HEC Montréal

COVID-19, the Open Road and the American Vandweller:

Ethnographic Fieldwork in a Context of Uncertainty

by

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Administrative Science
(Marketing)

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for a Master of Science in Administration

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December, 2021
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Résumé

Les dernières décennies ont vu la montée soutenue de l'ethnographie au sein des sciences sociales. Désormais une composante et méthodologie essentielle, elle est particulièrement importante sous la lentille du *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT). Cependant, malgré sa prise de valeur, peu d'articles ont été publiés au cours des 10 dernières années dans des revues centrées sur le CCT ou sur le marketing qui utilisent le terme « terrain ethnographique ». Ce manque de littérature récente laisse présager que l'ethnographie en tant que méthodologie est entièrement comprise, et il y a peu de publications qui la remettent en question. Ce projet de recherche vise à mettre en lumière les réalités du travail de terrain ethnographique sous la lentille du CCT dans un contexte d'incertitude, afin d'aider les chercheurs et praticiens à mieux préparer leur immersion dans leur propre champ d'intérêt. À travers une immersion dans la communauté de *vandwellers* américains, la chercheuse a identifié quatre thèmes qui illustrent les défis auxquels sont confrontés les chercheurs sur le terrain : (1) la recherche du terrain en soi; (2) la composante humaine du terrain ethnographique ; (3) entrer en contact avec les membres de la communauté en contexte de crise; et (4) l'attitude de la communauté de vandwellers dans une réalité post-hollywoodienne. Enfin, ce texte aborde également plusieurs implications théoriques, dont les facteurs logistiques affectant le travail de terrain, la composante éthique du travail de terrain dans un contexte de pandémie, la notion de succès versus échec dans un contexte d'ethnographie en CCT, et l'identité du chercheur durant la collecte de données.

Mots clés: ethnographie, étude de cas, autoethnographie, terrain ethnographique, COVID-19, *Consumer Culture Theory*

Méthodes de recherche: ethnographie, autoethnographie, netnographie

Abstract

Over the previous decades, ethnography has become an essential component and methodology in the overall sphere of social sciences, and specifically in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Yet, the last 10 years have seen few articles published in CCT-centric or marketing journals that use the term "ethnographic fieldwork." Ethnography as a methodology has seemingly been considered as understood, and there appears to be few additional studies that challenge the concept. This paper aims to bring to light the realities of ethnographic fieldwork under the lens of CCT in a context of uncertainty, so as to help ethnographers better prepare for their immersion into their own field of interest. Through an immersion into the American vandwelling culture, the researcher identifies four themes that illustrate challenges faced by researchers in the field: (1) the search of the ethnographic field; (2) the human component of ethnographic fieldwork; (3) reaching the community members in a context of crisis; and (4) the vandwelling community's attitude in a post-Hollywoodized reality. The paper further touches on theoretical implications of the findings, namely the logistical factors affecting fieldwork, the ethics of fieldwork in a pandemic context, the notion of success versus failure in the context of ethnography under the CCT lens, and the researcher's identity while performing fieldwork.

Keywords: ethnography, case study, autoethnography, ethnographic fieldwork, COVID-19, Consumer Culture Theory

Research methods : ethnography, autoethnography, netnography

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my research supervisor, Jean-Sébastien Marcoux. Without your continued guidance, invaluable insights, and sometimes much needed psychological support, this paper may not ever have seen the light of day. Thank you for setting the bar high, and for pushing me to deliver a dissertation that I am proud of.

In addition to academic guidance, getting through my masters dissertation required the support of my friends and family. I have many people to thank for listening to me babble on about ethnography, for providing much needed counsel, and for dealing with my mood swings:

To JF, the love of my life, words do not suffice to express my gratitude. I simply can't thank you enough: for your constant encouragement, for believing in me even when I did not, for being the best travel companion I could ever have dreamed of, for accepting the role of my research in our overall travel plans, for humoring me when I put a recording device in your face, for your steadfast love and support. Every time I was ready to quit, you did not let me and I am forever grateful. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To Gillian and Luc, my incredible parents, thank you for supporting me over the course of my masters (and in everything I do). You encouraged me to reach for the stars, to strive for the best. Thank you for your unwavering support and love during the most challenging trip of my life, for your confidence that I would complete this dissertation, and for listening to me go on and on about my project (in hindsight, I realize how often I did not make any sense at all).

To Manon and Paul, my wonderful in-laws, thank you for giving me a place to call home and for welcoming me into your lives with open arms. It's meant the world to me to be able share the experience of writing this mammoth document with you, in real time.

To my amazing friends, thank you for always making time for me, and forcing me to remember that I have a life that does not revolve around staring at a Word document.

And lastly, thanks to Kiwi, for not *completely* falling apart during our time on the road.

A note on the use of inclusive writing

In the following pages, an effort was made to abide by the principles of inclusive writing. In this day and age, it is essential to evolve writing practices to include the complexities and intricacies of modernity, while being respectful of our identarian differences and preferences. In accordance with the guidelines put forward by leading institutions and businesses on gender-inclusive language, this dissertation aims to limit the visibility of gender when it is not relevant for communication (United Nations, 2021). This includes using gender-neutral words (such as using *humankind*, instead of *mankind*) as well as avoiding attributing a gendered pronoun to a person when their gender-preference has not be stated. From this perspective, he/him/himself and she/her/herself are replaced (when possible and relevant) by them/them/themself/themselves, the latter being accepted as either singular or plural, depending on the context (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

However, there are instances in the text below where the use of gendered-pronouns is relevant for the overall comprehension to the paper. For example, in one instance there is discussion of a female solo-traveler, whereby the text discusses the challenges she faces as a woman traveling alone. In other cases, gendered pronouns are used in the literature review, as some authors have made their identity preferences clear in their work (this is the case of Jessica Bruder, in her 2017 novel *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*). Finally, when self-describing and describing JF, gendered pronouns were used, as the gender can be confirmed directly with the person in question.

Finally, efforts were made to steer clear of ableist language (language and turns of phrases related to disabilities). As "ableist language includes words or phrases such as crazy, insane, blind to or blind eye to, cripple, dumb, and others" (Google, 2021), alternate words and phrases were preferred.

For more information on inclusive writing, please visit these resources:

United Nations: https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml

The Government of Canada: https://www.noslangues-ourlanguages.gc.ca/en/blogue-blog/inclusifs-gender-inclusive-eng

Preface

On September 17th, 2020, I purchased a 2001 Jayco hybrid travel trailer from a couple living just south of the city of Montreal. "*Quirky, but sweet"* were the words I used to describe it, I recall. It was old, but in relatively good shape. Small, yet large enough that we could imagine ourselves living in it for a few months. Sturdy-looking, but light enough that we could tow it with our current car. We named it Kiwi, and to us, it was the start of a project we had been discussing for years.

My boyfriend – JF – and I had always dreamed of a *Great American Road Trip.* We were attracted by the idea of living out of a small trailer or van for months on end, meeting like-minded people, catching every single sunset, and discovering the western USA's most beautiful natural parks. We saved our earnings for close to two years, found a tenant to rent our home for a few months, moved back in with our parents to prepare for departure. We quit our jobs and spent weeks tweaking and repairing Kiwi, trying to make it into a home.

While on the road, I aspired to meet modern-day nomads – the American vandweller – and chose to dedicate time to studying their lifestyle choice and consumption practices, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was fascinated by how they rebelled against the "9 to 5," talked about the right to roam freely, and housed all their worldly possessions within the confines of their vehicle. I was struck by the concepts of "houselessness" versus "homelessness" and by how they followed migration routes to seasonal jobs – from the North Dakota sugar beet harvest to their work in Amazon fulfillment centers and to camp hosting positions. JF and I aspired to live like them, to adopt their practices and rituals, and hopefully meet some of them in dispersed campgrounds in the western United States. On the road, my goal was to understand how they had adapted to the reality of the pandemic, how their consumption habits had changed, and ultimately how they managed to survive the crisis.

Through all this, we were constantly reminded that we were in the midst of a global pandemic. As we planned our trip, borders remained closed, vaccines were developed, an inoculation plan was rolled out. We changed our itinerary once, twice, lost count. We wondered if we would be able to embark on the trip at all, cried, bargained, resigned ourselves.

And then the day was before us, and we had found a solution to cross the international border, and we were off to the USA.

Upon our return, 90 days and 25,000 km later, I had learnt a lot of things. About myself, my resilience, and the challenges of this way of travelling and living, but also about the vandwelling community and the reality of ethnographic fieldwork. I learnt that uncertainty is the only constant one has while experiencing the type of journey we had, but that it can often lead to opportunities and understanding if one can manage to navigate it. And, as Jacob Bronowski once said, "knowledge is an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty."

Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the 1990s, the world has changed a great deal. We saw the rise of the Internet and smart-phone era, observed a change in our consumption habits due to Amazon Prime (Vollero, Sardanelli and Siano, 2021), and (most recently) have experienced a global pandemic like the modern world had never seen before. And yet, according to academic literature, ethnography as a methodology is virtually the same now as it was 30 years ago. Indeed, from the perspectives of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and consumer research, the literature paints ethnography as an approach that is fully understood, and there appears to be few additional studies that challenge the concept.

More specifically, ethnographic *fieldwork* has noticeably been understudied in recent years: while there are a handful of newer publications that discuss interview and data analysis best practices, rare are the authors who are transparent with regards to the *how* of ethnographic fieldwork, especially in a context of uncertainty. In fact, ethnographic fieldwork is often depicted as an implied process, having gone smoothly, without a hitch: few are those who address the particularities of the field, its impart on the researcher's overall well-being, the challenges they may face, or how they adjust their tactics in order to ensure optimized recruiting efforts. In a world that has evolved considerably and given the current context of crisis, how can such factors be ignored?

This research paper aims to shed light on the reality of CCT-oriented ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in a context of uncertainty. To do so, the researcher provides an autoethnographic account of her immersion into the American vandwelling community (a geographically dispersed, modern day nomadic neo-tribe), during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of three months, she roamed the western United States in a 17-foot travel trailer in search of members of the far-flung community, an experience similar to the well known *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986. Camping in deserts, forests and casino parking lots, the researcher aimed to embrace vandwellers minimalist approach to consumption and their overall lifestyle, while scouring the western USA for members of the vandwelling community. The autoethnographic data gleaned from such an experience showcases the true nature of ethnographic fieldwork and touches on the less-than-perfect (and often unpublished) aspects the researcher may

face in the field, such as identifying and accessing the research field, ensuring the well-being of the researcher as an individual, physically meeting community members and striving to become an insider to the group of interest. Rounding out the autoethnographic data with a netnographic analysis of two well-respected community forums, the reflexive narrative produced aims to contribute to the literature by providing a transparent account of the intricacies of fieldwork, notions that are widely unexplored in current literature.

The findings discussed could provide useful intel on field immersion, allowing both scholars and practitioners to better prepare for their endeavours, especially in a context of uncertainty like the current global pandemic. Moreover, expanding on the realities of the ethnographic field, this paper further contributes to theoretical discussions related to the logistical factors affecting fieldwork, the ethics of fieldwork in a pandemic context, the notion of success versus failure in the context of CCT-centric ethnography, and the researcher's identity during the data-collection process.

This paper is structured as such: first, the literature on relevant topics shall be reviewed, followed by the definition of the autoethnographic and netnographic methodologies employed in the context of this research project. The findings will then be exposed, followed by a discussion on their theoretical implications and call for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While ethnography takes its origins from anthropology (Arnould, 1998a; de Waal Malefyt, 2009; Hackley, 2003; Sunderland and Denny, 2007), it has become an essential component and methodology in the overall sphere of social sciences. Indeed, today ethnography is one of the most important informing traditions of interpretive research, along with phenomenology/existentialism (Hackley, 2003: p.111). Characterized by some anthropologists and consumer researchers as "a deep hanging out" (Agar, 1996: p.158), the ethnographic approach is defined by Arnould (1998a: p.73) as involving

> extended, experiential participation of the researcher in a specific cultural context. […] In contrast to most market research, ethnography is intentionally less focused, less purpose-full, and longer term. It's research up close and personal with all the messy emotional implications this entails. [It should] aim to explain the ways that culture constructs and is constructed by the behaviours and experiences of its members.

In academia, ethnography is a prominent approach within many disciplines. While it may be anchored in anthropological principles, the focus of the following sections will be from the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and consumer research perspectives. Although ethnography is an important research method and philosophy in other realms of social sciences (such as sociology and anthropology), I've consciously limited my review of the literature to the aforementioned research traditions.

Following first the review of the appropriate CCT and consumer research literature on the overall ethnographic approach, the fieldwork aspect specifically shall be discussed, as it represents an important component of modern ethnographic research. Next, the researcher as the main instrument in ethnographic fieldwork shall be reviewed. Finally, autoethnography and the reflexive narrative will be examined, to provide clarity on the methodology employed in the context of this research paper.

2.1 Ethnography through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory

2.1.1 Consumer Culture Theory

In their frequently-cited article *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research*, Arnould and Thompson (2005) coined the term Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which refers to the "studies within the field of consumer research that address the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption" (Sherry and Fischer, 2007: p.1). In layman's terms, CCT "is an interdisciplinary field of research oriented around developing a better understanding of why consumers do what they do and why consumer culture takes the forms that it does" (Consumer Culture Theory Consortium, 2020). Arnould and Thompson's (2005: p.870) article states that CCT is

> organized around a core set of theoretical questions related to the relationships among consumers' personal and collective identities; the cultures created and embodied in the lived worlds of consumers; underlying experiences, processes and structures; and the nature and dynamics of the sociological categories through and across which these consumer culture dynamics are enacted and inflected.

While CCT falls under the consumer research "umbrella," if you will, it challenges the traditional consumer research representation of culture (Arnould, Crockett and Eckhardt, 2021) of "a fairly homogeneous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society (e.g., Americans share this kind of culture; Japanese share that kind of culture)" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p. 868–869). Building on Geertz's (1983) writings, Arnould and Thompson (2005: p.869) underline the importance of culture as a key factors in the making of experience, meaning and action. In this sense, culture conceptualizes "an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use – through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meaning – to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives" (Kozinets, 2001, as cited by Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.869). Thus, CCT is positioned as a way to contribute to consumer research by bringing additional focus to the cultural dimension of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.1).

It is important to distinguish CCT as a research tradition, rather than a methodological approach (which it is not): rather, it is a lens through which the consumer researcher can better interpret data, a consumer-oriented framework to answering their research questions. Arnould and Thompson (2005: p.870) argue that the pluralism of data collection and analysis techniques (both qualitative and quantitative) are central to CCT (for examples, see Arnould and Wallendorf (1994); Spiggle (1994); Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry Jr. (1989); Peñaloza (1994); Schouten and McAlexander (1995); Kates (2002); Kozinets (2002); Marcoux (2017); Atanasova, Eckhardt and Husemann (2020)). Moreover, it is often characterized by an interpretivist approach to data analysis (Askegaard and Scott, 2013; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Sherry and Fischer, 2007; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001) which seeks to identify time- and context-bound subjective experiences (such as motives, meanings and reasons), rather than determining lawlike regularities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988: p.511).

The research tradition has, according to Arnould and Thompson (2005), generated important knowledge that is relevant to multiple spheres in the realms of social sciences, public policy, or business management. Indeed, CCT has helped applications of cultural perspectives gain traction in the wider marketing management field (Visconti, Peñaloza and Toulouse, 2012). Through its discovery-oriented approach, its uncovering of unique insights and its actionable conclusions that are applicable to both scholars and practitioners, CCT has become particularly relevant to the marketing and consumer research fields (Arnould, Crockett and Eckhardt, 2021: p.2). More specifically, it has "advanced consumer behavior knowledge by illuminating sociocultural processes and structures related to (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.871). From this perspective, it is said that we are experiencing the institutionalization of CCT: while Sherry and Fischer (2007: p.1) have noted that it has become one of the three major types of consumer research, Askegaard and Linnet (2011: p.382) believe it is evolving "towards a synthesis of sociological, anthropological and cultural studies-derived insights into consumption; a market-attuned hybrid of social science which is by and large situated in business schools."

According to the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium (2020), CCT research is regarded as a framework of choice and is frequently published in many reputable academic journals, such

as the *Journal of Consumer Research*; the *Journal of Marketing*; the *Journal of Marketing Research*; the *Journal of Consumer Culture*; *Consumption, Markets & Culture*; the *European Journal of Marketing*; and *Qualitative Marketing Research*.

