are reactions to the anarchic capitalist market. For those wealthy enough, personal simplicity offers financial fortification and/or radical escapism. For the poor, thrift promised a similarly personal supplement to financial security. Across the wage spectrum, the broadly defined working class sought – or were told to seek – such piecemeal empowerment by changing their individual behavior.

In this chapter, I explore why the realm of personal spending proceeds as the privileged site of potential economic agency, and why so many “movements” concern themselves with how to consume in the right way. This tendency, I argue, originates in the fact that, *compared to the sharp and personalized servility of work*, the sphere of exchange and that of social reproduction hold out a measure of individual consumer agency and a semblance of political and economic equality. The market exudes a powerful material influence upon consciousness, dissuading collective political activity at the workplace or against the capitalist state while encouraging personal politics at home and at the store. As social relations become more and more commodified, constituting a “consumer society,” most forms of “individuality, self-expression, and stylistic self-consciousness” – including apparently-political activity – necessarily entails calibrated consumption. The rise of “consumerism” or “consumer culture” is far from an individual, genuinely sovereign choice as both anti-consumerist simplicity movements and consumption-approving postmodern theorists tend to assume. People’s level of wealth, though, determines just how “free” or “empowered” they may be as a consumer. For this reason, and as with tiny house enthusiasts, those with some modicum of wealth tend to fill the ranks of simplicity movements.

## Consumer society and its politics

At its basis, the concept of consumer society assumes that the consumption of commodities is the fundamental set of social relations, institutions, ideas, and identities around which most if not all others revolve. Of course, consuming nutrients and using of tools or goods is a transhistorical feature of humanity; it is the material foundation of corporeal and social existence. The fact that these nutrients, tools, goods, and so forth have been so thoroughly commodified under capitalism does not by itself birth a consumer society. The concepts of consumerism, consumer society, consumer culture, and other derivations originate in the supposed, epoch-marking shift to the consumption of wants rather than needs, a consumption primarily of pleasure rather than survival (Falk and Campbell 1997). It is this relative superfluity that casts consumption *as consumerism*, as an instance of “culture” rather than tactic of survival. “While consumption is an act,” Miles (1998, 4) clarifies, “consumerism is a way of life...the cultural expression and manifestation of the apparently ubiquitous act of consumption.” Featherstone’s (1991, 13) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* similarly argues “that it is important to focus on the question of the growing prominence of the *culture* of consumption and not merely regard consumption as derived unproblematically from production.”<sup>54</sup> Zygmunt Bauman’s *Intimations of Postmodernism* perhaps best captures the claim that society now revolves around – and is held together by – consumerism. “In present-day society,” Bauman (1992, 37) explains,

consumer conduct (consumer freedom geared to the consumer market) moves steadily into the position of, simultaneously, the cognitive and moral focus of life, the integrative bond of the society, and the focus of systemic management. In other words, it moves into the selfsame position which in the past, during the ‘modern’ phase of capitalist society—was occupied by work in the form of wage labour. This means that in our time

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<sup>54</sup> Featherstone (1991) does not explain what he means by “unproblematically” here.

individuals are engaged (morally by society, functionally by the social system) first and foremost as consumers rather than as producers.

Going a step further, others suggest that commodities are increasingly consumed less for their material usefulness than their symbolic – or cultural – utility (Baudrillard 2019; Abercrombie 1994).

Just exactly when and where mass consumerism or consumer society came to be is a matter of debate. Many place its starting point with the consumption of luxuries among Europeans and their colonial gentility in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (J. L. Anderson 2012). Others settle upon a time of increased population and consumer demand between the early 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, or more specifically as coming out of the mass production of the 1920s. Still others frame the timescale of consumerism more narrowly, emerging after World War II. If consumerism began following the postwar boom of the 1950s and 1960s, it has, many argue, fundamentally changed since the 1970s and 1980s into its most recent and ongoing form in the “post-Fordist” or neoliberal era – the era of a postmodern cultural consumption (Z. Bauman 1992; Miles 1998; Schor 1999; Lodziak 2000).

Whereas there is debate about the when and where of consumerism, much less is offered in terms of *why* consumerism took hold initially. Miles’ (1998, 5) *Consumerism as a Way of Life* merely suggests that it came to be out of a primordial “thirst for novelty.” Campbell’s ([1987] 2018, 302) classic *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* more specifically places it within the late 1800s Romantic movement, but even here the “longing” for a “ceaseless consumption of novelty” merely flows out of a Romantic critique of “traditional” consumption, leaving us nowhere closer to its material origins. A Marxist interpretation, conversely, argues that consumerism was produced through political economic changes, and it is the result of

capitalist innovations to accumulate profit. People want things that make their lives easier and more enjoyable, less onerous and difficult. Because capitalism is founded upon the production of a working class, that is, a majority of the overall population who have been forcibly divorced from their own means of subsistence, most of society is by definition unable to produce their own goods. As such, they simply must buy and consume commodities and commodified services on the marketplace, including biological necessities, in order to reproduce their capacity to labor and thus their survival (Mulcahy 2017). Under modern capitalism, Braverman (1998, 191) argues,

The population no longer relies upon social organization in the form of family, friends, neighbors, community, elders, children, but with few exceptions must go to market and only to market, not only for food, clothing, and shelter, but also for recreation, amusement, security, for the care of the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped. In time not only the material and service needs but even the emotional patterns of life are channeled through the market.

Relying on commodified services only expands as more people are drawn into the workforce at ever-more irregular hours, making it harder to accomplish social reproductive activity without resorting to purchased help (McCallum 2020).<sup>55</sup>

The same holds true for novel consumer commodities. The production of new needs is undoubtedly bound up with advances in a society's productive forces (its technological capacity), the relations of production and superstructural institutions. Marx (1976, 274) spoke of

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<sup>55</sup> McKnight (1995) raises similar concerns about how the market has rendered the family “dysfunctional,” as in no longer having a function given the commodification of social reproductive, household labor (particularly that of “emotional labor”). Unable to understand that this sort of consumption is inseparable from advanced capitalism, he ultimately and vaguely blames families for not embracing “applied skills” and not giving their coddled children enough household chores (see Block and McKnight 2011).

a laborer's "natural wants, such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing." "On the other hand," he continues:

the number and extent of his so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development, and depend therefore to a great extent on the degree of civilization of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort in which, the class of free laborers has been formed.

What one wants and needs, in other words, is fundamentally determined by the capacity for society to provide them and the state of class struggle over how to distribute the surplus of consumable goods. If workers succeed in capturing a greater share of surplus through political action (thereby reducing the extent of their exploitation) or through undertaking more skilled and monopolizable labor, they can claim this increase a moral right, as justice. Capitalists, meanwhile, would undoubtedly argue that such an increase is an injustice, with workers getting more than what they need or deserve.<sup>56</sup> This is why Marx speaks of needs and wants – beyond natural requirements for survival – as being defined by an “historical and moral element” (ibid.

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<sup>56</sup> A 2011 broadcast on the *Fox News* network's *The O'Reilly Factor* captures how wants and needs vary throughout history and remain a key staging ground for class struggle. The host, drawing from a Heritage Foundation Report about how poor people own household appliances, asks "So how can you be so poor and have all this stuff?" Directly citing the report, O'Reilly explains that "Eighty-two percent [of the 43 million] have a microwave...Seventy-eight percent have air conditioning. More than one television, 65 percent. Cable or satellite TV, 64 percent – thank God...Cell phones, 55 percent. Personal computer, 39 percent." The report continues: "There really isn't any connection between the government's identification of poor people and the actual living standards and the typical American. When an American hears the word 'poverty,' he's thinking about somebody that doesn't have enough food to eat, someone that's possibly homeless. It's not true" (quoted in Shere 2011). The message here, by this mouthpiece of capital, is that even the poorest fraction of working class is being paid more than enough, more than they really need. In 1964, within the postwar era of supposed universal affluence, one *Newsweek* article was, likewise, surprised by the existence of poverty and doubted its reality. Writing of economically depressed Harlan County: "88 percent of the families have TV sets, 42 percent have telephones, and 59% own a car." The article also found "a Puerto Rican family living on relief" in New York City who were still able to afford "a stereo phonograph set" (quoted in Ehrenreich 2020, 36). "The charge of extravagance is made to sustain the claim that wages ought not to be any higher," Ira Steward, labor leader and proponent of the US eight-hour movement, argued in the 1870s. When "a more expensive style of living...is denounced as 'extravagant,' it is another way of saying that the laborer must accept less wages" (quoted in Glickman 1997, 81). Charges of extravagance are supported by reference to what previously were – in some cases as far back as the 1950s – considered luxury items. What these reports neglect, of course, is that luxury items regularly become absolute necessities in day-to-day life depending on, as Marx put it, the "level of civilization," as well as the massive class struggles that earned the working class the capacity to afford the products of their labor.

275). That everyone must purchase commodities for needs or wants, whether symbolic or austere utilitarian, brings us to more material – less idealistic or ideological – interpretations of consumer society.

Mass consumption, like wage labor, is a basic feature of capitalist social relations – you cannot have one without the other.<sup>57</sup> Because capital remains a dynamic force, perennially searching for novel means to accumulate profit, it incessantly reorganizes production, consumption, and social reproduction for its own ends. As discussed further in chapter four, a crisis of capitalist accumulation plagued the United States and most advanced industrial economies in the late 1960s and 1970s. The capitalist class' primary tactic, to put it very briefly, was to replace stable, long-term and unionized employment contracts, relations that defined postwar Fordism with unorganized workers who could not fight against the capitalist class' drive to further discipline workers into flexible, precarious labor (Harvey 1990). But this was not the only tactic.

Fordism entailed the mass production of standardized goods for societies in a secular transition from rural to urban and industrial ways of life, in which people spent their rising incomes on consumer durables like cars and refrigerators, which they were able to acquire for the first time in their families' lives...Product markets, consequently, were governed by large oligopolistic firms which benefited from steadily growing demand, often at a rate that made it difficult for production to keep up...By 1971 there were clear signs that the – in hindsight, idyllic – world of post-war Fordism was coming to an end...Throughout the West, markets for mass-produced, standardized consumer durables were showing signs of saturation. Basic needs had by and large been covered; if the washing machine was still washing, why buy a new one? (Streeck 2017, 96–97)

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<sup>57</sup> “Individual consumption provides, on the one hand, the means for the workers’ maintenance and reproduction; on the other hand, by the constant annihilation of the means of subsistence, it provides for their continued re-appearance on the labor market” (Marx 1976, 341).

Faced with this situation, capitalist strove to produce and sell new, less durable and less standardized commodities. Jameson's (1984, 56) assessment suggests that much of this de-standardization meant that "cultural" or "aesthetic" artifacts have "become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."<sup>58</sup>

By the 1980s, the flexibilization of the labor market and reorganized production permitted a much more cost-effective output of customizable commodities that could keep pace with and produce rapidly evolving fashions for a whole host of demographically enumerated consumer types. Once-standard commodities and services could be upgraded or otherwise altered, forming sub-products that appealed to ever-smaller groups of consumers. Crucially, such niche, unique commodities could fetch higher prices. This phenomenon has only accelerated with the proliferation of online retail (or "ecommerce") that enables those living in the right place and with enough cash the capability to trawl the internet for niche and/or customizable commodities. Through increased customization and changes in fashion, capital is able to push the point of market saturation nearer and neared to the horizon. This reorganization of commodity production "eventually helped capitalist economies move on from the stagnation of the 1970s" (Streeck 2017, 98–99). Consumerism has also been increased by planned obsolescence, the suburbanization of social reproduction, increased working hours, and the reduction and privatization of public goods (Lodziak 2000; Mulcahy 2017; Huber 2013). All of

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<sup>58</sup> "Postmodernism then," Harvey (2004, 63) similarly argues, "signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production."

these phenomena are directly linked to capital's need for self-valorization and continued accumulation.

The theoretical understanding of how consumerism affects society evolved with political-economic shifts. This shift is especially evident in shift from the “modernism” of the industrializing and immediate postwar era to the “postmodernism” starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Harvey 2004, 38). Writing of and during Gilded Age America, Thorstein Veblen's (1994) groundbreaking *Theory of the Leisure Class* skewered the rich for their ostentatious consumption and display of expensive commodities. Combined with evident leisure time and financial security, these actions, Veblen argued, amounted to a new form of envious status-seeking and distinction from the masses of poorly paid workers endemic to modern society.<sup>59</sup> Marxist theorists offered another criticism of consumer society. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during World War II, expressed a pessimism about human liberation amidst fascist propaganda, capitalist rationality, and more advanced technology. As with the dehumanizing rationalism of mass production, they argued, there emerged a concomitant rationalization, homogenization, and commodification of culture intended to foster mass consumption. Formulaically produced solely for profit-maximization, the products of the “culture industry” (films, music, books, art, etc.) cultivated a mass consciousness increasingly incapable of transcending such bland and banal consumerism. The “culture industry” crowded out any thought not wedded to this market logic, establishing a “circle of

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<sup>59</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) perspective is reminiscent of Veblen's critique insofar as consumption habits foster “distinction” between “classes,” yet he suggests that consumers retain some agency in their decisions (Schor 2007, 24–25).

manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows even stronger” (Horkeimer and Adorno 2002, 121).

These theories, which offer a critical and pessimistic view of consumer society, subsequently faced criticism from postmodern scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. Overcoming the “elitist” “consumers as dupes” theories ascribed to the above theorists and their traditions, postmodern commentators emphasized, the “consumer as agent” framework (see Jenkins 1992; de Certeau 2011; Fiske 2017). This perspective is captured in the concept of “consumer society” itself. Lodziak (2000) refers to this understanding as “the ideology of consumerism.” Drawing from Bauman (1992, 51), he defines this ideology as the “view that consumption is ‘firmly established as the focus, and the playground of individual freedom’ and that it provided ‘unquestionable attractions’” (Lodziak 2000, 112). The ideology of consumption suggests that desiring individuals, acting as sovereign consumers, hold the power to determine the political-economic structure of society while denying that these “consumerist” behaviors are but the rational response of a dispossessed class dependent upon purchasing commodities (rather than producing, trading, or sharing their own use-values).

This viewpoint did not emerge during Fordist mass production. “On the consumer side” during Fordism, Harvey (2004, 139) argues, “there was more than a little criticism of the blandness of the quality of life under a regime of standardized mass consumption,” products and services typified by “austere functionalist aesthetic (high modernism) in the field of rationalized design.” This era of consumption was taken as one of bland conformity, of fitting in among the (white, upper- and “middle-class”) suburbs. Rather, the ideology of consumption could only emerge later as commodities became ever-more customized and even embedded within

countercultural and anti-consumerist movements (Heath and Potter 2004; D. Mitchell 2000).

Rooted in academia's "cultural turn" and ascending postmodernism throughout the 1980s and

1990s, "today's ideology of consumerism," Lodziak (2000, 114) argues,

celebrates the realm of consumption's ability to cater for more or less anything any and every individual might want. This is not only evident in the emphasis on consumption as a vehicle for pleasure, but also in another emphasis – consumption as an arena of meaning, an arena in which anything goes.

The ascription of inherent and significant *meaning* to consumption is crucial here. Such a connection not only enables one to envision consumption as primarily "cultural" rather than economic or biological. It also considers consumption, the sphere of exchange, as a utopian place of play and self-creation. Abercrombie (1994, 51) attests that "producers try to commodify meaning, that is, try to make images and symbols into things which can be sold or bought. Consumers, on the other hand, try to give their own and new meanings to the commodities and services they buy." In this framing, the symbolic value of commodities may, to some degree, be directed through advertisements or its materiality, but ultimately the essence of the commodity is a personal and largely inventive affair (P. Jackson 1999).

### **Towards a marxist theory of the "agentive consumer"**

"Men make their own history," Marx (1978c, 595) wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing." Although often interpreted this way, Marx was not primarily concerned with theorizing structure versus agency. Rather, he sought to show how, under capitalism, people's "agentive" capacity remains but is narrowly limited by abstract market forces. Capitalist subjects, as "bearers of economic relations," Roberts (2017, 95–96) argues, do not "suffer an impairment

of their *agency*...they suffer an impairment of their *freedom*. Commodity producers in a commercial society are *dominated* agents, not nonagents.” Following along with the more celebratory theorizations of consumer agency noted just above, I suggest that the sphere of exchange, its social relations as well as its literal geography, does offer a higher level of market agency *relative to* what the laboring class endures while on the job and at work.

This is so because the workplace offers the most acute instance of class confrontation, where the interests of workers (more pay, less work) are diametrically opposed to that of capital (pay less, work more). Even if the broader forces remain abstract, people experience workplace domination as a series personal and personally-delivered infringements and indignities (McCallum 2020, 8). “In purchasing command over labor, employers purchase command over people” (E. Anderson 2017, 57). This command is startlingly extensive. Obviously, one’s employer is ultimately only accountable to profit margins, and according to the intensity of work and workers’ exploitation. Workers have little right to complain about their treatment. An entire propaganda apparatus incessantly sows misinformation to dissuade workers from exercising their right to unionize. If this fails, employers find excuses to fire lead organizers. Even with union protection, the boss dictates what employees say and how they say it, how they comport themselves, where and how fast they go, and what they look like, including dress codes, haircuts, hygiene, piercings, tattoos, and even physical fitness. The boss can also force employees to undergo medical testing, fire workers for using legal drugs even when off-the-clock, or dictate their speech – especially political and union-related speech – when off the premises (E. Anderson 2017). The most pervasive mode of control that employers have over workers’ lives is also the most taken-for-granted: their control over your time. “Whoever controls labor in any society also controls time,” McCallum (2020, 8) argues. “When we sleep, eat, raise children,

spend time with our friends, bask in the sunshine, or take vacations is dictated by those who control our work.” Lifestyles do not flourish under such conditions.

Next to the regimented workplace of interpersonal domination, the agentic nature of consumption – however limited – is obvious.<sup>60</sup> “Compared to more traditional modes of social integration,” Streeck (2017, 102) argues,

association by consumer choices appears more voluntary, resulting in social bonds and identities that are less restrictive – indeed entirely free of obligations...In fact the only other actors that one encounters operating in a social structure of advanced consumption are firms whose marketing departments specialize in guessing your every want and striving to satisfy them, regardless of how idiosyncratic they may be. Such firms never argue with customers; they listen and comply, and indeed make every effort to know what their customers desire long before they themselves know.

Though the working class is alienated from the commodities they produce and/or sell, they are reunited with these commodities as consumers, becoming owners, reproducing those commodities while reproducing their nonworking selves. Through this self-directed, non-exploited form of consumption “work,” individuals may craft some part of their individual identities. “Within the ideology of consumerism we are free to choose who we want to be and our self-creation is achieved, in the main, by what we consume,” Lodziak concludes. It is of course true that the vast majority of society *must purchase* these symbolic wants as commodities because, as Debord (1983, 42) memorably put it, “the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life.” The worker cannot, in other words, readily “satisfy his intellectual and social requirements” outside of individual consumption (Marx 1976, 341). One can thus easily imagine the emplacement of sentimental or symbolic value upon commodities, particularly as a

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<sup>60</sup> “There is little question,” Schor (2007, 24) notes briefly, “that consuming is a, if not ‘the,’ realm of agency in contemporary society.”

means of social distinction or inclusion (Bourdieu 1986; Veblen 1994).<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the sphere of exchange certainly provides a much easier, safer, and more enjoyable means by which to express individuality and, relatedly, support political and moral causes.

It is for this reason that Marx (1976, 279) describes the marketplace, which has traditionally been in public space, as a “noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone.” And the popularity of this sphere is especially important for Marx because of what it is and what it conveys about capitalist society. He continues:

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labor power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labor power, are determined by only their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each.

There is a common experience here shared by all workers and all capitalists, no matter where or what sort of work or investing they do. Further, the sphere of exchange suspends the objective class position and interests among workers and capitalists, dissolving relations of exploitation

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<sup>61</sup> Miller, in his critique of much leftist work on consumerism, makes a similar case for understanding the meaning of certain commodities: “What worries me is that this bogey of a deluded, superficial person who has become the mere mannequin to commodity culture is always someone other than ourselves. It is the common people, the vulgar herd, the mass consumer, a direct descendant of the older ‘mass culture critique’ of the 1960s. It is never the rounded person who is encountered within an ethnographic engagement. If, however, we approach our own social relations and practice with the same level of respect, the same empathy and the same patience that a good ethnographer attempts to bring to the apparent authenticity of others, then we see something quite different – a world where a pair of Nike trainers or Gap jeans might be extraordinarily eloquent about the care a mother has for her child, or the aspirations of an asthmatic child to take part in sports” (Miller 2001, 229).

and domination into mere variations in their respective “means of subsistence.”<sup>62</sup> To quote Marx (1973, 251) again at length:

In the so-called retail trade, in the daily traffic of bourgeois life as it proceeds directly between producers and consumers, in petty commerce, where the aim on one side is to exchange the commodity for money and on the other to exchange money for commodity, for the satisfaction of individual needs – in this moment, which proceeds on the surface of the bourgeois world, there and there alone does the motion of exchange values, their circulation, proceeds in its pure form. A worker who buys a loaf of bread and a millionaire who does the same appear in this act only as simply buyers, just as, in respect to them, the grocer appears only as seller. All other aspects are here extinguished.

Class relations thus are experienced more as relations of stratified wealth in the sphere of exchange, whether or not people have the requisite wealth (either through wages or capital accumulation) to purchase some commodities and use those commodities to reproduce themselves in particular ways. As such, this surface appearance neglects the social relations – the exploitation and oppression, that latent antithesis between labor and capital – that defines the production of, in this case, a loaf of bread.

As the practical economic relations production and reproduction form the “base” and “foundation” of human consciousness (Engels 1963; Marx 1970), the sphere of exchange, that holder of all goods and common space of consumer relations, exerts a pressure on consciousness only outdone by that of production and wage labor itself.<sup>63</sup> Despite the *legal* equality within the

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<sup>62</sup> Unlike the hidden abode of production, then, economic force in the sphere of exchange can be less intense. “No one seizes hold of another’s property by force. Each divests himself of his property voluntarily,” Marx explains. “Since they [commodity owners] only exist for one another in exchange in this way, as equally worthy persons, possessors of equivalent things” they become equals who are “at the same time indifferent to one another” outside this commercial exchange (Marx 1973, 242–43).

<sup>63</sup> Relations of exchange and production, of course, interact. Practical economic experiences, and the consciousness therefrom, seeps from one to the other. Much of the ideological obfuscation of exploitation in the hidden abode of production originates within the sphere of exchange, namely the employment contract. Legally, workers can quit and find employment elsewhere. The workers may then throw themselves back into the labor market. “In reality,” Marx (1976, 723–24) reflects, “the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage,” he continues, “is at once mediated through, and *concealed by*, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labor” (my

sphere of exchange, just how much market agency consumers enjoy depends on their level of wealth. The entire working class experiences forms of “secondary exploitation” wherein “it is set upon by the other portions of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker, etc.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 479). Secondary exploitation “runs parallel to the primary exploitation taking place in the production process itself” (Marx 1981, 745). When it comes to socially reproductive consumption, there are widely different experiences between those straddling the line of economic ruin versus those wealthy enough to securely partake in stylized consumption. In other words, middle stratum workers have much more power in the sphere of exchange than those struggling to survive. This wage-based stratification facilitates significantly different experiences of daily social reproduction. The visceral experience of facing starvation and eviction rather than that of homeownership structures the level of agency in the marketplace.

### **Lifestyles of the agentic consumer**

These different experiences encourage middle stratum workers to envision the sphere of exchange and social reproduction positively, and to find within it personal political and moral expression outside production. This stratum of workers forms the basis of simplicity enthusiasts like that of tiny houses. Even as the terminology varies on how to conceptualize this segment of laborers, mine is not a novel claim. “The new conception of lifestyle,” Featherstone (1991, 84) argues,

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emphasis). Because of this legal capacity, the gloss of free and equal exchange follows the working class throughout its employment. Even while at work, “the wage-form extinguishes every trace of division of the working day into necessary labor and surplus labor, into paid labor and unpaid labor. All labor appears as paid labor... All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis this form of appearance” (Marx 1976, 680).

can best be understood in relation to the habits of the new petite bourgeoisie, who, as an expanding class fraction centrally concerned with the production and dissemination of consumer culture imagery and information, is concerned to expand and legitimate its own particular dispositions and lifestyle.

The “new petite bourgeoisie” is exceptionally attracted “to the most naive aristocratic qualities (style, distinction, refinement) in pursuit of expressive and liberated lifestyles” (ibid., 90). This liberating lifestyle produces a “sense of complicity with every form of symbolic defiance, provisionally at least, on the (lower) boundaries of legitimate culture,” Bourdieu (1986, 361) attests. Rather than purely symbolic consumption, the consumerism of “petite bourgeois” is, in their eyes, inseparable from ethical concerns. “Seeking its occupational and personal salvation in the imposition of new doctrines of ethical salvation,” Bourdieu (ibid., 367) explains, “the new petite bourgeois is predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption.”

Such vanguardism derives from the fact that the middle stratum has some wealth and time to stylize their commodity consumption and then use those commodities in particular ways. Still dominated by abstract market forces, much of this stylization revolves around socioeconomic security.

The new petit bourgeois is a pretender, aspiring to more than he is, who adopts an investment orientation to life; he possesses little economic or cultural capital and therefore must acquire it. The new petit bourgeois therefore adopts a learning mode to life; he is consciously educating himself in the field of taste, style, lifestyle. (Featherstone 1991, 90)

The “learning mode to life” originates in the constant anxiety of “middle class” existence. Ehrenreich (2020, 290) puts it this way:

The rich can surrender to hedonism because they have no reason to remain tense and alert. But the middle class cannot afford to let down its guard; it maintains in

its position only through continual exertion – through allegiance to the “traditional values” of hard work and self-denial.

Grasping on to new and promising lifestyles, of seeking out self-help advice and life coaches, becomes part of this “continual exertion.”

Though relative wealth determines whether one has the capacity to stylize and ethically calibrate their consumption practices, modern capitalism “converts all potentially dangerous conflicts, all questioning of its basic values, into market issues” (P. Marcuse 1988, 253). Everything from environmental degradation to sweatshop labor can be addressed via better and more ethical consumer choices. Crafting an identity or lifestyle around what are political or moral issues simply demands altered personal consumption and relating to those commodities in enduring and specialized ways. The political *becomes* personal. While large-scale, well-organized consumer boycotts have the collective capacity to cause real political change for others (Glickman 1997), lifestyle movement enthusiasts prefer a suite of individual consumer purchases for themselves (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012; Heath and Potter 2004). Again, this is less an issue of self-centered conspicuous non-consumption than the basic social relations of capitalist society, relations that delimit what sort of agency individuals may readily practice without fear of retribution. As Dean (2012, 91) puts it, “the sovereignty that liberalism (and, later, neoliberalism) hollows out is the sovereignty of the people – not the people as individuals, who are included as agents in civil society who buy, sell, and contract, but the people as a *collective* body with the capacity” to overturn their domination.

### **Neoliberal self-help and compensatory ideology of simplicity movements**

“If the New Deal was the revolution,” Cowie (2012, 226) argues of the 1970s and 1980s neoliberal project, “this was the counter-revolution.” Rather than some neutral application of economic thought, the neoliberalism was – and remains – a project of the reorganized and emboldened capitalist class (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism entails the reinstatement of classical liberal ideals, or calling for limited state intervention so as to ensure the free circulation of capital in its various forms. In many ways, neoliberals used state power to turn back the clock on class relations to that of the pre-New Deal “Gilded Age,” restoring an era of monopoly capital, extreme inequality, and an acutely dispossessed and disempowered working class. Yet neoliberals also went beyond such calls, recognizing the market less as a godlike force needlessly fettered by state involvement than as a series of social relations that must be upheld through the state’s *re-regulation* of the economy in favor of the capitalist class (Peck and Tickell 2002).

These neoliberal demands were no easy sell. In essence such appeals were, as one 1974 *Business Week* editorial put it, “the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more” (quoted in Cowie 2012, 224). By fall 1979, Paul A. Volcker, the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, bluntly stated that to stem inflation “the standard of living of the average American has to decline. I don't think you can escape that” (quoted in Rattner 1979). Though clearly antithetical to working class interests, the “New Right” – embodied in the Reagan Administration – capitalized upon working class insecurity to stoke ethnic and religious resentment among a sizable minority of the “white working class” (Kotsko 2018, 103). Cloaked by “cultural” issues like abortion and school busing, along with a flatfooted, fractured, and increasingly class-blind left unable to maintain a viable alternative (Wood 1999; Reed 2001; Dean 2012), the capitalist class was able to enlist enough support among the working class to push through its neoliberal

reforms (Cowie 2012, 227). Apart from ideological obfuscation, capital itself could discipline labor, reduce wages, and cut the rug from under unions by relocating production. The embedded landscapes of working-class social reproduction (home, family and friends, schools, citizenship, etc.) tipped the scales in favor of increasingly mobile capital. Whereas advances in logistics and telecommunication enabled manufacturers to find more exploitable, nonunion laborers elsewhere, starting with the US “Sun Belt” and then formerly colonized countries abroad (Shermer 2013), workers had less mobility (Peck 1996, 237). Better paying manufacturing jobs left and were replaced by service work, jobs that were generally de-skilled, low-paying, and increasingly difficult to unionize (Mann 2013, 156; Arnold and Bongiovi 2012).

Neoliberal ideology and policy, calling for a state to reregulate economic relations so as to redistribute wealth upward, cut or privatized public services and welfare provisions for the poor. From the Carter administration onwards until today, Democrats and Republicans alike have instituted the reduction in welfare spending amid the decline in “private welfare,” or the benefits provided to workers by employers (M. B. Katz 1996; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). This neoliberal regime of accumulation, Fraser (2016, 104) contends, simultaneously demands that women enter the workforce to supplement their household’s insufficient wages while “externalizing” reproductive labor “onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it” because, now, everyone works all the time. This entails, Braedly (2006, 216) argues, a “reconstitution of the relationship between the state and its subjects,” a process of “individualization and familiarization of social reproduction” wherein “the responsibility to ensure well-being through the life course is placed in the private sphere of home and family and is excised from the sphere of state responsibilities.” The hoisting of social reproduction onto an increasingly impoverished working class is not, though, simply reflective of an oblivious

neoliberal state. On the contrary, the reduction of welfare spending is meant to make the working class even more dependent upon capital and, therefore, on individual employers. Under neoliberalism and amid stagnant wages, indebtedness, and austere state support, the working class is less able to turn down or challenge (through unionization, for instance) low-paying or abusive employers. Ultimately, neoliberal welfare regimes function to condition the working class to consent to its new, degraded position within society (Peck 2001). The working class is compelled to reproduce the political-economic austerity of the neoliberalism into their personal behavior, work, and consumption.

In its bourgeois framework, neoliberal subjecthood and austerity is liberating; it adorns the impoverishing, atomizing, and alienating reality with a patina of fairness and potential.<sup>64</sup> Neoliberalism as desperate isolation, terrible jobs, and the inability to buy necessities or wants would claim few converts. For this reason, Leary (2018, 1, 15) argues that “any plausible critique of neoliberalism...must also take seriously what it purports to offer: what ‘meanings, life stories...and affects’ neoliberalism makes possible for us, even if they are hollow gifts.” Indeed, he continues, “in focusing on the language of capitalism, we must grapple with the sense of possibility this language promises.” McBride and Mitrea (2017, 102) expand, noting how this a “neoliberal common sense” causes individuals to “retreat inward,” abandon social (and especially political) relations and this isolation ultimately places greater pressure on individuals

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<sup>64</sup> “The advantage of this sense of self in a world characterized by apocalyptic anxieties and deep inequality” Leary (2018, 17) argues, “is some sense of control over the future and some sense of justice in the present.” A renewed sense of fairness and potential is especially crucial following the government’s obviously skewed response to 2008 crisis wherein financial debts were essentially nationalized while homeowners were left to fend for themselves (Davies 2016; Jilani 2017).

“to be resilient, ‘lower their expectations,’ and survive rather than strive to change austere trajectories” (see Silva 2015; S. S. Smith 2007).

Turning towards self-help is a key psychological and material mechanism by which people personally facilitate their own austerity. Self-help is not at all a new form of literature.<sup>65</sup> We have already confronted Benjamin Franklin’s call for personal austerity, and the self-help guides of Ed Bok and the *Ladies Home Journal*. Bok’s proposals were themselves echoes of the broader movement of bourgeois utopianism and transcendentalism in the mid-1800s, endeavors to reform and uplift the working class without economic or political struggle, i.e. “self-help” (Morris 1981). Just as self-help originally matured in response to the social, geographical, and economic changes – urbanization, class conflict, and economic self-interest – of the nascent industrial revolution, its latest phase corresponds with the 1970s pivot toward neoliberal policy and its degradation of working class life and intensification of political-economic inequality.

