CHAPTER 13

“THE WORLD IS MY BACKYARD”: ROMANTICIZATION, THOREAUVIAN RHETORIC, AND CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION IN THE TINY HOUSE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To examine the recent popularity of the tiny house movement with a critical eye toward the growing commodification of sustainability in a market that continues to shelter economic and class privilege, despite that the movement itself emerges from a desire to consume less and contribute to community more.

Methodology/approach – Written from the position of a tiny house builder and dweller, this study reads a range of recently published accounts of the tiny house movement, informed by contemporary work in environmental sociology. Investigates current rhetoric surrounding the movement with special attention to issues of mobility, consumption, and
the movement’s romanticism, with particular attention to the movement’s invocations of Henry David Thoreau.

Findings – Tiny house living can cultivate correctives to possible oversights or entitlements in environmental thought, challenge representations of the movement itself, and encourage those inside the “tiny” house movement to openly discuss the difficulties and capabilities endemic to tiny living.

Social implications – Tiny houses, while still bound to forms of privilege, hold potential to be what some social science researchers have seen as best practice. Practices that link the practicality of realism with the zeal of romanticism can contribute to what has been found to be a positive correlation between conscious consumption and political activism.

Originality/value – This critique offers a gentle corrective to unmitigated praise of the current tiny house phenomenon in order to highlight the movement’s potential for addressing more pressing social justice and environmental issues.

Keywords: Tiny house movement; sustainability politics; greenwashing; Thoreau

Nature is not made after such as we would have her. We piously exaggerate her wonders, as the scenery around our home

— Henry David Thoreau, A Week, p. 157

Grad student builds her own “tiny house”

Woman finds herself homeless and divorced but her comeback is epic!

These headlines open two different stories of single women who built, and now live in, small homes on wheels. Though these women’s experiences make for somewhat unusual narratives, the journalistic taglines grossly misrepresent them. The difficulties and motivations that led the “homeless and divorced” Macy Miller to the small house movement are chronologically far removed from the victim-narrative this particular headline portrays, which elides discrepancies of up to six years (Manetti, 2013; Miller, 2013). My own experience as the grad student who (according to the story) managed
to assemble an entire house through individual strength and know-how is similarly dissonant. The image that the description begets — of a woman powerfully alone on a rooftop, hammer in hand — reduces countless helpers, messy details, and dependence on community resources into a misleading narrative. Having been wooed to build a tiny house by the movement’s proclaimed environmentally conscious ethos, and then inhabiting the realities myself, I have become increasingly conscious of the discrepancies between the way tiny house stories are scripted and the sharp corners of tiny house life.

Despite the obvious differences in the above headlines, both frame tiny homes as symbols of freedom and resilience. The type of journalism, no matter how well meaning, that translates communities, tools, materials, and expertise into solo do-it-yourself tales exemplifies the tension between the increasingly popular contemporary tiny house movement’s rhetoric and the complex realities of tiny house construction and living. These misrepresentations are unsurprising when we take into account how effective green-washing tactics are for growing sales, or when we accept that for any movement to be “popular,” it must necessarily be marketed well. Popular media is undeniably bound to the commodification of environmental sustainability in a market that continues to shelter economic and class privilege. Yet, the self-reliant individualism which enthusiasts and businesses use to sell the movement seems opposed to the ostensible goals of tiny house living — to consume less and contribute to community more.

Reading recent rhetoric surrounding the movement — with particular attention to the movement’s invocations of Henry David Thoreau — this essay examines the ways in which tiny house living does more than just expose neoliberal logics of freedom-through-consumption which contradict the movement’s own rhetorical claims. By inhabiting this gap between rhetoric and reality, the tiny house movement highlights the discord between green-washing rhetoric and the complex realities of tiny house living. As the experience of living in a tiny house brings the dweller into closer confrontation with issues of mobility, privilege and the realities of waste, the movement may be even more aligned with Thoreau than most of its popular rhetoric allows. Yet, without calling attention to the realities of its privilege — or of the lifestyle itself — the tiny house movement runs the risk of reproducing tired tropes of environmental romanticism in a culture of commodification. The aim of this critique is to initiate closer consideration of tiny house realities, and Thoreau’s relevance to those realities; instead of romantic promises of self-sufficiency and benign environmental
impact, the Thoreauvian details of the tiny house experience show the radical possibilities for building a reflective, responsive, and mobile environmental ethic.

**THE TINY HOUSE MOVEMENT AND ITS MEDIA**

The small house movement is a social and architectural trend that advocates living simply in small spaces. It broadly includes models built on foundations as well as more mobile residences built on wheels. Though tiny houses can technically be defined as anything smaller than 800 square feet, as a general rule the term is reserved for the smaller transportable units that are approximately the size of one room—8 feet wide by 10–20 feet long. Currently, more than 60 builders cater to tiny houses in the United States alone, offering everything from pre-fabricated kits to do-it-yourself plans for the well-equipped in tools and experience. While commercially available tiny homes cost on average between $20,000 and $50,000, lower-income members of the movement are relying on community support, reclaimed materials, and communal property to reduce both economic and environmental costs, though the availability of these resources is highly variable.