2.1.2 Ethnographic approach in Consumer Culture Theory

Far from being a purely qualitative research tradition, CCT researchers adopt a wide array of methodological approaches; indeed, in some instances, quantitative methods and analytical techniques can be beneficial in advancing the overall theoretical agenda (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.870). While this statement holds true in the general sense, some methodologies are more represented than others in CCT-oriented consumer research, such as ethnography. In fact, ethnography is particularly well-suited to the realities of the CCT research tradition, as it aims "to explain the ways that culture constructs and is constructed by the behaviours and experiences of its members" (Arnould, 1998b, as cited in Goulding, 2005: p.299). As its application translates into leveraging several data collection techniques (such as observational data, photographs, interview recordings, etc.) to better understand a singular phenomenon (Arnould, 1998b: p.88), it is an approach that allows for an in-depth understanding of the cultures of interest which cannot be gleaned from more superficial data-collection techniques. In fact, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, several popular press articles praised the inherent value of ethnography for consumer researchers (Sunderland and Denny, 2007), underlining the relevance of such an approach.

According to consumer researchers Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003), there are four principles that govern ethnographic research. First, it is necessary to study the behaviour in a natural setting (*in situ*), rather than from the comfort of a library or database. The second principle requires that the researcher develop an understanding of the symbolic world of the subjects of study, from their shared meanings to the language they use. The authors state that

> no adequate knowledge of social behaviour can be developed without an understanding of the symbolic world of the subjects of study, seeing the world through their eyes and using their shared meanings, the empathetic process of *verstehen*. This involves learning the language in use: dialect, jargon, special uses of words, neologisms. (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003: p.216)

The third principle Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003: p.216) put forward is the necessity of an extended presence within a particular culture or sub-culture. Indeed, as the length of time spent in the field increases, so does the likelihood of spontaneously encountering important moments of consumption, meeting relevant informants and experiencing revelatory events (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Drawing from the classical anthropology perspective, Malinowski (2002 (1922)) even argued that, to gain the most value from an anthropological standpoint, the fieldworker must spend at least a year in the field. During field immersion, Malinowski (2002 (1922)) argues that the researchers must use the local vernacular, live apart from their own kind, and above all, make the psychological transference whereby the researcher becomes an insider to the community. While this statement doesn't necessarily hold true for CCT researchers (especially with regards to the duration of fieldwork), it nevertheless highlights the importance of complete immersion into the field. This third principle is sometimes challenging to achieve, considering temporal constraints the researcher may face (see Kozinets (2002), in which they integrated Burning Man, a festival lasting only 9 days). In this context, it is interesting to note that the field does not necessarily mean one single geographical location: anthropologists Sunderland and Denny (2007: p.33) argue that the modern field should be multi-sited and have multiple vantage points, considering the changes that can be present from a time and space perspective. Finally, based on the writings of Hochschild (1979), Elliott and Jankel-Elliott's (2003 p.216) fourth principle is the researcher's participation in cultural life, to develop a deep understanding of cultural/symbolic meanings and of "local rules".

While ethnography is a frequent approach in academia (in CCT, consumer research and anthropology, amongst others), it also has practical implications, such as applied ethnography for business management. From this perspective, although anthropology and the business world consciously distanced themselves from the other for years, significant work has been done by John F. Sherry Jr. and other authors to "incorporate (or to help reinstate) a cultural, anthropological frame into consumer and marketing research" (Sunderland and Denny, 2007: p.29-30), closing the gap between anthropology and the business world. This resulting traction serves as a launch pad for "high-quality, theoretically informed ethnographic work carried out by serious practitioner-scholars" (Sunderland and Denny, 2007: p.26). As applied ethnography continues to integrate companies from every sector (including Fortune 500 companies, the public sector and technology companies) (Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference, 2021), the number of applied

ethnographers steadily increases and have developed networks to support each other (such as the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC), conceived in 2005). Yet, despite it's value-creating potential outside of social sciences, some ethnography fundamentalists criticize the evolution of the methodology, noting that applied ethnography in a commercial setting often requires the researcher to forgo depth in favor of timeliness and client budget management (McCann, Ludwig and Mullins, 2010).

Finally, ethnographic research is usually an emergent process, characterized by an evolving research design. Hudson and Ozanne (1988) note that,

> as perceived realities change, the research design adapts. […] Although [the researcher] enters a research setting with some preunderstanding and a general plan, attempts are made to be open to new information. The study is allowed to unfold with the assistance of informants. Ideas, meanings, questions, and data-collection techniques are cooperatively developed. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988: p.513)

Accordingly, it is common (if not expected) for the research project to evolve as the fieldwork progresses; in fact, should the original research question remain the same once the fieldwork is completed, it is cause for concern. Indeed, this fieldwork (contrary to quantitative studies that are experienced in a more controlled environment) is full of uncertainty and relies heavily on the researcher themselves as key data-collecting instruments; consequently, it frequently occurs that the researcher must change course in light of their observations.

2.1.3 Ethnographic fieldwork in CCT and consumer research

In practice, ethnographic fieldwork is often described in broad terms and research tactics: participant observation, the long interview, fieldnotes, complete immersion into the field (Arsel, 2017; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001). In addition to in-depth observation techniques of participants *in situ*, "thick description"(Geertz, 1973) – defined as an extensive, often narrative-like interpretation of human social action that takes into account the overall situational and cultural context in addition to the physical behavior itself, with the objective of being understood by an outsider (Geertz, 1973) – is crucial to ethnographic interpretation and

data analysis. This reasoning also holds true for autoethnographic fieldwork, wherein the researcher turns their gaze inwards rather that facing the external "other."

In CCT, the field is the context of choice to study phenomenon of interest, rather than the sterility of a laboratory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.869-870). "To paraphrase Geertz's (1973) famous axiom, […] consumer culture theorists do not study consumption contexts; they study in consumption contexts to generate new constructs and theoretical insights and to extend existing theoretical formulations" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.869). Put differently, the particular context is not the subject of the study, nor is it an end in itself; rather, the context serves as the field of play of the researcher, in which they can develop theories and advance the broader scope of scientific knowledge. Thus, it would be inappropriate to classify some of these CCT studies on "the basis of their topical setting – the flea market study, the *Star Trek* study, the skydiving study – rather than the theoretical questions interrogated in that research setting" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.870)

A well-known example of ethnographic fieldwork is the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, an epic two month, cross-country journey undertaken by close to twenty researchers during the summer of 1986 (Kassarjian, 1987: p.376). The objective of the collaborative Odyssey venture was to challenge the "hardening mold of quantitative research at some remove from 'the real world with real people'" (Sunderland and Denny, 2007: p.30). During the research project, the team of researchers immersed themselves in the field, criticized widely accepted lab methods, and experimented with new ways of performing research. In CCT, the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* is often cited as a pivotal point in ethnography and the social sciences. However, despite Belk's (1987: p.357) claims that it is "the characteristics of the journey that make it a primary means of learning about self, the world, and other people" in a post-Odyssey article, he barely touches on the full reality of they faced while living in a 27 foot recreational vehicle and collecting data. Considering the scale of the endeavor, it is difficult to conceive that the whole process would have been met with little challenges. It is only through Holbrook's (1991) excerpts from the log they kept during their participation in the *Consumer Behaviour Odyssey* that we can just begin to glimpse the "human" component of fieldwork. For instance, Holbrook (1991) describes their feelings when parting with their spouse, to embark on the *Odyssey:* "This will be our longest

separation (by far) since we were married 21 years ago, and I'm not looking forward to it." Asides from this paper, there is very little discussion about the actual "how" of their fieldwork reality.

The *Odyssey* is but an example of research projects that barely give the fieldwork component a second glance: in many well-cited research papers that were built upon challenging fieldwork contexts (for examples, see Peñaloza (1994); Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry Jr. (1989); Kozinets (2002); Belk (1987); Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel (2012); Schouten and McAlexander (1995); and Gonçalves and Fagundes (2013)), the authors gloss over the difficulties they may have faced and the factors of uncertainty that may have come into play.

In contrast to these articles, Hill (1991) shares some of the realities they faced in the field, a rare find in CCT and consumer research oriented ethnographic literature. They discuss the challenges faced when it came to recruiting participants: in their research on homeless women, they blend into the environment of a women-only shelter as a volunteer and strive to gain their trust before asking them to participate in their project. Over months of adjusting their tactics, they finally succeed in accomplishing their objective (Hill, 1991). By sharing their reality, it lends the researcher credibility: it positions them as a reliable source on the matter, one whom may actually be trusted by the homeless women, making it easier for them to freely discuss their perspectives and the details of their lives.

While the fieldwork in this section refers to ethnographic research, it undoubtedly holds true for autoethnographic fieldwork as well. As the researcher immerses themselves into the field of interest and analyzes their own experience, they will face similar types of challenges the ethnographer faces. Ethnographic fieldwork relying heavily on the researcher themselves, it is further interesting to discuss their role as main field instrument.

2.2 The researcher as main field instrument in ethnographic fieldwork

In ethnographic fieldwork (be it academic, applied or autoethnographic), the researcher is considered the main instrument of data collection (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf, 1988; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Jaszabkowski, Bednarek and Cabantous, 2014; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001). As they immerse themselves into the culture of interest, it is understood "that the researcher is part of

the world that is under study and is consequently affected by it" (Boyle, 1994: p.165), and involves the researcher's physical, personal, emotional and cognitive selves (Van Maanen, 2011: p.219).

Jones (2010: p.254) argues that the researcher's performance is at the center of ethnographic practice. Incidentally, conditions that may affect the researcher on a personal and/or professional level will undoubtedly affect their ethnographic fieldwork performance. While some may try to compartmentalize and distinguish an immersive fieldwork experience from their personal lives and their identity as individuals (Amit, 2000), it is not always clear cut. According to Amit (2000: p.5-6)

> the conception of fieldwork as comprehensive immersion presumes a singularity of focus and engagement which flies in the face of the actual practices of many anthropologists [and consumer researchers], whether working near or far from their usual place of residence. Many ethnographers are accompanied by or continue to live with their families, visit or are visited by long-standing friends and associates, and maintain professional and personal communications, all while initiating relationships with and observing the activities of still other sets of people. [...] The notion of immersion implies that the "field" which ethnographers enter exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities which is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered. Yet, in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery.

From a researcher identity perspective, Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey (2012) ponder the question of accessing the foreign land that is the field, as strangers and outsiders. While the concept of researcher identity has been somewhat explored in marketing and consumer research (see Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey (2012)), Coffey (1999: p.2) notes that little attention is paid to the emotional and identarian dimensions affecting the researcher as a human being. Indeed, the current focus rather lies on how they manage their short-term transformations and identities in the context of integrating the field, to fit within the socio-cultural setting (Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012: p.275). The purpose of these short-term transformations (referred to as the "separation" phase by anthropologist Turner (1967: p.94)) is to embrace a new researcher identity, in order to obtain better access to the field and build rapport with the potential informants. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) underline the importance of thinking through impression

management: "impressions that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered as far as possible, while those that facilitate it must be encouraged, within the limits set by ethical consideration" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 83). In their study set in Brazil, Gonçalves and Fagundes (2013) note that the researchers' age, gender and ethnicity can play a role in how they are perceived and (un)welcomed by potential informants, marking the relevance of impression management. The author's wondered

> how [their] personal characteristics, [their] personal path and [their] methodological strategies helped or made it more difficult to be accepted in [their] participant households, to promote rapport and to make the fieldwork experience a rich source of data. (Gonçalves and Fagundes, 2013: p.337)

In the case of Gonçalves and Fagundes (2013), their age, gender and ethnicity could not be altered, but could serve as a tool to facilitate rapport building with potential informants. From an identity transformation perspective, tactics can include changes in dress, ways of speaking, and overall demeanour, as a way to actively construct a self that will be accepted by the community of interest (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey (2012: p.278) further note that the role of researcher entails a shift in identities, in order to achieve immersion and acceptance.

Drawing on Turner's (1967) work, Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey (2012) further explain that this separation phase results in mixed feelings, as the researcher experiences both positive and negative change, as they adopt their newfound identity: "everything is new, and the result is conflicting identities and emotions as we deal with various challenges and adapt to the new skills required of us. These feelings are not easily resolved and indeed continue throughout the fieldwork experience and beyond" (Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012: p.277). From a literature perspective, researcher transformation in itself is overlooked, from the perspective of the lasting impact of the research project on the human being performing the research (Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012: p.275). According to Coffey (1999), the nature of fieldwork is always personal as it constructs, shapes and challenges the researcher, from both identarian and human perspectives. The author argues that research can have long term impacts on the way the researcher perceives themselves, beyond the time and environment of fieldwork (Coffey, 1999: p.26). Turner (1967) further postulates that the impact on researcher's identity is felt both throughout the

fieldwork experience, and also upon the researcher's exiting the field. Indeed, "we relieve our fieldwork experiences many times during data analysis and through our attempts to disseminate our findings" (Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012: p.280).

In order for the researcher to become a true "insider" into the field of interest, there is much talk about impression management and short-term transformation (Gonçalves and Fagundes, 2013; Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Turner, 1967), yet very little on the physical safety of fieldworkers during their immersion (Clark and Grant, 2015; Williams, Dunlap, Johnson and Hamid, 1992). Indeed, from an ethical perspective, CCT and consumer research literature scarcely discuss these considerations, despite the potentially-dangerous environments into which the ethnographer thrusts themselves (such as in the case of Williams *et al.* (1992) who immerse themselves into the reality of crack cocaine drug dealers in New York City). Although rare, there are occurrences of fieldworkers encountering illnesses, injury or even death in the course of fieldwork (Williams *et al.*, 1992: p.344). While some researchers in anthropology call for "foresight, planning, skillful maneuver, and a conscious effort at impression management" (Sluka, 1990: p.115), as well as relying on both intuition and common sense (Williams *et al.*, 1992: p.361), the reality is that many researchers are knowingly putting themselves in harm's way during their data-collection process. Clark and Grant (2015: p.1) describe their feeling of not being sufficiently prepare the navigate the emotional and ethical challenged they faced during their experience, despite their pre-fieldwork training and details risk-assessment and ethical-clearance forms. The dangers lurking in the field (being perceived or real, it makes no difference) surely have a negative impact on the essential task of data-collection as a whole: researchers require flexibility and adaptability, regardless of the environment in which they are performing ethnography (be it in a war zone or immersing themselves into another culture or way of life)(Thomson, Ansoms and Murison, 2013: p.viii). According to sociologists Morgan and Pink (2018: p.400), researchers can mitigate their risk by learning by taking cues from those who we are studying, be it by navigating the dangerous landscape of drug dealers (Williams *et al.*, 1992), or ensuring one does not come into contact with the unseen threats of microbes in a hospital setting (Morgan and Pink, 2018). As the researcher themself is the main instrument of data-collection, it is clear that their safety and physical well-being should be a main consideration during fieldwork, despite its possible impediments to the process.

Finally, it is yet further interesting to understand the factors that lead to some fieldwork experiences being deemed unsuccessful, as these consequently affect the researcher (and thus, their performance in the field). In CCT and consumer research literature, the concept of failure versus success is rarely explored from a fieldwork perspective. Those who do discuss it see it "as a means of contributing to and encouraging a holistic development of ethnographic research practice and reporting" (Gill and Temple, 2014). Citing Snowden (2003) and Weick and Sutcliffe (2001), Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.335) argue "that stories of failures and near-failures are more important for learning than success stories." The same authors believe that the reason that these failures and near-misses are often left unsaid is two-fold: first, they argue that stories of failures may affect the researchers "standing in the academic community and, as a result, may include elements of 'keeping face'" (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010: p.336). And second, even if they were open to sharing their blunders, Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.336) believe that scientific journals do not want to publish stories of failure and mishaps, focusing on papers that bring forth theory-building conclusions. According to the same authors,

> often, admissions of blunders are removed from final reports and are considered redundant and irrelevant to the main argument. […] Consequently, although admissions of blunders may occasionally add some colour to the narrative, they are usually dosed with caution, so as not to undermine the researcher's credibility. (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010: p.336).