Since then, the genre has become much more varied and widespread. Between 1972 and 2000, the number of self-help books more than doubled (Whelan 2004) and, from 2013 to 2019, self-help book sales nearly doubled again (Graham 2020). In the 2000s, the self-help genre evolved beyond book form, constituting a “self-help industry” of “seminars, audio and video products, and personal coaching, [that] is said to constitute a \$2.48-billion-a-year industry” (McGee 2005, 11). “The tremendous growth in self-help publishing parallels an overall trend of stagnant wages and destabilized employment opportunities for American workers,” McGee (2005, 12) explains.

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<sup>65</sup> “It is worth recalling that these kinds of books are among the oldest body of literature in existence: the advice manual or written regimen whose origins can be traced back through medieval texts on *regimen sanitatis* to Pythagoras’s dire written warnings on the dangers of consuming beans” (S. D. Brown 1999, 22).

A sense of personal security is anomalous, while anxiety is the norm. To manage this anxiety individuals have been advised not only to work longer and harder but also to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and continuously improve themselves. The less predictable and controllable the life course has become, the more individuals have to chart their own courses, to ‘master’ their destinies, and to make themselves over.

Taking place over the past 50 years, the resurgences in self-help literature and ideology is an individualized response to disempowerment of the working class. The tiny house movement, with its calls to consume less, streamline social reproduction, and save more to weather the economic downturns, is clearly part of this self-help phenomenon.

Just as self-help is a stop-gap reaction to intensified isolation, a lack of economic security, and the retrenchment of state support, neoliberal common sense has recast coerced poverty into willful expressions of countercultural trendsetting. We can see what I term a “compensatory ideology” in action across production and social reproduction (see E. Harris 2019).<sup>66</sup> As graduates face poor job prospects relative to their college education, many have relied upon non-professional work to make a living. Such workers invest their labor with “symbolic and creative energies” as a means to compensate for the lack of remunerative employment corresponding to their skills or education (G. Morgan and Nelligan 2018, 12). Blue-collar work has become re-signified as craft production. Upscale bartenders have become “mixologists,” beer brewing is now a practice in local and sustainable craft production, butchers expertly help discerning customers source ethical and sustainable meat (Ocejo 2018, 8). The same process holds true for housing. Tiny houses in rural areas and “micro-apartments” in the

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<sup>66</sup> With “compensatory ideology” I am drawing from the work of geographer Ella Harris (2019) who refers to this same phenomenon as “compensatory cultures.” Given that the concept of “culture” is near-undefinable, too often all-encompassing, encourages idealist and superorganic thinking, and subsequently lacks sufficient analytical edge (R. Williams 1985; D. Mitchell 1995; Eagleton 2000), I prefer to put a more discerning interpretation of the phenomenon through employing Marx and Engels’ (1970) negative concept of ideology.

city provide hip, flexible, green, and otherwise ethical abodes for those yearning for cheap housing and the chance joining a likeminded “community.” Full-time living in RVs, modular housing, and converted vans and old school buses are now the centerpieces of economically savvy yet still adventuresome lifestyles. Through rebranding, having one’s house foreclosed upon and being compelled to choose between a micro-apartment and a tiny house can be experienced as a lateral move because this poverty has been massaged as a reflection of virtuous simplicity (E. Harris 2019; E. Harris and Nowicki 2020). The notion of lifestyle and simplicity movements ease this ideological rationalization of material deprivation.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than having some psychological or cultural impetus, consumption or consumerism is the predictable result of a maturing capitalist economy. Middle stratum workers are attracted to simplicity movements because their relative wealth renders the sphere of exchange a place of economic agency, at least when compared to workplace subservience. Stylizing their method of consumption, purchasing some commodities and not others, offers the easiest means by which the middle stratum can claw back some sense of agency amid overbearing domination and financial insecurity.

In the empirical chapters that follow, I illustrate how the tiny house movement seeks to redress the lack of control. No matter its voluntary, fun, and creative posture, the tiny house lifestyle movement – itself largely a product of the 2008 housing and financial crisis – is often more reactive than proactive, more thrift than simplicity. Still, because it encompasses a collection of other lifestyles trends – minimalism, savvy thrift, do-it-yourself, downshifting, and green living – the balance of thrift versus simplicity varies for tiny house enthusiasts depending

on their own personal emphasis. At the same time, coerced thrift is recurrently represented as voluntary poverty, providing a more palatable interpretation of one's own market vulnerability. Consumer agency, the stuff of simplicity movements, repeatedly compensates for the working classes' lack of freedom.

## CHAPTER 4 – THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE AND SPIRITUALIZED SIMPLICITY

Several narratives comprise the amorphous national mythology of the “American Dream”: the colonizing quest for religious purity; the promise of republican government; the hope of ever-increasing prosperity and upward mobility; and the individualized independence afforded through homeownership (Cullen 2004). Outside of the early Puritan enterprise, these ideals converge as a dream that the realities of economic dependence can be overcome, and class position transcended, through a work ethic and basic civic participation. In this spirit, a society riven by internal conflict can become a nation united around a certain set of moderating values encapsulated within the American Dream. Though multifaceted, no version of the American Dream occupies national consciousness more completely – and has been realized by so many – than the ideal of single-family, detached homeownership. In 2020, 67 percent of Americans owned their homes (“Quarterly Residential Vacancies and Homeownership, 3rd” 2020) while over half the population described their neighborhood as “suburban” (Kolko 2018).<sup>67</sup> Suburbanization reconfigured the Jeffersonian ideal of independent homesteaders, combining it with “widely shared assumptions about the beneficent influence of nature, small communities, and home ownership,” nurturing an individualistic respect for private property heralded as the key features of the national character (Cullen 2004, 144).

If the idea of the American Dream has been central to how many people conceptualize their desire for a nice house, a certain type of job, and, in the postwar era, a generally suburban and financially comfortable way of life, tiny house enthusiasts argue instead that it is, at least at this current political-economic conjuncture, really an American Nightmare. The apparent power

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<sup>67</sup> Sixty-seven percent is slightly down from its 2004 peak at 69 percent (“Quarterly Residential Vacancies and Homeownership, 3rd” 2020).

and security grasped by suburban homeowners during the postwar era (Huber 2013; R. A. Walker 1981) has, with the onset of neoliberal policy and flexible labor processes, ironically become an albatross. What could be called a narrative of the American Nightmare (sometimes actually so-called) structures the arguments of much of the tiny house movement's writing – in books, blogs, and articles – the discourse of reality shows, documentaries, and my own interviews with dwellers and enthusiasts.

Although tiny house partisans build or purchase tiny houses for a panoply of divergent reasons, they all nevertheless view this lifestyle choice as countercultural criticism of and call to rethink or abandon the suburban American Dream. The suburban American Dream, enthusiasts argue, has corralled people – often including themselves – into a groove of myopic personal overconsumption. While reproducing the Dream's call for independent, single-family homeownership set in suburban or rural landscapes, enthusiasts wish to shrink the scale of their housing and use this downscaled American Dream to facilitate economic security, to save money, reduce debt, work less, and play more.

These goals of economic thrift, though, regularly take the form of an elitist and moralizing criticism of “mainstream society's” ignorant and sinful predilection for overly-sized houses and overconsumption. Though scholars avoid it for fear of elitism (Schor 2007), tiny house enthusiasts subscribe to the “consumer-as-dupe” theory of consumption. Those uninterested in simple living are either ignorant or too weak-willed to uncover the path of spiritual contentedness. Nothing less than a sober and spiritualized awakening, variously called simplicity, simple living, or minimalism, is capable of counteracting the much-revered American Dream and its concomitant culture of consumption. Through reducing one's interaction with the

sphere of exchange and by practicing simplified social reproduction, enthusiasts showcase their virtues of shrewd self-control. This reduction in household objects and commodities mirrors the growth of minimalism and mindfulness. Tiny houses, further, are taken as the ideal vector through which to achieve and showcase the virtues of simple living because they architecturally enforce this spiritual conversion and its culling of physical commodities. A catechism of self-help literature supports aspiring tiny house dwellers as they reckon with, and struggle to personally overcome, their overconsuming and materialistic lifestyle. Just as their clarification comes from the individual effort of critical self-reflection, those stuck in the “American Nightmare” of debt-causing big houses/lots of stuff, and the corresponding “rat race” of full-time employment, ultimately only have themselves to blame. Even if America’s “consumer culture” first led someone astray, it is their personal responsibility to adopt minimalist living.

### **Commodity fetishism, and religion**

According to enthusiasts, then, people have not ascended to this utopian space of more life and less work because they remain beholden to their personal overconsumption. Mainstream consumer culture, because of its supposed idolization of consumer commodities – one propelled by wounded pride and grasping envy – hasten the individual vices of gluttony and greed. The problems of debt, overwork, and a stressful and unfulfilling life originate in an immoral attachment to physical commodities. To rectify this weakness, one must decrease such attachments to physical commodities. In either case, physical commodities, for the tiny house movement and minimalists in general, are powerful to the degree that they warp human behavior. Tiny house dweller Amy Henion (2014), speaking at a Northwestern University TedX talk, explains simplicity to the audience:

We like our stuff, and we like to buy more of it. But the truth is, *the things we own have power over us. They have the power to keep us rooted in one place. And they have the power to drown out our need for human interaction.* But once you detach yourself from the things you own, you find that you're free from the restrictions they place on you. (my emphasis)

Tiny house enthusiast and popular minimalist book author and blogger Josh Becker (2013a, 19)

likewise expresses the power of physical objects and commodities.

Owning a smaller house is mentally freeing. As is the case with all of our possessions, *the more we own, the more they own us.* And the more stuff we own, the more mental energy is held hostage by them. The same is absolutely true with our largest, most valuable asset. Buy small and free your mind. That's one of the benefits of minimalism. (my emphasis)

Nina Nelson and Allison Vesterfelt, both writing in *Tiny House Magazine*, offer telling examples on this line of thinking. "I began reading books by the Minimalists and Courtney Carver," Nelson (2015, 35) begins. "They, too, were forced to evaluate the various ways *the stuff they owned actually began to own them*" (my emphasis). "These items, as cheap as I may have obtained them," she continues, "had already stolen enough of my time and energy – time and energy I was so desperate to get back." So, she started selling off her accumulated commodities, but she stresses that "minimalism is not about less for the sake of less." Rather, it is "clarity of thought, clarity of purpose, clarity of surroundings" (ibid.). Allison Vesterfelt (2013), author of *Packing Light: Thoughts of Living Life with Less*, similarly lauds the life-improving qualities of simple living in her article, "10 Things I Gained When I Gave Up All My Stuff." Socialized in mainstream consumer culture, she used to think that "being responsible" meant having nice things (a couch from Pottery Barn), but after undertaking an "experiment" to "figure out how much stuff is too much stuff, how much is too little, and where a healthy balance lies," Vesterfelt (2013, 34) discovered "how scared I was when my life was centered around stuff. I would actually have recurring nightmares about my stuff...I can hardly believe I carried such a sense of

security around physical possessions.” In purging household objects, she discovered that “my stuff does not define me.” Upon this revelation, she gained “courage, a better understanding of myself (my real self), less anxiety, more freedom, and greater discipline.” She is, now, able to enjoy “once in a lifetime experiences” through “travel[ing] all the time now” (ibid., 35).

For the more hardcore minimalists in the tiny house movement, the power of commodities exists not in the sense that a table, for instance, could dance about on its own four legs, or that it can bruise a shin, but in the slightly mystical sense that physical commodities transcend their immediate sensuality. Chris Lehman (2016, 115) of *The Baffler* observes how minimalists and “declutterers”

are no less stuff fetishists than the vulgar hoarding horde. Indeed, by rigorously editing and customizing all the stuff that makes up their material lives, ardent declutterers are imbuing objects with far more elemental power than the careless hoarder who piles things up in precarious, ceiling-challenging towers.

Commodities, in this minimalist understanding, entice human beings to form unnatural relationships with them, and then these maleficent objects – and especially larger houses – surreptitiously inspire a materialistic mindset and suite of corresponding vices. By clearing away commodities, minimalists can cut costs and refocus on their spiritual selves.

This phenomenon is reminiscent of the Marxist concepts of “fetishism” and “alienation,” which describe the transfer of social power from people to commodities within a capitalist political economy dedicated to the blind pursuit of profit rather than needs fulfilment or democratic oversight. “The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence,” Marx (1978b, 72) argues, “but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him; it means that the life which he has

conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.” Thus alienation refers to human beings’ lack of power vis-à-vis the objective and abstract capitalist political economy. The flipside of this human alienation is that inanimate objects – in this case commodities – become impregnated with social power, or “fetishized.” Unlike religious fetishism, these commodities do in fact hold a real form of social power: that of value, or the portion of transfigured human labor embodied within them and, crucially, represented by money (G. A. Cohen 2000, 115). It is within the marketplace that commodities themselves become social in the sense that they mediate (and express) the relations between human beings (Marx 1976, 166).

In such a system of alienated production, social relations and individual choices are primarily determined through commodity exchange for the sake of the capitalist class’s accumulation. People, to put it simply, do the bidding of commodities and, by extension, “the market.” “The value character of the products of labor becomes firmly established only when they act as magnitudes of value,” Marx (1976, 167) writes. “These magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers. Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.” Given the level of supply and demand (itself influenced by an anarchic ensemble of social pressures), a commodity’s price could rise and fall; it might become highly valuable or, just as suddenly, completely worthless (a thing without saleable use-value is no longer a commodity at all). This lack of control is most apparent when that commodity is one’s capacity to labor. As every wage laborer knows, to survive under capitalism you need a job, and one that pays enough so you can purchase what you need to keep making it to work each day; you work to live, and so you live to work. The working class is not

only dependent on capitalist patronage, but capitalists themselves pay respect to the dictates of “the market” before hiring, which then echoes throughout the labor process.

Commodity fetishism, then, names how the capitalist market, operating under the law of value, abstractly dominates the relatively disempowered economic actors, no matter their objective class position. The only illusory component of commodity fetishism is that the commodity’s value (and its expressed form, exchange-value) appears as “the socio-natural properties of these things” rather than the result of how labor is socially organized under capitalist production (Marx 1976, 165).<sup>68</sup> For this reason, Roberts (2017, 85) argues that the concept of commodity fetishism is primarily about domination and it is “an epistemic problem” – a question of potential illusion – “only derivatively.” Yet there is ample evidence that this abstract domination does pose an epistemic problem, does encourage ideological, that is, incomplete, ideas.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin articulated such ideology in terms of religion rather than commodity fetishism, despite the obvious and intentional religious connotations of “fetish.” The “human self-alienation” that is commodity fetishism, where dead labor embodied in commodities dominates the living, produces a “*reversed world-consciousness*” reflecting “*a reversed world...* Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form,” Marx (1978a, 53–54) argues. ““Fear created the gods,”” Lenin (1963, 244) similarly contends. “Fear of the blind force of capital – blind because it cannot be foreseen by the masses of people – a force which at every step in life threatens to inflict, and does inflict, the

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<sup>68</sup> The “market,” meanwhile, appears itself to be beyond the control of society at all. It is either cast as something natural and animalistic (e.g. a bear vs. bull market) or as some superhuman entity that can only be “fettered” by the institutions of lowly humans (Leary 2018, 134).

proletarian and small owner ‘sudden,’ ‘unexpected,’ ‘accidental’ destruction, ruin, pauperism, prostitution, and death from starvation – such is *the root* of modern religion.” The tiny house movement, as it draws upon discourses preaching thrift and simplicity, is a folk religion of anti-consumption. The manner in which consumers participate in the marketplace determines their economic fate. By cutting back consumption, by curating it carefully, by practicing mindful minimalism, consumers exude their virtue and ensure their financial stability.

Considering the connection between simplicity, or minimalism, and thrift, I suggest that the sense of serenity decluttering enthusiasts experience originates in the act of saving money that would otherwise be spent on commodities or more expensive houses. Money has social power; it fortifies individuals amid the uncaring, undemocratic, and abstract domination of the capitalist political economy. Having extra money on hand, money to be used in the case of financial emergencies and crises like that of the Great Recession, produces a relative self-assurance. It eases financial anxiety. Although junk drawers and messy rooms can certainly be frustrating, minimalists misidentify their contented self-assurance as flowing not from saving money, but rather from reducing the quantity of, and altering their relation to, psychological commodities in their possession.

### **The nightmare**

Go to college using school loans. Get a sensible job. Get a credit card or two or three. Buy a house. Get married. Have kids. Continue working your way up the ladder. Buy a new car; buy another car. Buy a bigger house. Fill house with things. Work. Shop. Work. Shop, shop. Work. Two week vacation. Work. And so on and so forth. Diverging from this now traditional way of life, in our consumerist culture, can be viewed with a certain amount of disdain. To many, living with less material indicators of success is seen as a kind of failure — you must be poor or irresponsible or maybe even a “damn hippy.” Following a predictable path, filled with stuff, is seen as the lifestyle of choice. Can you say herd mentality? (Stephens 2016, 64)

This assertion, written by well-known spokesperson Alexis Stephens, captures the overriding sentiment of tiny house advocates, their recurrent assumption that living in a smaller home constitutes a countercultural admonition to mainstream society. Stephens' argument likewise highlights the undercurrent of resentment animating tiny house advocates, their consistent disdain for the "culture" and "lifestyle" of mainstream society, itself staffed by an undifferentiated, "herd"-like mass myopically sacrificing individual freedom on the altar of flamboyant conformity. Stephens is by no means alone in this. "The mantra of the culture again comes calling, 'buy as much and as big as possible,'" explains Joshua Becker, author of four self-help books and the tiny house movement's minimalist of choice. "They believe the lie and choose to buy a large home only because that's 'what you are supposed to do,'" Becker (2013a, 18) asserts. "When you start making money...you buy nice big stuff. Nobody ever tells them not to. Nobody gives them permission to pursue smaller, rather than larger. Nobody gives them the reasons they may actually be happier if they downsize their home." Though Becker never defines who the "them" is in his assessment, it is clear he, like Stephens, places tiny house people apart from the mainstream who, without a tiny house vanguard, will not find escape from the hegemonic American culture of consumerism and big houses.

Others pivot away from the false idol of big house consumerism because they have "been there, done that" and found it wanting. Kathleen Morton is known best in the "tiny house community" for her blog, *Tiny House, Tiny Footprint*, her co-authored book, *Vanlife Diaries*, and the documentary *The Meaning of Vanlife*. "The U.S. culture encourages planning for the future with to-do lists and sticky notes. There can be pressure from the media or family and friends to save money for a large house and other big purchases. Oftentimes, it can seem like in order to be successful, you should have several expensive possessions. However, there is a large

group of people in the tiny house movement, like myself, that want to just live in the now” (Morton 2015, 61).

Self-described “rogue taxidermist” and regular contributor to *Tiny House Magazine* Rebecca Vader captures such disillusionment in her article, “Freedom: Finding the courage to reject the 9-to-5, live life on her own terms, and be free to find out what is beyond a mortgage and streets of suburbia.” “We tend to be asked regularly now about why we are making this transition,” she begins.

The conversation typically turns to the American Dream and how it looks like we have everything already. But the main reason we are taking on the unknown – the tiny life – is because of that: *the American Dream*. The amount of money we pay, and the amount of time we spend maintaining our conventional life in a normal home is extremely detrimental to our happiness...We have gone through the monthly routine of paying mortgage payments and working our butts off just to live in a place that doesn't really suit our needs. (Vader 2016, 49)

Gabriella Morrison, another regular tiny house spokesperson, explains on her website, *Tiny House Plans*, that her “personal experience with tiny housing came while living in the ‘American Dream’ home” (G. Morrison n.d.). She later expands: “Trust me, we put in our time in that hamster wheel. There was a long period in which we believed the propaganda that surrounded us and we bought into the consumerism chain. Expensive cars. Expensive house. Expensive clothes. Expensive vacations. Were we any happier? No, of course not. We were caught in a cycle and kept making the same mistakes over and over again. We just didn’t know any better” (G. Morrison 2015, 24). In these renditions of the tiny house movement’s “American Nightmare” narrative, it is less the fault of individual consumers for their overconsumption than their socialization into overconsumption. At the same time, though, failure to see through this socialization is due to people’s own lack of critical thinking.

The tension between blaming societal pressures and individual deficiencies reemerges in another subset of the American Nightmare narrative. Channeling Veblen's (1994) critique of consumerism, enthusiasts argues that mainstream society's slavish acquiescence to mass consumerism originates less in propaganda and more in unescapable envy. Patricia Foreman asks in the second edition of her book, *A Tiny Home to Call Your Own*: "Why the big houses? Why so many additions? Why the round-the-clock home-improvement shows?" Traveling around the country and speaking with tiny house dwellers, she found that "the most common, and often most emphatic, reply was, "Everyone wants to 'keep up with the Joneses,'" later adding that "houses are graphic proof of our social status" (Foreman 2019, 3). Andrew Odom, who oversees the blog *Tiny Revolution*, offers a similar assessment of what has gone awry in the American Dream. Previously, Americans were content with a "quaint home in a decent neighborhood." Over time this traditional, respectable American Dream "morphed into a desire for a corner lot in an exclusive, gated community with homeowner association approved color schemes and manicured lawns. Somewhere along the line keeping up with Joneses actually meant whooping up on the Joneses and taking their place! The longstanding Dream," he breathlessly concludes, "has become more of a nightmare for many with a constant pressure to own bigger and better stuff and to get it 'right now!'" (Odom 2013, 6).

### **McMansions and supersized stuff**

The outcome of "keeping up the Joneses," of – addict-like – "jonesing" for a bigger house and more stuff, results in a predictable foil for the tiny house movement: "McMansions." The term originated in the neoliberalizing 1980s as the fortunes of wealthy grew in absolute and relative terms (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020; Wolff 2006) and they illustrated this additional

wealth through ostentatious consumption (Schor 1999, 16).<sup>69</sup> It most generally refers to any new house deemed pretentiously “oversized,” or twice the square footage as the average single-family detached home.<sup>70</sup> Such new, big houses are not only ridiculed and occasionally outlawed because of their size, though. Rather, McMansions are labeled as such because their garishness blemishes the surrounding neighborhood’s aesthetics (Nasar 2012).

Kate Wagner, architectural critic and creator of the popular blog *McMansion Hell*, puts a finer point on it, defining a McMansion as:

A poorly designed, poorly executed, oversized house. But there’s something more to them than looming entryways, vinyl siding, and mismatched windows that causes the knee-jerk hatred they rouse in so many. In part, the wounds are historical: as the 2008 crash unfolded, McMansions became the symbols of aspirational hubris, of excess, of wanting too much and borrowing too much to get it. (K. Wagner 2017)

Wagner’s framing differs little from tiny house advocates. Indeed, in another article she argues that “We need to design homes for our lives, not our stuff” (K. Wagner 2018). Yet Wagner adds more to the story, highlighting how the use-value of a house is subverted to its exchange-value, that is, how the potential to raise its price on the market for future resale literally shapes the house (K. Wagner 2017). The extra rooms, walk-in closets, open floor plans, and vaulted ceilings may be shallow status symbols, but the status they convey originates in the fact that these features, one-by-one, bolster the house’s exchange-value.

The term itself is interesting and reveals much about the tiny house movements’ framing of its problems with society. As the McDonald’s allusion suggests, these houses are taken to be

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<sup>69</sup> From 1983 to 1989, wealth of the one percent grew from 33.8 percent to 37.4 percent while the net worth among the bottom 40 percent decreased (Wolff 2006).

<sup>70</sup> McMansions are thus at least 4,784 square-feet.

the architectural equivalent of gluttony, the supersized house to match those impetuous and tasteless people who shove their faces with supersized burgers. “As a rule,” Shafer writes, “Americans like to buy big things. Like fast food, the standard American house offers more frills for less money. This is achieved primarily by reducing quality for quantity’s sake.” McMansions are, then, for those who just want to get the most value – in terms of calories, square footage, or stuff – for the money. “The American Dream,” Stephens (2020a) argues, quoting James Truslow Adams who coined the phrase in 1931, is the liberal idea that “life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” Due to people “keeping up with the Joneses,” however, “American culture and consumerism morphed this concept into a very limiting view of success. This [version] got translated into a widespread belief that you ‘making it’ meant owning a McMansion with a perfect lawn. And throw in, at least one SUV to take you to and from Starbucks.”

Just like those who eat at fast-food and avoid local, hip cafes for chains like Starbucks, those wanting big things, Stephens echoes Shafer, prefer “quantity over quality.”<sup>71</sup> McMansions are rare and difficult to quantify, though some studies suggest they exist in nearly all of the 50 most populous cities in the US (Nasar 2012, 443). According to Wagner (2017), McMansions are subjective, though, like any other obscenity, “you know it when you see it.” No matter, as tiny house advocates see them everywhere, proceeding as a hyperbolic stand-in for any house

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<sup>71</sup> This “quantity versus quality” argument permeates the tiny house movement’s criticism of big house and stuff, forming the basis of Sarah Susanka’s (2008) *The Not So Big House* and Shay Solomon’s (2010) *Little Big House on a Small Planet*. Shafer (2009, 21) notes how “quality over quantity became my mantra,” and that is why he chose tiny houses over mobile homes, RVs, and traditional houses. Anti-consumer academic Tracy Harris (2018a, 17) stresses this distinction between “mainstream” society’s preference for quantity (read: cheap) versus the quality sought by tiny house dwellers with a superior sensibility: “Tiny house participants also reimagine home as more important than the mainstream understanding that often promote quantity over quality, thus making house and home a more significant concept than the rather vacuous and superficial understandings often presented in popular culture. Conventional new home builds are often constructed quickly with cheap materials.”

much bigger than tiny. Whereas McMansions are generally taken to be a symbol of wealth inequality, or an outgrowth of the hyper-wealthy's out-of-touch consumerism, enthusiasts prefer culturalist understandings in lieu of such economic perspectives. The McMansion discourse, as with most forms of anti-consumerism, often proceeds as a generalized criticism of apparently-boorish mainstream American culture. "Anti-consumption politics," Phillips (2015, 93) rightly points out, "almost always seems to be about somebody else's wrong, less spiritually rewarding purchases."

Countless justifications and advertisements for tiny houses begin by presenting the growth in house sizes in recent US history. "Why a book about tiny homes? Because when you really look at the US housing inventory, you see that Americans have become obsessed with BIG. From supersized to jumbo. This includes soft drinks, vehicles, and housing. Not everyone wants, needs, or can afford the American Dream JUMBO home," Foreman (2019, 1) starts her book. Jay Shafer (2009, 26) adds a bit more detail in his opening salvo of simplicity:

Our houses are the biggest in the world – four times the international average. Since 1950, the median size of a new American house has more than doubled, even though the number of people per household shrank by more than 25 percent. Not so long ago, you could expect to find just one bathroom in a house; but, by 1972, half of all new homes contained two or more bathrooms. Ten years later, three-quarters did. More bathrooms, more bedrooms and dens, bigger rooms overall, and, perhaps most notably, more stuff, have come to mean more square footage. America's houses have, quite literally, become bloated warehouses full of toys, furniture and decorations, and a lot of things we may never see or use.

The square footage of non-tiny houses is, for Shafer, an insatiable vacuum. Dwellers cannot help but feed the beast with cheap consumer goods.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Alex Lisefski (2012, 23), the dweller and designer behind website *Tiny House Plans* – where he sells blueprints for \$200-500 – echoes Shafer in this regard: "Modern human habitation in this country is built on a scale that is

Outside of known authors and spokespersons, several of the tiny house dwellers I spoke with echoed these criticisms of “JUMBO homes” and supercharged consumption. Take Olive, for instance, a middle aged white woman whose tiny house rests on her several acres in the North Carolina countryside. Before moving into her tiny house, she and her husband were building a full-sized house that they would have shared had they not separated midway through. Stuck with an unfinished house and now on her own, Olive saves money by living in her tiny house as the construction proceeds on her full-sized house. Her plan, now, is to finish the big house and rent the tiny one through Airbnb. Though she originally bought her tiny house to rent it, Olive explains how she was always critical of big houses and too much stuff. When it comes to commodities, she describes herself as a goldfish: “you grow to fill the space you have.” “And even when I have a big house,” Olive adds, “I mostly spend my time in the living room or at my computer, you know, I work from home and I then I have a bedroom – you know most of us don’t live in a whole lot of our space. We just have room after room after room of crap. Like how much do I really need all this crap?”

Jess, a white woman in her 30s who now works as a “full-time digital nomad” doing marketing work, had a related if more subdued assessment about why tiny houses were suddenly so popular. “This is a personal opinion, but the kids out of the ‘80s, right, they had everything they could possibly want and I believe that *items* no longer have as much value. Stuff. They also currently have to live a more transient life, they’re a little bit more on the go and things like that,

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many times larger (in both physical size and resource usage) than the human scale. Houses are built more to store our stuff than house our people.”

and they don't even want to be bothered with this stuff, they'd just rather not have it." Another dweller I corresponded with, Violet, was even more to the point:

B: What are some of the barriers that limit the popularity of tiny houses?

V: People are too addicted to things and technology that tiny living does not accommodate.

Stephanie, another informant, expressed similar criticisms to me over the phone from a parking lot. A white woman in her 60s nearing retirement, Stephanie and her husband were traveling across the country for dog competitions in their converted van. (Though currently living the "van life," one of their two vacation homes is tiny). We broach the issue of stuff early on:

B: Do you think overconsumption is –

S: *Huge problem!* I see, you know everybody's like "Oh you gotta get this, you gotta get that!" And then, so all these people that used to be my friends that I can barely even talk to anymore – mostly because they don't understand me and why I don't want all this stuff, you know, and I don't understand them and why they do. I can always go back and have *your lifestyle*. I always can do that. I can always buy more stuff. But my mom was a hoarder, and when she died we emptied a dumpster a day out of her home for ten days and we still weren't done. Conscious consumption. What you need versus what we've always done. We don't have to do what we've always done, we can do what's better.

Unsurprisingly, "hoarding" functions as the hyperbolic equivalent of McMansions for tiny house advocates; it is yet another problem that gives the opposing tiny house movement some ideological unity. Indeed, it is useful to think of the numerous tiny house reality TV shows – along with the concomitant popularity of Marie Kondo "decluttering" and chic minimalism documentaries – as the contemporary counterpoint to the equally numerous reality TV shows

that pityingly psychologizing those not simply with too much, like owning several vacation homes, but with too much stuff of the wrong sort (i.e. hoarding).<sup>73</sup>

### **Tiny tabernacles: minimalism and tiny house spiritualism**

Gene Tempest (2017), a *New York Times* contributor and tiny home dweller, remarked that “A tiny home is a state of mind, if not a religion.” Reserving most of her short article – “What No One Tells You About Tiny Homes” – to the difficulties of living in a small space with her husband, she unfortunately never elaborates on this claim. Focusing on the popularity of Marie Kondo and related phenomena like tiny houses, Chris Lehman (2016, 115) of *The Baffler* expands upon Tempest’s one-off. “Kondo and her adherents in the decluttering world always recur to the idea that tidying is much more than the thoughtful rearrangement of one’s living space; it is a spiritual discipline, exercised to bring about a life-shaking transformation, what Buddhists call the ‘revolution at the personality base.’” Upon first read, the comparison of little houses with something so existential as spiritualism or religion is surprising. Yet, as the introduction chapter intimated, the tiny house movement is blankly moralistic. Indeed, the reasons given for big houses and overconsumption are ultimately classic “sins of excess”: pride, envy, greed, and gluttony. One, though, can shun these carnal instincts, return to grace via the virtues of temperance and prudence. A tiny house becomes a tabernacle, a sign of virtue and the means to stay virtuous; it has the power to literally change who people are and how they behave.

This understanding, it seems, is the basis of Tempest’s claim, and it is borne out in how tiny house enthusiasts speak of their experience with “simplicity” or, more commonly,

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<sup>73</sup> It started in 2009 with A&E’s *Hoarders*, a show so popular that it was more-or-less reproduced across basic cable TV with the TLC’s *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, Lifetime’s *Hoarders: Family Secrets*, and even Animal Planet got in on the fad with *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*.

“minimalism.” Unlike the related “KonMari Method” of Marie Kondo, minimalism has no such clear lineage. It is loosely defined by a handful of self-help authors in their books, blogs, documentaries, podcasts, and paid workshops. According to Ryan Nicodemus and Josh Millburn (2014), a well-known duo who call themselves “the Minimalists” (also the title of their blog and documentary), minimalism is “a lifestyle that helps people question what things add value to their lives. By clearing the clutter from life’s path, we can all make room for the most important aspects of life: health, relationships, passion, growth, and contribution.” Fellow minimalist and tiny house enthusiast Josh Becker (2019) similarly defines it as “removing the distraction of excess” so as to “focus more on those things that matter most.”<sup>74</sup> Calling it “simplicity,” Courtney Carver, another well-known anti-consumption entrepreneur, is also tuned into the life-altering power of reducing commodities. “*Be more with less* is about simplifying your life and really living. Living with less creates time and space to discover what really matters. Through decluttering, and focusing on the best things instead of all the things” (Carver n.d.).<sup>75</sup> Shafer (2009, 63) similarly interprets “Simplicity [as] the means to understanding our world and ourselves more clearly.”