Very recently, the small house movement has begun to occupy a larger space in the consumer imaginary, presumably as interest grows around ecological issues. Such well-known publications as *The New Yorker*, *Architectural Digest*, and *National Geographic* have run stories about the movement, its history, and its contemporary appeal. In fact, tiny houses have recently begun to attract somewhat of a cult following. The well-known South by Southwest film festival premiered the film *Tiny: A Story about Living Small* in 2013, and another film, *Small is Beautiful*, is in production. A number of new books on the subject address those already “inside” the movement, while many others assume a more D.I.Y spirit. Real estate publications like *RISMedia* have been eager to market the diminutive structures. And, as ironic as it may seem, Chevrolet, a company that brings to mind resource intensive heavy-duty pickups, published the un-dated article “In Living, As In Driving, Small is the New Big Thing” (Burlison, n.d.). In this piece, the car company likens tiny houses to their line of small vehicles while conveniently acknowledging the fitness of their trucks for hauling any small, wheeled house. The most glaring trend-appropriation to date seems to be a recent casting call across tiny house blogs and news sites.
looking for “folks across America that live in, or are planning on building a tiny house” (Griswold, 2014). Tiny House Nation ostensibly hopes to expand the novelty of tiny house living to a larger audience. Yet, the idea of building a television series around a movement that was in part born out of the desire to reject consumer culture further emphasizes the already heavily ironic inclusion of the word “reality” in reality T.V. This proposed “reality” show necessarily sells a version of tiny house life to viewers in between spots filled with commercial advertisements. Various capitalizations upon the small house spirit highlight how even well intentioned environmental actions can perpetuate economic structures that might be ideologically opposed to the ethos that gave rise to the actions in the first place. Moreover, the media’s treatment of the tiny house movement only magnifies discrepancies in the rhetoric already occurring in the movement itself.

MOBILITY, CONSUMPTION AND THE MOVEMENT’S ROMANTICISM

Discourse among tiny house enthusiasts often centers on claims of the freedom that mobility offers — namely economic mobility — but that promise is a bit more troubled than it initially seems. As a recent article in The New Yorker explores, “The rhetoric of present day tiny-house living begins with the assertion that big houses, aside from being wasteful and environmentally noxious, are debtors’ prisons” (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 29). Many tiny-housers experience not only lower monthly bills, but also, because of this, find liberty to work fewer hours or free funds for more fulfilling activities.

However, while bills for upkeep, water, and electricity are lower for tiny house dwellers, it takes substantial capital for most people to get into a tiny house. Tiny houses have yet to be incorporated into urban planning, as bureaucratic institutions are unsure whether to define them as mobile homes, motor homes, or accessory dwelling units. The resulting liminality makes insurance, structural regulations, and zoning difficult. These definitional difficulties seem to be why most, if not all, banks refuse construction loans for tiny house projects. Thus, someone wanting to “go tiny” would first need the capital to do so. In my own experience, 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. They are still firmly in what some sociologists have termed the “elite” realm of conscious consumerism (Carfagna et al., 2014). Though more networks of free materials, public tool libraries, and work shares are emerging, the tiny house movement would do well to acknowledge — and perhaps find ways to mitigate — the tremendous privilege it takes to enter the tiny house community.

While the tiny house movement has been consistently painted as promoting the long-term benefits of lifestyle changes, the reality is that most tiny houses are used for the short term only. In the reality of this short-term usage, tiny structures might be seen as yet another form of accumulation; people saving for a “real house,” desiring supplementary space in the form of mother-in-law structures, or those using the tiny houses as a source of rental income are all modes of tiny house living that may find the lifestyle freeing but temporary (Cerf, 2013). Using tiny houses as a temporary strategy to acquire more wealth participates in what Thorstein Veblen deemed “conspicuous consumption” over a decade ago in The Theory of The Leisure Class. Veblen warned that conspicuous consumption is a form of environmental power and an extractive exercise (Bell, 2012). Beyond the strategy of accumulation, tiny houses are primarily part of a profit-driven economy that relies on the aesthetic appeal of the structure: cute dwellings made out of new materials to appeal to consumers through the fashionable rhetoric of sustainability. The reality is tiny houses are only aesthetically more desirable than older, “less attractive” forbearers, like a trailer park or a dense apartment complex. In that aesthetic difference, and its underlying accumulative motivations, an element of the tiny house movement subtly but substantially differentiates itself based on class associations.

It could nevertheless be argued that tiny-housers desire more free time over upward mobility. Beyond the direct economic benefits of lower bills, additional income, or more savings, tiny-house rhetoric expresses a yearning for economic freedom that is often linked to a desire for reprieve from the manic pace of a consumerist economy. Still, in a perhaps troublesome expression of capitalist irony, the phrase “McMansions are the fad” has been a repeated criticism on tiny house blogs, interviews, and videos arguing for the superior longevity of the small house movement. Though its familiar Mc-wordplay critiques vast corporate sprawl, it also authorizes the very same logic by claiming that tiny houses are the more durable of fashionable living crazes. By marketing the economic freedom available
through smaller living as trendy, tiny house rhetoric magnifies its privilege (Papson, 1992). As the recent feature in The New Yorker reminds us, “Human beings have always lived in small houses — not to make a statement but because small houses were practical and cheap” (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 29). In fact, the decision to live in confined quarters, for many, is potentially not a “decision” at all. While the tiny house movement is attractive for its possible economic benefits, viewing it as a trendy experiment in living — one that takes a thicker wallet to begin — highlights the ways in which the tiny house movement is in danger of repeating logics of individual accumulation similar to those it seeks to denounce.