According to Gill and Temple (2014), there are three main factors of failure. The first is intrapersonal challenges, which refer to the internal psychological state of the researcher. According to the author's personal experience:

> [they] focused on too much on the theoretical aspects of the research when preparing for the fieldwork and not enough on the emotional toll and personal sacrifices it would require. This, perhaps, increased the likelihood and the impact of a number of intrapersonal challenges faced by [the author], which included: dealing with deception, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed, and feeling pressured rather than supported by mentors. (Gill and Temple, 2014)

Secondly, Gill and Temple (2014) describe the interpersonal challenges the researcher may face, namely the "process of negotiating and gaining access to groups." The authors go on to

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specify that these challenges often pertain to "assessing the goodness of fit with the group of interest and developing relationships on a timeframe." Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.338) add to this by noting that the researcher may become lost or have difficulty related to the "Other", either in a special, temporal or symbolic way. Finally, Gill and Temple (2014) discuss the third factor contributing to failure in the field: institutional challenges. These pertain to the researcher's obligation to the institution that hired or supports them in their research project, internal politics and budgetary constraints.

While it appears atypical to report the failures a researcher may experience in the field, it nonetheless allows for a better understanding of the reality of the field. As unsuccessful fieldwork sometimes occurs (especially in the case of less experienced researchers), it further underlines the importance of the human as the main instrument of data collection.

2.3 Autoethnography in CCT and consumer research

Ethnography (be it academic or applied) usually refers to the study of the "other," in their natural environment. However, the study of the "self" is often a complementary and necessary additions to ethnographic fieldwork. As it is near impossible for researchers to detach themselves completely from the field, it can be relevant to include their own experience as part of the data collection (Boyle, 1994: p.166), through an autoethnographic and/or reflexive approach.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011: p.1) describe autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." Stemming from sociology and anthropology, it is a method grounded in active self-reflexivity, "the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretation of, the research scene" (Tracy, 2019, as cited in Poulos, 2021: p.4). Incidentally, reflexive ethnography is a particular form and approach within the broader concept of autoethnography. It refers to the changes experienced by a researcher as a consequence of fieldwork (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.6). According to Ellis *et al.* (2011: p.6), autoethnography exists on a continuum ranging from the ethnographer's biography, to studying their life in the context of a

specific culture, to ethnographic memoirs (Ellis, 2004: p.50) and "confessional tales" (Van Maanen, 1988). Taken together, autoethnography and the role of reflexive ethnography can create a more nuanced narrative within CCT and consumer research projects, capturing the details that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Autoethnography enables researchers to speak against or provide alternatives to dominant and "taken-for-granted" stances in academic literature, while complementing and filling in gaps in existing literature (Adams, Ellis and Holman Jones, 2017: p.3). Anderson (2006: p.373) describes autoethnography as being a "turn toward blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion in the social sciences." Indeed, personal experience highly influences the research process; thus, autoethnography acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotion and the researcher's overall influence on the findings, rather than concealing them (Ellis *et al*., 2011). In other words, the researcher identifies their own experience as the primary data of the study (Tillman-Healy, 1996). But, it is not enough to simply share it: to establish reliability and validity, they must convey why their own experience is relevant in the realm of the literature and how their contributions can advance the social sciences (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). So, in addition to recounting their experience, the researcher must analyze it to comply with social science conventions (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

Autoethnography is often criticized as a research method, "for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.10). It is often criticized by social scientists as lacking rigour, theoretical foundations and analytical processes, while being too aesthetic, emotional and therapeutic in nature (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.18). Moreover, it can be thought to generate biased data (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). However, many are those who firmly oppose this view: as it strives to "disrupt the binary of science and art" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.11), autoethnography is merely a different scientific point of view (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). And, even though it is a first-person narrative, autoethnographers believe that the data produces can be as rigorous, theoretical, and analytical as more standard forms of social research, while adding interesting dimensions to it, such as an emotional component and an inclusive perspective with regards to personal and social phenomena (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

In practice, autoethnography translates into immersion within the culture of interest, detailed fieldnotes regarding what the researcher observes in the field and their own self-reflection

on their own experience (Adams *et al.*, 2017). Gould (1995: p.719) considers it "an ongoing process of tracking, experiencing, and reflecting one one's own thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations, and behaviors." It allows for the creation of accessible texts, that can be shared outside the context of academia (Adams *et al.*, 2017: p.4), thus helping advance the social science in modern business practices.

Autoethnography is typically written in the first person (Denshire, 2014; Ellis and Bochner, 2000), and aims to "produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.5). Since an individual experience is best described by the one who experienced it (Wall, 2006: p.148), the use of "I" is a key component in autoethnographic writing. Wall (2006: p.148) suggests that "the freedom of a researcher to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her experience with the experience of those studied is precisely what is needed to move inquiry and knowledge further along."

Although authors may alter "authorial points of view"[1] (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: p.5) to make the text more artful and evocative, Richardson (2000) suggests that autoethnographic accounts are inevitably of personal nature, since the author exposes their own lived experiences, while bridging the gap between the personal and the cultural. To do so, Denshire (2014: p.831) highlights autoethnographers' boundary blurring and fiction crafting techniques employed to write a compelling narrative. That being said, despite sharing certain commonalities with autobiography, autoethnography goes beyond merely writing about the self (Denshire, 2014: p.833). Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.737) describe the writing process:

> I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic, sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life.

Autoethnographic writing requires the researcher to "strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional titles and position… to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public" (Denzin, 2003, p.137). Holman Jones (2005, p.765) discusses the balance

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[1] Alternating between the use of the first, second and third person in their writing, to either approach themselves or create distance with the findings at hand

required to write an autoethnographic account, the *telling* versus the *showing*. There is a precarious balance to attain, so as to avoid the author slipping into "what Geertz (1988) calls, after Roland Barthes, 'the diary disease,' an explosion of narcissism sometimes verging on exhibitionism" (Bourdieu, 2003: p.282). In other terms, the "diary disease" refers to treating the autoethnographic writing as a personal diary, rather than attempting to distance oneself from the data to provide a more objective account of the data. The term "objective" is used, here, in a relative manner: while the nature of autoethnography is inevitably subjective, there is nevertheless degrees to which the researcher can distance themselves from their data and present an understanding of the broader concepts outside their own experiences.

All things considered, researchers' introspective accounts undoubtedly contribute to the advances of the social sciences, by the depth of the details that can emerge through an autoethnographic approach. By further combining the practice to ethnographic data-collection methods, the resulting data is richer and more nuanced. And, while autoethnography and ethnography have their differences, they do share an important commonality: both rely on the performance of the researcher during their immersion into their field of interest.

2.4 A methodological problematic: ethnographic fieldwork in times of COVID-19

The last 10 years have seen few articles published in CCT-centric or marketing journals that use the term "ethnographic fieldwork." In fact, the most frequently cited sources date to the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Belk, 1987; Boyle, 1994; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Ellis, 2000, 2004; Geertz, 1973; Goulding, 2005; Jackson, 1990; Joy, 1991; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnography as a methodology has seemingly been considered as understood, and there appears to be few additional studies that challenge the concept. Yet, the literature fails to take into accounts modern contexts of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic which we are currently experiencing. In a world that is becoming increasingly uncertain – what with predictions of additional pandemics, increased consequences of climate change, and considerable civil unrest in different parts of the world – how can researchers better prepare for the field?

Rare are the authors who are transparent with regards to the nature and the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork, especially when this type of external factor comes into play. From this perspective, there is a noticeable gap when it comes to the *how* of fieldwork. Perhaps the format of scientific articles are not conducive to such nuances and details, due to their relatively short length or perhaps there is a desire to mask the hardships of fieldwork. In any case, few are those who describe the particularities of the field, the context in which the researcher has parachuted themselves into, or what course they should take to ensure optimized recruiting efforts. And, while it may not be central to some research projects, the ripples of the sanitary crisis (or other external factor of uncertainty at play) on the ability of the researcher to perform their ethnographic fieldwork and the global impact on their research cannot be ignored.

Consequently, I believe it is necessary to address and rethink the *how* of ethnographic fieldwork in a context of uncertainty (like the COVID-19 pandemic), which is widely ignored in both academic/scientific and applied ethnography literature. A better understanding of the realities and factors of uncertainty that constitute the field would undeniably support scientists and applied ethnographers alike. A research question thus emerges: in CCT and consumer research, *what are the realities of ethnographic fieldwork, in a context of uncertainty?*

Chapter 3: Methodology

While the current aim of this research paper seeks to examine the reality of ethnographic fieldwork in contexts of uncertainty, it was not the question that was initially intended for research. The original aim of the research project was to meet individuals who lived full-time in their vehicles – the American vandweller – in their natural environment. Indeed, the initial interest lied in further understanding their unconventional lifestyle and consumption practices, with a particular attention to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. An approach based on an ethnographic methodology was elaborated, in which the hope was to meet and interview vandwellers. This evolution of research question is mentioned, as it highlights the emergent process and evolving design of ethnographic research (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001), while providing necessary context for the subsequent sections of the paper.

In September 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2001 Jayco hybrid travel trailer was purchased through Facebook Marketplace, in preparation of accessing the ethnographic field. The objective was to roam the western United-States over the course of summer 2021 (see Appendix 1), in search of environments in which the researcher was more likely to find members of the geographically dispersed vandwelling community. The trailer was quickly named Kiwi and was transformed into a home. The researcher would be accompanied on this trip by her boyfriend, JF. The intention was complete immersion into the reality of modern-day nomads and the embracement of their minimalist ethos during the time abroad, so as to glean understanding of their consumption practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The journey was not unlike that of the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, undertaken by 16 researchers in the summer of 1986. Indeed, much like the *Odyssey*, it was an experience "set apart from the ordinary and is outside of daily life" (Belk, 1987: p.357), in which the researcher sought "that which is emergent, unpredictable, enchanting and awe inspiring" (Jager, 1975: p.7). "Comforts [were] left behind in order to travel lightly and unencumbered, but also in order to free oneself from the familiar and comfortable existence in which questioning is unnecessary and meanings are never probed beyond current knowledge" (Belk, 1987: p.357). Leaving "the cyclical time of the dwelling (with its repetitive seasons, encounters and tasks)" (Belk, 1987: p.357), there was a need for self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and perseverance. Contrary to the 1986 expedition there was a considerable focus

on the "self," as the researcher's glance was turned inwards, having added an autoethnographic component to the overall research project.

The itinerary was planned at a high level (i.e., there was a general idea of the direction and national parks that were intended as stopovers), but a considerable amount of time was left open for spontaneity. Leaving from Montreal, Canada, the first stop was Burlington, Vermont. From there, the researcher drove due West until the state of Wyoming; then South through Utah and Arizona; and back up the coast, through California, Oregon and Washington (See Appendix 2 for itinerary map). The 6,000 km eastbound journey home would then be undertaken.

3.1 The context: the American vandweller

> There have always been itinerants, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the third millennium, a new kind of wandering tripe 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. (Bruder, 2017: p.xii)

During the immersion into the field, the aim was to interview American vandwellers, understand their consumption practices during COVID-19, and to become an "insider" to the community (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Gould, 1995; Maso, 2001). A compound word created by merging the words "van" and "dwelling", vandwelling often represents "an alternative lifestyle of freedom & simplicity" (Facebook, *Vandwellers Facebook: Live in your van*, 2021), in which the individual lives in a converted vehicle. The sub-Reddit r/vandwellers/ describes a vandweller as "someone [who] is living in their vehicle as their form of residence, be it permanent, temporary, by choice, or by circumstances. While we do refer to vans in general, vandwelling is sort of a catch all for most sorts of vehicle dwelling, be it van, car, pickup, school bus, step van, etc." (Reddit, retrieved September 22, 2021). Similarly, the private Facebook group *VanDwellers Facebook: Live in your van* describes the community as "more of a lifestyle or philosophy than any description of what you drive, camp, or live in." (Facebook, retrieved September 22, 2021). Because of their nomadic nature, it is difficult to estimate the total number of vandwellers currently

on the road. In 2011, the BBC estimated that roughly 3 million people adopted a more nomadic lifestyle in the United States alone (Grant, 2011): it isn't difficult to imagine that these numbers have increased since the pandemic.

Vandwellers do not consider themselves homeless: "equipped with both shelter and transportation, they've adopted a different word. They refer to themselves, quite simply, as 'houseless'" (Bruder, 2017: p.xiii). Indeed, this identity born of mobility, a minimalistic ethos and freedom reconceptualizes the notion of home and is seen as enhancing their life options (Duff and Rankin, 2020). Due to their serial relocations and the continuous movement from place to place, vandwellers experience a deterritorialization of the concept of home, which "refers to the unmooring of individual identities from location or territory" (Craig and Douglas, 2006, as cited in Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould, 2020: p.511). To them, the concept of home is very much attached to their vehicle (Bruder, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Harris, 2016). "Home is where you park it" and "the road is my home" (Harris, 2016) are common phrases in the community: as they move between locations, they consider each new environment as their backyard. Even when faced with the choice of a more traditional notion of home (i.e. they have the option to purchase a house, or relatives offer to take them in), they often do not wish to return to a more sedentary lifestyle (Harris, 2016; Zhao, 2020). Their sleeping arrangements typically consist of *boondocking*: also known as *dispersed camping,* is camping on public land or in authorized parking lots at no monetary cost. These sites typically have no amenities whatsoever, including potable water. Vandwellers sleep in Walmart parking lots (also knowns as *wallydocking*), public forests and deserts, and in cities (referred to as *stealth camping*, as it is often not legal to sleep in a vehicle in an urban area overnight).

In her book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century* (2017), the journalist Jessica Bruder integrates the vandwelling community over a three-year period[2]. Over the course of her experience, she successfully managed to integrate the community as a journalist and gained the trust and cooperation of many vandwellers. To do so, she purchased a "white 1995 GMC Vandura with a jaunty teal stripe" (Bruder, 2017: p.165) and named it Halen (a pun-intended

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[2] Although her approach is more akin to investigative journalism, there are many parallels to be made with ethnographic research. Starting as a small column for the newspaper for which she writes, her project swelled to immense proportions as she discovered the intricacies of the vandwelling community. And, while her approach may not have had the methodological title of "ethnographic research," her rigorous journalistic approach and her relentless pursuit of the truth is more than many ethnographers can claim to do.

reference to the late 1970s rock band, Van Halen). The van allowed her to weave in and out of the vandwelling lifestyle when her assignments permitted her to do so. She became an insider to the community and was able to unearth deep insights into this way of life. She describes vandwellers as, more often than not, being individuals over 50 years old,

> many [of whom] took to the road after their savings were obliterated by the Great Recession [of 2008]. To keep their gas tanks and bellies full, they work long hours at hard, physical jobs. In a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. (Bruder, 2017: p.xiii)

They gave up traditional "stick-and-brick homes, breaking the shackles of rent and mortgages. They moved into vans, RVs, and trailers, traveled from place-to-place following good weather, and kept their gas tanks full by working seasonal jobs" (Bruder, 2017: p.7). These seasonal jobs (a practice referred to as *workamping*) include the North Dakota sugar beet harvest, work in Amazon fulfillment centers or camp hosting opportunities – often times for very low wages and unsafe working conditions (Bruder, 2017)[3].

Furthermore, their minimalistic consumption habits (Bruder, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020; Harris, 2016; Monroe, 2017) lead them to borrow the land on which they park for the night and use public amenities to satisfy their basic needs. For the items they do own, most items have a high-use value, and is often repaired multiple times. "Materialism in general is seen as producing 'bumps in the road' during mobility" (Van Binsbergen and Geschiere, 2005, as cited in Bardhi *et al.*, 2020: p.511). Therefore, vandwellers strive to reduce their possessions to a minimum, in order to fully embrace their nomadic and highly mobile lifestyle. Bob Wells (a key figure in the vandwelling community often credited with inspiring thousands of individuals to adopt the lifestyle) shares their own definition of the lifestyle on their blog (CheapRVLiving.com) and on their YouTube Channel (542K subscribers, as of September 23, 2021):

> We're people who are tired of living the rat race and a life filled with hyper-consumerism -- always buying things looking for contentment, but never finding it.

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[3] Bruder herself worked stints in the North Dakota beet harvest (Bruder, 2017: p.184-189) and in an Amazon fulfillment center (Bruder, 2017: p.189-197) to better grasp the realities of the vandwelling and workcamping realities, so as to paint a fair portrait of the community members and the challenges they face.