Simplicity and minimalism, then, are not simply about throwing out unwanted objects and overcoming overconsumption. As both definitions above submit, the purging of household objects is only part of the process and, when compared to what comes next, a mundanely material part. Minimalism, Becker (2019) argues, “forces intentionality upon us,” which itself

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<sup>74</sup> See Hawke’s (2017) “When a Tiny House is Something More” for an identical take.

<sup>75</sup> Carver offers a slightly different, more self-focused definition as well: “*Be more with less* means: Be more you. Give yourself all the space, time and love to remember who you are. Living with less clutter, busyness, stress and simplifying your life will help you make the room to do what you need to do. Simplifying my life gave me the space, time, and love to be more me” (Carver n.d.).

“forces improvements in almost all aspects of our lives.” Minimalism also “brings freedom from the all-consuming passion to possess,” daring one “to seek happiness” in “relationships, experiences, and soul-care” rather than “stuff.” It further releases people from their “too hurried, too rushed, and too stressed” life of paid work and unpaid social reproductive chores (dusting knick-knacks, vacuuming, etc.). Reducing commodities and focusing on what matters ensures “freedom from duplicity,” or escape from the prideful necessity of displaying wealth you do not have. Finally, minimalism is “not external, but internal.” Though minimalism is about decluttering offices and houses, this external process helps “people find freedom and unity in their heart and soul” (J. Becker 2019).

Those I interviewed gave comparable perspectives on minimalism and simplicity. Claire defined the tiny house movement as “a movement for people who have determined that less is more and they want to be able to focus on their priorities, whatever those priorities are, not whatever society says is the direction that you should go: getting big houses, having more stuff.” Sarah portrayed her minimalism as a gradual process:

As far as living the minimalist life, with every move I downsized to what I need to keep, what’s actually important to have with me. For me it’s not about having the biggest house or the fanciest furniture...I’m not the type of person that needs a lot of *stuff*. I don’t tend to hang on to keepsakes and stuff like that. I have a few cherished gifts that my grandmother has given me before she passed, but it’s not – I’m not someone who has knick-knacks laying around and stuff like that. If I don’t use something I’m not keeping it, moving it from house to house.

“Do you find that deliberate-ness liberating?” I asked Diane, another dweller. “Oh yeah, yeah. Definitely,” she responded. “After spending several years literally being overwhelmed by my crap, I find the deliberate so much easier and so much more relaxing, less stressful and everything. There’s no ‘should I or shouldn’t I?’ I don’t have room. Move on. It’s great.”

According to Claudia, a former dweller who now sells tiny houses, minimalism is particularly attractive to millennials, who “just see the value in not having a lot of stuff” and “older people who have gone through it [owning stuff] and they know. They’re like, ‘I don’t live my life with this stuff; I don’t need all this stuff that I have.’ They had it, learned it, and don’t need it anymore.” Stephanie likewise explains: “When I hit 58-59, all of a sudden it was like ‘Oh I get it. I don’t need this crap, and my kids don’t want it.’ They made it very clear that my life of clutter was not anything they’d want. You gotta bite the bullet. Otherwise you’re paying a mortgage to store your crap that nobody wants.”

Chad, a white man in his late 20s who has lived both in a DIY tiny house on wheels (THOW) and a “skoolie,” was one of the more earnest about how fewer commodities improved his life. “Why is simplifying and getting rid of stuff is so important?” I asked.

I was really a more stressed out person...I think that once you start getting into that materialistic mindset. It’s contagious too. I went to a small private school. Generally speaking, everyone comes from nice money and good families and all that. I grew up with, you know, a great childhood and everything like that here, so it [minimalism] was easy to come to...So, I think that just in today’s world where everything’s about the newest iPhone, the freshest Yeezies, like, I didn’t want to – I realized that I was slowly subscribing to that and I just wanted to slow things down a little bit...So I think it was a cool way of not necessarily suppressing myself away from all that [material consumption], but taking an alternative route where I kind of maxed out what I needed. You run out of space and you don’t want things to feel cluttered and you realize that’s okay. You can be content. And just like reading, I don’t know, for instance Thoreau, *Walden*, and stuff like that, that was like a pretty inspiring book, and his philosophy of simplifying your life. And I think I just, yeah, I needed a cleansing of just, like, slowing things down. Experiencing things rather than buying things.

In addition to conveying yet again the spiritual aroma of living in a tiny house, its “cleansing” baptism shepherding later contentment, Chad’s story highlights two other tiny house themes. First, Chad’s relative wealth, which emerges almost as often as confessions of those who

endured pre-tiny house destitution. It also reveals itself in Chad's capacity to stop working and travel throughout the country for fishing and rock climbing. Second and a more important theme – expressed by Becker and Vesterfelt above and repeated below – is the distinction that tiny house dwellers and minimalists erect between purchasing physical commodities, which is bad, versus purchasing service commodities of “experience,” a key part of finding happiness and enjoying simple living's promised leisure time.

“A service is nothing other than the useful effect of use-value,” Marx (1976, 299–300) clarifies, “be it that of a commodity, or that of labor.” In other words, services are commodities available for purchase. “The first step the creation of the universal market is the conquest of all goods produced by the commodity form,” Braverman (1998, 194) explains, “the second step is the conquest of an increasing range of services and their conversion into commodities.” Through this process, “the inhabitant of capitalist society is enmeshed in a web made up of commodity goods and commodity services from which there is little possibility of escape except through partial or total abstention from social life as it now exists” (ibid.). The tiny house movement and minimalism mistake the consumption of services with a “partial or total abstention” from consumption altogether, thus redefining consumerism for its own ends. When tiny house enthusiasts celebrate “experience” they are almost always referring to some sort of tourism or hobby rather than, say, getting a haircut.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> This tiny house tendency mirrors broader trends wherein consumers are spending less on things like new appliances or clothing and more on “experiences with friends and family.” Just between 2014 and 2016 the consumption of experiential services has grown four times faster than regular commodity consumption (Goldman, Marchessou, and Teichner 2017) as the former “tend to become more meaningful parts of one's identity” (Gilovich and Kumar 2015, 149). Drawing upon Britton (1991, 452–53), Gibson (2013, 470) explains how “Tourism both feeds off the ‘desire for distraction from the demands and drudgery of everyday routines’ and relies on bodily displacement and immersion in unfamiliar environments.” “Immersion” here equates to a tourism of action rather than spectatorship (A. Franklin and Crang 2001, 13). Much like do-it-yourself trends (L. Smith 2013; Humphreys and Grayson 2008), embodied participation renders this consumption something to celebrate rather than shun.

### “Tight box” tiny houses

Architect Philip Jodidio begins his tiny house book, *Small Innovative Houses*, with a quote from Jeff Bezos, the wealthiest man in the world, on the inventive power of poverty: “I think frugality drives innovation, just like other constraints do. One of the only ways to get out of a tight box is to invent your way out” (quoted in Jodidio 2018, 6). For Jodidio, the “economic difficulty” facing the working class post-2008 crisis “may best encourage both the taste for small houses and the desire to design them differently...For those lacking an oversized ego or suffering from an undersized budget, what,” he asks, “could be more fitting than a small, innovative house?” (ibid.). Although clever space-saving design remains a key fascination among enthusiasts, the primary innovation that the limited space or “tight box” of a tiny house compels is minimalism. It is innovation by renunciation, voluntary or not.<sup>77</sup>

April Anson, a tiny house dweller, landlord and academic, articulates this “innovation” well. In her book chapter entitled “‘The World is my Backyard’: Romanticization, Thoreauvian Rhetoric, and Constructive Confrontation in the Tiny House Movement.” She worries that the tiny house movement is at risk of mainstream cooptation and a concomitant dilution of Thoreau’s philosophy of anti-consumerism. Yet the very size of tiny houses eases her apprehensions:

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Unlike the cloistered horizons of the middle stratum suburban consumer, a comparatively passive person enjoying the prideful, routinized banality of stuff in the comfort of their own bloated home – or the faux-experiences of cruise ship-type tourism – the “backpacker” tourist labors to encounter the real deal, to truly *learn* from these experiences and therefore improve oneself (Crouch 2000, 65).

<sup>77</sup> Ford and Gomez-Lanier (2017, 402), in their broad literature review of tiny houses, arrive the same conclusion: “One of the philosophical tenets of the tiny house movement is the departure from the values of conventional society such as excessive consumerism and materialism. By living small, a person must keep only what is necessary to live. A tiny house is a deterrent to acquiring more stuff that will just take up more space.”

Tiny house living, as I can attest, slowly teaches (or cultivates) poverty...As a result, my tiny house living has demanded a different type of economy by virtue of its lack of space and by the contrast with excess elsewhere. Rather than the economic gains made by living simply, Thoreau preached a voluntary poverty. His “Economy” is not so much a way to save more money, or to accumulate property (mobile or not), as it is a rejection of luxuries of all kinds...Similarly, living in a tiny house compels close encounters with waste – material and physical. Tiny house dwellers must calculate each purchase for waste and storage requirements weighing the use value of every item brought through the tiny door. For me, this consideration has slowly resulted in a reorientation to material possessions. (Anson 2014, 302, 306)

One of my informants, Simon, white a man in his mid-thirties who illegally resides in his THOW, offered the same explanation when I gave him a ride to the 2019 Colorado Tiny House Festival. An ardent transcendentalist and Thoreau fan, Simon saw tiny living as “an opportunity for that person to maybe reevaluate their life, or lock themselves into a way of living that they know philosophically is important, but if they bought a big house they know themselves and that they wouldn’t necessarily adhere to a minimalist lifestyle. So they force themselves into it; it just puts the people in the mindset already. I don’t have a big room that I can just throw another flat screen TV in, I don’t have the extra space.”

Even dwellers who avoid identifying as minimalists have made such lifestyle innovations for their tiny house. Chuck and Becky, a married couple in their forties with a Texas-based THOW, told me over the phone how “a tiny home really teaches you what really matters in your life. It’s more of your quality of life rather than the stuff that you have in your life. And with not having very much space to have a bunch of stuff you realize that I probably didn’t need that oversized sectional or big, big screen TV, or an oversized bed or big bathroom, that sort of thing.” Becky then added:

Whether you want to or not, because we definitely were not minimalists; we were normal. We had a bunch of stuff but, like, in order to even make it fit, even with

your craftiness, you have to downsize. So, I think – that’s just what changed so much. When we go shopping, say we ‘Buy a pair of pants, that means you gotta get rid of a pair of pants’ because we don’t have room for that. I don’t go shopping as much because I don’t really need anything. That’s really it. And we became better people, I think, because we’ve learned to work on our house and build things and stuff like that since we’ve moved in a tiny home.

Another dweller, Karen, who primarily sought tiny house living to avoid renting apartments, expressed over the phone how she and her daughter “got rid of about 90% of our possessions when we went tiny, and we have to be vigilant to not start accumulating more all over again, because there’s nowhere to put it.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Self-help minimalism**

Because it leans so heavily upon minimalism as its primary solution to “overconsumption,” and at least partly because minimalism is such a popular self-help trend, a significant portion of the tiny house lifestyle movement amounts to self-help guides.<sup>79</sup> Of all self-help titles, motivational and inspirational books are currently selling the fastest. The topic of minimalism is key among them. According to book industry analyst Kristen McLean, “consumers have placed an

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<sup>78</sup> Similar sentiments abound in tiny house media. Writing in *The Tiny Life* blog, Michael Hulleman (2014) is explicit about the tight box effect while reiterating the life changing impact of tiny house minimalism. “Less space means less hoarding, or accumulating stuff that many later feel they didn’t need in the first place—which may also result in a sense of freedom and mental clarity few have been able to articulate without embracing a smaller living space. It means new purchases must be carefully measured and thoughtfully considered, and the acquisition of one new possession often means the off-loading of another.” *Tiny House Magazine* contributor Sarah Myers, a young white woman who saw the light after years of enjoying an expensive Washington D.C. townhouse, notes how “living in a tiny house forces you to get rid of excess ‘stuff’ and stop mindlessly consuming unnecessary products (Myers 2013, 52). Predictably, tiny house minimalist Josh Becker (2013a, 19) sees it the same: “Downsizing your home forces you to remove baggage. Moving into a smaller home forces you to intentionally pare down your belongings...Smaller homes lessen the temptation to accumulate. If you don’t have any room in your house for that new treadmill, you’ll be less tempted to buy it in the first place.” Mary Murphy (2014, 58), yet another tiny house dweller and academic (like Anson), offers yet another example while calling for localism: “Manufacturing, shipping, and displaying commercial goods take a huge amount of resources. Most tiny house dwellers find that living in a small space encourages them to consider carefully before making a purchase... This helps prevent habitual engagement with the consumer economy, and limits purchases to things we truly need and want to have in our lives.”

<sup>79</sup> Not to be confused with the countless “how to” tiny house construction books, articles, and video clips.

increasing focus on mindfulness and minimalism in recent years” because they “are yearning for meaning, peace, and calm in today’s somewhat chaotic culture – and they’re looking for ways to slow down and unplug” (quoted in Graham 2020).

The self-help posture of minimalism blends into a highly related self-help phenomenon – mindfulness. *Psychology Today* defines mindfulness as “a state of active, open attention to the present,” a “state” wherein one observes their “thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad” (“Mindfulness” n.d.). Though not often centered or named explicitly, the characteristics of mindfulness permeate the tiny house movement, effectively proceeding as a synonym to simplicity and minimalism.<sup>80</sup> Mindfulness, with its vaguely Buddhist meditative rituals, further clarifies why the tiny house movement views anti-consumerism as a transcendent lifestyle. The brambles of clutter literally get in the way of mindfulness.

Ron Purser (2018), author of *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, notes how the concept gained popularity after the 2008 crisis of accumulation. In this context, mindfulness was shorn of its Buddhist beginnings and coopted by capital as a means to mitigate workplace and financial anxiety while individualizing and medicalizing stress as personal failure (also see: Arthington 2016). Through this process (and just like tiny houses, minimalism, etc.), mindfulness currently “appears to offer a universal panacea for resolving almost every area of daily concern.” Much of this elasticity mirrors that of mindfulness’s prime antagonist: stress. “Over the past 60 years or so, and particularly over the last several decades” Dana Becker (2013, 2) argues, “stress has been applied to nearly every

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<sup>80</sup> That said, “mindfulness” does occasionally appear in tiny house media: (see A. Morrison 2013; Littlefair 2015; Loewe 2018; Sughrue 2018; “Tiny House Big Moments In The News” n.d.; “Honey, I Shrunk the House: One Homeowner Compares Life before and after the Family’s Big Move to a Tiny House” 2015).

condition or situation that people encounter. Stress is a protean concept that can represent a situation or event, a psychological or physiological state, or an emotion.” Just as with minimalism, Becker understands the rise of stress as a political intervention. Anti-stress self-help literature “consists of fragments of Western science, holistic medicine, Eastern religion and neoconservative economics” that claim stress and its limitless related ailments are caused by a failure to manage one’s stress properly through mindfulness, meditation, time management skills, staying focused, being optimistic, and so forth (S. D. Brown 1999, 26). With stress management being a personal affair, this version of stress denies that “these tensions are linked to social forces and need to be resolved primarily through social and political means” (D. Becker 2013, 19).

The tiny house movement reproduces these depoliticizing and individualizing explanations. Just as those living with debt are to blame for past pride, envy, and gluttony, so too are the “stressed out” responsible for their discontent – and for the same reasons. And this is so because the solution is so simple, right there in front of us: “simplify, simplify” (Thoreau 1995, 58).<sup>81</sup> At the same time, though, minimalism is not altogether an easy feat. As a “countercultural” revision of mainstream values, it takes concerted action to get through “the great adventure of the pursuit of happiness through downsizing” (Clark 2012, 20). “Get super honest and challenge your relationship with material possessions. Dare to think outside the box and to find your own truth; not the one others told you to believe,” Gabriella Morrison (2015, 25)

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Brown (1999, 30–31) nicely captures this expectation in self-help literature: “Being ‘burned out’ is...a matter of choice because the solution offered by regimen exists, and has been offered up to the reader, who presumably now understands the inescapable condition of stress that otherwise awaits them. A grand gesture of extending wisdom and guidance is played out. The reader must further accept the serious nature of the choice he or she is making, and that it involves assuming an active role...The work of staying healthy is purely a matter of personal responsibility. The text offers help, but on the proviso that readers fully accept that the problems lie within themselves (and not within the structure of the world around them), and so readers first have to ‘own’ their stress.”

advises. “Be a warrior in your downsizing process and fight for your right to live a sane and happy life. If we could do it, anyone else can too. Start today and before you know it, the life you’d only dreamed about will be your reality.”

Such motivational declarations are not enough on their own, however. The tiny house movement is replete with step-by-step self-help tools. Josh Becker (2012, 32) begins his “Simple, Helpful Guide to Overcome Consumerism” by reminding *Tiny House Magazine* readers how minimalism brings “less stress, less debt, more time, more freedom.” But this is not the entirety of minimalism. Becker clarifies that dwellers must *want less*; they must achieve an internal, spiritual transformation that then welcomes “contentment, gratitude, freedom from comparison, and the opportunity to pursue greater significance.” Such a progression necessarily begins, as with all addictions, with admitting you have a problem: “Become acutely aware of the consumer-driven society in which we live,” he suggests. Next, one must “admit it is possible” and take heed of the “numerous persons throughout history and the present who have adopted a minimalist lifestyle that rejects and overcomes consumerism. Find motivation in their example. And admit you can join their ranks.” Finally, stalwarts must “renew your commitment daily” as “rejecting and overcoming consumerism is a daily battle. Expect it to be such. And recommit every morning – or every hour if necessary” (J. Becker 2012, 34).

Most minimalism-focused self-help guides specifically offer advice on how to get through the process of throwing out household objects, producing a different space of social reproduction. Christina Nilleman, a middle-aged white woman who owns a graphic design business (Nilleman n.d.) and is regular contributor to *Tiny House Blog* and *Tiny House Magazine*, criticizes Marie Kondo’s method as insufficient for the intensified purging required of

tiny dwellers. She thus suggests additional tactics. The first is “The Three T’s,” standing for treasure, tools, and trash, wherein one asks: “Is the item a treasure, a tool, or trash? Hint: trash goes bye-bye.”<sup>82</sup> The second is called “High Five”: “I like to keep a group of items to less than five. I have no more than five pots and pans, no more than five pairs of shoes,” etc. Finally the common “one in, one out rule”: if you buy one thing, throw out another (Nelleman 2016, 25).<sup>83</sup> Patricia Foreman’s *A Tiny Home to Call Your Own*, meanwhile, has an entire chapter devoted to “Clutter Control and Stuffology” – the “study of stuff.” Under the section titled “Destuffing Plans,” she suggests – along with several others – “a rule-of-thumb policy that maintains that if you don’t use something for an entire year, you probably don’t need it” (Foreman 2019, 110). Context specific advice is elaborated upon in sections “Closets and Stuff” and “Garages, Stuff, and Clutter Control” followed by full-page diagram on “Stuffology 101” outlining 23 negative “Unintended Consequences of Stuff” (ibid., 119).<sup>84</sup>

The tiny house movement does not only include self-help guides for decluttering and minimalism. Because minimalism, simplicity, spiritualized anti-consumerism, etc. occupies the center of tiny house solutions, minimalist self-help is also tailored to budgeting, environmentalism, interpersonal relations, work, and leisure. The most intense iteration of tiny house self-help literature I have come across is the aptly titled *Put Your Life on a Diet: Lessons*

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<sup>82</sup> Nelleman (2016, 25) adopted this method from minimalist YouTube personality Shoeless Joe Christian (see “ShoelessJoe Christian - YouTube” n.d.).

<sup>83</sup> Nelleman is just one of many to repeat this minimalist/tiny house axiom (Jay 2009; “Clutter Busting: The One in, One Out Rule” 2011; Carlson 2015; O’Reilly Davi-Digui 2017; Martinko 2018; Kit 2019). Johnson (2008, 57) refers to this as the “The shop-and-drop principle,” which applies to “everything you buy – every pair of shoes, every appliance, every book – you get rid of one or more items that are less necessary” so “your material possessions either stay at the same level or decrease over time.”

<sup>84</sup> Some of the advice offered by enthusiasts seeking to monetize their tiny house/minimalist celebrity show little respect for their readers. The entire corpus of Joshua Becker’s writings on his blog, *Becoming Minimalist*, which boasts of having over one-million readers, fits into this category. Post after post regurgitates his outlook on minimalism with only superficial alterations depending on the topic. So far, 11 posts offer varying numbers of tips for becoming a minimalist and, to take just two themes at random, eight posts reiterate how to raise minimalist children while he also penned 11 posts on how to give gifts as a minimalist (J. Becker n.d.).

*Learned from Living in 140 Square Feet* by Gregory Johnson, a well-known, early Shafer-accomplice who may well be considered a “founding father” of the tiny house movement. Johnson composed an amazing little book.<sup>85</sup> However haphazard its topical organization, Johnson impressively condenses several pillars of tiny house ideology, among them the astonishing power of tiny houses to solve countless social and personal problems; the promotion of individualized austerity; and, of course, the movement’s penchant for self-help advice. And Johnson gives advice on strange array of topics including, among many others: weight loss, political activism, marriage, investing, work productivity, aesthetics, carpooling, waste disposal, stress, technology, and house construction. Simple living promises a solution to all of these problems.

In terms of minimalism alone, Johnson’s discussion is practically indistinguishable from those reviewed above. What makes Johnson’s book fascinating is its interactive and instructional presentation. Much like a school textbook, *Put Your Life on a Diet* includes a few pages at the conclusion of each chapter dedicated to “Action Points,” “Discussion Questions,” and “Your Plan.” At the end of chapter 1, “How Ready Are You to Slim Down Your Life?” for example, Johnson’s (2008, 25–26) “Action Points” offers “things you can do to implement the information shared in this chapter and put your life on a diet. Start today. Begin with one or two action points and slowly implement more as you simplify your life,” among them tracking how you “spend your time and your money” so you “find balance” among the “various areas that consume most of your time” (including but not exclusively inert objects) and “if you notice that you are slowly

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<sup>85</sup> The thin book itself is only 144 pages, while its squat dimensions almost made it pocket-able. Given the following quotation, I suspect this was intentional: “I have a collection of tiny books. This helps reinforce the smaller scale of the home” (Johnson 2008, 51).

gaining weight, accruing debt, or running out of space at home, something needs to be altered.”

The discussion questions then present a chance at self-reflection: “How ready are you for change and how much help would you need from your support system?” and “Are there people you admire for their strength? Emulate their habits and goals.” And then finally a blank page to write an answer to “What will you do today to make a difference in your life?” (ibid., 27). The overarching premise of this textbook is that simple tiny house living requires a substantial personal reformation.

## **Conclusion**

The American Dream is a troublesome anachronism. Enthusiasts recognize that one of its versions, that of suburban homeownership its related consumption, cannot usefully proceed without another: the hope of ever-increasing prosperity and upward mobility. This decoupling marks the primary impetus for tiny house living. Yet this structural and material basis is neither reflected in the tiny house movement’s conception of the world nor its prescribed reforms of individual conduct. This lack permeates the tiny house movement because it collapses the previous fifty years of the working class’ economic degradation into suburbia-based consumerism. The suburban American Dream, in this framing, got out of hand and *caused* the economic insecurity now endured by enthusiasts.

Tiny house fervor bleeds into a lifestyle movement insofar as it offers up its own potted theory of American consumption. On the one hand, enthusiasts embrace a Veblenian critique, locating consumerism in social envy. On the other hand, over-consumers have been duped, not duped by the culture industry and pernicious marketing but by the mythos of the suburban American Dream. Whether of duplicity or envy, overconsumption is taken as a moral and

intellectual shortcoming. Intellectually, overconsumption occurs because people have not realized the rules of the game have changed and have not, as liberal subjects must, calibrated their lifestyle accordingly. Enthusiasts' chastisement of overconsumption mostly focuses on personal moral failings, those prideful and insatiable sins of excess epitomized as much by the wealthy as the unsophisticated mass of fast-food eaters. Such excess itself results from the idolization of big houses and physical commodities, of consumption for consumption's sake, of preferring *quantity over quality*.

Stuck in the approach and spaces of "consumer society," enthusiasts overlook how the neoliberalization of labor relations and state policy have produced the material foundations of this American Nightmare. Despite its references to society-wide consumer indebtedness, the cause and solution to debt (and foreclosures) rests within the individual; enthusiasts do not call for reduced advertising, envy-curbing economic equality, debt forgiveness, or public housing. Instead, and to exorcise the false idolization of commodities, one must summon a countervailing secular spiritualism: minimalism. This spiritualism is more Protestant than Catholic. Minimalism is primarily a personal and unmediated communion between oneself and one's commodities. Yet an entire industry of self-help advice shepherds initiates through and beyond the hellish circumstances of the American Nightmare. By adhering to this catechism, tiny house dwellers remake themselves, casting out unnecessary objects and, with them, debilitating stress. The physical space of the tiny house itself, meanwhile, fortifies simple living. The tiny house movement offers guidance and subsequent moral support as people embark upon their journey to tiny living.

The American Nightmare is the fundamental justification for the tiny house movement. As such, I revisit it in the following chapter. While this one and the next chapter outline how enthusiasts seek economic control by cutting back their consumption, they each reveal different diverging justifications and discursive framings. Whereas in this chapter I captured how enthusiasts frame economic deliverance in cultural and religious expressions, as a brave battle between social vice (consumerism) and personal virtue (minimalism and simplicity), in the next chapter we descend from this lofty spiritualism and come face-to-face with the underlying economic rationale for the tiny house movement's anti-consumerism in more matter-of-fact terms. The spiritual pretensions of simplicity, always more superficial than enthusiasts let on, settles into basic economic advice on how to escape debt and reach financial freedom: thrift and hustling. It is here that the simple living of the tiny house movement reveals itself as the key component of a compensatory ideology for economic precarity – even as this ideology still assumes poverty reflects moral and cultural deficiency.

## **CHAPTER 5 – FROM SIMPLICITY TO THRIFT: LEAN REPRODUCTION AND PERSONALIZED AUSTERITY**

The 2008 housing bubble and subsequent economic crisis led to 8 to 10 million housing foreclosures, wiping away homeowner equity and tearing away many families' sense of security as jobs decreased and working conditions worsened. By 2016, 72 percent of renters had hoped to become homeowners but were unable due to financial reasons. The widespread inability to become homeowners drove up the costs of rental housing (Pew 2018, 8; Kusisto 2018). Affordable rental housing is itself out of reach for tens of millions. Nearly one-third of all households were cost-burdened (paying more than 30 percent of income on housing) while fifteen percent of the population devoted more than 50 percent of their earnings to rent or mortgage payments (Spader and Veal 2018).

Since the onset of neoliberalism in the 1970s, stagnating wages, the reduction in public services (higher education funding, welfare), and the decrease in workplace benefits like healthcare and employee saving schemes had also forced the working class to rely on credit (Moody 2017, 30). This set the basis for the increased debt of much-discussed “middle class squeeze” before and after 2008.

Nowhere is the middle-class squeeze more vividly demonstrated than in their rising debt. The ratio of debt-to-net-worth of the middle three wealth quintiles rose from 37 percent in 1983 to 46 percent in 2001 and then jumped to 61 percent in 2007. Correspondingly, their debt-to-income rose from 67 percent in 1983 to 100 percent in 2001 and then zoomed up to 157 percent in 2007. This new debt took two major forms. First, because housing prices went up over these years, families were able to borrow against the now-enhanced value of their homes by refinancing their mortgages and by taking out home equity loans (lines of credit secured by their home). In fact, mortgage debt on owner-occupied housing (principal residence only) climbed from 29 percent in 1983 to 47 percent in 2007, and home equity as a share of total assets actually fell from 44 to 35 percent over these years. Second, because of their increased availability, families ran up huge debt on their credit cards. (Wolff 2010, 20–21)

It is this situation to which tiny house advocates draw attention. Neglecting how financial deregulation hurried and sustained a frenzy of fetishistic speculation on housing real estate, or the fact that the increased credit card debt never reflected expanded consumption (ibid. 23), the tiny house movement continually concludes that the problem rests with mortgages on normal-sized houses, a decision that is itself reflective of an intensified consumerism.

These housing burdens and indebtedness are inextricable from low-wages. Looking at affordability by location, and accounting for places with higher minimum wages, a minimum wage employee at 40 hours weekly could only afford rent in 22 counties among the more than 3,000 across the United States (Aurand et al. 2018). By 2011, approximately 28 percent of all workers' hourly wages were below the official poverty-level, at \$11.06 (Moody 2017, 30). Even for those fortunate enough to surpass the minimum wage, the working class more generally has experienced wage stagnation since 1973 despite productivity rising 243.1 percent (Mishel, Gould, and Bivens 2015). Looking at median-wage workers specifically, or those who earned more than half the workforce, wages rose only 6 percent since 1979. For low-wage workers, their wages fell by 5 percent. Meanwhile, and in the same time period, the "wages" or returns on investment for the top 1 percent of households rose 138 percent (ibid.). "So stagnant has been the income of the working-class majority," Moody (2017, 30) found, "that 30 percent of the workforce, and clearly a higher percentage of this in working-class [i.e. low-wage] employment, now relies on public assistance to get by."

And the situation is not poised to improve, as jobs with low-wages and little or no healthcare benefits or retirement plans have seen the fastest growth since 2000 (ibid., 32). In 1979, for instance, 69 percent of employers provided some form of healthcare benefits,

decreasing to 53 percent by 2010. Defined benefit pensions plans witnessed a similar trajectory, falling from 39 percent in 1980 to 18 percent by 2004. While defined benefit plans promise stable retirement income protected by employers, they have increasingly been replaced by defined contribution schemes whereby fractions of employee income is invested in stocks, bonds, and mutual funds. At the whim of anarchic capitalist speculation, the financial crisis of 2008 swept away much of the savings of those nearing retirement, with the median family savings dropping by more than half, from the already meager \$35,929 in 2007 to only \$17,000 by 2013. This drastic drop can largely be attributed to the fact that nearly half of all US households (and disproportionately those of color) do not have any retirement savings whatsoever (Moody 2017, 31) while 78 percent of say they are “extremely” or “somewhat” afraid they will exhaust whatever savings they have (Martin 2018). With 43 percent of all households headed by someone 65 years or older being rent burdened (Pew 2018, 12) with low-wages, lack of adequate healthcare, and little to no savings, it should not come as a surprise that Americans of 65 years and older make up two of every five tiny house owners (Kaufmann 2015; Morneau 2020).

Millennials, or those born between 1981-96 (Dimock 2019), are, given their general poverty next to astronomical student loan debt, taken to be the other age cohort driving the tiny house movement (“Tiny House Statistics 2020: Market Size & Industry Growth” 2020). As Noguchi (2019) reports,

Student loan debt in the United States has more than doubled over the past decade to about \$1.5 trillion, and the Federal Reserve now estimates that it is cutting into millennials’ ability to buy homes. Homeownership rates for people ages 24 to 32 dropped nearly 9 percentage points between 2005 and 2014...In January [2019], the Fed estimated 20 percent of that decline is attributable to student loan debt.

Although many commentators claim that lack of homeownership is simply a reflection of millennials preferring coffee-shop-adjacent urban rentals (Davidson 2014), one study estimates that 84 percent of millennials “believe homeownership is part of the ‘American Dream’” while 48 percent are waiting until they make “significant progress” on student loans (Lloyd 2019).

Tiny houses, as a new form of cheaper housing, accommodate these degraded economic conditions. In addition to being a reaction to abstract domination, something punctuated by the 2008 economic crisis, the clash between low wages and dear bills bolstered their popularity. In this chapter I argue that the neoliberalization of the capitalist political-economy has compelled the broadly defined working class to cope through what I call “lean social reproduction.” The term itself draws upon what economists call “lean production,” a method of increasing the exploitation of workers through what is aptly termed “management by stress.” It includes the intensification of the production and labor process through finding and then eradicating all “non-value-producing labor” so as to increase the efficiency of capitalist production (Moody 2017, 14–15). Just as capitalists use lean production to squeeze out surplus value from every last pore of production, thrifty tiny house enthusiasts save money by locating and then purging all commodities above and beyond those necessary for the basic reproduction of their capacity to labor. As an instance of compensatory ideology in action, though, this streamlining of non-productive life, this adopting of austere living, is personalized, that is, recast as medium of one’s personality, identity, values, and so on. Tiny house living thus proceeds as a concrete instance of a neoliberal ideology that “functions to deny the limits of capitalism by imposing limits on its subjects” (Moufawad-Paul 2017, 98). The popularity of tiny houses, and particularly their uncritical celebration, reveals a compensation-based acquiescence to these conditions.