Further, the wheels of the tiny house allow it to be moved which can ostensibly make its mobility a form of protest against notions of private property. In truth, tiny houses, though apparently divorced from private property rights, are almost as dependent on them as any permanent dwelling with a foundation attached to the ground. Parking the tiny house anywhere other than an RV park requires permits that vary widely depending on location and funding. While I am fortunate enough to live in Lane County, Oregon, where camping on family property is indefinitely permissible, most ordinances around the country are not nearly as lenient. As a result, parking tiny houses require either painfully slow legislation and paperwork, or borderline criminal living. The assertion that tiny houses challenge private property rights seems to be only applicable to those who already own the property on which the tiny house is parked, or can afford to pay in some other way for the land where the tiny house rests.

In addition to claims of mobility, tiny house rhetoric situates itself as a protest to philosophies that organize the “mc-mansion” vision — they promise a lighter ecological footprint through less consumption. Specifically, the decision to “go tiny” is often painted as a rebellious response to the neoliberal mandates on consumption that undergird most structural and zoning regulations. As the article “Building a Green Empire” notes, “the wheels are a nod to a nearly ubiquitous zoning ordinance that sets minimum square footage requirements for free-standing buildings” (Terdiman, 2010). As the rhetoric has it, because of their wheels, tiny houses are a loophole in an otherwise well-ordered, supersize happy system. As Shafer notes, “When you consider the immediate revenue generated by oversized houses thru permits, construction materials, labor, infrastructure development, and land costs, as well as the lingering profit to be made thru heating fuel, property taxes, remodels, inordinate maintenance, and (perhaps most notably) mortgage interest, it’s no wonder the regulations have been so popular with state and corporate groups” — and it’s no wonder tiny houses seemingly buck the
Tiny house living can bypass zoning ordinances, duck under minimum size requirements and attempt to more directly act with the spirit that gave rise to environmental certifications like LEED without contributing to the mandatory consumption that undergirds them.3 However, while the wheels and small size fundamentally reject “mc-mansion” ideals that control Mandatory Consumption Laws as well as the green-washing labels of LEED certification that can justify trendy corporate sprawl, many aspects of tiny house living can actually be preventative to elements of sustainable living.4 In my own experience, to live in a tiny house requires driving longer distances, eating out more frequently, and depending on other people for storage. The lack of storage and small refrigerators in most tiny houses make bulk food storage difficult; food preparation and canning are similarly compromised as the space needed is typically more than a tiny kitchen offers. Additionally, because it lacks a foundation to help regulate temperature, heating in extreme cold or cooling in extreme heat can take more energy than many anticipate. Moreover, filtering grey water or composting black water requires a long-term connection with the particular piece of land the tiny house rests on. Gardening, too, is dependent upon access and modification rights over the land. Many tiny house dwellers, including myself, find they dine out more, are reliant on neighbors or friends for storage, or end up adding additional structures to store larger and less-used items in their household.

Despite its daily complications, a few tiny-housers have more long-range motivations for “going tiny,” citing the structure’s ability to adapt in anticipation of global climate change. This vision, too, may have its problems. In an article in The New Yorker that unapologetically paints Jay Shafer as the “brainy misfit behind the tiny-house trend,” Shafer notes that the owner of a tiny house, while living intimately indoors, has a larger life outside, less apocalyptic anxiety and a lighter conscience (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 30). “The apocalyptic anxiety” Shafer refers to is presumably quieted by the mobility of the tiny house (it can move to a safer location), a move dependent upon access to property that is unavailable to many. Shafer’s rhetoric, aiming here to reflect a more connected and open sense of land — “a larger life outside” — relies on an assumption that “the world is my backyard,” a claim repeated by many tiny house blogs, bumper stickers, and slogans.5 Both the desire to be well positioned for environmental change and the territorial assumption in the “backyard” claim are inextricably bound to global economic privilege. In light of the growing number of climate refugees dealing with the loss of homeland due to industrial byproducts from industries which are no benefit to them, the idea of
out-pacing climate disasters by steering a brand new set of wheels to a new backyard unwittingly relies on assumptions of privilege. It is, then, not ironic that *The New Yorker* article describes Shafer as “the builder of the most stately tiny houses” — the luxury implied in the description seemingly fits the perhaps more palatial thoughts silently propelling some tiny house logic.

More theoretically, the tiny house on wheels, in its mobility, presumably complicates our understanding of a domestic realm by reversing the Global North’s *terra nullius* (vacant land) rationale used to validate territorial and cultural colonization. Based on European ideologies, white settlers in North America justified their occupation of land inhabited by indigenous cultures by declaring their “nomadic” lifestyles antithetical to land ownership. Though many indigenous peoples had a tradition of communal ownership and did craft small homes, their relationship was defined as *occupying*, but not *owning*, a section of unclaimed land. Thus, people have argued that the mobile tiny houses are a more responsible and flexible living style, one that works against notions of private property rights while also combating historically colonial land logics. Yet, the notion that a tiny house’s mobility fights against the “settlement” of land is complicated once one acknowledges the dislocating effect that mobility has had on indigenous communities through removal, relocation, and disasters related to climate change. If mobile living can be a way to recuperate alternative ways of relating to place, ones that resist privatization, it is also complicated by more contemporary annexations of peoples for the sake of land. Instead, through titles such as “Green Empire,” the rhetoric around the tiny house movement makes claims to land that rely on a diffuse settler-colonial notion of ownership while seemingly ignoring broad sociohistorical context as well as profound realities of present day land loss (Terdiman, 2010).