Instead, we are returning to our original, truly human roots of tribal nomadism. We've adopted lives of travel and adventure by living in a vehicle like a car, van, RV or tiny house and living lives of simplicity and even minimalism. (CheapRVLiving, 2017)

Wells's site, CheapRVLiving.com, is often cited on vandwelling blogs and online vandwelling communities as being one of the main sources of useful information about the lifestyle. It provide guidance on living and consumption best practices, while acting as a forum for the online community.

From a community perspective, Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel (2012: p.222) describe the vandwelling community as a neo-tribe, in the sense that they constitute "a more fluid grouping than subcultures, with less deep lines of division and more fleeting associations which represents recent consumer-based identities." They are heterogenous by nature, bound by common interests, a similar way of life, rituals and language (Hardy *et al.*, 2012) – indeed, they communicate using terms that are very much specific to their reality, such as "boondocking," "rig," "black tank," "stealth camping," "workamper" and "van conversion."

Duff and Rankin (2020) qualify the community as atypical and fragmented. "Unlike traditional housing where people live in collocated communities, being permanently beside or close to others, those who live in vans belong to a community which is physically dispersed and moving" (Duff and Rankin, 2020: p.750). According to the authors, vandwellers don't have long-term neighbours or relationships tied to a specific location – rather, when they meet in person, they find each other by mere chance in boondocking sites, in rest stops, or in yearly gatherings. While many of them are more solitary by nature, they nevertheless strive to make connections with members of their far-flung community: when they aren't meeting in the "real world," they are creating connections on social media (e.g. Facebook) or through popular forums (e.g. CheapRVLiving.com) (Bruder, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020). "Enabled by social media, vandwellers share information on topics ranging from pragmatics such as parking locations and vehicle repair to furnishing styles and food recipes" (Duff and Rankin, 2020: p.750), and develop relationships that they can further explore down the road. Bruder (2017) further describes this bond:

When they meet – online, or at a job, or camping way off grid – tribes begin to form. There's a common understanding, a kinship […], a few even called it a *vanily*. […] For some of them, spending [time] together became more appealing than reuniting with actual kin. (Bruder, 2017: p.xiii)

Every year, tens of thousands of self-identified vandwellers gather at the *Rubber Tramp Rendezvous* (RTR), a two-week congregation of nomads in the public lands surrounding Quartzsite, Arizona. The RTR, started by Bob Wells in January 2010, has evolved into the largest gathering of nomads in the world (Drifter Journey, 2019). While there are other, more informal gatherings throughout the United States, the RTR remains the largest and most well-known. In an invitation on Bob Wells's website, one can read: "In many ways we modern day vandwellers are just like the Mountain Men of old: we need to be alone and on the move, but we equally need to occasionally gather together and make connections with like-minded people who understand us."

Vandwellers are a distinct group that distinguishes itself from other similar subcultures (RVers, #vanlifers, Grey Nomads, Caravanners, Digital Nomads and Snowbirds) by the simple fact that their living situation is dictated by a lifestyle choice versus exclusively tourism-related reasons (Bruder, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020; Green, 2018; Harris, 2016). Indeed, "the prevalent discourse amongst vandwellers appears to be the personal choice to embrace freedom" (Duff and Rankin, 2020: p.750), while seeking "self-sufficiency, and mobility without paying for conventional stationary housing" (Project Van Life, 2021). Despite the fact some are forced into this lifestyle due to poor financial health or the loss of a home, many choose to pursue this lifestyle for years, even decades. The influential vandweller Bob Wells captures this sentiment: "I came into the van life kicking and screaming, but I fell in love with it" (Green, 2018).

Members of the vandwelling community are most commonly confused with those living the #vanlife. Popularized by Foster Huntington in 2011 (Kurutz, 2015), this social media movement is one based on the glorification (and to some extent, some form of gentrification) of the vandwelling lifestyle: twenty-somethings leave home to live in a van for a few months for travel-related reasons, and have a large focus on creating visually appealing content that they will primarily share on Instagram (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019: p.3). According to Wikipedia (2021b), these

photos include idyllic natural scenery, either framed by the open back doors of the van, or with the van prominently visible in the landscape. Others feature spotless, stylized interior views of the living space. The people pictured in the images tend to be young, attractive, and outdoorsy millennials. The photos are often set in natural areas, particularly in the Western U.S.

The lifestyle is characterized by a curated minimalism, digital storytelling and extensive social media use (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Hardy and Robards, 2015). The "#" symbol is thus a core component to their identity and nomenclature, as it refers to Instagram's central hashtag feature, allowing the individuals to explicitly associate with the group. This community often overlaps with digital nomadism (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019: p.8), portrayed "as young professionals working solely in an online environment while leading a location independent and often travel reliant lifestyle where the boundaries between work, leisure and travel appear blurred" (Reichenberger, 2018: p.2).

3.2 Adapting to the reality of the field: an autoethnographic approach

Although the research project's initial intention was geared towards studying the vandwelling community's lifestyle and consumption practices in the context of COVID-19, the focus eventually shifted towards the specificities of ethnographic fieldwork in the context of CCT and consumer research. While numerous academic texts touch on the tactics of data analysis and the basics of conducting ethnographic interviews, there is a noticeable gap in CCT and consumer research literature when it comes to the question: *what are the realities of ethnographic fieldwork, in a context of uncertainty?*

To answer this research question, an autoethnography-centric approach was favored. In this specific case, it is the most appropriate methodology as it allows for an in-depth analysis of the context, through the unique personal experiences of the researcher. It is a method that "is particularly well suited to projects that involve direct participation by, and impact on, the researcher as a human actor in a scene" (Poulos, 2021: p.24). This approach allows the researcher to "describe moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through more traditional

research methods. Doing autoethnographic fieldwork allows what we see, hear, think, and feel to become part of the field" (Adams, Ellis and Holman Jones, 2017: p.4).

In order collect autoethnographic data, a complete immersion into the vandwelling community was attempted over the course of three months, from May 14, 2021 to August 13, 2021. Relevant data was also collected pre-departure (April 2, 2021 – May 14, 2021), as well as upon return (August 13, 2021 – September 4, 2021). Immersion into the ethnographic field was achieved through adopting the community's consumption habits and minimalistic material culture, constant mobility, and by making efforts to be autonomous from an energetic perspective. By doing so, the objective was to become an "insider" to the community (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Gould, 1995; Maso, 2001), all the while gaining insight on the challenges ethnographers may face in the field. It is important to note the sanitary crisis that surrounded the fieldwork environment during this period; yet, as the initial research topic pertained to understanding vandwellers consumption practices *in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,* it was relevant and necessary to perform the data collection under these conditions.

Daily skeletal field notes were taken, spread out between a notebook, the iPhone's "notes" section, a travel log (a daily journal that describes day-to-day mobility and activities) and audio recordings. These fieldnotes were supported by photographs, when relevant and possible. Although there is no standardized or formalized way of taking field notes (Cury, 2015; Goodall Jr., 2000; Jackson, 1990; Lederman, 1990), a structure was developed that was used consistently to ensure a thorough collection of data. Notes were taken on the researcher's own personal experience, the difficulties encountered, the environment, the new-found rituals, observations about community members and practices, and the changes to the original plan – leading up to the trip, during the trip, and for 3 weeks upon our return to Canada. During the note-taking process, there was a notion of being a "boundary-crosser" with a "dual identity role" (Reed-Danahay, 1997): as the researcher moved between her role as researcher and that of a traveler, there was engagement with both identities in terms of self-reflection. During the data collection process, it was essential to take a step back when it came to the emotions experienced, while ensuring that truth and transparency remained top of mind. Furthermore, efforts were made to maintain an open mind so as to avoid pre-categorization during the data collection period (i.e., only focusing on certain aspects and observations).

The fieldnotes also included JF's thoughts and feelings with regards to what he experienced: although the events and challenges faced were the same, his perspectives and interpretation of the research scene was his own and was worth highlighting. In the context of the research project, JF was not a co-author, nor was he actively involved in the fieldwork. Rather, he acted as the subject and object of the study, in addition to being a trustworthy travel companion. Furthermore, as an autoethnographic approach was favored as the main data collection methodology, it is apparent that he inherently influenced the experience and perspectives on the field: through living in extremely close quarters and by sharing nearly every experience, he implicitly and undeniably influenced the researcher's own perceptions and interpretations of the research environment.

Concretely, relevant conversations were recorded while driving between destinations and questions were asked to him during the process of noting daily field reflections. In the fieldnotes, there is a distinction between his thoughts and the researcher's: together, they build a compelling and complementary narrative, allowing for a more thorough interpretation of the reality of fieldwork. These notes were periodically consolidated (both his thoughts and the researcher's) into a typed-up document, "in a form that is more coherent and reflective than the notes taken in-the-moment" (Cury, 2015: p.1). In this context, the reflexive nature of ethnography is implied, as "the researcher is part of the world that is under study and is consequently affected by it" (Boyle, 1994: p.165). According to Taussig (2015: p.75), this process is conducive to the "afterthoughts kicking in," allowing for the development of meaningful data and analysis beyond pure observation and emotions. The total scope of the transcribed fieldnotes spans 57 single-spaced pages and included 189 distinct entries. These entries began on April 3rd, 2021 and ended on September 4th, 2021. In addition to these entries, dozens of photos were consolidated to support the observations, when possible and relevant.

In accordance with Gould (1995: p.720), researcher introspection is used here as an interpretive technique, as it "relies on reflexive mediation between one's personal and one's research insights." A critical perspective on the data collected in the field was maintained, through a process Gould (1995: p.720) refers to as self-evaluation. To do so, data was evaluated in two ways: "[the researcher] tried to be as honest with [herself] as [she] could and examined [her] observations in terms of what [she] might be concealing and/or missing" (Gould, 1995: p.720).

This gave way to the discovery of emergent insight, which could have otherwise been overlooked. Then, "[she] examined the logic of [her] interpretations in light of what [she] experienced. [She] let [her] experiences drive [her] interpretations and made the latter consistent with the former"(Gould, 1995: p.720).

Finally, upon return to Canada, the data collection was completed through a non-participative netnographic study (Kozinets, 2015) of two web-based groups, in which vandwellers share their thoughts, opinions and challenges: *VanDwellers Facebook: Live in your van* and the sub-Reddit *r/vandwellers/*. At the time of writing, the private Facebook group has close to 12,000 members and the sub-Reddit has over 1,500,000 members. This collection of additional data serves to showcase the perspectives of vandwellers on the topic of the "glorified ideal" of their lifestyle by the external other.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected autoethnographic data itself is based on the method put forward by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012). While Gioia *et al.* (2012) explore its use for ethnographic research and is mainly based on semi-structured interviews, it remains relevant from an autoethnographic perspective. This inductive process is composed of a three-fold qualitative analysis: first, the autoethnographic text is coded in a process similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of open coding. During this process, "a myriad of informant terms, codes, and categories emerge" (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012: p.20). Secondly, as the analysis progresses, the researcher began to seek "similarities and differences among the many categories (similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of axial coding), a process that eventually reduces the germane categories to a more manageable number" (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012: p.20). Lastly, these categories were grouped into broader themes, allowing for a "big picture" understanding of the findings.

These themes were then validated with JF (a practice commonly known in qualitative research as member checking), as he experienced the same sequence of events, albeit from a different perspective. The objective of this validation was to ensure that the findings were truthful

and significant enough in the broader context of the journey and data collection period. While it is inevitable that autoethnographic data is subjective in nature (Bochner, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Rorty, 1982), this additional "fail-safe" allows for a more rigorous analysis, and overall stronger methodological approach.

After analyzing the data collected during the 90-day immersion into the field, four broad theme that define the CCT-centric reality of the field in a context of uncertainty were uncovered. Namely, those associated with (1) the search of the ethnographic field; (2) the human component of ethnographic fieldwork; (3) reaching the community members in a context of crisis; and (4) the vandwelling community's attitude in a post-Hollywoodized reality.

Chapter 4: Findings

During my autoethnographic research project[4], I was confronted with the full reality of ethnographic fieldwork. I entered the field with the intention of better understanding the lifestyle and consumption practices of the vandwelling community in the context of COVID-19: I had hoped to repeatedly interview 3-5 vandwellers over the course of the following months, approaching them in dispersed campgrounds and offering to "hang out" (Agar, 1996: p.158) around a campfire in the evening. To this, I planned to add a significant autoethnographic component, as I tried to integrate the community and experience the lifestyle first-hand. By pursuing the way of life chosen by the vandwellers, I committed myself to pushing through the discomforts, guided by the hope that I would fall upon people willing to participate in my research project. However, while the intended data collection tactics appeared realistic in a controlled pre-departure environment, they did not materialize according to my expectations. I mention this data collection approach, as it underlines why I remained so adamant to find often-isolated boondocking sites, even though these led to concrete difficulties for us (more on that in the following section).

All things considered, it is unsurprising that my initial research question is not the same as the one I chose to address in this research paper, as ethnography research is often an emergent process. Indeed, as my research supervisor has told me time and time again, "if you exit the field with the same question with which you started… you didn't do your fieldwork right" (J.S. Marcoux, personal communication, 2021). Thus, although the challenges experiences by the vandwelling community in the face of COVID-19 is no longer central to this research paper, it's importance relative to my fieldwork is undeniable, and serves as relevant additional context for

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[4] In the subsequent pages, I've altered my authorial point of view, as is the norm in autoethnography. I use the "I" and "we" pronouns seemingly interchangeably: this is not the case. Rather, the use of "we" refers to the experiences JF and I lived together, our immersion into the vandwelling lifestyle and the challenges we faced. The use of "I", on the other hand refers to the research process in itself, from my observations, to my challenges I faced as a researcher, and to my own interpretation of my field notes. The distinction may appear as a fine line, however I wish to dissociate both instances as much as possible, so as to better illustrate the realities of the field in the context of scientific research.

the findings discussed this section. And, while reality I faced in the field were disruptive and downright adversarial in the moment, I believe that the insights gathered through the process will help CCT and applied ethnographers alike better prepare for the reality of fieldwork, by taking into account the factors of uncertainty which may befall them. Thus, the following chapter aims to bring to light the findings that address the research question: in CCT and consumer research, *what are the realities of ethnographic fieldwork, in a context of uncertainty?*

Over the course of my own experience in the western United States, four themes emerged following the analysis of the autoethnographic data collected: (1) the search of the ethnographic field; (2) the human component of ethnographic fieldwork; (3) reaching the community members in a context of crisis; and (4) the vandwelling community's attitude in a post-Hollywoodized reality.

4.1 In search of the ethnographic field

Ethnographic research implies the researcher's complete immersion into the field, to better understand the community of interest from an insider's perspective. It suggests learning about the specific cultural guidelines that ensure peaceful coexistence, and experiencing their reality for oneself. But, what if locating the field itself isn't obvious? Powdermaker (1966) describes this lack of ability to locate and to get physically close to the subject of the research project as being a challenge towards the very fundamentals of research, in this case from an anthropological perspective.

Suppose a researcher wishes to study the surfing community (much like Canniford (2005) set out to do): they would head to a well-known surfing spot along the coast. They learn to surf, they meet surfers in the early mornings when the waves are at their best. Suppose another researcher wishes to study coffee aficionados. They would inevitably locate a city's top third wave coffee shops, learn about the different torrefaction methods, develop a palate for the different aromas. But what of a community that is geographically fragmented, atypical, discreet and highly-mobile, like that of the vandwellers? Suddenly, locating the research field itself becomes a key consideration, one that has the potential to "make or break" a research project.

Nevertheless, in the months leading to our own departure, I thought I had solved my conundrum: we would boondock every night in locations that I believed would be popular amongst the vandwelling community and would live by their minimalist and self-sufficient ethos. I reckoned I had done my homework, that I understood them enough to find them.

With my initial research objective in mind (that of understanding the lifestyle and consumption practices of vandwellers during the COVID-19 pandemic), we spent months preparing for our departure. We performed dozens of repairs and improvements on the trailer (that we quickly came to call Kiwi), to transform it into a home. We downloaded the mobile applications we would need to find places to camp overnight (apps such as Campendium, The Dyrt, AllStays and the Ultimate CG – see Appendix 3). To achieve full immersion into the field, we sought to become as energy-autonomous as we could (mainly through the installation of solar panels and the purchase of an external battery), a key component of the vandwelling lifestyle. We reduced our material possessions to the essentials and acquired the tools we would need to be mostly self-sufficient should we encounter equipment failures. I ensured I was prepared and organized to take observational notes as soon as I entered the field.