### **The contradiction between production and social reproduction**

“Capital” is often meant to describe raw materials or heavy instruments of production. Marx, though, focused on the elementary fact that all such things are the products of human labor, instances of congealed, accumulated past labor (what he often called “dead labor”). Capital is also a social relation, the social relations that define the production of new, useful things within a capitalist society; it is how the production of commodities is socially – not just technologically – organized (G. A. Cohen 2000). Class divisions precede capitalism; there are those who own the means of production and those who do not.<sup>86</sup> The individuals who possess raw materials and other instruments of labor – the means of production – thus hold an immense social power. This social power is embodied in the past efforts of workers (all of those things were produced by a whole collection of people). These materials finally become capital, Marx (1978e, 208) explains, “by maintaining and multiplying itself as an independent social *power*, that is, as the power of a *portion of society*, by means of its *exchange for direct, living labor power*.” When these individuals use this social power to produce commodities (specifically exchange-values, commodities for exchange) to capture greater portions of social labor, those means of production become capital and those individuals become capitalists. Greater portions of social labor are increased by putting more people to work. “The existence of a class which possesses nothing but its capacity to labor,” Marx therefore explains, “is a necessary prerequisite of capital” (ibid.). With their past labor expropriated by the capitalist or – really the same thing – without their own means of production or subsistence, most of society is compelled to work for a capitalist. This section of society is appropriately called the working class.

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<sup>86</sup> Which isn’t at all to suggest that feudal relations of ownership are the same as those under capitalism (see Wood 2002).

Workers receive a wage in exchange for their labor power, that is, their commodified capacity to labor. The capitalist, conversely, receives the productive activity of the worker, activity that not only replaces that value received in wages (i.e., makes up for that money the capitalist spends on wages) but also gives this past, accumulated labor greater value than it previously had. In other words, the labor power sold by the worker is ultimately worth more – in economic-value terms – than that received back in wages. If this were not the case, hiring workers would result in a net loss for the capitalist, and it would not happen. The gap between money paid to the worker and the value of their labor power captured by the employer is the basis of capitalist accumulation, of not only how new value is produced within society but also who, and which class, captures and then profits from that surplus value. Herein rests one massive contradiction: overproduction. On the aggregate, and because the working class produces more value than they can purchase back with their lesser wages, there is a tendency to produce more commodities than can be purchased. We recently saw this contradiction reach crisis in the Great Recession with the overproduction of housing relative to that of effective demand. These crises inevitably force capital to lay off workers and halt commodity production, which just further reduces the effective demand of commodities, causes further lay-offs, and so on.

I am focusing on a different contradiction here, however. This one concerns the wages paid-out to workers. If we ignore the noted contradiction above, the relationship between workers and capitalist can appear fairly congenial. As is obvious, worker and capitalist are reciprocally intertwined: “Capital can only increase by exchanging itself for labor power, by calling wage labor to life,” Marx (1978e, 210) explains.

The labor power of the wage-worker can only be exchanged for capital by increasing capital, by strengthening the power whose slave it is. *Hence, increase of*

*capital is increase of the proletariat, that is, of the working class. The interests of the capitalist and those of the worker are, therefore, one and the same, assert the bourgeois and their economists. Indeed! The worker perishes if capital does not employ him. Capital perishes if it does not exploit labor power... The indispensable condition for a tolerable situation of the worker is, therefore, the fastest possible growth of productive capital.* (ibid.)

Unfortunately for the workers, though, there are several capitalists, each competing with one another to find buyers for their commodities. Capitalists can only stay in business by selling commodities of similar use-value (i.e. quality) more cheaply than competitors. To do so requires raising the productivity of labor as much as possible, capturing more surplus value.

Marx usefully separates these techniques into two categories: absolute and relative surplus value. Absolute surplus value is simple. To increase it, the capitalist prolongs the working day (Vogel 2013, 160). Relative surplus value, conversely, is accomplished by increasing productivity within a given segment of working time and at a given payrate. Relative surplus requires ever-finer divisions of labor, greater technological and mechanical inputs, and the intensification of work by targeting and eliminating any instances of worker “idleness” (such as breaks) (Moody 2017, 14). In either case, the goal of the capitalist is to reduce the wages necessary to reproduce the worker day in and day out (or “necessary labor”) and increase that leftover portion that goes to the capitalist (called “surplus labor”) (Marx 1981, 960).

This highlights the key contradiction that gets our focus here: capital must exploit workers to the greatest extremes possible but without killing off so many as to limit the pool of potential workers and consumers. A limited supply of workers, for instance, would mean having to pay higher wages and improve working conditions, which cuts into profit margins, surplus value. Too few consumers, meanwhile, would only hasten the overproduction tendencies discussed above. “The maintenance and reproduction of the working class,” Marx (1976, 718)

notes, “remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.” Given the competition between capitalists and, as such, their inability to cooperate, capital requires that the state maintain the working class’ capacity to productively labor and rationally consume (Picchio 1992, 112).

Outside production, then, “necessary labor” marks the limits between life and death for the working class. It determines what and how much workers may consume so as to stay alive and return to work the next day so they can do it all again. As such, necessary labor, or the wages workers receive, typically constitute something of a subsistence wage. “The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity,” Marx (1976, 274) explains, “by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this special article. So far as it has value,” he continues, “it represents *no more than* a definite quantity of the average labour of society incorporated in it” (emphasis added). This last sentence is worth elaboration. As with any commodity, the value of a certain type of labor power is not increased as one expands the labor-time that goes into its making. Rather, it is determined by the “socially-necessary,” or societal average, amount of labor-time that produces a similar worker. Workers must, as the saying goes, live within their means.

An average means of subsistence for either “simple” or “complex labor,” then, determines the parameters of the working class’ wages. In addition to labor power’s capacity to produce more value than it is paid or worth, it is also distinct from other commodities insofar as its value remains variable.<sup>87</sup> Since the capitalist is coerced to degrade this level as much as

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<sup>87</sup> This is not to suggest that commodities other than labor power maintain the same value all the time. Any commodity’s value, labor power included – and particularly its surface representation, or price – can change through things like supply and demand. Any commodity that is unable to be sold (or hired) has, in that instance, failed to realize its value. As such, it is valueless. Rather, what makes the commodity labor power special in this manner is

possible, class struggle ultimately determines the actual, average wage rate.<sup>88</sup> “In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities,” Marx (1976, 275) argues, “there enters into the determination of the value of labour-power a historical and moral element.” These elements go beyond the basic, biological needs of survival, including the worker’s wants and methods of consumption. All of this, Marx (*ibid.*, 274) continues, “depend therefore to a great extent on the degree of civilization of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort in which, the class of free laborers has been formed.”

This is the stuff of social reproduction. After purchasing commodities in the sphere of exchange, social reproduction entails the labor necessary to realize the use-value of commodities (i.e. consume them) for the sake of reproducing “the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers” so, the next day, their labor power can be consumed by capital (Marx 1976, 717). Although outwardly simple, social reproduction has proven to be an unwieldy concept. At its basis, it aims to capture the social relations that exist outside the sphere of production. Obviously everything-but-work is vast and complicated terrain. Rather than attempting to hedge, many definitions simply embrace its expansive pretensions. To take just one small segment of Katz’s (2009) popular definition:

The term encompasses the daily and long-term reproduction of the means of production, the labour power to make them work and the social relations that hold them in place. It includes the “fleshy, messy” and diffuse stuff of everyday life, as

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that that commodity is inseparable from the person who holds it. And, this person can – within certain limits – alter their “worth” or price through action. This is not the case for inanimate commodities. Despite the claims of actor network theory (Storper and Scott 2016), there have not yet been any widget-led union drives.

<sup>88</sup> “The worker, finally, as owner and seller of his personal labor power, receives under that name of wages a part of the product; in this there is expressed the portion of his labor that we call necessary labor, i.e. labor necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of this labor power, whether the conditions of this maintenance and reproduction are poorer or richer, more favorable or less” (Marx 1981, 960).

well as a congeries of structured material social practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production.

Recognizing the broad definition of social reproduction, others have called for further subdivision. Vogel (2000, 157) usefully divides social reproduction into three sets of activities. The first set designates those daily tasks that “restore the energies of direct producers and enable them to return to work.” The second set of social reproduction includes “similar activities that maintain non-laboring members of subordinate classes – those who are too young, old, or sick, or who themselves are involved in maintenance activities or out of the workforce for other reasons.” And the third set: having babies, or the biological reproduction that renews the labor force of the working class by replacing those who have died or are otherwise incapable of working profitably under capitalism.

Women and families have traditionally performed all three sets of social reproductive activities within a single household.<sup>89</sup> For this reason, much of the scholarship on social reproduction highlights the domestic labor of housewives, labor that is and has been, at least due to the needs capital and patriarchy, often neglected. Yet social reproductive labor need not be the domain of women in single wage earner households. Rather, such labor “can in principle be organized in other ways, at least for a period of time,” Vogel (2000, 157) explains. “The present set of laborers could be housed in dormitories, maintained collectively, worked to death, and then replaced by new workers brought from outside.” “From a theoretical point of view,” she continues, “the reproduction of labor power is not invariably associated with private kin-based households” as most discussions of social reproduction understandably assume (*ibid.*, 153, 158).

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<sup>89</sup> Such a sexual division of labor was by no means universal. Rather, it typified the early industrializing capitalist (and imperialistic) nations in Western Europe and North America – and even then it was more prevalent among the better-paid fractions of the urban working classes.

A gender-neutral social reproductive framework is especially possible when it comes to Vogel's first set of social reproductive activities: the individual reproductive consumption of workers, "the processes that maintains and replaces the labor power capable of producing a surplus for an appropriating class" (Vogel 2000, 157). Drawing upon the work of Lebowitz (1992), Bhattacharya refers to the simple reproduction of the labor power commodity (Vogel's *first set* of social reproductive activity) as the "second circuit" of capital accumulation. The "first circuit" of capital accumulation, the direct production commodities, proceeds thus:

$$M \rightarrow C (MP + LP) \dots P \dots C' \rightarrow M'$$

In this equation, money (M) is used to purchase preexisting commodities (C), including the means of production (MP) and the labor power (LP) of workers. These commodities are combined in the production process (...P...) to produce new commodities (C') which are thereafter sold for a greater amount of money (M') than that at the start. According to Lebowitz (1992), the second circuit progresses in an analogous manner:

$$M \rightarrow Ac \dots P \dots LP \rightarrow M$$

Here, the worker starts with money from wages (M), uses said wages to purchase use-values as articles of consumption (Ac) in the sphere of exchange, which are thereafter used to produce (...P...) the labor power (LP) of the worker at home.<sup>90</sup> If lucky, the worker sells his or her labor power to the capitalist again, receiving enough money (M) to repeat the process anew. Whereas new, surplus value (expressed as extra money, M') is the basis and outcome of capitalist production, workers can only save extra money through reducing their commodity purchases

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<sup>90</sup> Of course, some use-values may be given rather than purchased as a commodity.

(Ac) and streamlining the process of socially reproducing (...P...) their labor power (LP) below that of their wages (M). “The goal of this process is not the valorization of capital,” Bhattacharya (2017, 81) explains, “but the self-development of the worker.” The tiny house movement, like previous calls to simplicity, is solely focused on the second circuit of capital, of accommodating lean production and a threadbare welfare state with its own lean and threadbare social reproduction.

### **Tiny houses are another form of cheap housing**

Tiny houses, then, are suitable to reduced consumer spending. They are, as such, a form of cheaper housing adopted as a means to make do on insufficient wages and state support. Just like tiny houses are a repetitive iteration of simplicity movements, so too are they one of the newest versions of thrifty living. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the urbanizing and seasonal working class, for example, lived in cheap boarding houses, while casual laborers and those maimed on the job settled for even more austere and cramped lodging houses (Groth 1999, 91–92, 133). The long-time unemployed, meanwhile, were forced to inhabit poorhouses (DePastino 2005, 12).<sup>91</sup> Workers with a slightly better income could afford to live in “apartment hotels” renting single-room-occupancy (SRO) units, which featured “small kitchens, likely without a stove, no dining room, often with folding beds.” Twentieth century housing policy and redevelopment schemes continually sought to limit and/or displace the supply of cheap housing through “slum clearances” to justify using state funds to produce new public and affordable housing units. Residential hotels and affordable working class urban housing have been steadily

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<sup>91</sup>For boarding houses, boarders rented rooms within a family’s home and typically ate with them, while lodgers “slept in the house but took their meals elsewhere.” In the nineteenth century, an estimated “one-third to one-half of all urban Americans either boarded or took boarders at some time in their lives” (Groth 1999, 92).

swept from urban centers under the guise of urban revitalization and redevelopment rather than gentrification (Kasinitz 1986; J. F. Bauman 2000).

Today, we are witnessing a rebirth and repackaging of small-scale housing as modish simplicity. (Abnormally small housing, of course, are one such iteration.) While dwellers typically park their tiny house on wheels in suburban or rural RV parks, some cities are turning toward small-scale, urban developments as affordable housing. Purchasing vacant lots with federal funds and subsidizing the costs, the city of Tempe, AZ, for instance, is currently constructing thirteen 600-square-foot small houses set around a larger, 900-square-foot “common room” with shared kitchen and laundry facilities. The Micro Estates Tempe development reserves six of the thirteen houses for city residents “making less than 80% of the area's median income, which is \$46,650 for a two-person household” (Pineda 2020). Depending on the resident’s income, the price tag for each house will be between \$165,000 and \$215,000. “For only 600-square-feet they’ve got as much open space as they’re gonna have,” a local Housing and Urban Development (HUD) official in charge of the project explained to me. The one-bedroom units have a shower and hot-plate and microwave-caliber kitchenettes. “It’s almost like the old SROs,” the official continued. “It’s nothing fancy; it’s nothing flashy.” Although the official candidly predicted that small-scale housing developments like this would eventually, as with SROs, become associated with – and therefore stigmatized by – the relative poverty of their residents, for now the Micro Estates include a host of hip amenities. The fact that these units are – unlike SROs – owned rather than rented is the most important distinction, but there are others. The developer boasts of the energy efficiency, water saving, and low-waste construction techniques. Meanwhile, a “Common Room and landscaped courtyard gives extra space and amenities, including personal gardens where homeowners can grow their own food or flowers”

(“Tempe Micro Estates” n.d.).<sup>92</sup> The relative affordability such housing is thus outshined by its green and communal amenities and proximity to the university and central business district.

The steady proliferation of “micro apartments,” or studio-type units below 350 square-feet with a kitchenette and bathroom (ULI 2015, 4), is a parallel, more urban housing trend (not yet, it seems, a “movement”) (E. Harris and Nowicki 2020). Just like with tiny houses, micro apartments often require a rewriting of building codes previously established to outlaw cramped tenements and other closet-sized dwellings (Glink 2015). Midtown Manhattan’s Carmel Place, for example, required then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg to waive a 1987 law forbidding the construction of units under 400 square-feet (Greenspan 2016). As with Carmel Place, similar micro-apartment complexes are taking root in other high-rent urban centers, promising an economic- and environmentally-friendly “smart growth” solution to endemic unaffordability (Maza 2015; Glink 2015; Koch 2013). Lauded as an exciting form of affordable housing, one Seattle developer’s dream of squeezing 132 “sleeping rooms” – some as small as 150 square-feet – into a five story building has repeatedly been hampered due to the same concerns once held by Progressive Era tenant reformers: inadequate sunlight, poor ventilation, and a “shared courtyard” only ten-feet wide (*Westside Seattle* n.d.). In Seattle alone, dozens of similar developments are underway.

There is some suggesting that micro-apartments are less about cost than lifestyle choice. As with tiny houses, there can be wide variations in costs no matter the size. Boston’s Factory 63

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<sup>92</sup> Cass Community Tiny Homes in Detroit, MI is another development geared towards providing affordable housing. Raising private funds, the faith-based nonprofit plans to offer a total of 25 rent-to-own tiny houses for individuals as low as \$10,000 annually who pay \$325 monthly rent. They can purchase the house outright after renting for seven years. According to Dianna Budds (2018a) of *Curbed*, “Cass has received inquiries from 45 states and numerous countries asking about how they can adapt the nonprofit’s model.”

micro-apartment complex, for instance, only straddles the city's steep median rent (\$2,400/mo.) with 374 to 597 square-foot units for \$1,677 to \$2,450 monthly. Typically associated with the "hot housing markets" of large coastal cities, micro developments are also cropping up in Iowa, Tennessee, and other lower-rent urban areas (Clark 2015; Mazza 2019a). One boosterish account from the *Christian Science Monitor*, offers this interpretation:

Culturally, young Americans are downsizing and sharing more, and this is allowing them to choose to live in smaller spaces. Instead of lining a wall with bookshelves, they keep books stored on an iPad or a kindle. Instead of filling a closet with heaps of clothes, they rent their wardrobe from the plethora of online rental companies proliferating across the Internet. (Maza 2015)

This caliber of analysis has some even concluding that micro-apartments, with their necessary shared household facilities (full kitchens, laundry, green space, etc.), are not a product of affordability, but rather young people's love of the "sharing economy" (ibid.). "My father is a buy-everything-gadget guy. I'm the opposite," one micro-apartment dweller said, clarifying his rationale. "I'm very minimalist" (quoted in Koch 2013). Often micro-apartments can be short-term housing. Lessees generally live in them for only 1 to 2 years. While conventional apartment renters renew their leases 57 percent of the time, it tumbles to 41 percent for micro-dwellers (Young 2017). Further, 82 percent of those searching for apartments did not, out of a preexisting lifestyle affinity, initially plan to find a micro-apartment, suggesting that the capacity to more affordably plays a large, often-neglected force driving these thrifty, tenement-like units (ibid.).

Tiny houses are a rural or suburban iteration of this urban micro-apartment trend. They are also, relatedly, reminiscent of mobile homes. Initially, during the 1920s and 1930s, *manufactured* mobile homes were a purely recreational commodity for the well-off, but more and more working class people built them themselves from timber and canvass and lived in them

permanently, earning the class-based moniker “gasoline gypsies” (White 2000, 4), a term since appropriated by the tiny house enthusiasts (“Gypsy BLISS Wagons” n.d.; “Gypsy Wagons Archives” 2020). Such makeshift housing solidified during the Great Depression as the laborers sought employment across the country. By the mid-1930s and prior to the more expansive “Second New Deal,” even “low cost” housing remained out of reach for nearly 80 percent of US households. The sale of mobile homes doubled between 1937-8 (E. Sullivan 2018, 37). As they became a permanent feature on the landscape, “campgrounds” – with their gesture toward temporality – were replaced by permanent “parks,” thus birthing the first “trailer park.”

The class character and mobility of mobile or manufactured home dwellers soon produced social and spatial stigma. By the 1940s, municipalities had begun passing exclusionary zoning laws, often outlawing trailer parks within city limits (*ibid.*, 40).<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, manufactured homes remained and were gradually codified into the Federal Housing Authority throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Though often taken, like tiny houses and micro apartments, as the result of consumer preference, “the proliferation of manufactured housing has grown precisely in tandem with the decline in direct federal support for affordable housing” (E. Sullivan 2018, 46). Despite their legal recognition, trailer or mobile home parks are disappearing as suburbs stretch further from the city center and park owners sell their land. The lives of dwellers are rendered even more precarious as manufactured homes are excluded from traditional mortgages, and so dwellers must finance their purchases as one does a car loan, resulting in

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<sup>93</sup> A massive wave of construction emerged during World War II to house workers producing for the war effort, and the cheapest option was manufactured housing. Rushed through production, the association of trailers with shoddiness only bolstered the class stigmatization (E. Sullivan 2018, 41).

higher interest and default rates and less consumer protections (E. Sullivan 2018, 51). This lack of more affordable financing options is yet another parallel with tiny houses.<sup>94</sup>

The current popularity of RVs as permanent housing has, reminiscent of the Great Depression years, reemerged. “There have always been itinerants, drifters, hobos, restless souls,” Bruder starts in her book, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*:

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 RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible choices that face what used to be the middle class...For many the answer seemed radical at first: *You can’t give yourself a raise, but what about cutting your biggest expense? Trading a stick-and-brick domicile for life on wheels?* (Bruder 2017, xii)

As with tiny house dwellers, these “nomads” confront flat wages, few benefits, increasing medical expenses, rising house costs, and retirement savings obliterated by the 2008 financial crisis, and are forced to “unshackle themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America” (ibid.). Nevertheless, Bruder (2017, 78) found that such austere living is couched as a lifestyle choice among many who remake their geography according to the spatiality of seasonal capital. One of the main proponents of living a life on the road, who runs the popular blog *cheaperliving.com*, framed nomadic living – shuffling from one seasonal job to the next – as the realization of a greener and more minimalist lifestyle, of “living more with less” to achieve “freedom, self-actualization, and adventure.” A key theme running through this

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<sup>94</sup> In postwar era, trailer parks were further associated with the poor working class. Those wealthier, conversely, sought recreational vehicles (smaller, lighter, more mobile) to take their families on cross country road trips, as captured by the iconic Winnebago. Meanwhile, countercultural types created van campers and converted old school buses to express their disdain for and escape from “middle class culture” and its connection to suburban homeownership and steady work (White 2000, 171–72), thus preceding the current fascination with living out of vans (“#vanlife”) and school buses (“skoolies”).

discourse, of course, is how overconsumption results in poverty and debt. “Going shopping because you’re bored is the quickest way to see your money disappear with nothing to show for it,” one post on the blog read (Caper 2010). After quoting Thoreau and Benjamin Franklin, a related post offered practical advice on how to “break the spending addiction” (“How to Make and Budget Money” n.d.).

### **Escaping debt**

Like Bruder’s nomads, tiny house enthusiasts tend to blame their financial anxiety upon prior misdeeds. Bound by neoliberal ideology, the need for such savvy budgeting, tiny house enthusiasts argue, generally originate with their own lack of forethought, lack of humble resourcefulness and, perhaps most importantly, lack of delayed gratification and the capacity to save (Ehrenreich 2020, 43). Brittany Felix, known in the movement for her website *Simply Tiny Freedom*, offers a telling example. In *Tiny House Magazine*, she writes candidly:

I’m going to start this with a pretty bold statement: I think anyone who says, “Money doesn’t equal happiness” is, at least partially, full of crap. I understand the general concept behind that statement and I do agree with the old cliché about the best things in life being free. However, being loved by my husband didn’t stop the collection agencies from harassing me on a daily basis when I was several months behind on everything. Enjoying a beautiful afternoon stroll through the woods didn’t stop the shame I felt when I couldn’t come up with my half of our mortgage payment several months in a row. Snuggling with my puppy on the couch didn’t erase the guilt I felt when I had to postpone the knee surgery I needed after tearing my ACL because I didn’t have the money to pay for it. (Felix 2015, 28)

While Felix could easily target her criticism upon several social factors: stagnating wages insufficient for homeownership; astronomical tuition/predatory interests rates (she also had student loans); regressive tax policies; and a brutal, commodified healthcare system along with inadequate or nonexistent health insurance due to steady decline of worker benefits, she blames

herself for overconsuming. “For some,” she writes, “shopping is an addiction as strong as cigarettes and alcohol. You have to completely reprogram how you look at the world around you with respect to money. The positive with working to become debt free is that you eventually replace the addiction of spending money with the addiction of paying off your debt.” What is more, she not only loses the social stigma of debt, but also gains a “perk” through the additional “praise” from her “loved ones” (ibid. 28-9).<sup>95</sup> Debt is an external sign of internal dysfunction.

One of my informants, Marco, interrogated his indebtedness and arrived at nearly the same conclusion. Marco aspires to build a tiny house or converted school bus (“skoolie”) but lacks the money to do so. He graduated college five years ago and currently works full-time at a nature center in New York state. “It’s a great job; it pays relatively well. It’s a county job so we get benefits out of it too which is very nice.” Yet Marco still struggles to get by, particularly with his \$30,000 (and rising) student loan debt.

With the debt that I have, the job pays for basically everything that I need with the  *tiniest*  amount of savings that I can put toward it [debt]. So as of right now, I also work one day a week at a café, which gives me a little bit more, but still not enough to really pay down debt. So there’s a possibility that I get another [third] job in the future, which is not the most ideal situation, but at the very least I want to hammer down my debt as far as possible over the next couple of years to even make the dream of owning, creating a tiny house or skoolie even remotely possible.

For Marco, then, paying off debt is a prerequisite to building a skoolie or tiny house. Once he lives in his low-cost tiny house or converted school bust, Marco can more quickly reduce his debt so as to achieve “financial freedom.” In addition to student loan debt, Marco blames his debt on “really poor life choices in my early 20s with credit cards. It’s sort of the stereotypical millennial story, I guess.” Nevertheless, he still seeks “the whole American dream of owning

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<sup>95</sup> For similar examples, see the writing of Odom (2013), Lora Higgins (2016), Hari Berzins (2016), Sicily Kolbeck (2014), and dweller Lisa Boyle as interviewed on *Tiny House Expedition* (Stephens 2019c).

your own house, white picket fence, family, etc.” Rather than only seeing his relative poverty as individual shortsightedness, he also understands it as a generational condition. “That dream has changed a little bit for my generation,” he frets. These alternate forms of housing are “a more attainable goal than going to buy a house with property” and perhaps his only chance at homeownership, even if that home is a bus. A tiny house or skoolie, for Marco, offers the chance at fulfilling the typical American Dream, but one downgraded to the point where he – an indebted college graduate – might eventually afford it.

Most reality TV highlights tiny houses set into foundations, often as vacation homes nestled amidst breathtaking rural landscapes or accessory dwelling units set in the expansive backyards of traditional houses. Just like most reality TV, they do their best to dramatize what is in reality a string of low-stakes decisions by the well-off. To just take from one season of *Tiny House Nation*, the utmost trepidations range from whether a musician’s grand piano could possibly fit in a tiny house, to whether a woman’s shoe collection could fit, to whether a “party bar” and treadmill could fit (so the mom can “stay fit”). If you look beyond network TV, a handful of series hosted on YouTube exist. Though focused on house tours and design aspects, they occasionally profile dwellers at a depth that reveals the thriftier side of the tiny house movement.

Jenna Spesard, a white woman in her forties, had her tiny house featured on *Tiny House Expedition*. Her episode, titled “Woman Builds Superb Tiny House to Pursue Her Dreams,” was posted in November 2019 and as of writing has 341,570 views. The episode summary outlines how Spesard “built her tiny house to pursue her passions for journalism and travel,” adding, for the DIY crowd, that her “cozy THOW [tiny house on wheels] is on the extra-tiny side [165

square feet]” so “the space is incredibly efficient.” Although certainly a happy ending, the initial impetus for Jenna’s tiny house decision is absent from her episode, so one has to explore her blog, *Tiny House Giant Journey*, to get the full story. “Five years ago I was working paycheck to paycheck at a miserable job. I was never able to save money, pay off my debt, or go on vacation. I was treading water and putting my dreams on hold,” Spesard recounts. She describes a life of precarious drudgery, a life of cramped horizons concretized by the humbling shadow of debt (most of it from student loans). Spesard offers two rationales for her predicament. First, she was duped by societal norms, naively led to a financial nightmare. How did she arrive at this situation? “Because society told me that I needed to live this way. It’s what you do after college. It’s the “norm.” But she also blames her uncontrollable consumerism. “I gaze around my apartment at all my ‘stuff;’ I’m amazed,” Spesard starts one *Tiny House Magazine* article. She then lists her “stuffed closet” and garage full of unused items. “I spent every cent I earned on inflated rent and craft beer.” Ultimately, Spesard discovers the source of her discontent in the sins of ignorance and incontinent gluttony, and the passageway to freedom (of finances, from work) illuminated by tiny house enlightenment – and drastically trimming her social-reproductive overhead through living “efficiently.”

Though tiny houses can resolve all sorts of debt, dwellers and advocates predictably emphasize the mortgage debt of too-big houses. Here is Jay Shafer (2009, 28) on the topic:

For most Americans, big houses have come to symbolize the good life; but, all symbolism aside, the life these places actually foster is more typically one of drudgery. Mortgage payments can appropriate thirty to forty percent of a household’s income...At this rate, an oversized house can start to look more like a debtor’s prison than a home.

Dweller Chrissy Stanley (2015, 59), owner of the blog *A Tiny Home Companion*, refers to mortgages as “a soul sucking expense we would have been saddled with for 30 years!” Patricia Foreman (2019, 23) grieves how “Just the sheer size of the modern American dream home means that families often require two incomes, and sometimes even more, to pay the mortgage.” Given the amount of debt serviced through work, “mortgages can feel like indentured servitude,” echoes Carrie Caverly (2014, 52) of Clothesline Tiny Homes. Featured in serial tiny house tour documentary *Living Big in a Tiny House*, Oliver and Cera, owners of Summit Tiny Homes, arrived at a similar framing. “We got married, bought the big house. We were working so hard to pay the big bills on the big house and we just found we lost touch with what we really enjoyed in life, which was hiking, climbing, and just getting outside and enjoying nature. So we were looking for a change” (quoted in Langston 2019a).<sup>96</sup>

### **Financial Self-Help**

As the general self-help movement blossomed along with neoliberal policies in the 1970s, the same holds true for financial self-help. In both cases, the degradation of working class life is inextricable from an individualization of economic precarity, a situation to be overcome by perennially remaking oneself as employable (McGee 2005; Chertkovskaya et al. 2013) or hoping to depend less upon such unstable employment through saving money and then investing it (Fridman 2017).<sup>97</sup> The tiny house movement’s financial guru of choice appears to be Dave Ramsey, a former real estate investor who over-specified and went bankrupt in the 1980s.

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<sup>96</sup> See also: “Solo Mother's Charming Tiny House Gives Financial Freedom” (Langston 2020).

<sup>97</sup> As with tiny house living, minimalism, and mindfulness, financial self-help likewise frames itself in spiritualistic terms. “Financial freedom does not belong to the economic sphere only.” It is tied “to realization, transcendence, fulfillment. Acquiring the strength, knowledge, and discipline to have your money work for you is meant to provide the crucial individual autonomy without which one simply cannot be the architect of one’s life” (Fridman 2017, 5).

Along with briefly hosting *The Dave Ramsey Show* on the Fox Business Network (2007-10), he is best known for his radio program of the same name. Airing across the United States and Canada and reproduced through his podcast, Ramsey is, after Sean Hannity and the late Rush Limbaugh, the third most popular talk-radio personality in the United States with more than 13 million weekly listeners (Alberta 2018). His podcast is but one part of his Dave Ramsey Solutions empire. Financial Peace University, which sells classes for \$129 apiece, is offered online and taught in over 5,000 locations throughout the United States while Ramsey is the bestselling author of nine books, the most recent being *The Total Money Makeover*.<sup>98</sup>

Within the financial self-help world, Ramsey is best known for his “debt snowball method,” an apparently proven tactic wherein indebted households pay off loans starting from smallest and most manageable to largest and most overbearing, thereby spurring momentum and motivation at the outset (Alberta 2018). After one conquers their debt, the next step is to save and invest to “let your money work for you” and not the other way around. Steeped in evangelical ideology, Ramsey views debt as a reflection of individual character flaws, past impetuosity that can be overcome through taking a good long look in the mirror and altering “spending habits.” Ramsey suggests that people must “attack debt with ‘gazelle intensity,’” a phrase he coined “after reading Proverbs 6:4–5, ‘Give no sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids. Deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, and like a bird from the hand of the fowler’” (“The Truth About Getting Debt Help” n.d.).

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<sup>98</sup> Through Ramsey’s political lobbying, Alberta (2018) explains, “a lot of students these days are taking Ramsey’s class, and not always by choice: Five states require high schoolers to take some financial planning curriculum before graduation.”

Ramsey avoids such an aggressive stance when it comes to wages, benefits, or social reproductive costs (Alberta 2018; Bond 2019), stressing that “consumer debt is not an income problem” because “as household income increased, so did the average amount of debt” (“The State of Debt Among Americans - from Ramsey Solutions Research” n.d.). In a response to one listener’s concern about paying off debt with such low wages, Ramsey scolded: “Don’t be like all those folks who complain about crap like stagnant wages and won’t get up off their stagnant butts to change their lives” (“Pay It off - Ask Dave” n.d.). Along this line of thinking, Ramsey (2018) rants that “the key to changing your life is changing your thinking. Start...by losing the victim mentality. You are not a victim. You are not a victim of big corporations. You’re not a victim of Wall Street. You’re not a victim of capitalism. You’re not a victim of wealth inequality. You’re not a victim of racism. You’re not a victim.” Though pitched as a folksy everyman, Ramsey, whose net worth approaches \$55 million, endorsed the Trump Administration’s 2017 tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy (Horsley 2019). At the same time, he argues forcefully against political solutions to indebtedness and poverty – again harping on the evils of “victimhood.” “When people tell you you’re a victim and they have the solution – that makes them the hero. Do not let a politician become the hero in your story. You are the hero of your story” (Ramsey 2018). Each person is personally responsible for their financial problems – and it all comes from changing your mentality, that is, taking his seminars, reading his books, and constantly sticking to a regimen.<sup>99</sup> The irony, of course, is that Ramsey’s business model –

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<sup>99</sup> As Casey Bond (2019) describes in detail, the personal finance industry is unregulated and the advice given often a disguised advertisement for particular financial products. It is also patently incapable of helping the very poor escape debt. Most success stories of Ramsey and his ilk (Suze Orman, Mr. Money Moustache) pertain to those with high paying jobs (ibid.). For example, one caller asked Ramsey for advice on how she and her husband, who together earn \$15,000 annually through their two small businesses, could pay off their \$38,000 in student loan debt and their \$39,000 mortgage. Ramsey admitted that “You have an income problem. You really can’t attack either one of these debts at that income level when you have kids.” The answer? “You need to get this \$15,000 to \$70,000 as fast as you can with your small businesses. If that’s not working, go get a real job, because you guys are starving to death. Then you’ll be able to attack that student loan with a vengeance” (“Starving with Debt - Ask Dave” n.d.).

not unlike other financial advisers – depends upon the continued desperation of his consumers, a political-economic condition he earnestly reproduces through his barking support of moralizing fiscal conservatism and blaming poverty on the poor.