While increasing media attention has highlighted the economic, environmental, and perhaps political concerns which compel more people to consider tiny house living, questions of access and private property rights emerge as controlling factors in the ability to join the movement. The rhetoric reveals the movement’s intrinsic relevance to a critique of corporate environmentalism as it is bound up with social justice concerns. Although the movement does promote more “sustainable” lifestyles, tiny house appeals made via aesthetic image and claims about the freedom in mobility are undergirded by problematic privilege that could inhibit or strengthen the small house movement’s impact for sustainability, resiliency, and environmental justice.
Even claims regarding the origin of the tiny house movement repeat romantic elisions that ignore predecessors to today’s contemporary movement. Most recent press coverage credits Sarah Susanka with starting the shift toward smaller houses when she published *The Not So Big House* in 1997; additionally Jay Shafer, founder of the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, has prevailed as the central figure associated with tiny houses – almost ubiquitously depicted as the visionary initiator of the current phenomenon. Yet, the promotion of mobile tiny houses dates back to at least 1987 with Les Walker’s book *Tiny, Tiny Houses*. While figures like Sarah Susanka and Jay Shafer are admirable in their own right, citing them as originary sources ignores the diverse history of minimal living. The most obvious corollaries to mobile tiny houses are house-trucks, photo documentation of which dates from the early 1920s with a particularly lively history in the 1970s (see Fig. 1). The house-truck, and its bus-equivalent, emerged almost simultaneously with the automobile itself; one photo, dated September 6, 1929, shows Charles Miller of Ogden, Oregon, standing proudly alongside his mobile masterpiece – a colonial tree house set on a truck bed, complete with porch railings and rows of grass seeded lawn along each running board (Greenless, 2011).

Left, Roger Beck’s house-truck

*Fig. 1.* Roger Beck’s 1978 House-Truck, Courtesy of Karen Kirchoff, Archives of Northwest Folklore, University of Oregon.
By ignoring the long histories of living with less – both by choice and by circumstance – tiny house rhetoric positions itself even further on the side of elitist impulses to flee to the woods in order to forget the troubles of “modern life.” The aesthetics of romanticism’s flight to the country has a distinctly political undercurrent, as William Cronon and Roderick Nash have thoroughly explored. Romanticizations of nature invoke an Edenic ideology that – in its ignorance of human relationality – invents an ideal refuge in the “wilderness,” a sanctuary purely in service of the human. In his oft-cited article “The Trouble with the Wilderness,” Cronon argues that the modern environmental movement is the “grandchild of romanticism” and finds, “the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject” (1996, p. 16). Similarly, tiny house rhetoric repeats Arcadian claims of sanctuary by hallowing the tiny house as a back-to-the-land project. As Nash’s famous Wilderness and The American Mind astutely traces, this Edenic compulsion can be linked to issues of appropriation, empire building, boundary creation, and, often, bad environmental policy – all of which thwart the tiny house movement’s ostensible goals of increased access and environmental responsibility. When articles ask “Are tiny houses the new American Dream,” we have to wonder if that dream diverges much from irresponsible idealism that justified American colonization (Andrews, 2014). Examples of the movement’s dependence on romantic rhetoric are rampant, but among the most obvious are the original models of Tumbleweed homes, which carry the names Walden and Emerson. Indeed, tiny housers’ romantic rhetoric repeat Thoreau’s notion of a “natural me,” or a truer, more authentic self-equated with the wild (Bell 180). This “natural me” is a construct of self which sociologists note is a social psychological invention with direct influence on modern elite environmentalisms.

More overt illustrations of the tiny house movement’s dangerous reliance on tropes of western imperial expansion can be found in such tiny house company names as “Frontier Fortress” or in individual models like Thomas Elpel’s “Little Castle.” Elpel – the author of Living Homes, a guide to stone, log, and straw bale construction – has built a very, very small castle, a tiny architectural tribute to the dominion impulse. In what seems an ironic misquote, Elpel’s blog cites Henry David Thoreau’s Walden: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” Though Thoreau was not speaking of building kingdoms on earth, but a more radical divestment from material dependence, somehow his words offer the right romantic lens for Elpel to envision his home as, quite literally, his castle. While this critique is not
meant as an indictment of these individuals, the rhetorical dependence on tropes of wilderness escapism and territorial appropriation threaten to undercut the tiny house movement’s more revolutionary aims.

Indeed, there are many radical models within the tiny house community, projects that are perhaps more consistent with Thoreau’s thinking. Conestoga Huts in Eugene, Oregon, seems to be responding to Thoreau’s question: “But how do the poor minority fare?” as well as his resolution that “On the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and ‘silent poor’” (*Walden* 27). Conestoga Huts serve the “silent poor” as they build tiny houses for the homeless community using a combination of reused, salvaged, donated, and new materials to help keep costs low. Additionally, in a project reminiscent of Thoreau’s call for every man to have at least a pine box to call home, the tiny structures of Gregory Kloen’s Homeless Homes Project are built out of dumpsters and other illegally cast off garbage (*Nellemann, 2014*). Furthermore, Boneyard Studios is a model of an urban tiny-house community in Washington, DC, that seeks to create living space out of otherwise vacant metropolitan lots. Though Boneyard Studios cannot legally have residents, it is one of many examples that illustrate how tiny houses can be an active part of infrastructure development — establishing codes and regulations, and encouraging Do-It-Yourself empowerment by open sourcing plans, budgets, and resources. More importantly, these examples highlight how the tiny house can be a large-scale metaphor for engaging with issues of social justice and community. Projects like La Follette High’s tiny house construction — a house to be donated to Occupy Madison’s tiny houses for the homeless program — show how tiny houses can responsibly serve the community to which they belong (*Schneider, 2014*). However, using *Walden* to market the sale of a $50,000 tiny house — possibly purchased as an extra dwelling — or to underwrite a tiny castle in someone’s backyard, repeats a silent injustice that Thoreau was attempting to critique.