In April 2021, just a few weeks before our scheduled departure, we felt ready and excited about the prospect of starting our journey and my fieldwork. I was confident that I had prepared myself adequately to integrate the community. I believed that I had identified the field, and knew where to find informants: that is, in dispersed campgrounds on the western USA's public lands. Based on what I had read in online forums and seen in YouTube videos, I targeted Wyoming, Utah, Arizona and California as the main states where I was most likely to encounter vandwellers.

And yet, in spite of our careful preparation, we faced an important barrier: what if physically accessing the American field presented a difficulty in itself?

4.1.1 Accessing the field

In the months leading to our departure, we were constantly reminded that we were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we planned our trip, international borders remained closed, vaccines were developed, an inoculation plan was rolled out. We adjusted our itinerary half a dozen

times during the spring of 2021, oscillating between finding a legal way to get across the US border, and embarking on a purely Canadian road trip. Access to my research field was uncertain and undefined, so close to our planned departure date. Notwithstanding my efforts to prepare adequately for my research project, it was difficult to conclude on *where* exactly my fieldwork would take place.

Truthfully, there are times where I wondered if I could even access the field at all. While we planned, the US/Canada border was not expected to reopen before the end of the 2021 summer, and measures were implemented to reduce vehicle traffic between the Canadian provinces (see Appendix 4). At the time of the announcement, I felt like "our escape route [was] blocked, that we [were] trapped between a whole bunch of places we [could not] go" (Field notes, April 16, 2021). I was struck by emotional turmoil and frustration, brought on by the constant uncertainty. I wondered if my entire project was in jeopardy.

Before continuing, one element warrants further explanation. Up until now, I've touched on my research project and my quest to locate vandwellers in their natural environment to better understand their reality in the face of the pandemic. But that was not sole objective we intended to achieve during our three months abroad: from a personal perspective, JF and I had always dreamed of a Great American Road Trip. We were attracted by the idea of living out of a small trailer or van for months on end, meeting like-minded people, catching every single sunset, and hiking the western USA's most beautiful natural parks. We had been planning this trip since 2018, saved our earnings for close to two years, found a tenant to rent our home, and moved back in with our parents to prepare for departure. We handed in our resignations from our corporate jobs. I made sure to align my M.Sc. dissertation with our travel plans. We accepted that we would return jobless, without our own home for the next year, and that we would be met with financial limitations both during and post-journey. With each successive decision, we became gradually more committed to the project. When all was set in motion, we felt the need to continue to move forward.

It is important to underline this personal component, especially in the face of a global pandemic. It provides additional context as to *why* we chose to keep moving forward, despite the difficulties accessing the field, the risks for our health, the risk of us transmitting the disease as we travelled. For us, this trip was to be "a trip of a lifetime." The way we saw it, it was now or never,

we didn't have a plan B. And, as the research project was intimately tied to our personal adventure (and the pandemic context), it remained on schedule.

To our greatest relief, on April 19, 2021, we found a solution to our border problem: working with a Québec-based transportation company, we would be able to legally access the United States. For $2,500, a commercial driver would drive our car and trailer across the land border, while we took an 18-minute flight from Montreal, Québec to Burlington, Vermont. The US/Canada border having remained open to air traffic, this was a perfectly legal solution. The date was set for May 14, 2021; however, I couldn't help but feel conflicted. I felt guilt and a feeling of social irresponsibility. Despite my eagerness to travel to the USA, I questioned our motives and wondered: "funny how the border is closed, but if you can pay, there are loopholes?" (Field notes, April 19, 2021). I feared the judgment of my loved ones and peers; yet "we [did not have] a single person condemn our choice – on the contrary, everyone we [spoke] to (even the most anxious and cautious) agreed that we made the right decision" (Field notes, April 30, 2021).

Despite my moral quandaries, we moved forward with our preparations. COVID-19 vaccinations had just recently become available to our age group in Québec, and we considered ourselves fortunate to receive our first dose less than 48h before our departure, on May 12, 2021. Indeed, both JF and I had been extremely cautious during the worst of the pandemic, and the vaccination was a welcome relief for us. We intended to get our second dose on the US side of the border, 30 days later, in a state where non-Americans could easily receive a dose. Nevertheless, we worried that we would be vulnerable to disease during the 30-day period, that we may be forced to return home should one of us catch COVID-19. Regardless of our concerns, we continued to move forward with our plan: from the perspective of my research, the objective remained to study vandwellers *in the context of the pandemic*. From the perspective of our personal travels, if not now, then when?

The day of departure (May 14, 2021) finally arrived, after months of preparations. We said goodbye to our loved ones and drove to a regional airport just outside Montreal. From there, the driver departed with our car and trailer, and we were left to wait to board the small, 8-person plane that would take us over the border (see Appendix 5). A turbulent and nauseating 18 minutes in the air later, we arrived in Burlington, Vermont. We crossed customs with ease, and eagerly awaited Kiwi's arrival. We were finally in the United States. An hour later, we saw our trailer

round the bend and breathed a sigh of relief. With that, our journey (and my fieldwork) could truly begin.

And then we were off. After a first night in a Walmart parking lot, we drove for 8 days straight, from Vermont to Wisconsin. We strived to immerse ourselves into the vandwelling lifestyle along the way, adapting our daily routines to our new reality: we began cooking on our little camp stove, we slept in sleeping bags, we accepted that our clothes wouldn't always be clean, we sat under beautiful starry skies at night, and gawked at the changing scenery as we drove thousands of kilometers on America's highways. However, we quickly faced challenges related to the actual *living* of the lifestyle, with all its logistical implications. In spite of our preparations, these had a significant impact on my fieldwork as a whole, from both the search for the field and participant recruitment.

4.1.2 Back to basics: logistical considerations

The logistical perspective of ethnographic research is often overlooked and undefined in CCT and consumer research academic literature. Some researchers will briefly mention the recruiting challenges they faced in the field as a consequence, and will briefly touch on the adjustments they had to make (see Hill (1991)); but, overall, there is a clear absence of the day-to-day realities the researchers undoubtedly face when immersing themselves into their chosen field. As our own experience shared a few commonalities with the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986, it is particularly surprising how noticeably absent the aspect of tending to basic needs and logistics is from the Odyssey's resulting published articles. While day-to-day considerations are apparent in some of the researchers' field logs (see Holbrook (1991) and Kassarjian (1987)), these do not appear to make it to press, despite the reality of the researchers being "crammed for days on end in a RV that was to be at once a study, a bedroom, a bath, a darkroom, and a kitchen" (Kassarjian, 1987: p.377).

Although logistical consideration may sound administrative and appear as contributing little to the findings put forward in academia and applied ethnography, it is impossible to completely ignore them while embracing an ethnographic approach. Indeed, in such a context as

field immersion, the researcher is considered the main instrument of data collection (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf, 1988; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Jaszabkowski, Bednarek and Cabantous, 2014; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001). As Boyle (1994: p.165) states, "the researcher is part of the world that he or she studies and is affected by it." How then is it possible to dissociate the challenges they face on a daily basis from their research and their ability to collect data?

In the case of my immersion into the vandwelling community, I aimed to fully embrace the lifestyle, to better understand the community's consumption practices in the context of COVID-19. Similarly to the researchers of the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986, I lived in a 20-year-old, 17ft. travel-trailer with one other person, for 90 days: that alone comes with a set of logistical considerations, that surfaced on a daily basis. We slept in forests, the desert and, on one occasion, a casino parking lot; we grocery shopped at Walmart and ate a few too many peanut butter and jelly sandwiches; we learnt to deal with extreme temperatures in the Arizona desert; we bathed in rivers when there was no access to showers; we spent a significant amount of time hunting down drinking water and dump stations; our rig[5] broke down on multiple occasions, and whatever skills and tools available to us were used to repair it. Despite the ease at which we eventually came to navigate our new reality, it did play a considerable role in my overall field experience, as it impacted my search for the ethnographic field and ensuing ability to recruit potential informants. Indeed, in my research field notes, there are 66 distinct entries that pertain to tending to our basic needs and the logistical challenges we faced, marking its relative importance. Throughout the process, I was nonetheless adamant that we keep to our original plan: knowing that the vandwelling community is skeptical of and guarded towards those that they consider "outsiders," I strived to integrate their way of life as much as I could. I believed that it was capital for me to experience the beauty and the hardships associated to the lifestyle, to better understand the atypical and fragmented community.

From this perspective, two main elements constituted determining factors that significantly impacted my data-collection objectives as a researcher: (1) tending to our basic needs and (2) frequent equipment failures.

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[5] The all-encompassing vernacular term used by vandwellers referring to their trailer, van, RV, bus, etc.

4.1.3 Tending to our basic needs and navigating frequent equipment failures

I quickly discovered that living in a travel trailer and frequently moving between locations entails some fundamental and recurring tasks: finding a safe, accessible and authorized place to park the trailer overnight, every night; locating showers and laundry facilities; and scouring county maps and lists of campgrounds to find a dump station (consisting of a hole in the ground into which we would empty our tanks, and a potable water spigot we could use to fill up our freshwater tank). To this, I'll also add locating strong and reliable cell service, to research the amenities we needed, to reach possible informants and to keep in touch with our loved ones back home. Moreover, while striving to access remote and treacherous boondocking sites, we had to manage the ensuing damages to the trailer itself. As human beings, these tasks were key to ensure our well-being and safety; as a researcher, it is clear that these had consequences on the data collection process, considering their overall time commitments and mental space occupied on a regular basis.

First, while experiencing the highly-mobile lifestyle for ourselves, we faced the reality of having to locate a safe and accessible place to camp overnight, every night. By and large, locating a place to park the trailer overnight was a greater time commitment than we had originally anticipated, and had real consequences on my ability to locate the field of interest for my research project. When we first arrived on the US side of the border on May 14, 2021, we made the assumption that finding public lands on which to boondock would be relatively straightforward, and that it would not take up too much of our time. That since "dispersed camping is in a large area, like a forest of desert, our chances of not finding a place to stay [would be] small" (Field notes, May 18, 2021). At the time, I believed that vandwellers would be found in these dispersed campgrounds and felt that it was essential for me to immerse myself as fully as possible into their preferred way of living, to better understand the community from the inside. As vandwellers are not tied to a specific geographic place, I would have to experiment with different locations, through a "trial and error" approach. Overall, while we did succeed in finding *some* boondocking locations (a Walmart, a casino parking lot, a dispersed campground on a forest road with relatively good access roads, to name a few), many were unfortunately inaccessible to us and our trailer: due to the poor conditions of the road, a steep incline, overhanging vegetation, a narrow passageway or a lack of options for us to turn the rig around, we could simply not access them. In cases where we

did try to access them anyways, we inevitably damaged the trailer and had to subsequently repair it (more on that later in this section). When dispersed campgrounds were not an option, we would turn our attention towards locating a state or private campgrounds for the night. However, these were often fully-booked: it was frequent to "have to call 5-10 campgrounds every time we wanted to change locations" (Field Notes, August 13, 2021), due to the high tourism season and because of COVID-19 related closures. With each call, we distanced ourselves from the geographic area of interest to us (National Parks, cities, the West coast seashore), forcing us to add countless hours of driving in the subsequent days. Staying overnight in "formal" campgrounds further made me feel like I was not experiencing the vandwelling lifestyle first hand, and that I would consequently be unable to locate the objects of my interest.

In addition to finding an accessible and safe place to park our trailer overnight, finding showers, dump stations, potable water and the occasional laundry facility occupied another significant portion of our day and mental bandwidth (Field notes, July 4, 2021). As we prepared for our departure in the spring of 2021, we had (wrongly) made the assumption that the western United States and its National Parks would be awash with the amenities we would frequently need. However, we rapidly came to the conclusion that was not the case: rarely were they in abundance or simple to locate. In some cases, we had to detour close to an hour each way to find the amenities we needed (Field notes, July 24, 2021). To circumvent the challenge, we embraced alternative methods: we bathed in rivers when we could (Field notes, July 4, 2021), resorted to "washcloth showers" when we had to, and signed up to a chain of gyms (Planet Fitness) with the sole intent of using their shower facilities when we passed towns in which they were located (Field notes, June 10, 2021). Locating amenities began to occupy an increasing amount of time in our days and we were forced to plan our itinerary and schedule as a function of where we could find them. My research project frequently took the back seat, as we were faced with more immediate realities and needs.

Moreover, we had to be mindful of cell phone network strength and reliability. Although a seemingly trivial concern, we in fact relied heavily on the ability to research our next destination, locate amenities, and keep in touch with our loved ones back in Canada. From a research perspective, a steady internet connection was essential in order to follow the vandwelling community on social media and attempt to recruit informants. On the occasions where I either had

a call scheduled with a potential informant or with my research supervisor, I often had to drive in excess of 15km away from my campsite to make sure I had at least a few network bars for the call to go through (Field notes, July 13, 2021). Leaving JF at the trailer, I would drive slowly with my phone in hand, setting-up along the roadside where the signal was strongest: inevitably, it impacted the spontaneity of my connexions and ability to reach out to potential informants on social media. Calls and "network time" had to be built into our itinerary, causing us to go out of our way to find quality service.

Adding to the time spent tending to our basic needs, we faced the consequences of constant mobility on the integrity and reliability of our equipment. Such equipment refers to Kiwi itself and the appliances it contains (water pump, toilet, refrigerator, storage spaces, tent, air conditioning unit, etc.), our car, and everything we brought with us for our journey, such as our air mattresses and cookware. Unsurprisingly, we relied heavily on them, as they constituted everything we needed to live our day to day lives. We had anticipated *some* failures during our travels and had brought some essential tools with us to ensure that we could repair them ourselves. Indeed, speaking with one vandweller in the field, they mentioned that it was essential to become skilled at repairing most issues yourself (Field notes, June 30, 2021), as repair shops are typically backlogged and relatively expensive. Yet, despite our careful preparations and multiple strategic reinforcements before our departure, we had not expected to be meet with equipment failures at the scale at which we did. Our three-months in the field proved to be a test of our self-reliance, resourcefulness and creative problem-solving ability: over the course of our travels, we faced upwards of 20 relatively major equipment failures (see Appendix 6), mostly due to our attempts at accessing remote boondocking sites. Such failures include our air mattresses popping on four separate occasions, the structural integrity of our trailer being in jeopardy twice during our journey (see Appendix 7), a crack in our black tank (the holding reservoir for toilet waste) and our fridge giving out in the middle of the desert. The trailer being our home for the duration of our travels and my fieldwork, the damage caused put our overall trip in jeopardy: had the damages become too costly to repair or had Kiwi's advanced age made the repairs unfeasible, we would most likely have been forced to avoid constant driving and mobility at all. The frequent attention we had to give to repairs led us to live in the lower levels of mental activity: by spending our time between fixing what had broken and tending to our basic needs, there was hardly enough time for loftier

objectives, such as locating the field, identifying and building relationships with potential informants.

Combined with Kiwi's advanced age and overall condition, these experiences forced us to come to terms with the notion that boondocking sites on public lands are often treacherous and difficult to access with old or large rigs (Field notes, June 18, 2021). I had to wonder: "how do vandwellers manage?" (Field notes, June 18, 2021). The constant vibration and driving must inevitably lead to equipment failures for them too. Knowing this, I wondered if we were searching for them in the right places: would they choose to attempt the drive to these boondocking sites? Were they better equipped than we were?

I had hoped to meet vandwellers by boondocking, but considering that some of the equipment failure were directly caused by our attempt to access boondocking sites, we had a choice to make: would we continue to try to access these sites (in the hopes of possibly meeting the geographically fragmented vandwelling community), or would we turn our sights towards paid campgrounds (public campgrounds or private RV parks) to ensure that we did not incur additional expenses due to repairs?