Chuck and Becky, who have lived full-time in a 284-square-foot tiny house on wheels, credit much of their financial security to Ramsey’s teachings. Originally from Memphis, Tennessee, part of the reason they recently picked-up their lives and moved to Waco, Texas was because the Lonestar State has less stringent codes and zoning regulation. It is, in other words, “a little bit more tiny home friendly than Tennessee.” Nevertheless, currently they and their tiny house reside in a rural RV park. “Here outside city limits you can have whatever you want, but you’re probably driving 30 minutes or an hour or whatever to get to work,” Chuck complains. Even still, their tiny house on wheels is, like most, not fully legal. “We kinda are doin’ like a catch us if you can kinda thing.”<sup>100</sup> By the end of the interview, Chuck and Becky had noted several reasons they chose to live in a tiny house. Key among them were ownership and its direct relation to customizability (discussed more below). More muted among their explanation but clearly an important reason was how their reduced housing costs helped them save money. “We’ve been doing Dave Ramsey just trying to pay off debt. With the tiny home it’s helped us pay off like \$50-60,000 in debt.” As is the case with several advocates and dwellers I spoke with, Chuck and Becky discussed issues of debt and its relationship to tiny houses in less personal

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<sup>100</sup> Tiny houses set into foundations are legal in several counties throughout Texas, including the city of Spur, which is the first self-proclaimed “Tiny House Friendly” town in the United States (“Texas” 2019). Even if Chuck and Becky find land and set it into foundation, though, tiny houses in Waco have to be at least 300-square-feet, a threshold they barely miss. “If you [the state] can tell that we’re missing 16-square-feet, then we’ll own up to it and do what we have to make it legal. For us it’s trying to get that loophole.”

terms. Concluding the interview, I asked what else I needed to know about the tiny house movement. Both drew my attention back to debt. Becky spoke first:

I do think a lot of the indebted people are getting in [to tiny houses]. The student loan crisis is a factor. Not only is the student loan crisis a thing, I think people are just in a lot of debt...The people who are paying on their student loans and their debt in general, I feel like they go to tiny homes and RVs and stuff like that because it's cheaper than having to buy another house.

Chuck then cut-in:

It's significantly cheaper compared to a mortgage. You can rent a spot at a campground for like \$300 to \$350 a month, and that's much cheaper than a one-bedroom apartment, which I think the average one is like \$800. I mean, I put it all to debt because we're trying to pay-off debt and I feel like it's all connected.

Likely referring to his Dave Ramsey teachings, Chuck blames this debt on simple financial ignorance and lack of forethought. "If they would teach the young about debt and how to use it to your advantage and not, like, 'Oh I still have \$1,000 in my checking, I can get a car,' then people won't always think they're broke and have to get into smaller houses or RVs or mobile homes or rent for years."

The story of the Bushes, and how they paid off \$125,000 in debt through "tiny living," is told at least a couple times within tiny house related media, appearing on both the Tiny House Lifestyle podcast (Waldman, n.d.) and the serial documentary Tiny House Expeditions (Stephens 2018). Their story was later profiled on CNBC's "Millennial Money" series (Martin 2020), which either features young millionaires or debt-burdened millennials cutting their expenses to the point of newsworthiness. Kothney-Issa and Marek Bush fit into the latter category. As with Chuck and Becky, the recently wed 28-year-old Black couple used the teachings of Dave

Ramsey to combat their “six toxic mindsets of debt.”<sup>101</sup> In addition to student loans, their high credit rating – as they tell it – infected them with consumer mania and their debt just kept rising. They started looking into tiny houses as a means to put Ramsey’s web seminars to work. Despite their high credit rating, financing their tiny house was, as Marek put it, “quite the runaround.” But, after a while, they found a builder who offered them a seven year loan at \$800 per month with “low interest.”

This only added to their debt in the short-term, so they began taking up extra “side hustles” in their quest to become debt-free. Kothney-Issa, or Ko, working as a restaurant server and bartender, added part-time gigs as a tutor and lifeguard. Marek, who already worked as a security guard, took on overnight warehouse shifts with UPS, occasional restaurant jobs, but most of all as a delivery man for Domino’s Pizza. And these delivery shifts were often the only time the newlyweds could see each other. “I would ride in the car while he delivered pizza, that was our time together,” Ko recalls (quoted in Martin 2020). “At first we were like, ‘Let’s get as many jobs as possible’ so we were doing three at a time,” Marek explains. “But when you introduce the third, it’s tricky with scheduling, and you don’t have enough availability, and then you end up not getting enough hours – or you’re not sleeping enough! Two jobs was really what we found worked best,” he concludes. “We could take off one day per month!” Ko interjects. “Self-care!” she jokes (quoted in Waldman, n.d.).

After two years of living out of their tiny house, spending as little as possible, and working several low-wage jobs, the Bushes eventually paid back all their debt and are

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<sup>101</sup> The “6 Toxic Mindsets” include: “1. No real concept of re-payment obligations; 2. You ‘HAVE’ to go into debt to go to school; 3. I’ve got the credit, so I can ‘afford’ it; 4. If it’s 0% interest, it’s not a big deal; 5. I ‘deserve’ this (debt rationalizations); 6. Hubby did it so why can’t I? (Hubby: I owe her that)” (Bush and Bush 2020).

considering selling their tiny house for an estimated \$59,000 to be used for a down payment on a traditional house. In the meantime, the couple has leveraged their minor tiny house celebrity status by starting a YouTube channel with, as of writing, nearly 30,000 subscribers tuning in to see anything from saving techniques to camping trips to wedding anniversaries. Their newest hustle, the channel also sells T-shirts, tank-tops, sweatshirts, mugs, cell phone cases, tote bags, and a sticker, all of which feature the custom “Living Tiny with the Bushes” logo or “Live intentionally. Laugh while you’re at it” (Bush and Bush 2020). Together, these ventures earn them about \$500 monthly (Martin 2020).

Though both couples – Chuck and Becky and the Bushes – tackled their debt through Dave Ramsey and severe budgeting, the Bushes and subsequent media coverage narrate their story as one of overconsumption corrected through sober saving. “We had a really nice luxury downtown apartment and we were like ‘We gotta be serious about this, we gotta scale-down our living a little bit’” (quoted in Waldman, n.d.). CNBC reporter Emmie Martin (2020) likewise points out how the Bushes “lived well, taking elaborate vacations and renting a two-bedroom loft...for \$1,200 per month in Jacksonville, Florida.” Given that the average apartment rent in Jacksonville is \$1,109 (“Average Rent in Jacksonville” 2020), it is debatable just how luxuriously they lived or elaborately they vacationed. It is more likely that the Bushes, earning just \$56,000 annually between them, which falls well short of the median US household income of \$68,704 (Semega et al. 2020), would have been struggling no matter their consumption levels. Overconsumption, though, simultaneously accords with the typical road to “financial freedom” narrative pushed by tiny house movement (more below) and news media alike while downplaying the depressing reality of low wages, relentless work, and unaffordable social reproduction endured by a young working class Black couple.

The cases of Chuck and Becky and the Bushes highlight one of the tiny house movement's main prescriptions for indebtedness: get a tiny house because they cost less. Josh Becker (2013a, 19) nicely summarizes this line of thinking:

Smaller homes are less expensive to purchase and less expensive to keep (insurance, taxes, heating, cooling, electricity, etc.). Living small means you go into less debt and less risk. Dozens of on-line calculators will help you determine "how much house you can afford." These formulas are based on net income, savings, current debt, and monthly mortgage payments. They are also based on the premise that we should spend "28% of our net income on our monthly mortgage payments." But if we can be more financially stable and happier by only spending 15%... then why would we ever choose to spend 28?

Lora Higgins (2016, 13) of the blog and life coach company *Tiny House Teacher*, reflects on how this process worked for her:

Living tiny has helped me escape the earn to spend treadmill. Before I downsized, a considerable amount of my monthly income went to housing expenses. These included my mortgage payment, homeowners association fees, utilities, upkeep and maintenance on my primary home. I could afford these things, but I never felt like I could get ahead with my monthly budget. Living tiny has allowed me to cut my actual living expenses by more than half, which has freed up a considerable chunk of change each month. I have been able to use this money to pay off debt, save in my emergency fund and have more fun!

Reduced square footage "creates an echo chamber of cost reduction" (Hulleman 2014). Another echo is, as mentioned above, how the "tight box" of a tiny house encourages less consumption.

Higgins (2016, 13) adds how "living tiny has encouraged me to spend less! I spend less partly because I have less space to fill...smaller spaces encourage more intentional purchases."<sup>102</sup> The movement's advice for individual indebtedness clearly goes beyond just getting a tiny house.

The tiny house is but part of an overall project of budgeting through reduced consumption. "The biggest benefit of our tiny house adventure," Odom (2013, 7) writes in *Tiny House Magazine*, "is

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<sup>102</sup> "Consider buying [a tiny house] way below what you think you can afford to create a financial buffer for yourself," Johnson (2008, 75) similarly argues.

that we have become a ‘cash-on-the-barrel’ family. We have dug ourselves out of personal debt, have taken control of our spending, and re-prioritized our needs vs. our wants.”

Unsurprisingly and just like minimalism, most discussions of debt and saving center around step-by-step self-help instruction. Hari Berzins is the author of *Coming Home: Letters from a Tiny House* and part purveyor of the blog *Tiny House Family*. The latter is, like most tiny house blog operators, also a money-making endeavor where Berzins offers classes on “Radical Money: Making Your Debt-Free Dreams Reality.” Although Berzins charges \$197 to enroll (Berzins n.d.), she offers some free advice in her article “5 Ways to Save for Your Mortgage-free Dream Home.” And Berzins (2016, 38) has some credibility given that her family reportedly lost both their business and home in the 2008 crisis, leaving them with only “\$300 to our name.” She offers this advice:

- Use a spreadsheet to “track your spending;”
- Account for every dollar by “cut[ing] small change items;”
- Cook at home (“Most mindless money expenditures are food related. Let’s face it, when we’re hungry or have a craving, the budget isn’t top of mind”);
- “Use a buying moratorium control sheet. Before you make a purchase aside from groceries, write it on your control sheet. Add the date. Don’t buy it for at least 30 days. The longer you wait, the more the urge to buy will leave. Often when you wait, you will find other items that can serve the same purpose, or you’ll find what you need in a thrift store, on Craigslist, or you’ll realize you can do without;”
- “Make drastic life choices: Revising your lifestyle sometimes calls for big changes like selling your house, getting rid of your cell phone, selling your car and buying an older one, getting rid of your stuff in storage, moving to a new community, getting a roommate, etc. This type of change is jolting, but is the quickest way to edit your lifestyle, and begin to really sock away the money” (Berzins 2016, 38)

The financial situation of Berzins and other desperate debtors reveals just how much thrift undergirds tiny house simple living. Although enthusiasts’ discourse of gluttonous McMansion residents sees indebtedness as an outgrowth of vice or ignorance, case after case highlights how poverty – not misused wealth – compels cost-cutting. Detailed budgeting, continually trimming

away at tiny expenses, upending your living situation, and cutting out basic commodities, including those necessary for social reproduction and work (i.e. cell phone, car, groceries), is chalked-up to editing one's "lifestyle," of coming around to a new way of life, rather than enduring the fallout of an immense capitalist crisis.

### **Financial freedom and tiny house hustles**

The 2019 Colorado Tiny House Festival occurred over several days in late June, taking place on county fairgrounds in Brighton, a small city just a short drive from Denver. Often sparsely attended, it was unseasonably cold during the festival, raining just enough to be miserable but not enough to call it a day. (By the end of each day, every tiny house and skoolie featured shuffling footprints of mud.) Claspings a coffee sold by a vendor who poured cups from the back of her converted van, I hustled to plastic folding chairs protected by few tents facing a squat, drafty little stage. The speaker is Chris Penn, a 30-something man with a full dark beard, bundled up with a tightly-hooded sweatshirt and beanie. Penn explains that he is a skoolie owner, and also the star and producer of "Tiny Home Tours" on YouTube. Penn has spent the last ten years on the road, traveling for months at a time and, when the money ran out, parking long enough to find a job in food service, retail and so forth. After graduating college, he spent \$18,000 to convert the yellow school bus he originally bought for \$3,000 at an auction.

Penn's topic is financial independence, specifically "How to Make Five Figures a Month" through living in a tiny house, van, or skoolie. "The first years on the road was me basically bartending. It was the way that I could make quick cash in a city, and then this whole YouTube thing got me down the rabbit hole," Penn started. Over time, he was able to "monetize it," taking five months to get his first \$100 check from YouTube. "I'm not a professional," Penn

cautions. “This is just how I’ve done it. Like I said, five figures a month; I’ve been making five figures a month for the last 6 months.” The key is having multiple sources of income. At one time, he had nine “side hustles,” or affiliate marketing ventures whereby he posts advertisements on his websites. As his YouTube channel attracted more viewers, Penn became better known in the tiny house/skoolie trend, enabling him to earn money by consulting on bus conversions as well as to put his video editing skills to work on related projects. “I just try to set up as many of those income sources that I can but also set them up passively. So you put the work in, you set up the framework, and then the money just keeps coming in.”<sup>103</sup>

Chris Penn is not the only person in the movement pushing tiny houses, skoolies, etc. as a means for financial freedom, easy cash, or a means to avoid much-reviled waged work.<sup>104</sup> There

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<sup>103</sup> In addition to hosting ads, this passive income – or “making money while you sleep” – derives from Penn hiring people to do his work, by becoming a small-time capitalist himself. “How much is your time worth?” Penn asks the audience rhetorically. Initially Penn priced his labor power at \$20 per hour, but after breaking it down, it was really only \$.07 a minute. Too paltry an amount for his time and talents, Penn explored how to “delegate tasks” to cheap labor found through Upwork, a successful company sourcing subcontracted gig workers from across the globe (now thriving during the pandemic) (Akhtar 2020). “Uh, for example my editor is out of Moldova, he helps me with some edits. And I’m able to pay him \$17 an hour where the monthly income for Moldova is \$250. So he is actually able to quit his job, I’m able to move to new projects. He’s my fulltime editor now, he’s making in one week what he used to make in a month. So his quality of life goes up, my quality of life goes up because I can actually travel, I can spend time with friends, I can do new projects and research these projects. So once I started realizing, okay if I’m able to outsource these tasks for even less, if I value my time at 20 dollars per hour, somebody else can do those tasks.” Though pitched as a win-win, it is questionable whether doing a significant amount of Penn’s work for him at only \$17 per hour, and without the protections and benefits that accompany employee contracts, is anything but exploitative to his full-time, freelance gig worker, especially as the average monthly salary in Moldova is \$1,307.50 US, not \$270 US as claimed (“Moldova Average Salary Survey” 2020). After getting a taste, Penn has also subcontracted workers from the Philippines, and now, with a hired team of videographers, editors, and an assistant to keep track of it all, he does little else than “hold all the keys for the accounts” and “review the [completed] videos.”

<sup>104</sup> Not coincidentally, the financial self-help of tiny houses mirrors the so-called FIRE Movement, or “financial independence, retire early.” In addition to TEDx Talks, FIRE advocates have also been featured on tiny house podcasts (Waldman, n.d.). This is not surprising; the notion of FIRE originated in one of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement’s foundational texts (Maniates 2002; Vanderbilt 1996), Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin’s 1992 book, *Your Money or Your Life* (Kerr 2020). Just like Dave Ramsey, FIRE first demands individualized or familial frugality to pay off debt. Next and to be successful at it – to retire early – FIRE requires squirreling away tens- or hundreds of thousands of dollars by saving between 50-75% of your income. Once savings reach approximately 30 times their yearly expenses, often roughly \$1 million,” they can retire (Kerr 2020). To accumulate this wealth, one must also aggressively invest so as to, as with Penn, garner a continuous, passive income so you may retire in your 30s or 40s. Associated with millennials working in tech or financial sector, even Ramsey is skeptical given that it necessitates at least a six figure income to become a millionaire by the time you hit 40 (Hogan 2015).

are several tiny house TEDx Talks wherein advocates claim the same benefits (see Baker 2011; Henion 2014; A. Morrison 2014; Bryan 2020). As with the Bushes above, a significant number of enthusiasts endeavor to monetize their tiny house experience to a point where they can quit their jobs or only work part-time. Michelle Boyle, who was “living paycheck to paycheck” and seeking a way to retire, recalls her “Ah-hah moment” with tiny house real estate. After reducing her housing costs, she realized “I could reinvest the money that I earned in corporate America” to build and rent five tiny houses through Airbnb so as to “increase my income and reduce my dependency on corporate America” (quoted in Stephens 2019c). Dweller Hari Berzins (2013) gained minor celebrity through her blog *Tiny House Family* and picture-heavy tiny house presence on social media, which she later leveraged into a book project. Now she offers an “e-course” and paid consulting on a variety of topics, from “Mindful Money” to “Simplifying” and “Self Care.” Julia Fowler (2016), who was already hoping to become an online personality through her hair-advice video blog, now incorporates her tiny house lifestyle brand. In addition to instruction on how to stay debt free, she sells t-shirts and stickers. Another article by Alan Hussey Jr. (2016) offered some personal background before drawing readers to his social media accounts featuring tiny house product placements and recommendations. Knowing that many are attracted to tiny houses as Airbnb investments, enthusiast Sarah Murphy (2016, 55) smartly advertises paid advice on how one may become, like her, a profitable tiny house hotelier.

For those on the fence, *Tiny House Magazine* includes advice on monetizing their experience. “Yes, the market is saturated,” Tea Tapson (2015, 55) begins her article, “To Blog or Not to Blog?” “There’s a new tiny house blog popping up every week or two, and they share on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, it’s a regular Transmedia Fest of tiny houses.” Despite this saturation, though: “Certainly anyone who can increase their business should blog, that goes

without saying. Anyone who has or wants to increase their own brand image, particularly those who are already well known in the community, should continue to blog” (ibid.). Thankfully the movement’s flagship publication featured suggestions on “3 Things to Think About When You Work Tiny House Experience into Your Personal Brand.” According to the article’s author Erica Breuer (2016, 51), “personal branding” is “the act of pulling together your experiences, perspectives, and talents, and presenting them in a way that moves you toward what you want,” such as a “new job” or “business venture.” Branding herself as a “career coach,” Breuer explains how “my simple living experience in an RV shows my clients that I’m not only used to thinking differently, but that I’m great at navigating change. Paired with some glowing testimonials, it makes for some pretty compelling proof of what I can do for them when they’re trying to shake things up in their career lives” (ibid., 52). Offering some concrete advice on personal branding, Eric Prine (2014) explains how to best photograph your tiny house for an audience while MJ Boyle’s (2013) “This Tiny House Sponsored By” explains how she, using fellow enthusiast Andrew Odom’s book, *Your Message Here: Learning to Gain Sponsorship for Your Tiny House Build*, could occasionally receive discounted materials for her various tiny house Airbnb listings so long as she advertised their products.

A significant portion of tiny house enthusiasts are not wedded to the romantic escape from the crass commercialism of the marketplace as were Thoreau, the Beats, and countercultural hippies. Instead, they lean into it, evidently unaware of or careless about their blasphemy vis-à-vis the movement’s “patron saint.” In this sense, April Anson’s (2014, 291) worries about the tiny house movement’s promotion of “self-reliant individualism” undercutting “the ostensible goals of tiny house living to consume less and contribute to community more” appear justified. Yet this apparent market-driven bastardization depends upon an inadequate

understanding of what the tiny house movement is and always has been. The Romantic tradition is but one force driving movement, and even that wide-ranging critique is regularly reduced to tiny house aesthetics (i.e. minimalist interior design) and hustling to get some quick cash and pay off debt.

Marketed as budget-minded housing and sought after by the economically anxious and over-worked, those who are forced into self-reliance, there is no leap at all for tiny houses to be propelled by financial motivations, for them to be appreciated as a means to save, earn money, and replace typical work – whether it be through becoming a personally-branded small-time capitalist selling themselves and commodities directly (of services like consulting or souvenir-like objects) or indirectly through advertising and sponsorships on social media and blogs. It is reasonable, as Anson suggests, that Thoreau would shudder at this embrace of advertising and commodified striving. But the tiny house movement, despite its Romantic critique of capitalist production and labor, is not of the mid-1800s. No, it was birthed in and is sustained by a vastly different historical geography, one more in line with the economic precarity and neoliberal ideology that inspired the voluntary simplicity than the more cutting, if still bourgeois, critique of intensifying capitalist social relations, of industrialization supplanting artisanal production, that so concerned Thoreau.

## **Conclusion**

Every working man prefers surrendering the trifling luxury to which he was accustomed to not living at all; prefers a pigpen to no roof, wears rags in preference to going naked, confines himself to a potato diet in preference to starvation. He contends himself with half-pay and the hope of better times rather than to be driven into the street to perish before the eyes of the world.

This passage from Engels' (2009, 89) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which draws from his research conducted while living in Manchester between 1842 and 1844, obviously captures a much more acute material deprivation of the working class than what I have presented above. Tiny houses, as I have stressed repeatedly, are not inhabited by for those so dispossessed to be on the verge of starvation. That said, the political-economic system remains fundamentally the same. Then as now, workers must fetch a price for their commodified labor sufficient to afford commodified housing, food, and other biological necessities. Given the anarchy of capitalist production and distribution, that balance is always temporary. When the price of labor falls relative to the workers housing and means of subsistence, the working class has and continues to either fight back against capital and demand more or, if politics proves impractical at the moment, to make do by surrender their trifling luxuries.

For many dwellers, tiny houses are, if not purely an instance of surrender, a method of tactical retreat, of hanging on until their economic situation improves. Tiny houses are thus one tactic by which the US working class – whose labor power has been steadily devalued since the 1970s and then further dispossessed during the Great Recession – can stay in a type of cheap housing known more for being cute than for being thrifty. This crude material reality nevertheless places tiny houses among other forms of more affordable housing relied – or forced – upon by the working class, rubbing greasy elbows with SROs, manufactured homes, micro apartments, and RVs. As with tiny houses, even if these forms of cheaper housing are spit-shined with the discourse of minimalism and simplicity. Yet the dwellers and enthusiasts discussed in this chapter forthrightly explain how their lifestyle has limited their spending, enabled them to sock away some savings so as to make up for – and finally leave behind – the times past when the price of their social reproductive expenses eclipsed that of their labor power.

Above I refer to this cutting back, this surrendering of trifling luxuries, as lean social reproduction. Although a reaction to a degraded labor market and an absent welfare state, thrifty dwellers still blame indebtedness upon their own personal overconsumption. They react to this situation by constant and detailed budgeting, a practice that always implies cutting out as many consumer expenses as possible. Essentially, tiny house dwellers exclude any means of subsistence that are not immediately necessary for them to reappear at work the next day. “The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc.,” Marx (1978b, 95) writes of such logic, “the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your capital.”

But for those setting up tiny house hustles on their road to financial freedom, the high minded notions of shirking crass commercialism for a life in the woods is, they rightly recognize, not yet something they afford right now. Struggling just to get by, many enthusiasts are not above hawking cheap merchandise or branding themselves to make their lives a bit easier. Just as minimalism ideologically compensates for thrift, recasting individual material necessity into a metaphysical transcendence, it also valorizes the most basic entrepreneurial behaviors proffered by financial self-help gurus. Once again, there is a clear tension between spiritual simplicity amid plenty and entrepreneurial thrift amid poverty.

While this chapter and the previous one explained how enthusiasts seek control through spiritualized and entrepreneurial budgeting, which often requires working and saving harder and harder, the next chapter presents a means of seeking control through escaping commercially-saturated forms of labor, housing, and social interaction. Simple living, for these enthusiasts

entails avoiding mainstream society, not mainly because it is sinfully consumeristic or doing so facilitates your savings, but because it is depressing and dehumanizing – and they have the time and money to do so.

## CHAPTER 6 – DIY DE-ALIENATION AND NOSTALGIC ESCAPISM

Poverty and indebtedness inspired both Thoreau's and Jay Shafer's decision to live simply.

Thoreau's mother encouraged him to become a lawyer and civic leader. Balking at such traditional careers appropriate to his family's wealth and stature, Thoreau charted a less personally alienating path by fleeing as much as possible from the reviled "commercial spirit" permeating the nation, becoming a writer and intellectual. Wary of repeating his father's regular indebtedness, Thoreau could only undertake such an insecure trade by living frugally. Known as a figure of woodsy masculine self-reliance, Thoreau also lived as a "starving artist," felling trees as much as cutting down his expenses. He was dependent upon the generous patronage of Ralph Waldo Emerson to make ends meet (Shi 2007, 141–42). Fittingly, Jay Shafer also sought out an unconventional career path befitting his personal passion. Working as an adjunct art professor at the University of Iowa, Shafer struggled financially. "My first tiny house was the product of me not being able to earn enough money to build a big house or afford much more than very basic rent," he admitted (quoted in Vara 2019).

It can be argued that the poverty of these coronated luminaries of the tiny house movement – just like the justifications for the tiny house movement itself – has been repackaged as the voluntary outcome of spirit-driven countercultural critique, finally casting their lifestyle as one blazed by steadfast erudition rather than destitution. Certainly, the previous two chapters, focused as they are on simplicity-as-economic security, could support this interpretation. But the timeline of these men's biography suggests that their celebration of "voluntary poverty" came after the fact. Their goal, first and foremost, was to avoid what they saw as alienating and stultifying labor.

In this chapter, we confront enthusiasts holding similar justifications for their simple living lifestyle, people who see tiny houses as multifaceted vectors of a less alienating life. Thriftier than traditionally-size home mortgages, and because they compel tight box-type minimalism, the tiny house lifestyle enables one to lessen their dependence upon alienating wage labor and perhaps retire early. The capacity to design and build your own tiny house, moreover, presents an unalienated, self-directed, and ultimately self-affirming form of labor. In addition to already being niche, the customizability of tiny houses, either through do-it-yourself construction or by working closely with contractors, enables dwellers to more fully identify with and express themselves through their tiny houses. This customizability, of course, depends upon ownership, something more easily accomplished because cheaper tiny houses typically have shorter financing periods. Combined with the movement's overall anti-urbanism, the image of self-directed and rural labor practiced by sternly independent homeowners, with homes so small they cannot help but retreat to the romantic outdoors, fosters a nostalgic longing of a more intimate, more moral, and simpler past. Although used in several ways, "community" captures this imaginary historical geography.

### **Defining alienation**

The concept of alienation captures more than the foundation of commodity fetishism. Marx, in his forthrightly humanist project, uses the concept to name the historically-imposed disunity of humankind from nature, and therefore their human nature or "species being." Bertell Ollman (1976, 133–34) summarizes how this basic separation manifests itself across several human relationships:

Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it) – a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards) – a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility have rendered most forms of cooperation impossible) – a break between man and man.

Phrasing it less abstractly, Ollman argues that people have “been reduced to performing undifferentiated work on humanly indistinguishable objects among people deprived of their human variety and compassion” (ibid., 134). Given the understandable fetishization of commodities and the apparent freedom and equality defining the sphere of exchange, alienation’s root most readily reveals itself in the abode of production. Here is Marx (1978b, 74) on the topic:

Labor is *external* to the worker. It does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work he feels outside himself.

In this manner, the natural creative power of human beings becomes appropriated by capital. Thus if we think about alienation as the alienation of use-values, this appears most obviously when the working class must sell the use-value of its labor (more accurately labor power) to capital (Ollman 1976, 185).

But we can also apply the concept of alienation to commodities the working class rents or owns, namely housing. Just as labor is an essential human activity, part of human nature, so too are its creations, most immediately those necessary for the reproduction of life. “Whether we dwell in caves or in condominiums, housing is a universal practice,” Madden and Marcuse (2016, 58–59) argue, “home is an extension and expression of our capacity to create. It takes an infinite variety of forms, but making a home for ourselves is an essential and universal activity.”

The capitalist class, through its commodification of housing, exploits this universal human requirement for its own ends. The use-value of one's shelter, in other words, is regularly alienated from dwellers, usurped by the constant pressure of exchange-value. "Commodified dwelling space is not an expression of the residential needs of those who live in it. It is determined by landlords, sublessor, management companies, real estate developers, banks, bailiffs, and bureaucrats" (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 59).

Although also relevant to homeowners, these relations are most evident in terms of rental housing wherein residents can only alter their living space within strict limits, reserving customization as additional decoration or furniture that must be temporary and erasable. The rental deposit functions as the guardian of rental housings' exchange-value. Just as the creative capacity of labor only expresses itself as profit-producing labor power, the reproductive activity at home can only express itself within the parameters set by the dictates of capital. Madden and Marcuse refer to this process as "residential alienation," noting how the commodity form of housing limits dwellers' expression and, therefore, maximization of its use-value. Residents "struggle to fulfill their individuality and freedom" in housing because it remains "the instrument of someone else's profit, and this confirms their lack of social power" (ibid., 59).

### **Alienating work**

The time spent at work, the irregularity of working hours, and the intensification of the labor process have all increased since the capitalist class's revanchist offensive in the 1970s (McCallum 2020, 7).<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, worker satisfaction surveys unanimously contradict the

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<sup>105</sup> The term "burnout" is itself a product of the 1970s, and workplace stress has recently become recognized by the World Health Organization (Moss 2019).

inhumane drudgery of labor under capitalism suggested by Marx.<sup>106</sup> According to a recent Pew survey, almost 80 percent of workers are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their job while 15 percent are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied.” Unsurprisingly, those satisfied tend to be households earning \$75,000 annually or more in full-time jobs (which have more benefits) while only 39 percent earning \$30,000 or less per year being “very satisfied” (“How Americans View Their Jobs” 2016). A Gallup poll similarly found that these high levels of worker satisfaction remained steady or increased since 1993 (“Work and Workplace” 2020) while worker satisfaction has grown to its highest percentage since 2005 (Weber 2018). What is more, a 2017 Pew survey found that 70 percent of working adults said that their job “provided them with at least some meaning,” 34 percent derived a “great deal of meaning” from their employment while only 29 percent found little or no meaning at their job (“Where Americans Find Meaning in Life” 2018).

It is not nothing that nearly one-third of workers finding no “meaning” at their job, particularly as this result follows decades of human resources departments rebranding work as a place of meaning (Weeks 2011; McCallum 2020). Since the 1970s, the notion of meaningful work became more widespread wages and working conditions fell. During the 1960s, few workers thought of their employment in terms of “meaning.” By the 1980s, nearly half of all US workers cited “meaningful work” as a life goal (McCallum 2020, 143). As with the related ascendance of self-help literature, this “new work ethic saved capitalism from critique by reorienting its objectives to the emotional and psychic needs of the self,” McCallum (2020, 147) writes. Like “meaningful work,” “job satisfaction” itself is always relative and compared to

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<sup>106</sup> In addition to Pew and Gallup, a Conference Board survey came to the same conclusions (Levanon, Li, and Ray 2017).

similar work within the same or similar industries. The unemployment of the Great Recession, according to Dr. Peter Cappelli of the University of Pennsylvania, “reset expectations for a whole generation,” acculturating the working class to cherish employment in general and/or work more for less (quoted in Weber 2017). But this process of lowering expectations can be traced back to the onset of the neoliberal project begun in the 1970s. Or, that companies have merely become better at eliding negative changes to working conditions while highlighting positives (Bellis 2015). Surveys on workplace stress also challenge the rosy picture of an overwhelmingly content working class. According to surveys conducted by the American Institute of Stress (Boyd 2020):<sup>107</sup>

- 40 percent of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful.
- 26 percent of workers said they were “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work.”
- 25 percent view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives.
- 12 percent called in sick because of workplace stress.
- 75 percent of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago.
- 25 percent have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress.
- 9 percent are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace and 18 percent had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year.
- 14 percent of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn’t (2 percent *did* strike coworkers).

Beyond work stress, there are other indicators that “job satisfaction” does not capture the daily tension and indignities endured by workers. For instance, the 2019 “Mind the Workplace” report by Mental Health America found:

- 58 percent of people reported that they were unmotivated at work. Of those, 24 percent were strongly unmotivated.

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<sup>107</sup> These survey statistics are a compilation of three surveys conducted in 1999, 2000, and 2001.

- 66 percent reported that workplace issues negatively affect their sleep, and half of respondents engage in “unhealthy behaviors” to cope with workplace stress, such as drinking, drug abuse, and lashing out.
- Over half of respondents would not recommend their workplace to others, and 1 in 5 were strongly against it.
- Nearly half (45 percent) look for a new job at least several times per week.
- Over half (55 percent) reported they were afraid to take a day off to attend to their mental health. (Nguyen et al. 2019)

These parallel surveys on workplace stress offer a bleaker vision of employment that accords with Marx’s assessment – not to mention the obvious enjoyment of not working (weekends, holidays, etc.) and the desire for retirement (Graeber 2019; McCallum 2020).