As strikingly misfounded as Elpel’s Thoreauvian-inspired castle is, references to Thoreau are almost ubiquitous in tiny house rhetoric. Most notably, the movement has christened Thoreau “The Patron Saint of Tiny Houses” (*Sheam, 2011*). In fact, Thoreau’s *Walden* and its one room cabin are almost the sole historical citations among tiny house enthusiasts, cited as the origin of a radical social experiment that has come to symbolize American self-reliance.10 Though one might expect Thoreau’s dependence on others — his proximity to the railroad, and his frequent dinners with his mother or Emerson’s family — to have fully saturated both critical and popular attention, tiny house rhetoric relies heavily on continuations of
“Thoreauvian” myths of Edenic self-reliance. Invoking transcendentalism and “Thoreauvian living” not only rely on a narrow, elitist, and exclusionary canonical literary heritage, it also magnifies the tiny house movement’s escapist promises. By continuing to redeploy this highly romanticized version of Thoreau for sales pitches and motivational messages, the movement inevitably teeters on a mythic pastoral edge as it participates in a continuation of its rhetorical mis-history (though this doesn’t mean late Thoreau cannot be recuperated for his environmental ethics, which I will discuss).

Tiny house rhetoric and its “Thoreauvian vision” exemplify what environmental activist Edward Abbey (among others) noted as political simplification of complex environmental thinking via invocations of Thoreau. Yet, though Thoreau’s “live deliberately” dictum is invoked repeatedly on tiny house blogs and such wide-reaching public forums as the Oprah Network, the nuances of Thoreau’s position hold more complex relevance to the realities of tiny house living than his oft-quoted aphorism.

“THE PATRON SAINT OF TINY HOUSES”

Similar to denunciations of the privilege in modern environmental actions like the tiny house movement, Thoreau has often been critiqued as an example of a larger exclusionary environmentalism defined by wilderness and wilderness — one seen as “elite, mainly white, male-centered, nostalgic from the start, and indifferent to most of the adult and workaday world — an ideology of perpetual youth, driving an agenda of high-end vacations” (Purdy, 2014). However, Thoreau was more politically radical than many critics acknowledge. In fact, just as careful attention to tiny house rhetoric reveals the more complex realities of tiny house life, a close reading of Thoreau highlights his relevance to tiny house realities, my own included. Rather than the Thoreau of wilderness escapism, easy self-reliance or indifferent living, attentive reading reveals a Thoreau who reflects the consequences of civilization’s politics, emphasizes community, and explores critical paradoxes central to issues of mobility and waste. In these ways, Thoreau can be related to tiny house experience on a deeper, more politically potent level.

Instead of the common view of Walden as a documented escape to the country, Thoreau’s experiment was motivated by the desire to directly reject the civilized politics of accumulation. Thoreau’s desire to “live deliberately, [and] to front only the essential facts of life” carries obvious
resonance with the spirit of “simplify, simplify” in the tiny house movement *(Walden 65).* In fact, he even anticipates some tiny dwellers’ more rebellious rejections of debt-culture. In *Walden*’s section titled “Economy,” Thoreau questions the desire for more costly “civilized” housing as an irrationality, one that imprisons the individual in the exchange of one’s entire life for a servitude to debt; his words, “our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them” finds mirrored sentiment in tiny house rhetoric’s claims that big houses are debtor’s prisons *(Walden 26).* In my own experience, living in a tiny house has forced me to confront my own consumption in a more material and quotidian way — conspicuous consumption becomes even more conspicuous by the very nature of having to negotiate such a small space. Indeed, Thoreau’s critique that “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,” rings harmoniously with tiny house logic *(Walden 27).* Rejecting the economy that drives men to “become the tools of their tools,” Thoreau’s calls for simplicity and rejection of accumulation are germane to tiny house ideals.

Yet, while Thoreau’s “Economy” chapter certainly seems to anticipate tiny house critiques of debt-culture and Mandatory Consumption Laws, Thoreau’s “Economy” has elements of parody — one that could actually lampoon some of the contemporary interest in tiny living that are based in anticipated economic gains *(Solnit, 2013).* Thoreau, having “since learned that trade curses everything it handles,” would likely reject certain tiny house motivations like saving up for a “real house” or finding extra income through renting out the small space *(A Year 115).* Rather than prudent economic investment, he demands we must, “cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them” *(Walden 220).* This cultivation of poverty does not occur, however, in the move to tiny living. It happens in the reorientation that is a consequence of living in a tiny house for a significant period of time. Tiny house living, as I can attest, slowly teaches (or cultivates) poverty. The excesses that exist in life outside the tiny house begin to seem more and more irresponsible. 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.
Thoreau’s “simple, deliberate life” model resists tiny house rhetoric that often markets how to live “without sacrifice,” a sentiment driven by the desire to protect luxury (Griswold, 2013). In contrast, Thoreau sees the sacrifice in voluntary poverty as the most important aspect of living deliberately. He calls his audience to “be content with less,” claiming that “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor” (Walden 13). Shiny new tiny house models with “all the comforts of a real house” would perhaps seem an affront to Thoreau’s political critique of accumulation, especially given the emphasis he placed on rejecting luxury. This is not to say that building with used materials is rare — my own house is built from approximately 85% upcycled materials, as are many individually built tiny houses. Those bricolage models are more in line with Thoreau who explicitly documented the previously used materials with which he built Walden. Thoreau’s attention to resourcefulness and material responsibility could act as a corrective to the many tiny house models aggressively marketed as new environmentally responsible purchases.