In the end, we opted for the latter: to avoid incurring additional expenses associated to repairs and to have easier access to basic amenities, we chose to spend our nights in paid campgrounds. This represents a pivotal point for my research project, as it signified that I would not be meeting vandwellers in their natural environment, camped on public lands; however, having realized mid-project that finding potential informants in boondocking sites posed more of a challenge than I anticipated, I hoped that the shift would lead me to meet vandwellers in one of their main work environment, in campgrounds. This hope was reinforced after reading Jessica Bruder's 2017 book, *Nomadland*: it highlights the fact that the summers months are when vandwellers made most of their income. The book underlines the fact that my initial hypothesis about vandwellers whereabouts was somewhat incorrect: they wouldn't exclusively be camped out on public lands or roaming the country. Rather, they would be working as campgrounds as camp hosts or harvesting corn fields or giving nature tours in state parks, to name but a few options. In our case, many of the campgrounds where we hoped to stay hired vandwellers for the season, as camp hosts. Their tasks include welcoming campers, ensuring the cleanliness of the campground and acting as the point-person for any questions the campground guests may have. While the pivot

to paid campgrounds was mostly driven by our desire to reduce repairs, this was a serendipitous benefit. Additionally, this change in our way of traveling would significantly reduce the time we spent on researching basic amenities, as most (but not all) private campgrounds had shower blocks, laundry facilities, potable water, and a dump station: I endeavoured to spend the gained timed researching the objects of my study, in their place of work, and trying to build relationships with them in the field. Overall, adjusting the course and way of our travels forced me to adapt my recruiting tactics and evolve the overall angle of my project. From meeting vandwellers in their natural environment on boondocking sites, I eventually came to focus on meeting them in their place of work. By associating a geographic location (in this case, campgrounds) to the community, I hoped to have more luck in identifying its members.

Tending to our basic needs and experiencing frequent equipment failure are qualified, in this paper, as *logistical considerations*. While the nature of the challenges may appear straightforward, the time commitment required and their influence on my overall behaviours as both a traveller and a researcher cannot be underestimated. Indeed, they impacted the way we experienced our three months on the road and on my data collection process as a whole. In the case of my research project, the logistical aspect of fieldwork made it difficult to *find* the research field at all: considering the geographically dispersed aspect of the vandwelling community, the field of research remained undefined (despite having narrowed it down through our pivot to paid campgrounds).

By and large, immersion from a logistical perspective is rarely addressed in CCT and consumer research literature. In my readings, I've yet to come across an author who exposes these seemingly mundane (yet important) aspects of CCT and consumer research fieldwork. Having lived an experience akin (in some respects) to that of the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986, I was surprised to find very little details on the logistical factors the researchers faced during their own two-month on the road (see Belk, 1987; Kassarjian, 1987; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Holbrook, 1991). Perhaps this is in part due to the relatively condensed format of their journal articles, or perhaps these details are perceived as not contributing sufficient value to theory-building conclusions (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010: p.336). Regardless, there is an under representation of logistical considerations in academia, which constitutes an often-missed

opportunity for researchers to further cement their credibility as an "insider" to the community, by showcasing the true nature of their immersion.

Although the reality of ethnographic fieldwork can be understood from the perspective of the search of the field itself (and its logistical considerations), we must nonetheless consider additional factors. Indeed, such factors include the human component of ethnographic fieldwork, which undeniably has an impact on the researcher's overall performance in the field.

4.2 Immersing myself into the field: the human component of ethnographic fieldwork

Similar to logistical considerations, the human experience is rarely touched upon in CCT and consumer research literature. The researcher is often depicted as having a sole point of interest and focus (i.e., the research question they are striving to answer), while their own human experience is often overlooked (for examples, see Peñaloza (1994); Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry Jr. (1989); Kozinets (2002); Belk (1987); Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel (2012); Schouten and McAlexander (1995); and Gonçalves and Fagundes (2013)). However, it is undeniable that the human component plays a key role in the researcher's perception of the field, how well they perform their fieldwork, and if ultimately the fieldwork is qualified as successful. To separate the human being from the researcher in a context of complete immersion into the field would be like saying that the researcher has no emotions, no desires, no fears, and no personal challenges of their own. It would diminish the importance of the very essence of why ethnography is so relevant and interesting for the social sciences: that the researcher can experience similar emotions and realities as the community that they study.

In the case of my research project, I immersed myself in a context that was very different from the overall life that I choose to live – and this during a pandemic. I chose to live abroad for a season, shared a cramped space with another human being, who has his own emotions, wants, fears and challenges; my resiliency and perseverance were put to the test on a near-daily basis; I met hurdle after hurdle when it came to recruiting participants and collecting ethnographic data; we sometimes feared for our physical safety and our health; and I tried to integrate a community that did not accept me (more on that in section 4.4). To add to this, there is the notion of travel as a

transformative experience, from an identity perspective (Coffey, 1999): through the fieldwork experience, both my identities of researcher and traveller evolved. Knowing this, how could I possibly dissociate my own human experience from that of researcher? Indeed, these factors most certainly impacted my performance as a researcher and my ability to create relationships with potential informants.

The following section aims to shed light on the three main axis of the human experience, as experienced in the context of fieldwork: (1) my health and safety preoccupations during ethnographic fieldwork, (2) my psychological well-being during field immersion, and (3) the risk of field immersion as a couple.

4.2.1 My health and safety preoccupations during ethnographic fieldwork

In the context of fieldwork, a researcher must use a combination of mind and body to collect the data, that much is for certain. In the case of the physical self, the impact of ethnographic fieldwork is often omitted in CCT and consumer research literature. In the sometimes hostile environment in which we thrust ourselves, we faced realities that directly impacted my physical capabilities to perform ethnographic fieldwork. Namely, we were confronted with extreme bouts of heat and put considerable stress on our bodies. We regularly worried about injuries or dehydration. We were reminded frequently that we were still in the midst of a pandemic, and worried that we would get sick. On one occasion, we wondered if we needed to head to the hospital. Furthermore, camping in secluded places came with some safety matters to consider: what of wild animals, like bears, snakes, mountain lions or moose? What of ill-intentioned people that may wish us harm?

We left Canada well-equipped: we carried two full medical kits with us (containing everything from Advil, to bandages, to wound-cleaning syringes and tourniquets), a satellite phone to use when off the grid, emergency blankets, electrolytes and wide-brim hats. A few weeks before our departure, we took wilderness first-aid courses and read up on what to do in the event of a snake bite. We discussed different escape scenarios and agreed on a course of action for each potential situation, be it a wild animal attack, a fire or a person who aims to harm us physically.

We purchased bear-spray and a small ax, to use as defense weapons. We always unhitched the trailer from the car when we parked it for the night, to ensure we could get away quickly should we need to.

The main physical concern we experienced during our time on the road pertained to the near-constant excessive heat. Over the summer of 2021 we experienced extremely high temperatures on a near-daily basis. While some of it is attributable to simply being in the Utah and Arizona deserts during the warmest periods of the year, it can also be linked to the 2021 Western North America heat wave (Wikipedia, 2021c). In some cases, the extreme temperatures reached heights in the 45°C-50°C range (see Appendix 8) during the day (Field notes, June 2, 2021; June 10, 2021; June 11, 2021; June 18, 2021; June 21, 2021; June 25, 2021; June 29, 2021; July 4, 2021; July 12, 2021). Heat management became a daily consideration, and not *just* because we became uncomfortably warm. On a physical health perspective, we began to worry about dehydration and heat stroke, both real risks threatening to affect our bodies and putting my fieldwork in jeopardy. While boondocking, this posed a real challenges, as we could not run our air conditioning unit without being plugged into an electrical outlet. When we weren't trying to escape the heat by spending some time in the idling air conditioned car (Field notes, June 10, 2021), we were making sure that we were sufficiently hydrated and cool. Everywhere we went, we began lugging around Powerades and sufficient water to dip our t-shirts in, should we begin to overheat. On one particularly hot occasion, JF experienced what we thought was the start of heat stroke: it took hours to finally bring his temperature down. I was close to making the decision to drive him to the hospital, as heat stroke can be deadly (Field notes, June 7, 2021). In spite of our preparation, we had not anticipated the degree of difficulty at which we would have to manage our body temperatures. From an ethnographic fieldwork perspective, it was challenging to work and try to meet potential informants, as we were trying to ensure that we did not overheat and put ourselves in immediate danger. Indeed, "data-collection went on the back burner, as we were just trying to manage ourselves and make sure we were comfortable and healthy" (Field notes, June 10, 2021). However, considering the significant autoethnographic component of my research project, the challenges we faced made for interesting observations and insights into the reality of a fieldworker.

In addition to the physical strain the excessive heat put on our bodies, we had to be mindful of injuries. Notwithstanding the fact that we carried a medical kit, a serious injury would

have put a stop to our experience, forcing me to abandon the field. Living in a small trailer and being forced into self-reliance for many aspects of our lives, accidents were never far from our minds. We had several near-misses (e.g. nearly dropping the 200 lbs trailer tongue jack on my foot, hiking accidents, road accidents), but thankfully managed to avoid any major incidents. Had the worst happened, in addition to seeking out medical attention, my data collection would have been brought to an abrupt halt.

Furthermore, it was hard to ignore the fact that we were still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic: despite entering the field partially vaccinated and receiving the second dose half-way through our travels, the risk of contracting the virus was never very far from our minds. Although our risks were relatively low (as we spent most of our time outside, away from cities), the consequences of becoming ill extended to my fieldwork and the overall continuation of our trip. This concern further hindered my ability to reach the vandwelling community (see section 4.3), as it created a necessary physical distance between myself and the objects of my study.

Lastly, we concerned ourselves with our overall physical safety with regards to wild animals and to ill-intentioned people wishing to cause us harm. Camping in secluded areas, we ensured to take the necessary precautions. Simply by travelling as a pair (versus travelling by myself, as a woman), we were significantly safer and less of an easy target. This is corroborated by ad hoc conversations with women vandwellers we encountered throughout our travels. One of these women mentioned packing up her van and driving away if a man or group of men parked too close to her. She was more comfortable being isolated overnight, rather than run the risk of a harmful encounter. Furthermore, this same woman shared that she had to equip herself with weapons (a knife and pepper spray/bear mace) so as to deter any potentially dangerous behaviours (Field notes, July 12, 2021), a behaviour aligned with the work of Clark and Grant (2015).

We ourselves experienced the worry and fear of being "at the wrong place at the wrong time" (Field notes, June 18, 2021): one night, we were camped in a very isolated dispersed campground, surrounded by shrubs of different sizes. Because of the incessant heat, we chose to sleep with the tent flaps open[6]. As I lay there, I saw movement and a light in the shrubs across the

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[6] While the tent is attached to the trailer, it's simply a piece of fabric. When opening the flaps, the only thing separating us from the outside world was a very thin mesh fabric, aimed at keeping bugs out. This piece of fabric, while relatively well built, is very easy to break, especially when it is done intentionally.

road. I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. I remembered the warning signs we saw saying there were mountain lions in the area and realized how exposed we were. I wondered if someone was waiting for us to drop our guard to cause us harm. I was scared and my intuition was screaming to leave immediately, despite us having no where else to go. "The whole experience made me fear for my safety, I felt like we were out in the open and barely sleep for fear of wild animals or shady people" (Field notes, June 18, 2021). Thankfully, in this case, my imagination played a wicked trick on me; and yet, the fear I experienced in that moment was raw, and real, and intense. This particular experience impacted my desire to isolate ourselves in remote campgrounds, afterwards favoring locations where they were many people (often times summer vacationers, a group that did not align with my research intents). While fearing wild animals or ill-intentioned people may not constitute a determining factor in my fieldwork experience, it nonetheless impacted my overall behavior as both a researcher and a traveller, as it forced us to realize that our physical safety was a key priority.

Looking back on our overall experience, we were extremely fortunate: a few minor health and safety mishaps here and there, but nothing to cause excessive concern. We saw bears and snakes and moose, but always from a safe distance. The people we met were friendly, generally speaking. We did not get injured or sick. We did not get heat stroke. Nevertheless, as I was in the very midst of my fieldwork, we lived knowing that something negative may happen at a moment's notice, despite our care. Without a doubt, the physical considerations listed above played a large role in my inability to collect ethnographic data: it placed us in a situation in which it was impossible to focus on meeting potential informants and working on becoming a true insider to the community. In these cases, all of our focus was turned to ensuring our overall health and safety.

4.2.2 My psychological well-being during field immersion

A complete immersion into this type of research field undoubtedly comes with it's set of psychological considerations. On the road, we both encountered our fair share of mental strain. As a human being, I am not one for complete stoicism: despite my resilience and desire to not exaggerate difficulties I face, I sometimes experience emotional turmoil or anxiety when I'm unsure how to navigate a certain context. And, while JF stands tall in the face of adversity, he is

not without faltering when said adversities stretch for days, weeks, months. Anxiety was a constant travel companion. Both JF and I experienced incidents that collided with how we perceived ourselves, our identities. And, as a researcher, I sometimes couldn't help perceiving myself in a negative light when my initial expectations didn't materialize as planned.

The feeling of anxiety came on slowly, before we set foot on American soil. Personally, I felt it with regards to planning our itinerary and the logistics of crossing the border. On the road, I felt a different kind of angst: one stemming from a lack of amenities, frequent equipment failures, and not having a routine I could ease into (Field notes, May 22, 2021). It was accentuated by the difficulties we had in reaching our loved one (and support networks) back home, as well as by events that could have created irreparable damages to the trailer; in one such case, I tried to back Kiwi into a tight campground and had to drive through a dip in the road, nearly costing us the whole undercarriage and levelling jacks. It was an incredibly "emotionally charged moment, in which I came very close to breaking down in sobs" (Field notes, June 13, 2021).

Moreover, there was a global pandemic to worry about: as my initial research objective was to understand the lifestyle and consumption practices of vandwellers during COVID-19, it was inevitably a frequent consideration during our immersion. As will be discussed in section 4.3, many Americans we encountered lived the health crisis in a very different way than JF and I did. Social distancing was not enforced in many states through which we crossed; people did not wear masks. On a few occasions, people ran up to us to shake our hands and give us hugs (Field notes, May 20, 2021; May 21, 2021). For most of our trip, I felt nervous getting physically close to people, falling back on the distancing habits we developed since March 2020.

Although we managed to live with most of the stress we faced on the day-to-day, and even became used to some aspects of it, there are instances that reached beyond anxiety and collided with our core identities, how we perceived ourselves. For JF, this was rooted in a sense of belonging. For him, the lack of access to showers had an impact on his emotional well-being: the inability to access them, to have been denied them, struck a chord in him, making him feel like an outsider (Field notes, June 12, 2021). The feeling of not belonging is one he mentioned multiple times during our travels. In the instance above, the feeling is set in the context of access to showers; however, the reality is that it was more deeply rooted in the fact that we could not find people like us during our 90 days on the road:

You know the expression "qui se ressemble, s'assemble[7]"? I think that, for me, it's been something that is difficult – especially when we are boondocking. And to be staying in the same areas as [some of the vandwellers] bugged me a little, because that's not who I am, that's not how I see myself. I'm a successful person in life, and I don't have to be here. I choose to be here. Whereas [some of the vandwellers] have to. But, especially since we don't have jobs right now, it kind of creeps up on me where I start to question myself again, you know? Did I just make this monumental mistake [traveling through the US for 3 months] that will lead me to be this full-time vandweller for the rest of my life? And I know this makes no sense rationally, but sometimes it's still how I feel." (Field notes - JF, June 14, 2021)

It was challenging meeting people like us on the road, especially as we strived to integrate the vandwelling community. While the latter is composed of a wide array of people, sharing diverse backgrounds and reasons for being on the road, it is not a community that JF felt he could relate to on a broader level. It made him question his choices and how he perceived himself, from both a personal and professional perspective. For a time, he felt like we had no ties to fall back on, nowhere we were part of a tribe. Interestingly, the feeling somewhat dissipated once we joined the Planet Fitness gym, in order to use their shower facilities. By simply having a membership card, he suddenly felt like he was part of something, however trivial it may seem (Field notes, June 29, 2021).