These latter set of reports likewise accord with how the tiny house movement evaluates employment.<sup>108</sup> Spokesperson Andrew Morrison (2014), speaking at a TEDx event, explains how he calculated the worktime he and his wife devoted to paying off their full-sized house. “27% of our income, 27% of our time, that’s 10.8 hours out of a 40 hour work week that we’re working just to pay for our housing. That doesn’t include maintenance, utilities, or other costs that could add on so it could easily be closer to two out of every five days that you’re working to pay for your housing. That’s a lot of time.” Though mentioning how overwork can be a product of social structures, Harris (2018b, 43) argues that “Participants of the tiny house movement are countering the work-and-spend cycle” by refining their consumption. In an episode of *Living Big in a Tiny House*, a recently retired couple, Jaimie and Dave, describe their pre-tiny life as a “daily grind.” Dave adds: “You’re stuck in that rut with everybody else, you know. Like, I know we can do something different, I think we can make this happen, let’s go down this path, let’s just try it out” (quoted in Langston 2019c).<sup>109</sup> Dusti Arab (2016, 45–46), a tiny house dweller

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<sup>108</sup> The American Nightmare narrative illustrated much of the disdain for standard salary or wage labor, with references to being on the “hamster wheel” (G. Morrison 2015), “rejecting the 9-to-5 life” (Vader 2016), “working your way up the ladder” (Stephens 2016).

<sup>109</sup> For another video clip of a tiny house dweller ridiculing the “rat race” of work, see Langston (2020).

and “content marketer,” skillfully takes account for and reproduces these anti-work tiny house narratives. “We love the stories where people realize how miserable they are and then take action to change it. They quit their soul-sucking job, they leave an unsatisfying relationship, they buy an around-the-world ticket.” Arab gleefully concludes the article by explaining how she herself quit her job and “now I’m moving to the woods.”

Michael Boyink, who runs the website *Ditching Suburbia*, most forcefully expresses the movement’s framing of and disdain for work in his article “Pretty Prisons, Golden Handcuffs and Caged Birds.” Noting the rise in working hours, and under the subheading “Work Sucks,” he writes in *Tiny House Magazine*:

We have to work that long in order to pay for the golden handcuffs we’ve willingly held out our wrists for, inflated lifestyles on the left hand and ever-bigger homes on the right. But We Aren’t Happy. Big house, big life, fancy office with plenty of perks yet most of us are unhappy with our jobs... It’s not bad to want a nice house in the suburbs. But be careful about the world that you are creating for yourself. Are you building yourself a pretty prison? Accept that job knowing the hours will be long? There’s a brick. Adopt that dog because you can bring it to work? There’s a brick. Sign a loan for a boat? There’s a brick. Sign up for 401K plan with a long vesting period? There’s a brick. Start working later because it’s easy and supper is provided? There’s a brick. Start buying a \$5/day cup of coffee on the way in every day? There’s a brick. (Boyink 2016, 45–46)

Boynik’s article is revealing in several ways. First and just as advocates’ criticisms of environmental destruction and debt invariably redounds to overconsumption, the same holds for the criticism of work. People work hard because they played too hard. Further, his cautioning bricolage elides distinctions between minute and large purchase, suggesting that people may avoid overwork – escape the prison – if only *they* brewed their morning coffee. And this places his argument well within the overarching “American Nightmare” narrative. The first step to escaping the “pretty cage,” Boyink (*ibid.*, 45) concludes, is realizing that “Our culture will sell

you that prison as the ‘American Dream.’” Fortunately tiny house people “know better.” No matter the phrasing, the tiny house movement sees itself as combatting overwork. The workplace merely promises wantonly insufficient rewards in exchange for tedious labor. Work, in short, is to be avoided and replaced with more meaningful activity outside work, where workers can “feel” themselves and escape the spaces of acute alienation.

### **Alienating housing**

Drawing from author and publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* Steward Brand, Jay Shafer notes how commodified housing subverts use-value to exchange-value. Under the heading “Mi Casa Es Su Asset,” Shafer quotes Brand and his distinction between “use value” and “market value” (i.e. exchange value):

If you maximize use value, your home will steadily become more idiosyncratic and highly adaptable over the years. Maximizing market value means becoming episodically more standard, stylish, inspectable in order to meet the imagined desires of a potential buyer. Seeking to be anybody’s house it becomes nobody’s. (quoted in Shafer 2009, 40)

Shafer quickly leaves this line of argument behind, instead focusing – as does Wagner (2017) in her discussion of McMansions – on how “market value” inspires the construction of non-tiny homes. Unlike Wagner, Shafer (2009, 40) concludes that big houses ultimately arise “because they are what most Americans are looking for.” Others, though, highlight the issue of commodified housing – either rental or by paying off a mortgage – as precarious due to their lack of ownership. Carrie Caverly (2014, 52) captures the issue with commodified housing perfectly. “Mortgages can feel like indentured servitude, and when the economy fluctuates and our income declines we see how fragile our ownership really was. Or decades of rental homes where we can never truly settle into our surroundings, never invest in our environment.”

### **Assuaging alienation: ownership and do-it-yourself creativity**

The tiny house movement maintains its Thoreauvian and countercultural roots in its criticism of alienating wage labor and celebration of leisure and meaningful, self-directed work for oneself rather than the market. The lesser costs of a tiny house permit one to work less and relax more. “Being a single mother and having struggled in the past to bring up four children on my own and renting as well,” says one dweller featured on *Living Big in a Tiny House*. “I just thought that this is a good way to escape that rat race and I never really had my own home and I didn’t want to have a huge mortgage and I thought that this was a way to do stuff I really want to do like travel one day, maybe?” (quoted in Langston 2020). Jenna Spesard, who above lamented her pre-tiny house and minimalist life as “working paycheck to paycheck at a miserable job” while “never [being] able to save money, pay off my debt, or go on vacation,” describes tiny houses as “a dream fulfillment movement, something that helps you work towards whatever dream or passion that you have.” Spesard continues, again drawing attention to unfulfilling work: “I get emails almost on a daily basis from someone saying ‘I just watched your video, I’m sitting in my cubicle at work, and it’s just made me really think about my life and what I really wanna do and thank you for that and I just wanted to say thank you’” (quoted in Stephens 2019d).

Outside avoiding alienating labor, many enthusiasts see DIY tiny house construction as a means of creativity and self-expression. For instance, a tiny house was not only a way for Chuck and Becky to save money and pay off debt. It was also a cheap method of becoming homeowners who have the capacity to customize their domestic space. “I think the main thing was just owning it and not being stuck in one place,” Becky said. “And we really do like owning it,

working on it, doing things around the house and knowing that, like, if we do something on it, we're not gonna move out of it next year. We've lived in apartments for so long. It doesn't matter what you do in an apartment; you're gonna move out of it eventually and you don't benefit from it." Chuck elaborates:

Whereas our tiny home we can paint the door, we can fix up something and we, we get the benefits from that until we sell it. It's mainly just the customization of a tiny home, that you can make it into whatever you want it to be as long as you own it. But when you live in an apartment, you gotta turn everything back to normal.

Jess likewise connects ownership with creative labor. "Homeownership is a great way to feel secure about your future," she attests.<sup>110</sup> Tied into ownership – to that security as well as potential for improving the use-value of one's home – is the potential of DIY customization to overcome what is missing in typical work wherein one's product is intangible. "Homeownership is a great way to feel secure about your future," she attests. "If you look at the hierarchy of needs, if you have clothing and shelter you can get to the next level, you know?" Much later in the interview, she reiterates the positives of homeownership on an individual level:

I'd like to see more people in home ownership. It changes a lot of things. I guess maybe just security and knowing you have your own shelter. I guess there's some psychological weight knowing that you're safe and secure. I remember the first place I owned – and it wasn't tiny – but I remember thinking that this place out of the entire planet, that little piece of it was mine, you know?

As such, Jess is eager to see "the growth of maker spaces and the craftsman movement where, you know, especially at a time when robotics are gonna replace us and many of our jobs, right, there's this need to create, to use our hands and make stuff" like "building houses. Whatever it is,

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<sup>110</sup> Claire, a Black woman in her 40s, similarly supports her preference for a tiny house as opposed to living in a studio apartment in terms of ownership. "I would say that the advantage that I have in my tiny house is that I own my house and nobody can take it away from me."

I think there's still some desire that, at the end of the day, you wanna see what you did, you know?"

Andrew, a white man in his late 30s from central New York, bared his emotions as he wistfully confided, over the phone, his dream of living in a tiny house. He spoke from his car during his lunch break, regularly interrupted by echoing exhaust, as he had no time for a face-to-face meeting. The interview began with him expressing his dissatisfaction with his current living space, eventually recognizing, in a resigned tenor, that he only uses his apartment for sleep between work, and so all that "extra space" – his living room and kitchen – is wasted.

I think one of the more understated but bigger pieces of it is that I wanted to do *something* (sheepishly laughs). I wanted to have something to show. I wanted to make something that was useful because I think part of it was, I would spend a lot of time on these conceptual drawings but I don't have a lot to show for the work I do. And this was a physical thing I could do. It's something that I could, I don't know, show off I guess in a sense. But also just be a little more expressive.

As our conversation progressed, his assessment of what this tiny house could do for him was far more expansive than artistic expression; it facilitated an identity and purpose. "How do you expect your lifestyle to change once you get into that tiny house of yours?" I asked.

I think I'll just have a little more, a greater feeling of ownership of my own life. A greater responsibility to myself, I think. I'll be living an alternative lifestyle and I'll have to be a little more accountable to all my decisions, explain why I'm doing what I'm doing, just a little less habit driven of a lifestyle. I don't know. Maybe a little more mindful of things. I also think it will give me a sense of pride on a daily basis, living in a space that I built myself.

Andrew continues to explain that, although he is not "financially pinched right now," it could free up some money to do other things with his life, change careers. He immediately, though, returns how his tiny house could fundamentally reshape his daily life, self-identity and self-esteem. "I think it'll just make me a more interesting person – to the outside world. I like the idea

of doing, you know, presenting on my life experience, and I think having something like this will give me something to speak on, so.”

I met Chad, a man in his mid-20s, through mutual friends. By the time we spoke, he had already built, lived in, and then sold his tiny house and was now living out of his converted school bus. As with Andrew, the DIY potential of tiny houses appealed to him. Chad also hoped to stand-out from his peers by owning his own home, a personal achievement signaling adulthood, moral superiority (see Silva 2015). But seeking out social connections through a boosting of self-respect (“more accountable to myself”) and self-esteem (“more interesting person”) as Andrew had expressed, was absent. Chad did it to have fun through recreating his dwelling then living in it as a means to more easily travel.

So everyone has their particulars and when you’re in these small spaces, you really need the flexibility of customization. I think that’s why a lot of people design their own houses or have someone do it toward how they live. I think for a mobile house or a trailer it’s kind of cookie cutter banged out and I can see that becoming a little more claustrophobic because you’re going into a small place and it’s telling you kind of how to live, in a way.

The process of building idiosyncratically “is part of the fun. You have this artistic freedom to build exactly the way you want it and to be creative about it.” Simon, my transcendentalist Colorado carpooler, similarly distanced his DIY build from houses “mass produced in a factory” or from “cookie cutter” designs. Instead, building it himself offered a sense of “self-expression” and “craftsmanship” in tiny houses’ “uniqueness” and “originality.”

Others highlight a sense empowerment as they build their own home. “In an age of experts and specialization,” Logan Smith (2013, 33) argues in his article, “Tiny House DIY Ethos,” “most of us surrender to the complexity of a new problem and pay to have a professional

repair the issue for us. However, there is something about living small and striving for simplicity that has changed my perspective and given me a sense of empowerment.” Tiny house academic Mary Murphy (2014, 59) contents that “tiny houses are incredibly empowering. I can certainly attest that waking up in a house I built with my own hands has changed my perspective on the world. I start each day with a sense that anything is possible and dreams really can come true.”

Matt, a white man in his 30s featured on a web-based documentary series *Living Big in a Tiny House* offers a similar perspective but through a coming of age narrative. “In some ways this home for me was a rite of passage,” he began. “Not that I would never have considered myself a man before but there’s something that happened after completing your own shelter, your own space.” Matt continues:

There’s a maturing that happened, an aging of the wine and I feel more settled within myself after competing this house. And I think a big part of that is because I didn’t know if I could do it, I didn’t know how to do it and proving to myself that I could and now living in the fruits of those labors is an affirmation for me that, again, the impossible is not impossible and what you set your mind to – more likely than not – you can do it. (quoted in Langston 2019b)

Another DIY builder, Kim, a white woman in her fifties who had her story presented on YouTube channel *Tiny House Tours*, also found empowerment:

I guess what I’m targeting, for women especially who are going to be on their own, no matter what age, don’t give up your dreams, especially if you don’t think you can build it out. I hear so many people say, “I could never do that.” Well, I did it so anyone can do it because I don’t have any experience whatsoever in building. You can get people to help. You can get a lot of information off the internet and you can get lots of advice from people like me who have done it and can give you advice. (*After Divorce She Built Her DIY Tiny House to Start a New Life on the Road* 2019)

Steve is now in his 40s, living in a 450 square-foot garage in his parents backyard that they had converted into a fully functional accessory dwelling unit. Not content with the accessory

dwelling unit (ADU), and preferring to find his own place away from his parents, Steve decided to put together \$20,000 in savings and build his own tiny house on wheels. He first attended a weekend tiny house construction workshop for \$400 with another 100 or so attendees. He had planned on purchasing a “shell” (walls and roofing), but the cost – between \$13,000 to \$15,000 – was beyond his budget. For a short time, he hired a friend of a friend to help him construct the shell at \$50/hour. Since then Steve has been slowly finishing the interior himself, learning as he goes, relying on the free labor of friends and family, using their tools, open space, and so forth. “Everything was like five times harder and more detailed than I thought it would be,” Steve said with exhaustion. “This has been totally beyond – there’s been a lot of tears, a lot of frustration.” He is now \$4,000 in debt.

Steve remains undaunted, though, stressing the latent meaning behind the DIY project. He describes himself as “an idea-guy, a dreamer-guy” and “a creative person.” But, he grieves, “I’ve never been able to build anything and make anything happen. This to me seemed like a project that was possible, right?” No matter the debt and annoyance, the undertaking itself was both a singular outlet of creative energy and a sense of power through creation. “Building it yourself is the medicine of it. It’s the journey of it. That’s where a lot of the transformation of it happens, that empowerment. You eventually feel *empowered*. I built a shed, I built a bed, I just feel like I can get out my tools and just whip something out. I feel confident that I can create something with wood in the three-dimensional world that we live in, which is really a great feeling. So, to me that’s been the most life-transforming thing and the most important piece is *building it yourself*. Taking that step into the unknown of, like, I’m actually going to become a builder.”

The popularity of “craftmanship,” exuded by the tiny house movement’s promotion of DIY construction, harkens back to the mid-1800s Arts and Crafts movement its criticism of industrial production and alienated wage labor. Unlike the movement’s key founder, William Morris (Thompson 1977), the tiny house movement fails to move from a criticism of mass industrial production to a critique of capitalist social relations in their totality. Nevertheless, DIY offers a form of work outside wage labor. It and its near-synonyms – “maker” and “craftsman” and “artisan” – promise a more hands-on, non-desk-bound experience of personally useful concrete labor. “Maker,” a term and social role finding popularity under neoliberal capitalism, depicts itself as “an autonomous creator” that, by buying their own tools and materials for fashioning use-values, permits unalienated production. The “DIY movement” similarly proceeds as basic home repair but also something of a countercultural, low-waste, and anti-consumerist ethos encapsulated by the tiny house movement.

In this way, DIY is a way of being in the world; it is a lifestyle. It is also, therefore, a particular sort of consumption – and one rising in popularity (Comm 2017). In their analysis of DIY-based consumer behavior (i.e. buying the materials required for DIY projects), Wolf and McQuitty (2011) confronted explanations little different from what I found among tiny house enthusiasts. DIY projects were engaged in by people of all incomes on the basis of “spending money wisely,” though a wealth of free time, the capacity to purchase construction materials, and necessary skills are the biggest factors in determining who can undertake them (ibid. 159). “Informal and inexpert by nature, straddling work and leisure,” Leary (2018, 70) argues, “DIY has typically never been a strict necessity: you don’t just ‘do it yourself’ because you *have* to, but also, and sometimes mostly, because you *want to*.”

The key motivations expressed were customization, control, and identity. Whereas customization is straightforward, DIY “allows people to take charge of a part of their environment that typically is controlled by others,” such as the design of one’s home. Identity forms a larger, and of course more complex, set of motivations. “Four sources of identity enhancement were described as meaningful by our DIY participants,” Wolf and McQuitty (2011, 160) found: “(1) a sense of empowerment; (2) an identity as a craftsman; (3) membership in a community of DIY enthusiasts; and (4) the need to be unique or different from others.” Woven throughout all of these motivations was an emphasis – expressed by all of Wolf and McQuitty’s informants – that DIY projects are worthwhile in and of themselves, despite difficulties or final outcome. What matters to DIY consumers was the expressive nature of the project and the fact that it was an instance of labor “completed without pressure” and an escape from one’s work routine (ibid., 164). These same motivations are certainly a factor in the tiny houses’ popularity.

### **Tiny house community**

“Community” is a recurrent but varied term in the tiny house movement. At its most mundane level, there is “the tiny house community,” meaning a collection of individual enthusiasts who share interests (i.e. the tiny house lifestyle) and subscribe to the same tiny house media, including books, blogs, magazines and, most importantly, social media. Tiny house related Facebook groups are virtual spaces wherein enthusiasts share pictures of their tiny houses, ask for and receive advice on minimalism, thrift, construction, local zoning laws and building codes, equipment/appliances, builders, and places to legally park. For these reasons, the tiny house movement’s notion of “community” resembles what Bellah (1985, 335) called a “lifestyle enclave.” Whereas “community,” refers to an “interdependent” group of people who share a

common history and “act together politically” across all spheres of life (work, market exchange, social reproduction), a lifestyle enclave is “formed by people who share some feature of private life. Members of lifestyle enclaves express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles.” The tiny house movement, as a lifestyle movement focused on the sphere of exchange and social reproduction, certainly fits within Bellah’s definition of lifestyle enclave.

Writing in *Tiny House Magazine*, Steve Harrel, operator of websites *Tiny House Swoon* (pictures of really fancy tiny houses) and *Tiny House Listings* (a searchable database of tiny house sales/rentals), sees the tiny house community as an ecosystem-like “formula” combining four social roles:

The doers (folks building a tiny house), the listeners (folks wanting to build a tiny house), the advisers (folks who know how to build tiny houses) and the sharers (folks who disseminate tiny house info). All four parties have a very specific and important role. All four of these parties make up what’s often referred to as the “Tiny House Community.” (Harrell 2014, 5)

Laura LaVoie (2014, 5), in another atypical discussion of “the tiny house community,” recalls how, pre-tiny house, she “felt entirely disconnected from [her] own life.” This all changed when she moved into her tiny house. “I began to participate in my own local community,” LaVoie explains. But this “local community” was, for her, primarily virtual. “I forged virtual relationships with other tiny house builders, bloggers, and enthusiasts” who she might later meet in real life, especially at tiny house conferences and festivals. Even when not face-to-face, “our community is just a click away. The far flung community members can check on social media, form online communities, and keep the conversation alive.”

In either case, this first tiny house notion of “community” is quite loose to the point where it is practically indistinguishable from the already-loose definition of the tiny house movement. As Harrel (2014, 5) himself put it: “To be part of the community, all you need do is take interest in living in a tiny house and recognize the benefits of doing so. Once you do, you’ll be playing your part in helping the growth of the tiny house movement.” Simply being pro-tiny house renders one a part of the tiny house movement or community and an active contributor to its expansion. This pursuit need not be face-to-face or in a physical space, let alone a local and tightknit one. And this virtual space is only slightly more communitarian than the “sharing economy” insofar as these relations or “roles” are regularly mediated through commercial exchange – despite the highly abstract rhetoric of “doers” and “advisers” (rather than paid builders and consultants), “listeners” (rather than potential consumers), and “sharers” (as opposed to people who sell and advertise houses, lifestyle self-help guides, or cheap promotional materials).

Speaking with Greg at the Colorado Tiny House festival, founder of the construction company Tiny House Connection, it was evident that “community” played a large part in advertising. A bearded and earnest man in his 30s, Greg described how he himself sought out tiny houses “for the lifestyle,” namely simplicity. Leaving me when a customer approached, I picked up the company’s glossy flyer from the table. It exclaims that the endeavor – less a business – is “Driven by Community” and promises to help customers “Start Your Tiny Adventure Today!” It continues, clarifying that “Tiny Home Connection is, above all else, a community. A place to corroborate ideas, learn from professionals, get advice and help build the tiny home of your dreams and inspire others to follow their own.” Further below, in large text: “Tiny homes built around you and your lifestyle!...Ask us about Tiny Home Communities!”

Rather than a purely cynical sales pitch, I got the sense that Greg sincerely meant it. For enthusiasts, there genuinely is a sense of cohesion around undertaking the tiny house lifestyle – something often misunderstood by dwellers’ friends and family – together.

Such communal relations, enthusiasts suggest, have and can emerge among those living in actual “tiny house communities,” that is, RV or manufactured home parks that are advertised toward tiny houses on wheels. Claudia, employee of a tiny house construction company, underlined how prevalent this typical notion of community is when dealing with clientele. “I think that that’s something we are *sorely* missing in our modern world. A real sense of community,” she told me over the phone. “If you were to build a tiny home community, what you are kind of building is a neighborhood where you all have that same kind of lifestyle in common, no matter what the reason is that brought you to that lifestyle. There’s going to feel a sense of shared space.” In this manner, “community” for the tiny house movement is taken as a solution to the widespread colloquial narrative that “community life” has been overwhelmed by the onslaught of modernity (Putnam 2001; Valentine 2001). Another informant, Sarah, also envisions communities as a coming together of those living the lifestyle. “I would love to find a tiny home community in farmland or something like that,” she began. “Almost like a – what I envision is like 6 to 10 units, you know. You garden together; it’s like a cul-de-sac of sorts. But every person has chosen the tiny home living and stuff like that.” This attitude can be seen in the fact that, unlike RV/manufactured home communities, tiny house communities much more forthrightly highlight the communal aspects to their potential tenants (even if the rhetoric of “community” often permeates both). Some of this likely comes down to the issue of choice. In a trailer park, Simon explained to me, “you’re just getting a different kind of person in that, generally speaking. Just more of – I feel – and maybe this is just a generalization – I mean it is,

but – the people in a trailer park aren’t necessarily there because they chose to be there, you know? Whereas the tiny house, you know, the aesthetics of them are punched up, they look a lot more like a normal house, and they, um, you know they’re intentional about it.”<sup>111</sup>

The well-established *Tiny House Blog*, for instance, includes a statement about what a general tiny house community holds in store, underscoring how the very scale of a tiny house facilitates “community”:

Unlike in other types of neighborhoods, you won’t only be seeing your neighbors as you walk in and out of your house. Because of the small homes and close-knit layouts, you’ll have a community just outside your door that you’ll have the opportunity to be interacting with regularly. Because rooms in tiny homes are smaller, much of your life starts to get lived outdoors when possible. Barbeques, outdoor offices, and nature-friendly play-spaces will help you to spread out and make the most out of your surroundings. In addition, folks may be using spaces like outdoor gardens and fire pits to grow and prepare their own food. Folks may read, exercise, or walk pets so much that they spend more time outdoors than in. This is a lifestyle that many have been building their lives around for centuries. With so many people carrying on their chores, work, and living outside, it makes chatting or catching up with your neighbors all the more natural and enjoyable. You may discover common interests or just start discussing daily events with those who live close by. Many lifelong friendships have stemmed from just being neighbors and in a tight knit community that is all the more true. Your neighbors will become more than acquaintances. They will be friends, confidantes, and those you begin to “do life” with. If you’re excited about being in close community with those who live nearby, a tiny home you can bring and live in a tiny house community could be a wonderful investment. (“What Is a Tiny House Community Like and How Much Does It Cost?” n.d.)

I quote this in full because it so neatly encapsulates the broader narrative around tiny house communities; the *Tiny House Blog* is not the only one to frame community in this manner.

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<sup>111</sup> Among my informants and from what I have seen in tiny house media, enthusiasts rarely denigrate trailer parks and the like as being some lower-class form of small-scale, alternative shelter. Most are openly supportive of such housing or have lived in or considered living in manufactured houses or RVs. That said, tiny houses are often deemed superior by enthusiasts due to their customizability and greater “quality” of construction, that is, being constructed with similar materials as those of typical houses. Tiny houses also tend to cost much more – in time or money – and require significant savings upfront, lending some credence to the claim that tiny houses gentrify manufactured home parks and long-stay RV campgrounds (Kimble 2018).

Enthusiasts are quick to highlight how the size of a tiny house not only facilitates minimalism and thrift, so too does it encourage one to go outside, to actually meet their neighbors, see the outdoors, and engage in leisurely labor in a “tight knit” community (Johnson 2008, 54; Salomon 2010, 152; Ethan 2015; Best 2017; “Living in a Tiny Home Means More Time Outside!” 2020).

### **Tiny house communities and proto-capitalist nostalgia**

Others yearn for a more radical iteration, redefining community as something most appropriated to an idealized historical geography prior to large-scale markets, industrial production and its concomitant division of labor and antagonistic class relations. The tiny house movement is not at all alone in this framing of community. The notion that small-scale and local social interactions will return people to some time and place where life was better and more moral is near axiomatic on the postmodernist and poststructuralist left (Srnicsek and Williams 2016) and especially among environmentalists (Correia 2012; Phillips 2015). Enthusiasts have simply folded tiny houses into – and help reproduce – this pre-existing ideology and its escapist practice.

Take Steve, for instance. After graduating from Stanford University, he “traveled in a hippie van around the US, visiting intentional communities,” staying for one to three months at a time “where you can do work-trade, live in the community and maybe apply to live there.” As a “romantic transcendentalist,” Steve’s interest was philosophical, but it also originated in his yearning for a simpler and less isolating past, the chance to “build your own house as you could 50 years ago. Throughout human history maybe the family would help you out, maybe the community would help you out but,” Steve continues,

when you got to a certain age you’d go out and build your own little shack out of whatever materials are there. I kind of want to live in the woods, community, the

way I think probably most of my ancestors did, in small villages and small rural areas for most of history, feeling connected to nature and to smaller group of, a tighter knit group of people. So maybe I just want to turn back the clock.

Steve's longing originates in his disdain and disillusionment with widespread poverty, such as the lack of affordable housing, and what he sees as the callow ways of modern living. "I kind of have problems with how the world is, I guess," he tells me. Throughout his 20s, Steve recalls "feeling alone and depressed in what is isolating-America, where you're supposed to live in an apartment and get entertainment from some kind of *screen* or something, and I don't know, I just wasn't into it." Again, Steve views this process as returning to a small-scale, communal past, wishing to get "back down to a more tribal level where you're making things with your hands and you're a lot more connected to your day-to-day life, right?"

Several other enthusiasts couch their modern prescriptions in the supposedly nobler, more humane past. Lloyd Kahn (1973, 3), author of the canonical *Shelter*, anticipated such wistful visions, even to the point of celebrating the guild system:

In times past, people built their own homes, grew their own food, made their own clothes. Knowledge of the building crafts and other skills of providing life's basic needs were generally passed along from father to son, mother to daughter, master to apprentice. Then with industrialization and the population shift from country to cities, this knowledge was put aside and much of it has now been lost.

Minimalist Josh Becker (2013b, 22), in a rare engagement with employment (but doubling-down on his pop-philosophy), presents another wholesome, frictionless image of the past, but one so fantastical as to be outside discernable time and space:

Back in the beginning, families were responsible to accomplish everything for their existence: hunt, farm, build, sew, cook, clean, etc. Until one day when somebody noticed their family was better at farming than building and decided to barter with a neighboring family. "If we grow extra food and give it to you, will you build an extra house that we can live in?" Our understanding of work was born. Both

benefited from the arrangement: better food was grown and stronger homes were built. In the end, all of society benefited. And each individual was able to pursue contribution in their area of giftedness and passion. But somewhere along the way, we lost our focus. We no longer worked to benefit others, but ourselves. Work became selfish. Work became that thing through which we make money so that we could do the other things we really wanted to do.<sup>112</sup>

“The romance of a bygone era, along with the curiosity and intrigue of age old crafts, shaped the person I am today,” Hussey (2016, 13) writes in *Tiny House Magazine*.

I was fascinated with the 19th century growing up: the technologies of the time and hands-on way-of-life, the craftsmanship and attention to every detail of even the most ordinary, mundane objects fascinated me – the details that today would be taken for granted or even ignored. I strived to achieve the same expert-level of craftsmanship in a variety of art forms. Whenever an opportunity was presented for me to learn an age-old skill, I jumped at it!

The notion of tiny house communities, with their shared use of space, tools, and equipment, appeals to dwellers who are drawn to tiny houses because they expedite simplicity or minimalism. Gregory Johnson (2008, 53), co-founder of The Small House Society, captures this perspective best. In the ‘old days,’” he writes,

people weren’t collectors of unnecessary items – It wasn’t practical or affordable. The blacksmith would have some clothes and simple belongings for daily living and the tools of his trade. The same was true for the shoemaker, the baker, and the candlestick maker. They would decide what their calling was in life, and then they could own the tools needed just for that line of work...Keep only the “stuff” pertinent to your vocation.

Chad similarly frames tiny houses as harkening back to simpler times of artisan-like creativity.

“You have this artistic freedom to build exactly the way you want it to and to be creative about

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<sup>112</sup> The Verso-published and pseudo-leftist – actually quite reactionary – tract by George Monbiot (2018, 19), *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*, arrives at a similarly childish understanding of the history of work under capitalism. “We were once brought together by work, travel and entertainment. Now these activities tend to estrange us,” he very briefly laments. Like Becker, Monbiot believes we must practice a form of positive thinking and, once we get all those bubbly people together, found local “autonomous communities” (ibid., 89-90).

it,” he told me over the phone. “It’s fun; it’s recurring. The tiny house movement, it’s circling back to like the frontier, when people were moving out and just building their own houses.”

Lee Pera, now a widely-known figure in the tiny house movement, garnered her renown as one of three co-founders of Boneyard Studios, once a tiny house community in Washington D.C. established in 2012. Pera was driven by a lack of a creative outlet and social isolation.

My impetus for doing a tiny house was really just to form a creative community in DC. I was lacking that. I moved here from the west coast, working for the government, surrounded by a lot of Type-A personalities and wasn’t sure if I really loved the city. And then I met a few folks and decided to start building tiny houses on a non-buildable alley lot...I started hosting monthly events, a tiny house concert series, open houses and met a lot of creative folks in DC. (quoted in Stephens 2019a)

Like Steve and the others above, her desire for creating a tiny house village reflected an idyllic nostalgia. Pera continues:

What I like a lot about the tiny house movement is that it teaches people that we can build our own houses. Vernacular housing was great – my grandpa built my grandmother’s last house by hand, without power tools, actually. So that’s just one generation removed from me, and now here I built my own house as well. So it’s not – we all come from that tradition of building our own houses but we’ve stepped away from that. I think it’s really important to remember that everyone can do this. (quoted in Stephens 2019a)

Featuring a handful of highly photogenic models, and culturally undergirded by its collection of artists, the community did almost as much as Jay Shafer’s *Oprah* appearance to spark conversations about tiny houses (Lapin 2014). Within two years, however, and citing disagreements over who owned the land, paid for repairs, and ultimately had say over the direction of the space, the experiment came to an unceremonious end (Goldchain 2015). The social relation of private property, in other words, permeated the community’s borders.

Several enthusiasts intimate that tiny house communities can provide a set of non- or less-capitalist social relations. Claudia positions it as a form of mutual aid. “I think people are realizing that you can find your community, you can find your people, and you don’t have to do this all alone. This is probably what we should be doing. Going back to our roots where it really did take a village to raise a child.” Patricia Foreman (2019, 170), author of *A Tiny Home to Call your Own*, offers a similar sentiment:

For some, being part of a community means hope for gaining some help in some areas of life. This could be help in childcare by having other children in the community for your children to play with or help in raising your own food by community gardening, or it could be a peace of mind from knowing that will be others around you can call upon in times of need.