Yet, instead of acknowledging how Thoreau’s thoughts could critique and strengthen tiny house visions, tiny house rhetoric’s only critical engagement with Thoreau is its hasty rejection of his model of “individualism” — one that is said to be at odds with the tiny house movement’s more communal focus. However, though Thoreau’s experiment at Walden began (provocatively) on July 4th and many consider the book a classic of American individualism, Walden was not constructed to exemplify this value (Walls, 2007). In fact, his experiment was in large part preoccupied with community. The construction of the book was a product of many lectures, internal conversations, drafts, and critiques from confidants, while the text itself describes the numerous visitors at Walden as well as his daily trips to town. Walden was not an experiment in solitary life; it has merely been appropriated in that way.

Tension between the oft-cited Thoreau-as-American-individualist and his writings, which immanently engage community, parallel a similar dissonance between the rhetoric and realities of tiny house living. While Thoreau as an individualist without a desire for community may fortify tiny house proponents, this position (with its rhetoric of self-sufficiency) ignores Thoreau’s recognition that “we belong to community” (Walden 35). By virtue of the fact that most tiny houses rest on someone’s property, reality affirms Thoreau’s broadsided view of community. Though the tiny
house movement claims to depart from Thoreau precisely in their focus on community, the tiny house is still marketed as a self-sufficient structure. In fact, the movement’s desire to more directly engage in communal modes of living has highlighted a need for tiny house communities, where tiny houses can park and share common resources. However, no such communities exist — in large part because landowners stand to profit more by impermanent rental space (Pino, n.d.). An “exception” can be found in Jay Shafer’s new company Four Lights, which is working on plans for a tiny house village in the wealthy city of Sonoma, California. The village model is provocative for possibly setting legal precedent for land use, though the Four Lights village plan is conspicuously comprised of brand new custom models from Shafer’s company. 

In fact, the communal reality of living in a tiny house more closely follows Thoreau’s experience at Walden; instead of allowing the dweller autonomy, tiny house living cultivates a greater degree of reliance on neighbors, community resources, and shared land where the houses are parked. In my own experience, by living small I have come to depend more and more on community resources like storage facilities, shared bathrooms and showers, and community gardens. While I have enjoyed this reorientation to my community, if there were a tiny house community available, living in such close community would further lighten my environmental footprint. Ultimately, while tiny house rhetoric sees Thoreau’s supposed individualism as inapplicable, the current reality of most tiny house living reflects the same inconsistencies between self-reliance and communal dependence that many have identified in Thoreau’s experiment.

Similarly, criticism of Thoreau’s language ironizes the same elitist language that exists in the tiny house movement. Critics have read Thoreau as reflective of white patriarchal elitism, criticism that strikingly parallels critiques of claims within tiny house rhetoric, which emphasize mobility and detachment from place in assertions like “The world is my backyard.” Thoreau’s language — at times — is similarly influenced by assumptions of settler-colonial rights. Despite his description of living Native Americans and the recent genocidal history that the land testifies to, Thoreau still sees himself as a “first settler” of the land around the lake, a reflection that ironically occurs in a chapter titled “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visions” (Walden 178). The irony of placing this settler-claim in a chapter ostensibly focused on former inhabitants and reflection (winter, for Thoreau, is the time for reflection) points to Thoreau’s attempt to conceptualize a different form of settlement;
attachment to place, for Thoreau, is more than the economic and social mobility which allows one to move to a place and declare ownership (or that allows a person to build, own and occupy a tiny house). Settlement for Thoreau means a deeper, more challenging and reflective relationship with the place and the privilege of residing in that place. It is a notion of settlement that the tiny house movement could benefit from — a confrontation of privilege and resulting responsibility.

For though it is necessary to point out Thoreau’s problematic language and proximity to entitlement, Thoreau did attempt to confront his own privilege, and the effects of it. By stressing the benefits of traveling at home, Thoreau sought to investigate how one’s relationship with the place one inhabits reveals truths about a general tendency within humans to appropriate and fence (Walden 91; A Year 148, 165). In his observations, Thoreau is explicitly self-implicating: “By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed” (Walden 114, emphasis mine). Indeed, he is often preoccupied with the consequences of such colonial expansion — both environmental and social; he comments in almost all of his large works, in one way or another, on the ways that fences and land-appropriation inhibit freedom. Intense reflection on the inevitable consequence of civilization’s encroachment — or the white elitist progress that he finds himself bound up in — leads him to say, “I suspect myself, and cannot help a shudder, when I find myself so implicated even in what are called good works” (“Walking” 264). Ultimately, Thoreau’s belief in closer attention to the details of one’s own living forces him to acknowledge the hypocrisies of civilized life; this reflective reality relates to the tiny house experience as life inside the tiny space can make more acute how quotidian details can raise important political questions.