For me, the identity crisis I experienced during our travel stemmed from the concept of making a home for us. While this may be rooted in stereotypical gender roles, I nonetheless identify as a homemaker, a person who can create a comfortable space for JF and I to live, making sure that we both have everything we need to thrive. During our time on the road, the concept of home is one that appears time and time again in my field notes: it forced me to realize the importance I give to this part of my identity. Quirks and equipment failures aside, Kiwi undeniably became our home over the course of three months. Our constant mobility brought us to many, many different environments, from forests, to parking lots, to RV parks, to deserts, to the sea. And yet, "nowhere really [felt] like home, except within the confines of the trailer" (Field notes, August 8, 2021). Thus, when I lacked the ability to make it more than *just* a trailer, it clashed with my perceived

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[7] A loose translation of the expression "birds of a feather flock together", meaning that individuals sharing common traits are more likely to create bonds.

identity as a homemaker. For example, on one occasion, in the height of a Utah heatwave, our propane-fuelled refrigerator gave out as we were camping out in the desert. While this could have constituted more of an annoyance than anything else, it created true internal conflict for me. It directly impeded my ability to make sure we were comfortable and well fed; it meant that most of our produce, meat and dairy would spoil within a few hours, if not connected to an electrical outlet; it meant that I perceived myself as failing at making a home for us (Field notes, June 22, 2021). Due to various constraints, namely our timeline or financial strain, we did not have the refrigerator repaired for the duration of our trip. This, in turn, impacted my self-perception for the remainder of our travels:

> I pride myself on being good at making a home for us. And it's been challenging in the trailer. For example, not having a fridge that works properly makes me feel inadequate on a personal level. For me, the fact that I can't seem to make it homely and comfortable for us makes me feel shaky and uncertain about myself. (Field notes, July 24, 2021)

For both JF and I, a steady feeling of stress and identity conflicts rooted us in the lower levels of Maslow's (1943; 1987(1954)) hierarchy of needs. Thus, it's unavoidable that this lifestyle doesn't necessarily rhyme with self-actualization: a lot of time was spent caring for the fundamentals, such as our physiological, safety and love/belonging needs. There are moments where we thought of packing up and heading home, because the emotional strain was becoming nearly all-consuming. From a research perspective, it became challenging to focus on the research project at hand and proceed with my fieldwork. In all transparency, there is a three-week period in which I do not have field notes to account for, due to the psychological turmoil I experienced. In one case, near Bryce Canyon National park in Utah, I was unable to perform my intended duties as a researcher:

> Bryce Canyon was our first real RV park […]. At this point, I was emotionally exhausted. I also considered myself a failure for not being able to "tough it out" in the desert. Because of this, although I had a short window of opportunity to chat with a vandweller (who worked in the convenience store next to the park), I was mentally unable to muster enough energy to do so. (Field notes, August 15, 2021)

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I look back on this period and can plainly see that we were struggling: we began experiencing the psychological toll of our endeavour. From a research perspective, I perceived myself as being unable to attain my fieldwork objectives, due to my own mental state. The lack of attention to the field illustrated by my inability to speak with a potential informant heightened the feeling of anxiety and created a vicious circle. I fretted over finding participants in general, negotiating with JF to try just one more boondocking site, at the risk of breaking something else on the trailer; when he conceded, we would navigate to a site in the middle of the woods or desert, have to locate amenities and inevitably perform more repairs, which would then make me feel more anxious than before. When we *did* encounter potential informants, I was sometimes not psychologically able to engage with them. Until we committed to camping in state or private campgrounds and focussing my attention towards vandwellers in their work environment, I felt like we couldn't escape the cycle.

It is important to underline the post-trip experience as well: once we had crossed the Canadian border and were sleeping comfortably in real beds, the ripples of our travels on my mental well-being continued to be felt. Indeed, it prompted a feeling akin to what the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1968; 1970) refers to culture shock upon ones return home (reverse culture shock), which the author deems relatively common amongst researchers returning from the field. We experienced the "attitude of being something of an outsider in [our] own society" (Powdermaker, 1970: p.344). We felt forced back into a schedule that was not our own and were suddenly overwhelmed with social interactions and expectations. Considering that we rented out our condominium for the year to enable us to travel, we were suddenly left without a place to call home (Field notes, August 11, 2021): we travelled between our relatives, Kiwi left parked in a driveway. For a short time following our return, I was unable to focus on pursuing my research, feeling a sudden hollow and anxiety at being back into what we called the "real world" (Field notes, August 2021).

These psychological components of fieldwork are often overlooked in CCT and consumer research literature; however, it's textual absence does not necessarily reflect the true reality, as my own experience suggests. The psychological challenges and barriers researchers face may not be reflected in their field notes or in their published articles; yet, it is indissociable from their fieldwork experience. While it is not mentioned in their published work, I am certain that the

researchers involved in the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986 experienced similar (albeit not identical) psychological strain during their two-month immersion into the field. The researcher being the most important instrument for data collection in the field, how can they be expected to perform at their highest level when they are facing psychological and identarian struggles of their own?

4.2.3 The risk of field immersion as a couple

In the sections above, I've explored the reality of fieldwork through the perspective of the individual mind and body. In addition, there is one last component that deserves attention, when it comes to the human experience of fieldwork: that of the immersion into the field as a couple.

In my case, I chose to embark on my research project with my boyfriend, JF. As a reminder, JF is not a co-author, nor was he involved in data collection from a potential informant perspective. He accepted to support me through my endeavour, to immerse himself into the lifestyle, and to share his deepest thoughts with me. He accepted discomforts and didn't complain when I put a recording device in his face whenever he said something worth noting. Although our relationship is strong, embarking on such a journey had its share of risks: what if our relationship fell apart on the road? What if he told me he didn't want to support my research project any longer? What if he imposed choices that would impact my fieldwork?

We developed some form of interdependence: over the course of three months, we were rarely more than 20 meters away from the other. We became increasingly dependent on each other; yet as a team we became very independent from the rest of the world. We shared less than 40 square feet of trailer space, and had to coordinate ourselves to do everything together:

> As someone who is quite independent, it's actually quite difficult to have that when you are living in a trailer with your spouse. Because it's so small, because we only have one car, because of safety concerns… you end up doing everything together. There is no concept of privacy, of "your own space." If someone wants to stay up

and read, the other can't really go to sleep; if someone needs to go to the store, the other may as well go too. (Field notes, July 24, 2021)

All things considered, we were very fortunate: asides from one small argument caused by trying to back the trailer up into a tight spot, our experience as a couple was seamless. From a researcher's perspective, I had the best of everything: a partner willing and eager to help me attain my project objectives, while ensuring that we were safe and healthy. In difficult and emotionally tense moments, we leaned on each other and found ways to navigate each situations. Interestingly, the most challenging situations we faced were upon our return: because of the certain codependence that organically developed during our time abroad, we struggled to "untangle our lives from the others" (Field notes, August 20, 2021).

While the immersion into the field as a couple did not pose an inherent challenge to my research project, I nevertheless want to underline its importance and the risks associated with the choice. Indeed, had our relationship gone askew or had JF not been as supportive as he is, this may have had significant implications on my fieldwork as a whole. It is also worth noting that, although my experience is characterized by immersion as a couple, the same holds true for immersion as a group of researchers. Taking the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* of 1986 as an example yet again, it would be unsurprising to learn that the team's dynamics and cohabitation influenced their overall fieldwork experience. Thus, immersion as a couple/team/group should most definitely be considered by ethnographers as they plan their own research field, as it may constitute a pivotal moment in the overall data-collection process and abilities.

In the overall context of ethnographic fieldwork, the human aspects (physical, psychological, personal relationships) constitute a significant portion of the challenges researchers may face during the course of their data collection process. Indeed, we know that it is near impossible to fully disentangle the researcher from the human being performing the research. As the main instrument of fieldwork, the impacts of such factors on my own psychological and physical well-being were consequential. We faced difficulties that could have put a full stop to my fieldwork. Had we decided to head home, had the financial strain become too much, had JF and I separated, had my emotional state forced me to take a step back, had we gotten injured… my time in the field would have been drastically cut short.

While the challenges were eventually (somewhat) mitigated, they had an undeniable effect on my perception of the success of my fieldwork. Indeed, during our travels and after our return home, I often felt like I had not managed to attain my initial research objectives (Field notes, August 30, 2021) of interviewing vandwellers to understand their lifestyle and consumption practices in the face of COVID-19. Despite my immersion into the field, I hadn't succeeded in locating the potential informants I had hoped to meet, due to logistical challenges, and to the different facets of the human experience in the field. However, through this experience, I managed to gather significant autoethnographic data, contributing to answering the question of understanding the reality of ethnographic fieldwork in a context of uncertainty.

Back home, I continued to experience intrapersonal challenges (Gill and Temple, 2014). Specifically, I dealt "with deception, [felt] hopeless and overwhelmed" (Gill and Temple, 2014), as I did not feel like I had completed my fieldwork successfully. Coming from a business school background, I had set metrics and key performance indicators that I believed would measure my success in the field, and felt that I had not met my goals. I believed, for a time, that the full scope of my research project was in jeopardy, in spite of the 57 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes and 189 distinct entries pertaining to autoethnographic data. Yet, as I was reminded several times upon my return, ethnography is an emergent research tradition; thus, as my research project evolved, these metrics and criteria of success became obsolete, and were due for reconsideration. While I had not met my initial research objective, I hardly failed my fieldwork: rather, I managed to adequately pivot, focussing my attention on the autoethnographic component of my experience as I experienced aspects of the vandwelling reality first-hand.

In CCT and consumer research literature, rare are those who explore seemingly "failed" fieldwork experiences and overall research blunders, and the psychological turmoil that accompanies it from the researcher's standpoint. As argued by Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.336), researchers often make efforts to "keep face" in their ethnographic writing, ensuring their credibility. In scientific literature, successful research projects are widely shared and praised; and yet, failed attempts are noticeably absent. As ethnography is an emergent research tradition, where one failed attempt may lead to significant advances to literature, how can we objectively qualify the success and failures in the field in a context of uncertainty, from a CCT perspective?

In the previous sections, the search for the field and the human component of ethnographic fieldwork have been explored. The challenges put forward under these lenses pertain mostly to the effects of the field on the researcher themself, from both the material/logistical perspective as well as from their experience as an individual. In addition to these factors that characterize the overall fieldwork endeavour, there are several additional aspects to consider; namely, physically reaching the community of interest warrants further interest, as it is a key component in the overall success of ethnographic fieldwork.

4.3 Reaching the community members in a context of crisis

Expanding on the notion of searching for the field in itself (see section 4.1), the importance of physically reaching and meeting members of the vandwelling community cannot be underestimated. Indeed, while I may have gotten considerably closer to locating the field of research in itself once we pivoted to campgrounds (a known place of seasonal work for workampers), I continued to try to find *them*. Although there were instances in which I was in the appropriate geographical location, the context of uncertainty in which my research project was set had undeniable ripples on my ability to successfully meet the subjects of my interests, as it forced both vandwellers and myself to adjust our behaviours and practices to account for the factors affecting our environment.

In the following section, I aim to discuss the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heatwave on my ability to reach and interview the vandwelling community in their natural environment. Next, the effects of said external factors on our behavior shall be discussed, as they constitutes important factors in overall ethnographic fieldwork.

4.3.1 The influence of external factors on my recruiting efforts

In my pre-departure research, I had read that the geographically dispersed vandwelling community typically camped out on public lands, often in Utah and Arizona where there were more available sites than in many states. While the initial boondocking approach yielded few

fruitful encounters (we mostly met vacationers living in their RV or bus for a few weeks), it served as interesting insight, further advancing my search for potential informants. Indeed, once having been immersed into the field for a few weeks, I eventually came to adjust my approach and prepared to locate and meet members of the vandwelling community in their work environment, specifically in campgrounds. Through this pivot, I met a handful of camp hosts, some of them full-time vandwellers. Although I did not necessarily have the opportunity to talk with them for long, our brief encounters gave me glimpses into their lives: how one had been a workcamper for decades, who was now in their late 60s (Field notes, May 29, 2021); how another lived in Colorado for years, and left to work in a campground convenience store after the fires had closed down their previous work place (Field notes, June 21, 2021); how yet another simply enjoyed being out in the woods, away from the hustle-and-bustle of city life (Field notes, July 28, 2021).

However, even though this transition towards campgrounds should have made more in-depth conversations with vandwellers more accessible, it didn't produce the entirety of the expected results, as some external factors came into play. Indeed, there are several hypothesis explaining the challenge in reaching the community in itself, of which certain particularly stand out as having impacted my data collection experience on the whole. Specifically, while having to cope with the record-breaking heatwave of the 2021 summer, we were also 18 months into the coronavirus pandemic: despite the fact that inoculation plans had been rolled in many countries (including Canada and the USA), the world was not yet out of the metaphorical woods.

Overall, COVID-19 added a layer of complexity to our broader experience. Even as we adjusted to the American "masklessness[8]" and lack of social distancing measures, the pandemic was never far from our mind. From a personal and individual perspective, JF and I were both extremely cautious with regards to sanitary measures at home, as some of our loved ones were in the more "at-risk" age groups. For over a year, we isolated ourselves as much as we could, sanitized our hands every time we entered and exited a public place, had masks stored in every jacket and purse, tried to respect the various sanitary guidelines to the best of our abilities. At the start of the pandemic, we were the type of people who used antiseptic wipes on our groceries when we brought

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[8] In the USA, masks were phased out quickly as of the month of May 2021. President Joe Biden had recently taken office and had committed to delivering 200 million COVID-19 vaccine within his first 100 days in office (Murphy, 2021). As a consequence, social distancing and wearing masks in public places were no longer enforced in many states through which we crossed, such as Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, Nevada and Oregon.

them in from the store. From a cultural perspective, our province boasted a relatively high percentage of vaccinated individuals before our departure (Government of Canada, 2021). As such, we were eager to receive our first dose of the vaccine. We considered ourselves fortunate to receive it less than 48h before our scheduled departure, and made plans to receive our second dose on the other side of the border. In general, we adopted the mentality of "better to be safe than sorry", and had fully integrated Québec's cultural norms into our daily lives.

JF and I spoke at length about the pandemic's anticipated impact on our into the field and adjusted our itinerary multiple times to adapt to the latest news (Field notes, April 3, 2021). Regardless of our worries, we were set in our decision: we would cross the border and continue our travels, despite the pandemic. As I aimed to study the lifestyle and consumption practices of vandwellers in the context of the pandemic, it was inevitable that we would brush up against the reality of the situation. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork, COVID-19 impacted my ability to build relationships with people on the road, be it because of safety concerns for ourselves or out of respect of the safety preferences of others. Interestingly, it also had influence on the vandwelling community's way of life, swaying their preferences from working in campgrounds to living off COVID-19 subsidies.

From a human-to-human perspective, we were careful in our interactions with the "Other," for both our personal safety, but also to respect their own preferences. In one instance, in Sedona, Arizona, we camped near a lone traveler. We spoke to them briefly as they levelled their van: they explained that they were taking an undetermined amount of time off from their teaching position and intended to be a ranger in a nearby state park for a while. They had converted their van themselves, ensuring its relative autonomy. After a few minutes of small talk, we were each forced to retreat to the cool air of our vehicles, as the midday heat was becoming too much for either of us to handle. We waited a few hours for the sun to go down, for the temperature to drop: I wanted to pick the conversation where we left off and hoped to learn more about their recent lifestyle change. However, as we ventured outside, we were swarmed with large desert flies. It was almost worse than the heat. In pre-COVID times, we would have solved this issue quickly: we would have invited them into our trailer for a drink. However, at that time, we were not fully immunized and were thus reluctant to extend the invitation (Field notes, June 10, 2021). Although I tried to keep the conversation going for as long as we could manage, we inevitably each retreated

to our respective trailer and van, to get away from the swarm. The following morning, they were gone at the crack of dawn, and my questions were left unanswered.

Thankfully, as of the end of June and the mid-way point of our travels, we were fully immunized, having received our second dose of the vaccine in a Walgreens pharmacy in Flagstaff, Arizona. From that point on, our worries were eased: although we still did not want to get up close and personal out of respect for the people with whom we were interacting, our own anxiety considerably diminished. Nevertheless, my recruiting challenges were not over. Despite the broader trend of "masklessness" and lack of social distancing, we remained mindful of the body language and preferences of others: we would make sure to keep some distance if they showed signs of unease as we approached, we would not invite them into our trailer, or ourselves into theirs. As an example, we met a family living in a converted school bus: the couple, their two infants and their dogs had been traveling the country for close to 18 months (Field notes, July 14, 2021). As we set up Kiwi in the field in which we planned to camp, we chatted for a few moments, and I noticed that they ensured to keep a healthy distance from us. I hoped to catch them outside their rig in the following hours, to ask them a few questions and have a more in-depth conversation. Unfortunately, my hopes were in vain: it started to rain, and did so for the duration of our stay. We confined ourselves to our rigs. Going to knock on their door would have been of poor judgement, considering the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, their initial reluctance to approach us and the fact that they had small children with them. Moreover, similarly to the lone traveler in Sedona, it would not have been appropriate to invite them into our trailer (or us into theirs), nor would it have been appropriate to ask them to chat outside due to the poor weather conditions.