A key part of fostering community is subtracting it from mainstream market exchange. “I envision like-minded people coming together to build tiny houses and other shared structures, sharing resources like vegetable gardens, workspaces, and community rooms. It’s about empowerment and supporting the local economy, rather than depending on banks and developers,” Lustado (2013, 22) argued in *Tiny House Magazine*. Lustado here highlights the tiny house movement’s adoption of localism: the assumption that temporal and spatial immediacy will produce social harmony lessen class distinctions and typical commercial relations (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 11).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, enthusiasts express a sublimated hope to transcend capitalist society so as to reduce their alienation vis-à-vis work, housing, and their fellow human beings. Thrift, as was often the case in the previous chapter, is not so much disguised by simplicity. Even when vainly adorned in minimalist rhetoric, enthusiasts cut their housing and social reproductive

expenses so they can work less and perhaps stop working altogether. Thrift is less elided with simplicity than becoming its precondition. Still, overwork is overwhelmingly depicted as deserving punishment for personal overconsumption. Even as it too requires a minimalist reckoning, enthusiasts are less outwardly moralizing when it comes to tiny homeownership. Owning a tiny house outright, enthusiasts explain, provides some financial security, especially in the wake of the Great Recession and the lingering “crisis” of affordable housing. Do-it-yourself construction and customization fortifies that sense of ownership while offering a rare avenue to enjoy unalienated, self-affirming labor. The skills and knowledge that come with such labor, the capacity to build a fully-functional tiny house from the ground-up, understandingly gives a sense of empowerment to those of the downwardly mobile middle stratum who have lost jobs, savings, and then their homes to foreclosure.

For others, building a tiny house, shifting to the tiny house lifestyle, encourages them to break out of their daily routine, offering novel avenues of self-growth and a sense of meaning in the world. These desires and practices most naturally occur at the local scale in semi-rural settings, not unlike hippie communes back then or manufactured home and RV parks now. Finding affinity with certain segments of the poststructuralist-environmentalist left, several enthusiasts vaguely hope to produce a genuine “community,” a localized, proto-capitalist political economy of cooperative government and horizontal artisan production proceeding in balance with nature and human nature. This less-alienated production gestures toward less-alienated social relationships (i.e. neighborliness) an idealized, self-marginalized geography uncorrupted by advertising, envy, and commercial exchange – a space outside the American Nightmare.

The tiny house movement is not alone in viewing “community” as a space of pre- or proto-capitalist social relations. This framing is a fairly common one. “Community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging,” Joseph (2002, vii) writes. Just as social reproductive labor *appears* to be outside capitalism, the same holds true for voluntary organizations or “community efforts” that do not produce surplus value. Nevertheless, such organizations are not, in fact, outside capitalism or, more rarely still, anti-capitalist (ibid., 70). Rather, “community” operates as a fetish, Joseph argues, a supra-social entity abstracted from “community members” themselves and their embeddedness within capitalist social relations. Through this process, “communal formations are frequently articulated as providing an alternative to the alienated realm of production; in other words, they are understood as independent of the larger social relations of production within which they are situated” (ibid., 57). Ultimately, the “romantic discourse of community” does not signal a promising “alternative economy” as some suggest (see Gibson-Graham 2006), but rather a capitalist alternative to the social relations of communism. Community thus offers “another route for the desires for that which is not capital” that nevertheless remains within and fails to challenge that which it is ostensibly opposing (Joseph 2002, 74). Such an understanding of capitalism and its supposedly cloistered geography is the basis of misidentifying escapist actions as collective politics.

## CHAPTER 7 – TINY FOOTPRINTS AND LIFESTYLE ENVIRONMENTALISM

We are in the face of a global environmental emergency, and we are absolutely pushed to this point where we have to find some solutions as a society for us to live with less energy requirements. We haven't even really talked about the environment yet. And I actually try to keep it out because it's too controversial. But the truth of the matter is that, when we're talking about tiny homes in relation to the environmental movement, we're talking about one of the most attainable ways for us to actually reduce our carbon impact in life. And it's done in a way that doesn't necessarily result in a huge amount of sacrifice in somebody's life; it's just simply moving into a smaller space that is simply going to be more energy efficient, that is simply going to allow us to make our cities denser, in a way that still promotes the harmony. That density means that people don't have to drive as far. People don't have to fill their homes with all sorts of stuff that they don't need just because they're gonna avoid some empty spaces. All of these things result in a carbon footprint.

Above is an excerpt from tiny house spokesperson Zack Giffin speaking at the 2019 Colorado Tiny House Festival.<sup>113</sup> Giffin's perspective succinctly packages how enthusiasts understand tiny houses as means to combat climate change and ecological destruction. His hesitancy on the issue reveals how environmental concerns are not, for most enthusiasts, front-and-center in their rationales for going tiny. His speech also, though, illustrates how environmentalist thinking

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<sup>113</sup> I only spoke with two individuals at the Festival who explicitly brought up environmental concerns, and neither of them lived in a tiny house. Still, they saw themselves as part of the movement and parked their small habitats on the grounds for attendees to appreciate. After waiting minute or two for a couple of people to conclude their tour and exit, I ducked into the camper shell fixed atop the bed of a small, red, late-'80s Toyota pick-up truck. I entered, made some small talk (his truck is 98 square-feet), and then explained to the 60-something white man, leisurely laying sideways, shoeless, on what counts as the space's couch, that I was writing about the tiny house movement. As with most people there, he was fairly curious. And as with most who came to the festival to show off their abode, it was not a full-on tiny house; there was no kitchen or bathroom but merely a place to rest and sleep. And of course the guy didn't live in it. He explained that he used it as a means to facilitate his passion for skiing, saving on hotel costs. "Why do you think tiny houses are so popular at the moment?" I asked. "Well it's not new," he corrected me (as was a fairly common response). "People have been living in tiny homes for a long time." "So why do people do it, you think?" I pressed. "Less impact on the environment," he replied, quickly followed by: "The world's population is just getting bigger and bigger, so it makes sense." When I asked him if he thought tiny houses are a movement, he hesitated but eventually thought, "Yeah, I think it's a movement. It's politics? Again, it comes down to tiny houses being better for the environment." Later in the afternoon, I spoke with bashful teenage girl sitting in a small, customized teardrop trailer, with room only for a padded couch that looked just wide and long enough to be used as a bed (she sat just a few yards from her mom, who had a similar set-up). Nevertheless, she referred to it as a "tiny house. She explained that the tiny house movement is, for her, primarily about reducing her "environmental impact," though she admitted that she was "something of a hippie, so." She added that for a person to live "the tiny house lifestyle" they just "have to be comfortable with getting rid of their stuff."

remains a key animating feature of the tiny house movement. Lastly, Giffin's speech captures how enthusiasts see their tiny house living as a relatively easy and painless way to reduce their environmental impact on the world. Tiny houses themselves are a greener form of housing while they also discourage consumption, a practice that they believe will reduce the production of commodities and the emissions and waste therefrom.

Whereas enthusiasts' motivations for tiny house living discussed thus far are inward-looking, hoping to improve dwellers' spiritual, financial, and social lives, when it comes to environmental concerns enthusiasts can interpret their personal actions as an outward-looking way to improve society and its relationship to the environment. The engagement with environmental issues brings the tiny house movement closer to being an actual social and political – as opposed to a purely lifestyle-based – movement. Through the act of living in a tiny house, particularly those constructed with more sustainable materials, solar panels, compost toilets, rain harvesting systems and the like, enthusiasts do their individual part to serve the broader environmental movement. Even with such an understanding, though, the tiny house movement is best categorized as what Huber (2019, 11) terms “lifestyle environmentalism,” a form of environmentalism that revolves around making the right sort of personal consumer decisions. These consumer decisions include reducing one's personal consumption of energy and natural resources through buying commodities that are efficient in terms of energy use, waste production and, of course, use of space. Once these commodities are brought home they are used and/or disposed of in a greener fashion (composting, reusing, recycling, etc.). When it comes to environmental concerns, many enthusiasts have a collective goal in mind, but the method by which they hope to achieve this goal remains, as with everything else in the tiny house movement, individualistic.

## **Footprint analyses and lifestyle environmentalism**

The individualistic method of environmental action reflects an individualized framing of environmental degradation. The idea is that each person has a discrete carbon or ecological footprint. These analyses correspond with the notion of carrying capacity, “the speculative maximum equilibrium number of organisms of a particular species that can be supported in a given environment” (Phillips 2015, 53). According to this, every environment contains a fixed number of resources (expressed in absolute space), and any given species consumes these resources at a fixed rate. Eventually, a growing population will “overshoot” the environment’s capacity to sustain it (ibid., 54). Footprint analyses thus add up each person’s consumption activities, such as the energy one uses, the food they eat, their housing and mode of transportation, to arrive as a cumulative ecological or carbon footprint. One of the problems with such analyses is that “no other organism monopolizes the means of production and forces some of those organisms to work for money” (Huber 2019, 16). Nor, relatedly, do other organisms produce the necessities of life for the sake of profit rather than need, thereby providing those with money a much greater capacity to consume than those without it.

Footprint analyses lend themselves to individualistic environmental action. Indeed, they correspond with a much older economic theory of consumer sovereignty, or the claim that people’s consumer decisions dictate what commodities capitalists produce and how capitalists produce them (i.e. using more or less sustainable materials, technology, etc.). Consumer demand dictates the supply, not the other way around. The sphere of exchange, in this framing, is not only a place of relative freedom. Consumer decisions are also taken to be an effective means by which individuals may force their will upon society and capital. People can, as the saying goes,

“vote with their dollars.” The tiny house movement – though generally critical of advertising, planned obsolescence and the like – still subscribes to this theory of consumer sovereignty. McMansions and the suburban landscape, they routinely suggest, originate in consumer demand (poor taste, gluttony, etc.). Yet this overlooks how suburban homeownership was and is intentionally pushed by government policy (homeowner subsidies, the highway system, etc.), how the Great Recession stemmed from an overproduction of housing, and then dispossessed homeowners through foreclosure despite their consumer demand for housing not decreasing whatsoever.<sup>114</sup> (For enthusiasts, a demand for tiny housing exists, but it is impeded by their illegality.) The competition between capitalists compels “cutting corners” in the production process, heightening negative externalities like waste and pollution. Commodities, further, are only produced and made available for consumption to the degree that they can profitably be sold. More “ethically produced” and “sustainable” commodities thus tend to cost more (Huber 2019, 16).

Unfortunately, personalized austerity and individual practices of greener living cannot alter or overcome the political-economic origins of climate change and environmental degradation: the contradiction between capitalist production and nature. “Nature is necessarily viewed by capital,” Harvey (2014, 250) writes, “as nothing more than a vast store of potential use values – of processes and things – that can be used directly or indirectly (through technologies) in the production and realization of commodity values.” Just as economic

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<sup>114</sup> Prior to widespread capitalist social relations and fixed capital-intensive production, proportional production occurred because “it was demand which governed the supply which preceded it. Production followed consumption step by step. The great industry, forced by the very instruments of which it disposed to produce on an ever-increasing scale, could not wait for the demand. Production preceded demand. Production preceded consumption, supply forced the demand” (Marx 1973, 73).

competition coerces individual capitalists to exploit the working class as much as possible, the same holds for exploiting nature. Workers, like the natural world, function for capital as things to be used – and potentially used-up – to produce commodities of a value over and above the cost of their production. To expand surplus value, to widen profit margins, each capitalist necessarily must externalize the costs of production, divorcing themselves from what happens to the working class and the environment outside immediate production. The working class is left to fend for itself at the end of the workday. So too, in a sense, is the environment. Capital, in the short-term at least, can wash its hands of how such intense exploitation affects (and destroys) human beings and the environment. This process, moreover, does not simply entail those industries producing the commodities that mainstream society “overconsumes.” Rather, it is a feature inextricable from all production and value creation in a capitalist society.

### **Tiny house, tiny footprint**

Environmental concerns are not the main motivators for tiny house living. Severin Mangold and Toralf Zschau’s (2019) “In Search of the ‘Good Life’: The Appeal of Tiny House Lifestyle in the USA” arrives at a similar conclusion. Using interviews with 30 dwellers or would-be dwellers, the article examines the various motivations given for wanting to live in a tiny house. Mangold and Zschau (2019, 8) found that “the most common struggles faced by tiny house enthusiasts suggest that their interest in the tiny house lifestyle may have been driven – at least initially – more by necessity than choice...Deeply affected by the strains in their lives and having found new hope in the financial mantra of the tiny house movement, all but one participant made direct or indirect references to wanting to be financially secure.” Most of this revolved around student and household debt, along with the inability to find employment or the burnout of working too

much for too little pay. Whereas 23 of the 30 informants directly gave economic rationales, the remaining seven “made references to both personal benefits and environmental considerations. When analyzing the interviews more carefully, however, it became clear that even these environmental reasons were secondary.” “Taken together,” they conclude, “the interviews suggest most tiny house enthusiasts turn to the lifestyle for reasons that are primarily or exclusively personal. Tiny house enthusiasts with predominately environmental motivators are rare” (ibid., 13).

Although Heather, Shearer, and Paul Burton’s (2018) “Towards a Typology of Tiny Houses” primarily outlines the potential variations of tiny houses, drawing from a 2017 quantitative survey, they also argue in their article that the main motivator for the popularity of tiny houses is economic.<sup>115</sup> After stating how tiny houses offer a corrective to “our big, expensive houses” and defining the tiny house movement as “a counter-cultural response to conspicuous consumerism,” they nevertheless document how 4.4 percent of respondents chose tiny houses because typical housing is “too expensive.” There is the same percentage of respondents who decided to go tiny for “environmental sustainability,” though economic-related categories – “Don’t want a mortgage;” “Reduce overall debt;” “Economic crashes;” “To retire;” “For security;” and “Avoid homelessness” – dominate most given rationales and are all within a

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<sup>115</sup> Shearer and Burton divide tiny houses according to their: mobility (wheeled or not), size (some tinier than others), their method of construction (DIY or manufacturer built), tenure length/type, and legal status (Shearer and Burton 2018, 3). They also consider cousins to “the iconic tiny house trailer,” such as “a cottage, townhouse, apartment, granny cottage, extension, holiday house, converted shed, container house, caravan, beach shack, converted bus or truck, mining hut, tourist cabin, laneway dwelling, Japanese flats, yurts, fonzi flats, squats, tiny house villages, intentional communities, eco-housing, co-housing etc.” (Shearer and Burton 2018, 8). Just how useful this typology will be remains to be seen. Jasmine Ford and Lilia Gomez-Lanier’s (2017) “Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay? A Review of Literature on the Tiny House Movement” does what it says. They present much of the tiny house basics discussed above while concluding that tiny houses have the potential to stick around given their “sustainable design” aspects. Ford and Gomez-Lanier’s article stands-out among the literature in that it explains what tiny house advocates believe without immediately adopting those same assumptions as given fact.

single percentage point (above 3.5 percent) with sustainability.<sup>116</sup> Megan Carras (2019), drawing from her dissertation on the tiny house movement, found the same. “Regardless of how tiny living is marketed by the enthusiasts, sustainability was not a major driver for most of the participants in my study. Instead, it was almost an afterthought.”

Even though lifestyle environmentalism takes a backseat to minimalism, paying off debt, and partaking in DIY labor and tiny house communities, it is still a significant justification for tiny living. Media coverage has captured this significance. Take, for instance, the celebrated tiny house antics of Rob Greenfield.

You may remember him from 2017, when for one month, he wore every single piece of trash a typical person in the U.S. creates – 4.5 pounds per day! Or you may have seen him riding a bamboo bicycle 4,700-miles across the United States in the summer of 2013 to raise awareness about food waste. He lived in a 50-square-foot tiny house in San Diego before moving onto his next project: building a tiny house out of recycled materials for only \$1,500. Oh, and he’s also growing and foraging his own food for one year. Sound drastic? You bet it is. But Rob is doing this for a reason: to lower his own environmental footprint, and to educate people on how they can lower theirs. (Hanes 2019)

Most academic research also highlights how tiny houses can have positive environmental outcomes. Tracy Harris, like several other academics who write about tiny houses, is a tiny house dweller herself (see Anson 2014; 2018; M. Murphy 2014). Through her own experiences and handful of interviews with enthusiasts, dwellers, and builders, she penned a broad, boosterish summary of the tiny houses in her short book, *The Tiny House Movement: Challenging Our Consumer Culture*. As the title implies, Harris maintains the tendency to frame tiny houses as a

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<sup>116</sup> Unfortunately, Shearer and Burton fail to divulge just how many individuals their survey reached and, more confusing still, they cite Shearer’s earlier work that was published before 2017, which, needless to say, does not address the future survey (see Shearer 2014; 2015). They also cite Kilman’s (2016) limited empirics as support for the conclusion that tiny houses’ popularity mostly derives from their relative affordability. Fortunately, more robust studies have proven these assumptions true.

method to rectify what she takes as rampant overconsumption (focusing on Canada and the United States) as most easily identified in post-1970 growing house sizes. Harris is at pains to present tiny houses as a radical departure from negative social and environmental norms. Like Greenfield, she believes her lifestyle reforms are capable of helping people do the same. By living in her tiny house, she is “demonstrating a way of life full of meaning with less consumer goods, debt, paid work, and environmental degradation. It offers a lifestyle with a small environmental footprint, but that is large in meaning and social impact” (T. Harris 2018b, 23).

Harris is not alone in framing the tiny house movement as being largely preoccupied with environmentalism. In fact, almost all of the few academic assessments of the movement devote themselves to convincing the public that tiny houses will clamp down on consumerism and reduce environmental impact (Anson 2018; 2014; T. Harris 2018b; M. Murphy 2014; Kilman 2016; Mutter 2013; Carlin 2014; Saxton 2019b; Vail 2016; Shearer and Burton 2018; Schneider 2018). The tiny house movement’s spokespersons promote the same discourse. “At 2,349 square feet, the average American house now emits more carbon dioxide than the average American car,” Shafer (2009, 26) notes in his foundational book. “Under no circumstances does a 3,000 square foot house for two qualify as ‘green’” (ibid.). Shafer continues, explaining how “the average American house consumes about three quarters of an acre of forest and produces about seven tons of construction waste. It emits 18 tons of greenhouse gases annually” (ibid., 21). Large houses also require more energy for heating and cooling and materials to build, which means more materials have to be produced and then transported across space, leading to even more fossil fuel usage (Foreman 2019, 138).

To the degree that enthusiasts worry themselves with the environment, their rationale begins in analyses of ecological or carbon footprints. This much is evident among the numerous tiny house enthusiasts referenced above. Maria Saxton's research, though, has done the most to connect tiny houses with such footprint analyses. While countless tiny house boosters came to common sense conclusions that smaller houses would produce a smaller carbon and ecological impact, Saxton's detailed study has proved it. After surveying 80 dwellers across the United States, questioning them to calculate their environmental footprint before and after they moved into a tiny house, she found that "ecological footprints were reduced by about 45% on average" (Saxton 2019b). This encompassed eating organically, gardening, recycling, and biking more. "The overall insights derived from this study," she writes, "indicate that positive environmental impact behaviors outweigh negative ones by approximately six to one when downsizing to a tiny home. In addition, 100% of participants demonstrated an overall positive ecological footprint" (Saxton 2019a, 2). Saxton's research is also important because her findings have been shared so widely. Throw "tiny house environmentalism" into a search engine and you will likely find several of Saxton's articles or articles that reference her results. Though the tiny house movement is generally less concerned with environmentalism than what Saxton's wide-ranging coverage suggests, many enthusiasts still consider their lifestyle as more environmentally friendly than that of typical homeownership. Just like the physical scale of a tiny house compels thrift and minimalism, for instance, so too does it help reduce one's ecological or carbon footprint. As Saxton (2019a, 8) herself put it, tiny house dwellers are "forced to confront their material consumption."

Numerous dwellers discuss how a confrontation with their material consumption inspired a sense of environmentalism. Though principally attracted by minimalism and saving money for

retirement, Diane also saw her tiny house living as an instance of shrinking her footprint. “It’s obviously a smaller footprint,” she responded to my question about tiny houses and environmentalism. After moving into her house, her awareness of how to maintain a more environmentally friendly lifestyle grew. “You have to be somewhat environmentally conscious just because you are taking up smaller space and using up less electricity and all that stuff.” She adds that many people get involved in tiny houses for environmental reasons, but she and “a lot of people just sort of fall into it [environmentalism] because you basically have to because you’re living in such a small space.” This certainly holds for several informants. Interviewing Claire, I again initiated a conversation about tiny houses and “living green.” She responded:

It was not my initial concern; that was my retirement. But after years it starts to make – I think even if you weren’t when you start you eventually become more aware of that. And, so, I’ve become very aware of my, becoming more of a responsible person in the, paying more attention to my waste, recycling and things like that. Through living this life I’d say that I’ve become better, for sure. You either know it upfront or you become aware of it through living the life.

My conversation with Chuck and Becky, who primarily sought to reduce debt, proceeded much the same.

BH: In the media around tiny homes there’s a big focus on environmentalism and a criticism of overconsumption. Were those at all factors for you?

CB: No, but since living in it we’ve learned that it is pretty efficient between having a tankless water heater to a mini air split unit compared to a, you know, manufactured RV. Our electricity bill is probably a third of whatever everybody else’s electricity bill is during the summer. So we stay in an RV park, so compared to all our neighbors our bills are cheaper.

The environmental concerns of Diane, Claire, and Chuck and Becky were something they all “fell into” after they started living in their tiny house. They all set out to save money, pay back their debt, and hasten retirement, not to practice green consumption or reduce their footprint. Just

as with minimalism, their tiny house induced a new relationship with consumption and energy use. Chuck and Becky folded their post-hoc environmentalism into their broader project of saving money via reduced utility expenses. Next to Chuck and Becky's inward-focused environmentalism, Claire describes how her tiny house encouraged her to become "better" and "a more responsible person," that is, personally responsible for her impact on the environment.

Speaking with Olive, she offered yet another example of both tight box environmentalism and how she "fell into" environmentalist thinking. Like Claire, though, she framed this environmentalism as having a collective, and explicitly "political" goal in mind. Olive assumed my question about politics in general referred to, first, the political lobbying to legalize tiny houses and, second, environmental issues.

BH: What, if any, do you think are the politics of the tiny house movement?"

O: Well I'm not one of those who goes to the tiny house things. I'm in a couple Facebook groups, but I'm not one of the actives. I'm one who would love to see [zoning and code] regulations loosened... And it's leaving less of a footprint. I think about the energy that's being used to heat this tiny house, the amount of resources I'm using is so much less than even a 700 square-foot house.

BH: Is the environmental component is something to consider, for you?

O: Something to consider for everybody, I think.

BH: How have you seen the tiny house movement evolve? Where are they going in the future?

O: Where we're going with the planet, resources and global warming, um, I think this may be necessary in the future. I'd love to see incentives for downsizing one's footprint. That's what I hope. I kind of fell into this [environmentalism] by accident but now that I'm in it I love it...

Clearly the scale of a tiny house, as that tight box of coerced innovation, not only helps instill minimalism but also an environmentalist lifestyle. My discussion with Olive also shows how, if

there are any politics to the tiny house movement, anything that may render this lifestyle something more a self-focused practice of simplifying austerity and assuaging alienation, it falls on environmental issues.

After noting how “consumption for the sake of status pervades contemporary American culture,” Kilman (2016, 6) claims that “the composting toilet nudges its user to better understand the destination and nature of their waste.” This is so because “human waste stays in the basin” of the compost toilet rather than disappearing down a pipe, often to be used for later composting. Anson (2014, 306–7) gives an identical perspective while tying it back to Thoreau. Compost toilets, she argues,

require people to live with the messy consequences of consumption typically flushed away in more traditional living structures. We must physically confront our waste every time we empty the tank or bucket. We are forced to consider, together, our impact and the life cycles of our excess... If the tiny house movement has Thoreauvian roots, they are grounded in a soiled confrontation with waste.

Teagan, an architect whose enthusiasm mostly pertains to DIY construction, also stressed how “tiny homes bring a person closer to their resources.” Teagan, though, focused less on human excrement than that of general energy usage. The appreciation of resources usage emerges “particularly if they [dwellers] use tanks instead of hook-ups. I am very aware of wasting water or sucking my batteries dry on wasted energy.” Reminiscent of Rob Greenfield, Gregory Johnson, drawing upon Malthusian thinking, sees making resource use unnecessarily harder as a way to cut back. “Because water is a constant on our planet, and the population is still growing in many countries, the number of people without access to water is increasing. What can you do to help the situation? I’ve noticed that carrying my water home [from the store] makes me more conscientious of how much water I use” (Johnson 2008, 101).

The act of building a tiny house oneself also encouraged dwellers to evaluate and reduce the environmental impact of their construction materials. As Claire put it: “If individuals build their own home, when I did my research I was definitely aware of using materials that would be less toxic and all that kind of stuff. You either know it upfront or you become aware of it through living the life.” Dee Williams (2015, 75), in her tiny house memoir, was attracted to tiny houses partly because of the chance to use green construction materials. “It would put all my home repair and remodeling skills to the test, and I’d have a chance to build something perfect; something warm and kind, and made out of materials that didn’t make me feel like I was lying to myself every time I claimed to be an environmentalist.” Steve, another DIY tiny house builder, explained how he initially sought out “sustainably harvested” wood, but he was particularly interested in buying “redwood because it’s local here.” Costs, though, prohibited this. “It’s so expensive,” he laments, “I wound up getting a lot of pine from other parts [of the country]. So that increased the fossil fuel count on the transportation to get the wood over here, but it helped me with the price. So, it was always a trade-off.” Dale, though he has thus far only designed his off-the-grid tiny house, still foresaw how it would “keep me more cognizant of my consumption of natural resources, whether it’s water or electricity or gas or whatever.”

### **Help Yourself, Save the World**

The tiny house movement’s proposed solution to environmental concerns predictably manifests as self-help advice. Brittany Peters (2016, 42), a *Tiny House Magazine* contributor, describes how she and her 20-something boyfriend have, for the last five years, “been on a journey to a more sustainable lifestyle,” their “goal being to reduce our footprint on earth.” Unlike those I spoke with, the couple was primarily drawn to tiny living because, “in this day and age... it is

vital that we all take personal responsibility for our impact on our planet.” Peters then shares “some of the changes we’ve made and other ideas that can be easily adopted by anyone.” When it comes to electricity, she recommends buying efficient appliances and unplugging appliances “as soon as you are done using them!” For water, reuse it through grey water systems, harvest rainwater, and “divert urine from your toilet to use on trees.” Finally, the issues of food and fossil fuels are overcome via eating local, organic, vegan, and starting your own garden (ibid., 42-3).

Lifestyle-dietician Gregory Johnson devotes a sizable amount of his self-help guidance to environmental issues. For those who “choose to offset their own environmental impact,” Johnson offers several “action points.” As with Peters, Johnson (2008, 36–42, 67–71, 101) calls on dwellers to unplug appliances, use composting toilets and efficient lightbulbs, eat local, fresh, vegan, raw, etc., but also things like digitizing old photographs, walking at least three times per week, buying biodegradable containers, calculating water and wattage, turning off the faucet when brushing your teeth, recycling, and buying only lightweight clothes, which require less water to clean while enabling one to more efficiently layer across seasons.<sup>117</sup> “With this in mind, consider your personal health as well as the health of the planet while exploring simpler and smaller living” (ibid., 36).

The above suite of self-help environmentalism amounts to just another instance of green consumption. Some enthusiasts, though, couch their individual lifestyle as leading by example.

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<sup>117</sup> “A major draw to the tiny house movement is the reduced carbon footprint and all the environmental benefits that come along with the smaller “shoe size” Chrissy Bellmyer (2016, 65), an instructor at a design and building school, writes. In addition to cutting back on electricity consumption, she offers advice on how “downsizing and sustainability are a constant work in progress. In our consumer driven society, there is enormous quantities of stuff coming in and out of our lives every day. So do your best, be mindful and don’t be scared to mess up now and then.”

This notion of the tiny house movement is best captured by its founders. After talking about resource use and waste production, Johnson (2008, 40) asks: “So given this context, how can you – just one person – put a dent in statistics like these?” Expanding the concept to include issues beyond the environment, he continues: “How can you have an impact in the world on this and other global concerns such as poverty, health epidemics, natural disasters, war, homelessness, and starvation?” Johnson provides an optimistic, life-choice type answer in typical self-help fashion.

I have been a long-time activist, but I was often discouraged at not being able to do more. I had the attitude that I was only one person and how could one person make a difference? I eventually realized that living the answer would accomplish more than protesting, shouting, and carrying a picket sign. My answer was “lifestyle activism.” I knew that others might copy my example of responsible living, and the domino effect could produce significant positive results. I am glad to say that my small home has done exactly that. (Johnson 2008, 18)

He stresses how “it’s been said that activism must begin at home.” Following along with the common call to “think globally, act locally,” Johnson (2008, 48) claims that there is nothing more local than “the realm in which we have the most immediate influence...our home and daily living.” Again, though, this is not solely an inward-looking lifestyle change, he suggests, because such “really quite powerful” activism “conveys an example the others can learn from and copy.” “Embracing less in a culture founded on the precept of more is countercultural, but it need not be self-consciously so,” Shafer (2009, 62) argues. “To do what we know to be right takes enough effort. There is no need to waste our much-needed energy on actively trying to change this spendthrift society. The tangible happiness of a life well lived is worth a thousand vehement protests.” Yet Shafer assuages his misanthropy by claiming that “Each person who chooses to live so simply inadvertently teaches the virtue of simplicity.”

Susan Susanka (2008, 219) addresses this potential explicitly. “How can we change our perceptions of what constitutes a good house and convince our friends and neighbors that we are not crazy for building smaller, more tailored homes that in all likelihood will cost just as much as their larger ones?” she asks. Her answer is that “we should look more closely at ourselves, at how we want to live, at what inspires us, and at what our planet needs to return to balance. If we can start reflecting these values in our houses, we will make a small but significant step in helping humanity achieve the extraordinary spirit that we all are born with.”

Several enthusiasts are critical of such individualized activism but still embrace it. Steve, one the DIY builders, answered my question about the politics of the tiny house movement:

Obviously, the funnest kind of politics is the embodied kind of politics, right? Where you’re feeling it and you’re living it. You’re definitely putting your body into it – and you’re kind of making a statement on one level about who you are and, there’s something there, for sure...So I can be that person to display a different lifestyle for someone, but really I’m just doing it for myself (laughs). But you could say I’m doing it because I’m embodying my politics, but it’s really – it just feels better.

In response to the same question, Dale had a similar take, though redirecting it specifically to environmentalism.

From an environmental perspective it’s definitely for society in general. I don’t think – this is going to sound wrong – but I don’t think the choices I make are that important environmentally speaking, whether I live in a house the size of a tiny house or not. I mean, when you look at it in aggregate, of course it is. But I’m not doing it because I’m like “Boy, I’ve saved the world. I’ve done my part!” Or like, as an example type of decision from an environmental point of view. And I think like allowing, and I’m a pretty social person and inviting people in to see how it works could help maybe make some cynical people a little less cynical, if it can be done...Going on this journey [designing his tiny house] has elevated my awareness of things, and it’s also provided me an opportunity to help showcase our consumption behaviors a little more, what we really need and what we don’t need.

Kai Rostcheck's (2015, 22–24) article in *Tiny House Magazine*, “How Are You Giving Back to the Tiny House Movement?” follows a parallel trajectory. After acknowledging how “living Tiny is a personal response,” he stresses the ongoing housing unaffordability crisis. This brings him to the question: “Are we going to watch out for ourselves as individuals? Or is the Tiny House Movement more than a collection of people? Does it also stand for what’s possible when we stand together?” Hoping that dwellers “don’t just downsize and move on,” he provides eight ways to “give back” to the movement. But these solutions, ranging from offering personal construction assistance to attending a festival to buying land and establishing a tiny house community, are pointedly not about broader social or political change. Rather, they constitute what was described in the last chapter as merely being a part of “the tiny house community.”

The tiny house movement’s disdain for those outside their lifestyle enclave can foster an individualistic apathy about performing lifestyle environmentalism, having little concern with even leading by personal example. Alexis Stephens’ article “Tiny living: The Ultimate Expression of Individualism,” is a case in point (also quoted in chapter four). She begins by defining individualism for the reader: (1) the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant; (2) a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective. Unlike the “herd mentality” of the consumerist mainstream, enthusiasts embrace how:

Living in the United States is all about an individualistic way of living. Right? As Americans we value our freedoms above all. Freedom to say what we want, dress how we want, live where we want, act on our own judgement, etc. These freedoms allow us all to live as we each see fit, per our individual desires and needs. Getting to know yourself and identifying your priorities are essential components of crafting a true independent lifestyle. By choosing housing in a way that makes sense for your life – your personality, lifestyle preferences, goals – you are creating your own freedom. Freedom from the herd. Tiny/small house living is freedom from the status quo of the mainstream American lifestyle. (Stephens 2016, 66–67)

Vina Lustado's article, "Can Tiny Houses Save the World?" applies this anti-collective attitude to environmental issues.

We have our own personal challenges to face and "saving the world" doesn't fit in our to-do list...If we were *actually* moved to take action, our efforts seem inconsequential. Does changing my lightbulb *really* make a difference? To be honest, I'm skeptical...and maybe it doesn't matter. My motivation is not based on what I *should* be doing. Rather, it's whether my intention is aligned with my core values. It's a practice in authenticity [to oneself]. My actions have to reflect my lifestyle, especially if it is to be effective and sustainable. Anything else would feel like an exercise in guilt-ridden responsibilities. What fun is that? (Lustado 2013, 21)

Still, Lustado maintains some of her lifestyle activist credentials when she claims that "the most effective way to reduce one's own carbon footprint is to minimize the size of one's dwelling."