Thoreau and the tiny house movement share fundamental ideals that prize simplicity, the value of community, and the desire to reject private property laws and cultures of consumption — despite their inheritance of romantic rhetoric and entanglement in systems they ostensibly reject. Still, the most interesting parallels between Thoreau and the tiny house movement come from the decidedly unromantic experiences offered by these experiments in living — encounters with the privilege inherent in notions of mobility and the price of certain “freedoms” taken for granted. Most politically potent, perhaps, is the relevance of Thoreau’s meditations on waste and decay when considering the tiny house movement’s relevance to contemporary environmental politics.
While environmental thinking and Thoreau have been equally criticized for their aversion to waste and decay, Thoreau’s treatment of these topics helps crystallize why the experiment of tiny house living can be a corrective response to criticisms that environmentalism ignores issues of waste.20 Much of Thoreau’s writings concurrent with and after his time at Walden are preoccupied with decay and waste as fertile ground. By treating waste as a productive material, Thoreau offers a needed environmental ethic that can be cultivated in the modern-day experience of tiny house living. He writes: “The constant abrasion and decay of our lives makes the soil of our future growth” (A Week 284). In one of this last essays “Autumnal Tints,” falling leaves represent how “to grow in the midst of our decay,” and Thoreau recognizes that “we are all the richer” for this growth (pp. 13, 33). These late writings build what Sean Ross Meehan has called the “fecal matter of Thoreau’s ecological ideas” (p. 300). Though few critics have attended to this, Thoreau’s ecological ethic is grounded in a productive and provocative view of waste, decay (or “shit,” as Purdy says).21 What’s more, his writings take on waste, decay and death with much more frequency during and after the more than two years he spent at Walden. This suggests that, in some ways, Walden taught Thoreau awareness.22

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. Similar to Thoreau’s documentation of the materials he “up-cycled,” living in a tiny house has forced me to appreciate material possessions that have been, or can be, used in multiple ways; it has grown my gratitude for belongings that enrich, rather than burden, daily life. In this, tiny house living can be seen as a needed answer to the longstanding call to get consumers to confront their excessive waste and to critically examine the “throwaway mentality” (van Dam, 1978).

More fecally speaking, tiny house toilets typically are either composting or use black-water tanks, both of which keeps waste in close proximity. As a result, tiny house dwellers must consider how waste is stored and filtered. It requires living 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. Not only has tiny living given me a more material appreciation for my own waste, it also demands some unusual conversations with guests to my house. We must
discuss how the facilities work, and what can and cannot be discarded and how. These are rather taboo topics for polite conversation, but I have found that they are also an example of how the tiny life teaches even those not living in the house per se. 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. More broadly, Thoreau’s meditations on waste as fertile ground for rooting a deliberate life draws attention to how the tiny house movement can populate what has been critiqued as a sort of wasted space in environmentalist thinking.

**WHERE ROMANTICISM MEETS REALISM**

While tiny house rhetoric waves Thoreau’s “living deliberately” like a quippy blog banner, Thoreau’s use of the phrase does articulate the sociological, political, and environmental potency in tiny house living. Thoreau said that living deliberately means making a *satirical* poem out of one’s life. Living deliberately is grounded in attention to satire – awareness of how “we are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtue the return stroke straps our vice” (*A Week* 179). As satire relies on opposition between the literal and the vice or folly behind the literal, to make of our life a satiric poem means to continually confront the failures and messiness of our waste. For Thoreau, and for tiny house life, waste can “startle us with that rare kind of experience that could only have been learned from the most trivial experience” (*A Week* 119). Though Thoreau has been critiqued as a symbol of an elitist nature and tiny housers can represent or reveal a privileged form of environmentalism, the actual *experience* of tiny living can serve as a corrective. If, in Thoreau’s words, “a man sees only what concerns him,” the realities of living small leads the individual into closer confrontation with privilege, dearer dependence on community, and a more responsibly aware orientation to waste (“Autumnal Tints” 137).

In the realities of tiny house living, the tiny house movement, while reflective of privilege, can actually be understood as what some social science researchers have seen as best practice, practices that “link the facticity of realism with the passion of romanticism” (Wolfe, 1995). Tiny houses can be examples of “eco-habitus” strategies that are “collective, albeit relatively elite strategies” that “promote awareness of and responses to environmental challenges” (Carfagna et al., 2014). Just as Thoreau’s many aphorisms play with juxtapositions similar to the notion of elite
“eco-habitus,” the tiny life is itself a continual re-acquaintance with the very real satire of human life — the discrepancies between the realism of tiny house life and the romantic idealism that motivated it.

Tiny house life simplifies by its very nature, but confronts with the comfort-costs of simplicity. It woos beautifully from afar but hones the perception of life’s daily ugliness. Living in a tiny house makes material the sharp theoretical corners of sustainability, the ill planning and the failures of even the most sophisticated, pragmatic, or intellectual of approaches. It plays with you in romance, and stubs your toe on realism. Most importantly, it highlights disconnections between rhetoric and reality. It can be a way to engage in what social science has found to be a positive correlation between conscious consumption and political activism (Willis & Schor, 2012). In this growing activism, tiny house living can cultivate correctives to possible oversights or entitlements in environmental thought, challenge representations of the movement itself, and encourage those inside the “tiny” world to openly discuss the difficulties and capabilities endemic to tiny living.

As such, the tiny house movement must always remember that what is one person’s waste can be another person’s house. It must press back on dominant cultural appropriations inevitable to the current system — challenging that system while still pressing for further recognition within it. While acknowledging and working to minimize the privileges undergirding much of its mobility, it must remain mobile.

NOTES

1. This essay reads popular media and tiny house rhetoric broadly; the critique is focused on tropes occurring in such sources and is not meant as an indictment of any particular actor.