Building and living in her tiny house permitted her to "show that architecture can be a solution to social and environmental issues" (ibid., 22).

## **Conclusion**

Enthusiasts' concern with climate change and ecological destruction never totally stands alone. When present, environmentalism is typically an addendum to the dominant anxiety about overconsumption, alienation, and economic precarity. Tiny house environmentalism is thus often yet another rationale for why people should consume less housing and less stuff; it is an ideological add-on further justifying anti-consumerism. But this time the typical moralism of spiritualized simple living is also supported by the authority of hard science and is lent credence by legitimate environmental issues: climate change, unsustainable resource use, the production of waste and pollution. Those practicing the tiny house lifestyle thus become doubly virtuous; their anti-consumerism reflects a sober and mature approach towards consumption and a means to protect the environment and humanity alike.

Just as some enthusiasts incorporate a nostalgic and escapist localism into their justification for tiny house communities, an association that certainly makes the tiny house movement appear more political than it is, the same holds true for the tiny house movement's environmentalism. For those dwellers and enthusiasts who consider their lifestyle to be environmentalist, oftentimes this appreciation comes after they move into their tiny house. The innovation-inspiring scale of the tiny house, along with the more immediate and personal confrontation with human excrement and resource consumption, allows or compels dwellers to become more personally aware of and responsible for their environmental footprint. Here, within this environmentalist milieu, some enthusiasts consider their personal anti-consumerism and more sustainable living practices as doing something beyond self-centered minimalism or thrift. Their lifestyle environmentalism, or "lifestyle activism," hopes to inspire others to downsize their home, their sphere of consumer pleasures, and even at times routine conveniences on the behalf of the environment rather than their own personal security and contentedness. Despite such pretensions, though, this "activism" merely entails doing what you were doing (living in a tiny house, minimalism, etc.) while allowing others to see you doing it. Through this visibility, dwellers lead others by example. Some enthusiasts, though, explicitly balk at the idea that their lifestyle should positively affect anyone but themselves. Even as lifestyle environmentalism entails individualistic methods of provoking social change, detractors interpret their lifestyle to be purely individualistic in both goal and method.

The individualistic method of lifestyle environmentalism stems from footprint analyses. The only things left are discrete individual consumers who owe to the environment what they bought from it with their wages. The size of one's footprint reflects the length of their consumer receipts and utility bills. This mode of thinking necessarily depends upon forgetting "all of social

science, all of history, politics and economics” (Phillips 2015, 56). In other words, carrying capacity, ecological- or carbon footprint analyses assume that each person has an equal say over just how “green” society should be and is, therefore, individually responsible for environmental issues. In this mode of thinking, “the conclusion is clear: a politics of less consumption” (Huber 2019, 16). Lifestyle environmentalism amounts to certain groups of people, particularly those with some modicum of wealth in time and/or money, embracing anti-consumerism as a mode of politics. Having decided to avoid “unsustainable” commodities, to buy sustainable ones, and then to dispose of them correctly, adherents draw a dividing line between their smaller environmental footprints and the bigger ones acculturated into the American Nightmare of consumerism.

Certainly, green consumption can have positive environmental outcomes. Yet, this individualization of environmental responsibility systematically overlooks how large-scale production for the sake of capital accumulation – not individual decisions about consumption, waste disposal, and so forth – is by far the greatest culprit of greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation across the globe. Footprint analyses distract from this reality, and thus dissuade collective political action to fight back against these processes. Instead they celebrate, through the trappings of objective science, every instance of abstaining from buying commodities. Environmental concerns are thus an additional reason for enthusiasts to practice personalized austerity.

## CONCLUSION

Over five days in June 2019, the Trump Administration gave the tiny house movement its greatest claim to legitimacy since Jay Shafer’s 2007 *Oprah* segment. Co-hosted by the National Association of Trade Builders and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the inaugural Innovative Housing Showcase highlighted “new building technologies and housing solutions that are making homeownership more affordable for American families” (along with stop-gap shelter designs suitable in post-disaster areas) (HUD 2019).<sup>118</sup> Speaking from the National Mall to well-known tiny house advocate and documentarian Alexis Stephens, HUD Secretary Ben Carson premised his interview by noting the widespread rental burden facing US households. Peering over his shoulder at one of the featured models on wheels, he argued that tiny houses offer an obvious solution. “We don’t want to just talk about it. We want people to come here and see tiny homes, see, you know, compartmentalized homes, manufactured homes.” What makes tiny houses so “wonderful,” Carson exclaimed as he turned back to the camera, is that “people just can’t afford the average cost of a new home now; it’s like \$309,000! But you can get into a tiny home, you can get into a manufactured home, for *much* less. And you’re building equity, and then you can use that equity to make the next step” (quoted in Stephens 2019b).

Tiny house advocates, long frustrated by tiny houses’ broad illegality, finally felt they were being heard. Having suddenly become a legitimate “solution” to the ongoing “housing crisis” in the eyes of the federal government, enthusiasts tamped down their “American Nightmare” rhetoric and instead framed tiny houses as a way to drastically down-scale, and thus salvage, the American Dream. Several spokespersons conveyed these sentiments within the

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<sup>118</sup> The Showcase planned for 2020 was canceled due to the pandemic.

Showcase’s tiny house panel discussion, “Many Problems, Mini Solutions.” Alexis Stephens stressed how nowadays “people are drawn to a different kind of American dream, one of reduced debt and greater freedom with their time. Slaving away just to meet your basics doesn’t leave a lot of time or money for things that you need or like to do, like spend time with your loved ones.” Stephens goes on to explain how she has witnessed a “paradigm shift” in people’s minds after they tour her tiny house, realizing that, though it has “been shoved down our throats” to the contrary, maybe success is not defined by having a large home. “Rapidly growing is the amount of people who want to live in a tiny home that’s well-designed because they discovered – guess what – I can live comfortably this way to meet my needs and I’m gonna have a higher quality of life because the savings I get I can use towards healthcare, for groceries or,” concluding with a dark joke, “something fancy like a savings account.”

Fellow panelist Elizabeth Singleton, founder of a nonprofit that builds subsidized tiny houses for the poor and homeless, similarly contends that tiny houses offer a frugal road to homeownership. “Americans still believe in the American Dream,” Singleton begins.

And we have an affordable housing crisis...what tiny homes – on wheels and foundations – [provide] is a sense of “I can still have that American Dream and not go broke,” you know? I don’t have to live with my parents. Or I may live in the backyard, but I own my own home. When you are in a crisis, then you have to start thinking outside of the box, and that’s what this [showcase] is about today. (quoted in Stephens 2019b).

In this manner, enthusiasts envision tiny houses as a means to preserve independent homeownership by embracing budgetary thrift. These spokespersons support the American Dream of independent homeownership, just not when ownership comes with a big house, lengthy mortgages, and the alleged obligation to overconsume.

Whereas Shafer's *Oprah* appearance framed tiny houses as the route for personal happiness, those offering "mini solutions" at the Housing Showcase highlighted the material foundation of tiny houses' growing popularity: a financially anxious working class increasingly unable to afford traditional forms of suburban housing. Catching on after the Great Recession, which saw foreclosure rates shoot up by 81 percent – taking away the homes of estimated 861,664 families in 2008 alone, the tiny house movement emerged as a sensible alternative to traditional housing. Even before the Great Recession, neoliberal policy, with its degradation of working class living standards so as to boost capitalist profits, had steadily been forcing the working class – including those of the progressively "squeezed" middle stratum – to survive on stagnating wages amid regressive tax policies and a reduction of the welfare state (Quart 2018)s.

In this context, it is not surprising that many confronted their degraded and precarious economic situation by seeking greater control of their lives. The tiny house movement is one strategy of seeking control. Economic concerns are the most common among tiny house enthusiasts (see G. Morrison 2015). Both, though, revolve around a lack of control – from a lack of consumer "impulse control" (Vesterfelt 2013; Berzins 2016) to the inability to control your own labor (Boyink 2016; J. Becker 2013b) or to control what happens when you cannot afford your mortgage or rent (Foreman 2019; Shafer 2009; Higgins 2016; Felix 2015). It is for this reason that enthusiasts describe tiny houses, and the tiny house lifestyle, as an exercise in freedom (Odom 2013; Engberg 2016; Stephens 2016; Vader 2016). Tiny houses promise the freedom from stultifying stuff, freedom from work, freedom from bills and debt.

Tiny houses are an innovative form of housing and style of life that promises a measure of personal control by consuming less, saving money, paying off debt, and eventually working

less and living more. Capitalist contradictions manifest as abstract market forces. Changes in people's economic and social position – joblessness, foreclosure, rising home prices – emerge anarchically from the irrational logic of competition and capital accumulation. Without any meaningful democratic oversight, people do not produce the economic conditions of their life. Rather, these economic conditions determine the sharp parameters of working class existence. Reacting to this bewildering ensemble of volatile price signals, enthusiasts grasp on to well-established ideologies that always locate the origin of economic precarity within individual deficiency. Enthusiasts thus reduce the abstract, dominating web of capital accumulation – producing lost homes, lost jobs, lost wealth, lost time, lost humanity – to that of manipulative product advertising, “consumer culture,” and individuals' moral and intellectual incapacity to buck this abridged domination. They also overwhelmingly blame their lack of economic control and poverty on their own – and often others' – lack of spending control. The route to tiny house freedom, such as it is, requires cutting back on consumption and proper budgeting. The problem of overconsumption, identified as such, determines the proposed solution: buy less house and less stuff, acculturate to your degraded economic situation, match governmental austerity with personalized austerity, lean production with leaner social reproduction – economically retreat for the sake of social and economic freedom. Minimalism blends into thrift, poverty into simplicity.

The tiny house movement, I have argued, entails a spatial, temporal, and social reconfiguration of daily life for the downwardly mobile middle stratum workers as they navigate several contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Enthusiasts endeavor to reduce the time they spend at the workplace and to expand the time they spend at home by altering the decisions they make within the marketplace, or the sphere of exchange. Altogether this reconfiguration is an effort to manage their relationship to the commodity form, to avoid being

used as a commodity at work and to enlarge the time and space of realizing use-values at home. In so doing, they expand their realm of life, of unalienated labor, of socialization and individuation, outside of work. In this concluding chapter, I will not only review how and why the tiny house movement responds to the contradictions of capitalist accumulation, thereby rendering it a plausible avenue of seeking individual control, but also speculate on the political implications and limitations of this lifestyle movement's ideology.

### **Seeking control**

Although a product of neoliberal capitalism and the Great Recession, the tiny house movement is also but another instance of a startlingly repetitive reflex in United States history. During times of economic crisis and social and personal unmooring, simplicity and thrift are proposed to the working class as a method to maintain and survive under, rather than to improve or protest against, their subservient and precarious economic position. Thrift and simplicity functioned as a tactic to manage the poor and, to a lesser extent, ridicule the wealthy. For middle stratum workers, calls for simple living often entailed a more radical critique of alienating capitalist social relations. Rather than challenging its structural basis, simple living meant romantic escapism. The tiny house movement is best understood as the latest iteration of this recurrent tactic wherein working class alter their consumption practices as a salve for the financial, social, and existential anxieties produced by abstract market domination.

Next to the regimented indignities of depersonalized, abstract wage labor, the sphere of exchange is a space of formal equality, of less dominating and less alienating social interactions. The sphere of exchange is, then, less a place of limitless freedom than being the only place wherein individuals have some agency: control over what they buy and sell. This relative agency

makes it appear as if all economic outcomes originate within the sphere of exchange. Whether one is wealthy or poor, it can be attributed to their personal market decisions. One either sold their labor power for too little or spent too much on commodities. Discourses of simplicity and thrift, moreover, avoid any confrontation with capital or the capitalist state. In fact, demands for simplicity and thrift ease capital accumulation while blaming poverty on working class overconsumption rather than inadequate pay or too little state support.

These historical discourses of simplicity and thrift have found new purchase since neoliberal turn of the 1970s. Wages have stagnated amid a bipartisan project to reduce the welfare state's support for the poor, shun organized labor, and institute regressive tax policies in the name of market efficiencies and personal responsibility. Without the option of institutional support, it became every person's responsibility to accommodate themselves to this political-economic landscape. The then-nascent self-help industry ballooned to meet this need. The tiny house movement, as with the broader appeal of micro housing, urges personalized austerity. Yet this austerity has been sufficiently rebranded as embracing the nobler practices of rugged self-reliance, Thoreau's romantic simple living, and conscientious lifestyle consumption, thus ideologically compensating for a degraded material livelihood.

Rather than finding fault in neoliberal policies, enthusiasts suggest that they have been led astray by a duplicitous American Dream and its requisite "consumer culture." Feeling led-on and abandoned, they envision the tiny house movement as a countercultural corrective and overdue rebuke to typical big-house lifestyle in mainstream America. Coached through self-help advice, minimalism and mindfulness are the tools by which enthusiasts can curate the spatial organization of their home and, through this ascetic streamlining, transcend their petty concerns

and achieve spiritual harmony. Dwellers, in their own framing, are those who have reached a higher plane of understanding. Often smacking of elitism, a significant segment of enthusiasts contends that those outside the lifestyle enclave, because they have overconsumed, have put themselves into economically precarious positions. These consumer purchases not only reflect bad taste, but also poor values. Just as buying the wrong types of commodities is a sign of underlying immorality, cutting-back on personal consumption is an exercise in self-directed virtue.

Tiny houses, of course, are not only a means for some to signal their virtue. Indeed, the spiritualism of tiny house minimalism is a fantastical, quasi-religious expression of underlying economic anxiety. Many enthusiasts have “joined” the tiny house movement as a thrifty way to afford homeownership, pay off debt, and make do on inadequate wages. Just as enthusiasts rely upon the self-help industry for advice on simple living, they too use it for advice on financial freedom. In both literatures, poverty and indebtedness result from immoral consumerism, economic ignorance, and a lack of forethought. Cutting out consumer commodities and cutting social expenses to the bone thus become a two-fisted exercise in attaining financial freedom and spiritual contentedness. But for those who are seriously struggling to escape debt, financial freedom demands constant work, investing, and “side hustles” up to the point where enthusiasts become small-time entrepreneurs and self-brand to make any money they can. Minimalism thus reveals itself as economically desperate thrift, and not solely a conduit to stay virtuous or embark upon romantic escapism.

For those without significant debt, reducing consumer spending and rationalizing social reproduction enables romantic escapism. Cutting back on consumption, for some enthusiasts,

enables them to – as with the simple living of Thoreau and those of the counterculture – evade alienating work and commercial relations, to enjoy more leisure time of travel or just hanging out with friends and family. Unlike lengthy mortgage payments or apartment renting, cheaper-to-buy tiny houses can be more quickly owned outright. With such ownership, dwellers can fully realize their use-value of their home. DIY tiny house design, building, and customization, meanwhile, is for many a self-affirming mode of un-alienated labor, an artistic project and hobby. In addition to assuaging their alienation vis-à-vis work and housing, many are guided by the promise of more genuine – if often exceedingly nostalgic – social relations promised by small-scale, local tiny house “communities” less sullied by commercialism, social anomie, and inequality.

The tiny house movement’s environmentalism calls not for separating from society, but rather undertaking consumer decisions with society and the environment in mind. Tiny houses, because they use less energy and construction materials, are, next to larger houses, environmentally friendly. Living in a tiny house thus involves one in the broader environmental movement. Yet this “activism” of dwellers amounts to lifestyle environmentalism, or practicing green consumption and green social reproduction as the best way to individually help the environment. Such a tactic not only draws from the bourgeois theory of consumer sovereignty, but also the implications of carbon and ecological footprint analyses. These tools essentially correlate personal overconsumption to personally-caused environmental degradation (in terms of fossil fuel use, waste, etc.). In this manner, tiny house environmentalism expresses the same type of moralized anti-consumerism, but this time through the trappings of science. The virtues of minimalist-type anti-consumerism, that is, a spiritual commune with one’s own space and physical commodities meant to conjure personal contentedness, becomes – without any

additional behaviors required of the tiny house dweller – a selfless and political act of environmental activism.

### **The poverty of simplicity**

Enthusiasts' economic, social, and spiritual life pivots upon altering how they spend their money. Domination and deliverance both originate in the sphere of exchange. Taking this part of capitalism as the latter's totality, the movement remains geographically and ideologically incapable of transcending such cramped horizons. Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a withering broadside of French intellectual and activist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, takes aim at bourgeois socialists' similar fixation with commodity distribution in the marketplace. Bourgeois socialism argued for "equal exchange" between buyer and seller so that commodities (including labor power) and the money paid for them reflected their true value (Marx 2014, 74). With this, everyone got their "money's worth." Because nobody is cheated, they argued, a key basis of economic inequality would be extinguished. "Mr. Bray," Marx writes of one of Proudhon's uncited inspirers, "makes of the *illusion* of the honest bourgeois the *ideal* which he desires to realize. In purifying individual exchange, in freeing it from all the antagonistic elements he finds in it, he believes he has found an '*equalitarian*' relation which he desires to see adopted by society (ibid., 85). This political program of market fairness defined bourgeois socialism's proposed method for working class liberty. It attempted to translate the legal equality of exchange into economic equality.

Though slightly implied in its notion of community, the tiny house movement does not, on the assumption of widespread dishonesty among retailers and landlords, call for equal exchange. Indeed, it assumes formal equality, arguing that the poverty of the working class

originates in exchange through overspending. The sphere of exchange is the proving ground of unfettered individual meritocracy. Overconsuming workers cheat *themselves* out of economic equality. That said, the tiny house movement and bourgeois socialism alike ignore the actual basis of abstract domination – the capitalist mode of production itself – and the actual causes of the working class’s oppression and poverty – their alienation from the means of production and their resulting exploitation within the hidden abode of work. The tiny house movement thereby ignores, just like the impoverished philosophy of Proudhon, how working class poverty and exploitation precedes, follows, and is the necessary foundation of capitalist exchange and distribution. This leaves both bourgeois socialism and the tiny house movement with only one place within which workers may alter the conditions of their life: the sphere of exchange.

Just as bourgeois theories of the housing question believe quality housing will financially and morally uplift the working class, the same holds true for the tiny house movement. By reconfiguring the space of social reproduction, dwellers force themselves to act differently in the market. With this common geography of action, nineteenth-century bourgeois socialists and tiny house enthusiasts “sincerely deplore the distress of the proletariat.” In lieu of calling for a democratic reappropriation of social wealth, a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the eradication of class oppression, “it denies the necessity of [class] antagonism.” Without grasping the structural foundation of the proletariat’s distress, and assuming that inequality and poverty are “the result of the baseness of human beings, as the result of original sin,” those seeking to redress it can do little more than “deliver moral sermons” (Engels 2005, 57–58).

These sermons target both the commercial “greed” of the bourgeoisie and the consumption habits of the broadly defined working class. As bourgeois socialists would “counsel

the workers to be sober, to work hard and to have few children” (Marx 2014, 135), the tiny house movement validates reduced spending and more saving. Thrift – phrased as simplicity or not – illuminates the path to increased economic freedom through the saving of money, that universal bearer of social power. Workers have the agency to use this social power as they see fit. Of course, this is limited by the amount of money they have. For the working class, the goal of purchasing commodities is primarily the satisfaction of their needs of subsistence, whether they be necessary for basic survival or to gratify social and intellectual needs.

Yet the tiny house movement prescribes an opposite manner of relating to commodities. Thrift and simplicity demand that the sphere of exchange and social reproduction become less a space of pleasure and needs fulfillment than a means of accumulating savings. Given the unpredictability of capitalist production, the fresh memories of the Great Recession, and the weakened state of organized labor, this is a rational recalibration. For tiny house enthusiasts, and especially those struggling the most financially, the self-denial of lean social reproduction builds a nest-egg to be relied upon in old age, illness, emergencies, or during the next economic crisis – and to do so without resorting to welfare or depending on friends and family.

As discussed above, the value of labor power includes all those commodities that go into its making. Not a static measurement, this value shifts according to the state of class struggle and prevailing perceptions of fairness and justice. Together, these factors produce a standard of living. The tiny house movement, like those simplicity movements which preceded it, manifests as a regressive force upon the “historical and moral” elements determining the wages of the working class. It thereby reproduces and facilitates the need for capital to reduce the value of labor power to the greatest degree possible, that is, for workers to exist only *as workers*. Unlike a

slave, Marx (1973, 289), argued, the wage laborer is “formally posited as a person who is something for himself *apart from his* labor, and who alienates his life-expression only as a means towards his own life.” In addition to cutting out basic expenses, to save money workers must avoid “participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his taste, etc., his only share of civilization which distinguishes himself from a slave” (ibid., 287). The working class’ capacity to consume permits an enjoyment of their life as non-workers. In terms of improving the livelihood of workers, simplicity and thrift is a step backwards.

At least in the long run, the tiny house movement promises to maintain or expand dwellers’ time away from work, increasing their existence as non-workers. In the meantime, though, reducing expenses by living in a cheaper tiny house and being compelled to embrace minimalist anti-consumerism remains front-and-center. The tiny house movement alone, with only thousands of acolytes, cannot put a downward pressure on the working class’ wages. With self-denial practiced on such a small scale, the reduction of living expenses will not produce a drop in prevailing wages or the standard of living. If tiny houses and other sorts of cheap housing increase and become generalized, however, the wages saved on housing and consumer goods would result in a proportional reduction in wages, a degraded standard of living. “Therefore,” Engels (2005, 65) argues, “the more [the worker] saves the less he will receive in wages. He saves therefore not in his own interests, but in the interests of the capitalist.”

Unfortunately, the tiny house movement is not all alone. It is part of a much larger trend celebrating thrift as simplicity and forced asceticism as an opportunity for spiritual transcendence, savvy entrepreneurship, rugged self-reliance, and exceptional individuality. The

newfound popularity of cheap housing among the middle stratum of the working class, along with the appeal of micro apartments, living fulltime out of a van, an old school bus, or an RV signals a qualitative shift in tactics for economic confidence as wages continue to stagnate. Outside of housing, highly related trends have been picking up steam since the neoliberal turn: entrepreneurial frugality to reach financial freedom; self-help guides to sustain the sanity of harried workers through mindfulness and decluttering; and of course minimalism and simple living to reduce stress and expenses at the same time. All of these newfangled phenomena redound to recommending thrift to the broadly defined working class. Relying on these discourses, enthusiasts envision themselves as being on the cutting edge of a new form of cheaper housing and, potentially, reaching a less alienated relationship to labor and method of socialization.

The tiny house movement's call to embrace thrift as virtuous simplicity, then, encapsulates a recurrent if sublimated critique of capitalism. It cries out against capitalism's commercialism, social isolation, environmental destruction, and the overall misery of life due to overwork and insufficient leisure time. All of these symptoms are worthy of critique. But the tiny house movement's critique is altogether superficial and impoverished. Wedded as it is to a lifestyle politics focused on personal consumption, and thus privileging individual consumer decisions above that of collective political actions, it leaves the root causes of alienation, austerity, and abstract domination – the capitalist mode of production itself – unchallenged. The tiny house movement is thus ultimately more interesting in how it reproduces neoliberal ideology than its desire or capacity to combat it – and how such a sad state of social surrender can so easily be rebranded as a countercultural route to material and spiritual salvation.

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Zweig, Michael. 2012. *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*. Second edition. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.  
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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### BRIAN HENNIGAN

Department of Geography, Syracuse University  
 144 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-1020  
[brhennig@syr.edu](mailto:brhennig@syr.edu)

### EDUCATION

**PhD, Geography**, Syracuse University, 2013-present

**MA, Geography**, Syracuse University, 2013

**MA, Nonprofit Studies**, Arizona State University, 2011

**BA, History**, University of Arizona, 2009

**RESEARCH INTERESTS:** Urban Poverty, Homelessness; Labor & Labor Movements; Welfare Policy; Social Reproduction; Class, Culture, & Ideology; Social Theory; Political Economy; Ethnography

### PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES

**Hennigan, Brian**, and Gretchen Purser. 2020. "The Other Side of the Paycheck: Recommending Thrift to the Poor in Job-readiness Programs." *Critical Sociology*. (online) DOI: 10.1177/0896920520964537

Baker, Tom, Joshua Evans, and **Brian Hennigan**. 2019. "Investable Poverty: Social Investment States and the Geographies of Poverty Management." *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (3): 534-554.

**Hennigan, Brian**, and Jessie Speer. 2019. "Compassionate Revanchism: The Blurry Geography of Homelessness in the USA." *Urban Studies* 56 (5): 906-21.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2019. "From Madonna to Marx: Towards a Re-Theorization of Homelessness." *Antipode* 51 (1): 148-68.

- Honorable Mention for 2020 Albert Szymanski-T.R. Young Marxist Sociology Graduate Student Paper, American Sociological Association

**Hennigan, Brian**, and Gretchen Purser. 2018. "Jobless and Godless: Religious Neoliberalism and the Project of Evangelizing Employability in the US." *Ethnography* 19 (1): 84-104.

Purser, Gretchen, and **Brian Hennigan**. 2018. "Disciples and Dreamers: Job Readiness and the Making of the US Working Class." *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2): 149-61.

- Special Issue: The Making of the US Working Class

Purser, Gretchen, and **Brian Hennigan**. 2017. “‘Work as unto the Lord’: Enhancing Employability in an Evangelical Job-Readiness Program.” *Qualitative Sociology* 40 (1): 111–33.

- David E. Sopher New Scholar Award, Geography of Religions and Belief Systems Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers, Runner-up

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2017. “House Broken: Homelessness, Housing First, and Neoliberal Poverty Governance.” *Urban Geography* 38 (9): 1418–40.

### MANUSCRIPTS IN PREPARATION

**Hennigan, Brian**. “Class.” In *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural and Social Geography*, edited by Nuala Johnson, Richard Schein, and Jamie Winders. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell. (Forthcoming)

### POPULAR PRESS

Purser, Gretchen and **Brian Hennigan**. 2020. “Teaching Thrift to the Poor.” *Work in Progress*. November 26. (repost)

**Hennigan, Brian** and Gretchen Purser. 2020. “Teaching Thrift to the Poor.” *Marxist Sociology Blog: Theory, Research, Politics*, November 25.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2019a. “Why Is Homelessness Criminalized?” *Marxist Sociology Blog: Theory, Research, Politics*. September 5.

- Among “Top Ten” most-read articles of 2019

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2019b. “Why Is Homelessness Criminalized?” *Jacobin Magazine*, September 7. [Republished from *Marxist Sociology Blog*]

Purser, Gretchen, and **Brian Hennigan**. 2017. “Cleaning Toilets for Jesus: Inside the Program Teaching Submission to Capitalism as Divine Duty.” *Jacobin Magazine*, June 30.

Purser, Gretchen, and **Brian Hennigan**. 2017. “Evangelizing Employability: Inside a Faith-Based Job-Readiness Program.” *Work in Progress*, February 23.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2012a. “Art and Protest.” *Pholx*.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2012b. “Benign Present: The Ideological Undergirding of the Ethnic Studies Debate.” *Pholx*.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2012c. “Cultural Baggage in the New World Order.” *Pholx*.

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2012d. “The Commodification of Love: Charity Under Capitalism.”

**Hennigan, Brian**. 2012e. “Tucson’s Ethnic Studies Debate Lives On.” *Pholx*.

**Hennigan, Brian**, and Amanda Strobel. 2011. “Conspire to Work Together: Arizona’s Social Economy and the Conspire Art Collective.” Social Economy Arizona Innovation Projects. Phoenix: Arizona State University.

### BOOK REVIEWS

Andrew Ross, *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World’s Least Sustainable City* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011). *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol 42, no. 3 (May 2013), pp. 458-9 (unsigned).

Lewis D. Solomon, *Cycles of Poverty and Crime in America's Inner Cities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, (2012). *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol 42, no. 5 (September 2013), pp. 764-5 (unsigned).

### **AWARDS & RECOGNITION**

Honorable Mention for 2020 Albert Szymanski-T.R. Young Marxist Sociology Graduate Student Paper  
 Graduate Research Funding Award, Department of Geography, SU, **\$1,000** (2019)  
 Appleby-Mosher Research Award, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,500** (2019)  
 Roscoe-Martin Dissertation Stipend, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,000** (2019)  
 Summer Research Project Assistantship Award, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,800** (2018)  
 Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration Research Assistantship Award,  
 Maxwell School, SU, **\$2,000** (2017)  
 Sopher Best Graduate Paper Award, Department of Geography, SU, **\$1,800** (2017)  
 Roscoe-Martin Dissertation Stipend, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,000** (2017)  
 David E. Sopher New Scholar Award, Geography of Religions and Belief Systems Specialty Group,  
 Association of American Geographers, Runner-up (2016)  
 Summer Research Project Assistantship Award, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,800** (2016)  
 Maxwell Tenth Decade Project on Work, Labor, and Citizenship, SU, **\$2,500** (2016)  
 Roscoe-Martin Dissertation Stipend, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,000** (2016)  
 Summer Research Project Assistantship Award, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,800** (2015)  
 Graduate Assistantship, Department of Geography, SU, **\$50,000 total** (2012-2015)  
 Summer Research Award, Department of Geography, SU, **\$14,050 total** (2012-2017)  
 Travel Grant, Graduate Student Organization, SU, **\$300** (2013-2015)  
 Sopher Best Graduate Paper Award, Department of Geography, SU, **\$1,800** (2013)  
 Master's Thesis Distinction Award, Department of Geography, SU (2013)  
 Roscoe-Martin research grant, Maxwell School, SU, **\$1,000** (2012)  
 Tuition Scholarship, Department of Geography, SU (2011)  
 Phi Beta Kappa, ASU (2011)  
 AmeriCorps Eli Segel Education Award, **\$4,725** (2010)  
 Cum Laude, University of Arizona (2009)

### **TEACHING/LECTURE EXPERIENCE**

HST101: America until 1865 (TA)  
 HST102: America since 1865 (TA)  
 HST111: Early Modern European History (TA)  
 HST331: Race and Sport (TA)

GEO/SOC300: Class, Capitalism, and Politics (instructor)  
 GEO 171: Human Geography (TA & instructor)  
 GEO103: Environment and Society (TA)  
 GEO273: World Political Economy (TA)  
 GEO 463: Begging, Homelessness, and the Question of Disability (lecture)  
 GEO171: New Economic Geography (lecture)  
 GEO 103: Urban Environments, Homeless Ecologies (lecture)  
 SOC800: Work & Labor (lecture)

### **PRESENTATIONS**

Recommending Thrift to the Poor (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at the *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting*. Virtual. (April 2021)

Learning to Labor: Job-Readiness and the Virtue of Thrift (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association*. New York City (August 2019)

Re-theorizing the homeless as workers and activists. Presented at *Power at the Margins: Mobilizing Across Housing Injustice – A Scholar-Activist Gathering*. Minneapolis, MN (March 2018)

From Madonna to Marx: Towards a Re-theorization of Homelessness. Presented at the annual *Critical Geographies Conference*. State College, PA (October 2017)

Jobless and Godless: Religious Neoliberalism and the Project of Evangelizing Employability (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at the Regular Session on Ethnography at the *Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association*, Montreal (August 2017)

From Citizen to Surplus, Madonna to Marx: Towards a Re-theorization of Homelessness. Presented at the *Graduate Research Symposium* for at the Maxwell School's Tenth Decade Project on Work, Labor, and Citizenship. Syracuse, NY (April 2017)

Jobless and Godless: Religious Neoliberalism and the Project of Evangelizing Employability (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting*, Boston, MA (April 2017)

“Work as Unto the Lord”: Enhancing Employability in an Evangelical Job-Readiness Program (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting*, San Francisco, CA (March 2016)

“Work as Unto the Lord”: Enhancing Employability in an Evangelical Job-Readiness Program (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at the RC-22 session on “Welfare and Civil Society: The Role of Religion” at the *International Sociological Association's Forum of Sociology*, Vienna, Austria (July 2016)

“Work as Unto the Lord”: Enhancing “Employability” in an Evangelical Job-Readiness Program (with Gretchen Purser). Presented at Program for Advancement of Research on Conflict and

Collaboration (PARCC), Conversations in Conflict Studies Series, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (September 2015).

Capitalism, Production, and Stigma: Managing the Homeless Class. Presented at *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting*, Chicago, IL (April 2015)

Push, Pull, Drag: The Sociospatial Management of Homelessness in the Valley of the Sun. Presented at *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting*, Tampa, FL (April 2014)

House Broken: Housing First and the Right to the City. Presented at *Graduate Research Symposium*, Syracuse, NY (March 2013)

### **SERVICE/RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Organizer, Syracuse Graduate Employees United, 2013-2018

Graduate student member, Syracuse Labor Studies 2014-present

Geography Dept. Senator, Graduate Student Organization, Syracuse University, 2016-2017

Graduate Representative to the Faculty, Syracuse Geography, 2012-13

Member, Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program, 2013-present

Member, Association of American Geographers, 2011-present