2. For more on how green marketing techniques serve to “legitimate consumption by protecting corporate environmental practices from criticism & by reducing guilt associated with overconsumption,” see Papson (1992).

3. LEED certification stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is awarded by the U.S. Green Building Council. See Papson (1992) for more on how green marketing techniques serve to legitimate consumption.

4. Mandatory Consumption Laws: “In accordance with the International Residential Code, current laws mandate that all newly constructed residential structures have no less than one habitable room of at least 120 sq ft (§303.3); every kitchen must be no less than 50 sq ft (§303.4); other habitable rooms shall be no less than 70 sq ft (§304.2,3); rooms shall maintain a minimum ceiling height of 7 ft. The required height shall be measured from the finish floor to the lowest projection from
the ceiling (§303.6). Habitable space is defined as: Any space intended for living, sleeping, eating or cooking” (Shafer). For more information, see Shafer (2013).

5. While he is certainly not solely responsible for coupling the tiny house movement to this phrase, Jay Shafer, in an interview for the film Tiny: A Story About Living Small, emphasizes that “the whole world is [his] living room,” a sentiment that has come to characterize much of the movement.

6. See Shafer (2013) for a lucid analysis of these aspects of the tiny house “revolution.”


8. Also see the writings of Leo Marx (1964), Raymond Williams (1973), and Ken Hiltner (2011), while Lawrence Buell (1994) provides a succinct critical overview in The Environmental Imagination.

9. The sentence before the one that Elpel quotes highlights Elpel’s selective reading: “In proportion that he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness” (Walden 217). It is clear that Thoreau is actually critiquing the idea of building a castle on earth because spiritual development is what we should take pleasure in. In what could be an even more explicit critique of Elpel’s misreading of Thoreau, Thoreau writes “These humble dwellings, homely and sincere [...] were more pleasing to our eyes than palaces or castles would have been” (A Week 195).

10. Thoreau has been described as the beginning of the Tiny House movement (Copperwood, 2013) or as “the Granddaddy” of the movement (LaVoie, n.d.) who is undoubtedly “proud” of his 21st century progeny (Bredenberg, 2011), while the movement is almost ubiquitously described as “Thoreauvian simple living” (Dirksen, 2012) or as a type of “Thoreau’s Cabin[s] Redux” (Dirksen, 2009). Indeed, the connection between the two is so embedded in Tiny House rhetoric that the comparison has inspired an entire curriculum unit in an 11th Grade English class (Carlson, 2011).

11. “In his introduction to Abbey’s Road, he complained that critics are always calling some nature writer the ‘Thoreau’ of this or that place” which exemplifies how, like “salesmen, we scramble for exclusive territory on this oversold, swarming, shriveling planet” (1972, p. XX).

12. See Solnit’s article “Mysteries of Thoreau Unsolved: On The Dirtiness of Laundry and The Strength of Sisters.”

13. Thoreau’s vision of the necessities of life seem far removed from the luxurious concerns populating tiny house blogs when he remarks that every man who was “hard pushed” should be able to purchase a large railroad box — 6 ft by 3 ft — and “having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free” (Walden 23).

14. Thoreau bought “the shanty of James Collins … for boards,” reused shingles, brick and windows, and notes the importance of knowing where his materials came from (Walden, 32, 37, 166).

15. See Lance Newman’s work exploring Thoreau’s conceptions of community in “Capitalism and Community in Walden and Wild Fruits” and “Thoreau’s Natural Community and Utopian Socialism.”
16. Though Shafer has been described as a modern Thoreau, more constructive models of Thoreauvian community can be found in Green Anchors — a shared community space that supports tiny house builders with tools and building space, or Quixote and Opportunity Villages — self-governing tiny house communities for the previously homeless in Olympia, Washington and Eugene, Oregon respectively. These models of shared space, expertise, and materials seem more consistent with Thoreauvian “deliberate living” than Shafer’s new for-profit company.

17. Thoreau finds himself in a middle-position as witness to the recent violent conquest and the tragedies therein, while also attempting to situate himself as inside that history. Though Thoreau misleadingly describes native peoples as “extinct,” he also often laments the losses and brutality incurred by native inhabitants as well as the tragic loss of wildness in frontier expansion. The fact that Thoreau revised his original version to more heavily ironize the Anglo-Saxon exemplifies this awareness. See *A Week* page 43.

18. See *A Year* page 117 and *A Week* page 202 for two explicit examples.

19. I feel the “shudder” Thoreau speaks of here, realizing my own privilege to be inside the tiny house movement, to have been wooed to the movement by the very rhetoric I now critique; considering details of tiny house living difficult is a reflection of comparative luxury.

20. David Gessner (2004) and Timothy Morton have separately argued that environmentalism, by lauding the abundance of nature, have ignored the importance of garbage; similarly, Gessner — and Dana Phillips (2012) examination of Gessner’s claims — find Thoreau averse to such “trashy” topics.

21. In “In the Shit with Thoreau: A Walden for the Anthropocene” Purdy (2014) reads Thoreau as celebrating “we are all in the shit,” and cites Thoreau’s claim that in excrement lay “the mother of humanity.”

22. It is important to note that Thoreau went to Walden, in part, to write about the last trip he took with his brother, who died three years before. I would like to suggest that beyond the meditations on death which stem from this tribute, Thoreau’s experiment in living, which allowed him close study of natural processes, led him to prize the fertility in waste and decay.

23. Thoreau writes: “the divinest poem, or the life of a great man, is the severest satire” (*A Week* 250).

REFERENCES


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**FURTHER READING**