In addition to recruiting challenges directly related to the coronavirus, we quickly realized that many campgrounds and amenities were closed due to the pandemic, including those within the popular Yellowstone National park (Field notes, May 17, 2021) and Yosemite National park (Field notes, July 1, 2021). While this forced us to perform additional research as to where we would be camping, it posed another problem: these national and state parks are where I believed it was most likely to find vandwellers, as they worked as camp hosts. Even though I had identified the field of interest, there were suddenly fewer available options for us to choose from, especially considering the peak tourism season of the summer months. As many public campgrounds were closed, we sometimes turned our attention to paid RV parks. However, these were typically

manned by permanent employees that did not necessarily live on the premises, and did not fit the requirements of my research project.

These closures aside, the pandemic altered the vandwelling community's way of living and working: during a phone conversation with a community member (who wished to remain anonymous), I asked how the pandemic had influences the way of living of vandwellers. They didn't hesitate, stating that for them and those they knew, COVID-19 wasn't bad at all. Rather, vandwellers often left their low-paying jobs in favor of unemployment subsidies, often making as much as $450USD a week (Field notes, July 13, 2021). Considering this often amounted to more than their normal wages while working in campgrounds, many left their jobs and enjoyed these newfound benefits. Thus, although we had ourselves forgone boondocking sites in favor of paid campgrounds, the altered vandwelling reality and the closure of several state campgrounds put me in a stalemate: although I had thought state campgrounds were the right place to locate working vandwellers, I had difficulty identifying potential informants in this context.

For the vandwellers that *did* continue to work in campgrounds, the heat wave we experienced throughout most of our travels (see section 4.2.1) played a significant role in their behaviours, and impacted my ability to meet and interview them. Indeed, they would rapidly retreat to the coolness of their rigs or vehicles (their air conditioning units working, since these campgrounds typically have electrical outlets), avoiding spending unnecessary time outside during the day. This held particularly true in more desert-like environments (such as Utah, Arizona, Nevada and California), in which there is very little shade for people to sit under during the heat of the day. For my research project, this translated directly into an inability to informally meet people: for the little time we spent in the sun, whether to level our rig or attempt to prepare meals outside Kiwi, we were often alone as our neighbours and camp hosts sought to escape the rays (Field notes, June 11, 2021; July 12, 2021). Nevertheless, this period of heat-induced isolation constituted interesting grounds for autoethnographic data-collection and observations, as the external factors clearly had a noticeably impact on my ability to reach the community members.

In a similar vein, we had initially considered leveraging the use of campfires to meet and "hang out" with potential informants in the cool evenings. The campfire being a symbol of gathering and relationship building, I had imagined us strolling up to our vandwelling or camp host neighbours and inviting them to our campsite to sit and chat around a blazing fire. Despite the

heat of the days, the nighttime temperature dropped by close to 20°C in some areas(Field notes, June 10, 2021): a campfire would have most likely been a welcomed sight. I've always found that there is an openness to be found in campfire conversations, perhaps due to the lack of eye contact or feeling closer to the natural elements. Yet, with the heat wave came excessive dryness, which in turn led to a fire ban in most of the western USA, including in state and private campgrounds. While a seemingly unimportant detail, this lack of informal gathering space made it more difficult to spontaneously meet and exchange with people, whether in semi-isolated boondocking sites or in campgrounds.

Although I believed that I had located the field of interest for my research project, reaching individual community members proved to be a challenge, considering the external factors of COVID-19 and the heat wave. Notwithstanding their impacts on my ability to recruit potential informants, these aspects further affected the way I perceived my personal safety, as an individual performing (auto)ethnographic research. Indeed, while members of the vandwelling community adapted their behaviours and practices to take into account there then-current environment, we equally felt the need to change our ways in order to ensure our safety.

4.3.2 Adapting our behaviors to COVID-19 and environmental factors

While the notion of researcher safety has been explored by some anthropologists (see Williams *et al.* (1992); Clark and Grant (2015); Morgan and Pink (2018)), the guidelines remain undefined when it comes to CCT and consumer research literature. In addition to the notion of reaching and recruiting potential informants in the field, I believe it is important to note the underlying assumption of researcher safety in such a context of crisis. The influence of the researcher as a human being on the actual data-collection process is worth highlighting, especially from the perspective of the discrepancy between what the researcher *ought* to do to fully integrate the community of interest and the researcher's personal preferences and beliefs. In the context of my own field immersion, we were faced with the consequences of COVID-19 and the incessant heatwave, both of which inevitably influenced the course of my data collection and recruiting process, while also creating certain ethical tensions from a researcher's perspective.

First, a recurring theme during my fieldwork was making sure we weren't overexposing ourselves to the excessive heat. In the second part of our trip, when we had committed ourselves to shifting towards paid state or private campgrounds, we focused on ensuring that we could run our air conditioning unit in the evening by parking in campsites that had electricity for us to connect to. More importantly, the heat and subsequent wildfires affected our overall itinerary, as it dictated which campgrounds we could stay in and which areas were safe for us to visit. Considering the state of our trailer, we were mindful to adjust our routes and made sure to find alternate locations to sleep: we avoided forests and areas with excessively dry brush, so as to ensure that we did not put ourselves in a potentially dangerous situation. Consequently, while focussing on our own safety was a key, we were sometimes herded away from the geographic locations of interest, towards more populated areas. In the latter, there was a larger proportion of private RV campgrounds, which typically hire permanent staff to man their establishments (rather than the seasonal vandweller). The widespread wildfires (see Appendix 9) further resulted in us cutting our overall experience short by a few weeks. A few days spent in the smoked-filled North Cascades National park, close to the Canadian border, helped us make up our minds: because of the wild fires and consequent smoky air affecting the northwestern part of the country, we chose to adjust our plan and drive home a few weeks sooner than expected (Field notes, July 22, 2021; August 20, 2021).

Together, the heat waves and the wildfires sprinkled throughout the western US required us to adapt not only our itinerary, but our overall way of living. An external factor we had no control over, it dictated where we would sleep and what routes we would take, so as to ensure researcher safety. The trade off to ensure our overall well-being was a compromise on (and to a certain extent, a sacrifice of) my research project itself: by abiding by our personal safety preferences, we sometimes felt like we were distancing ourselves from locations where I believed it would be more likely to meet member of the far-flung and atypical vandwelling community. When we did meet some of them, we still had to be mindful to not overexpose ourselves, thus affecting the overall success of my ethnographic encounters.

From a COVID-19 perspective, we were faced with the American reality of "masklessness," in which masks were phased out quickly as of the month of May 2021. We were shocked, especially coming from Québec, where sanitary measures were (and still are) very

present. In the early days of our immersion into the US, we sometimes worried for our safety, both while performing necessary daily tasks (like grocery shopping) and when encountering potential informants on the road. And yet, even though COVID-19 appeared to be a thing of the past, it constituted a real recruiting challenge for my research project. For most of our trip, I felt nervous getting physically close to people, falling back on the distancing habits and sanitary reflexes we developed since March 2020.

During our initial drive across the country, from Vermont to Wyoming, we encountered a few situations that were a stark contrast to our own practices. In one case, we walked into a Walmart to purchase a few supplies. Out of the roughly 300 people encountered, only 14 wore masks, including ourselves (Field notes, May 22, 2021). During another pit-stop at the popular Wall Drug in South Dakota, we entered an ill-aerated cafeteria, in which over a hundred people stood in close quarters (Field notes, May 21, 2021), without masks. Lastly, as we camped on public lands in North Dakota, we were approached by fellow campers, who went straight for a handshake and hug: it caught us by surprise and made us feel uneasy (Field notes, May 20, 2021). In each case, we worried for our own safety and the potential negative consequences it could have on our overall experience. Thankfully, we felt more comfortable once we left the urban areas in favor of National and state parks: being outdoors and away from city-goers significantly reduced our risk of contracting or spreading the disease.

There is an interesting conundrum present in the context, from an ethical perspective. On one end, ethnography (be in in CCT, consumer research, or anthropology) entails the researcher's complete immersion into the field of interest and attempts to behave like the community at study. On the other hand, my preferences and beliefs as a human being were top-of-mind, especially when confronted with a reality that did not align with them. Using the "handshake and hug" incident as an example, the best way forward is unclear: by refusing the handshake and hug, I was putting distance between myself and the community I wished to integrate, showcasing my "outsider-ness". On the other hand, had I gladly accepted the handshake and hug, it would have gone against my beliefs and personal preferences. Drawing on the literature on researcher safety during fieldwork (see Williams *et al.* (1992); Clark and Grant (2015); Morgan and Pink (2018)), how can we reconcile the necessity of community integration with the ethical requirements of ensuring the researcher does not put themselves in harm's way, especially in a context of a global

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sanitary crisis? How does one fully-immerse oneself into the lifestyle and approach potential informants when one fears for their own health?

In academic literature, it is rare that factors of uncertainty or external considerations are described as part of the ethnographer's fieldwork. In the context of my own experience, COVID-19 played a significant role in my efforts to recruit participants, in addition to its impact on our safety and access to the field. Had this research project happened 2 years sooner, in 2019, I would have had less qualms knocking on a neighboring rig's door. Yet, in the midst of a pandemic, this was simply not a possibility for us. Although we prepared as best as we could under the different circumstances, the unpredictability of ethnographic fieldwork forced us to adapt our plans and impeded on my ability to spontaneously meet vandwellers. Moreover, I found myself in an ethical dilemma: by definition, ethnography involves the researcher immersing themselves into the field, with the objective of becoming an insider to the community. Yet, as a human being, I had my own set of beliefs and preferences with regards to my personal safety, and wished to avoid catching or spreading COVID-19 (or, for that matter, putting myself in dangerous situations with regards to the heat and wildfires). In this, there is an ethical dissonance between what the researcher ought to do from a research perspective, and what they feel they must do from a personal standpoint. While the notion of researcher safety has been explored in anthropology literature, in such a case as the context of COVID-19 there is little guidance, no obvious path forward. The pandemic aside, external factors, such as climate change, further widespread disease, political turmoil and civil unrest will inevitably continue to impact future research projects, in which the researchers immerse themselves into their field of interest. Although we cannot predict a crisis, researcher can at least prepare for it's potential appearance: these external factors and ethical considerations must therefore become a principal consideration when planning the fieldwork.

While physically reaching the community of interest during a context of crisis constituted a hurdle in itself, we encountered further challenges when we did eventually manage to meet community members. Indeed, although we strived to immerse ourselves into the vandwelling lifestyle and adopt their consumption practice, the notion of being an outsider to the community was a constant travel companion.

4.4 The vandwelling community's attitudes in a post-Hollywoodized reality

In the previous sections, three factors that may influence a researcher's fieldwork experience were explored: the search of the ethnographic field, the human component of ethnographic fieldwork, and reaching the vandwelling community in a context of crisis. While these themes are essential in providing a better understanding of the reality of fieldwork, there is one additional sphere that requires attention: that of being accepted by the subjects of the research project, once these have been located. In the context of my fieldwork, I was faced with the daunting task of attempting to integrate an already guarded community and attempting to build relationships, in a context in which they were already bombarded with media and outsider attention due to the award-winning film *Nomadland*. While this constituted a barrier to entry into the community in itself, it also had effects on my own perceived identity as a researcher, further underlining the hindrances associated to the recruiting process.

4.4.1 The vandwelling community in the wake of *Nomadland*

In 2020, the film *Nomadland* was released. Produced by Chloé Zhao, the movie is loosely based on Jessica Bruder's 2017 book, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century*. The storyline follows a working vandweller (workamper) who is forced to leave her home after her husband dies and the sole industry in her town closes down. She becomes "houseless" and begins to roam the USA in search of seasonal work. Throughout her journey, she meets other vandwellers and creates strong relationships with them; she participates in the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzsite, Arizona; her minimalist lifestyle forces her to become creative with the material possessions she does have; when offered a permanent home, she refuses, preferring to live her life of freedom in her van. The film portrays the vandwelling life as difficult and lonely; yet, the scenes of camaraderie between vandwellers shows the importance of the broader community and their belonging to this nomadic tribe. While the main characters are professional actors, some real vandwellers play themselves as supporting characters, showcasing the authentic nature of the film.

The film was a triumphant success: since its release, it won an outstanding 107 awards, the most notable of which are the Academy Awards for Best Picture, The Golden Globe Awards for Best Motion Picture – Drama, the Toronto International Film Festival People's Choice Award, and the Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion (Wikipedia, 2021d).

Together, book (2017) and film (2020) paint the complex and raw lives of the vandwelling community, from the nature of their rigs, to their interpersonal relationships, to the socio-economic challenges they must endure, and to the realities of finding work. With the rise in popularity of the film, the vandwelling community suddenly became of interest to the masses. More and more people were suddenly trying to understand and integrate the lifestyle, to the dismay of the core vandwelling community. Indeed, the neo-tribe (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019) is one that does not covet the attention of the media, nor the eye of the public. In the wake of *Nomadland*, the already suspicious community members became increasingly weary of outsiders. In the context of my research project, this had very real consequences, namely with regards to how they perceived my attempts at integrating the community as well as the recruiting challenges it posed.

I myself viewed the movie from within my trailer, camped out near the California coast (Field notes, July 8, 2021). I watched how the main character was forced out of her home, and yet managed to embrace and thrive in her new nomadic lifestyle. I watched her live a minimalistic lifestyle and share whatever she could with the ones she chose to build relationships with. I watched her argue the difference between "homelessness" and "houselessness." Although being fully aware that the film is a "Hollywoodized" version of the lifestyle, I couldn't help but wonder: was this depiction close to reality? I had been on the road for close to two months by the time I watched the movie and had yet to meet many individuals who shared the same ethos and ways of living.

Through a netnographic approach of the subreddit page *r/vandwellers* (boasting 1.5 million members at the time of writing) and the private Facebook group *VanDwellers Facebook: Live in your van* (close to 12,000 members), I was able to unearth the community's thoughts on the matter. Unsurprisingly, their opinions are scattered: while some praise the film's realism, others complain that it adds to the glorification of the lifestyle, or that it portrays them as being homeless. Indeed, some users believe that the film strengthens the untruthful stereotype of vandwellers:

But I didn't like either [the book or the movie] --it looked to me as if both of them were feeding the stereotype that people have of us that we are all poor broke down and out bums who were forced into this life by some sort of catastrophe. (lennyflank, Reddit, 2021)

The user worries that the public opinion of their life is not accurate, that their identity will fall under a stereotype of homelessness that is not their own. Notwithstanding the comments like lennyflank's, the majority of comments found on the Reddit and Facebook online communities are more positive in nature. In one post on the Facebook group, in which a user asked, "How realistic does everyone think it is?," the response was generally favorable towards the realism of the film:

Partly true partly fiction, but yes I think it was realistic. I don't think it glamorized our way of life, nor did it paint it in especially somber colors. It dealt with grief, hardship, community, and hope. I liked it. (User 1, Facebook, 2021)

Very realistic. […] I am a full-time nomad and van dweller. The movie is realistic, not for the entire community, but it is none the less very realistic for a large percentage of the community. (User 2, Facebook, 2021)

The movie may not be YOUR story. But it's still accurate for many. It is surprising how many people are angry because the movie doesn't represent them and their experiences. (User 3, Facebook, 2021)

The comments above illustrate the notion that vandwellers do not compose a homogenous community; it would be like saying that city-dwellers (people that live in the city) have the same lifestyles. And yet, it would be false to do so: some inhabit mansions while others share a 2-bedroom apartment; some only eat organic produce while others survive on canned goods; some live in better neighborhoods that others; some are minimalists while others filled every nook and cranny of their homes with material possessions. The same can thus be said for the vandwelling community. Even though *Nomadland* is a realistic portrayal of *some* vandwellers, it cannot fully be generalized to the entire community.

Furthermore, in response to negative comments on one Reddit thread, the user kerrygetz describes their feeling and highlights the presence of a few real vandwelling community members (namely, Swankie, Bob Wells and Linda May), who play themselves in *Nomadland*:

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Wow. So much hate on the movie. I loved it and thought it was a pretty great depiction of the lifestyle. You can't get any more real than actually having real live van dwellers star as themselves in the movie. It didn't glamorize [the vandwelling lifestyle], it didn't shit on it either. And you can see a variety of people doing it for different reasons in the movie. Not sure what single kind of stereotype it's perpetuating. (Reddit, 2021)

The presence of "real live van dwellers" makes the portrayal of the vandwelling lifestyle more authentic, in the user's view. For those currently living the nomadic lifestyle, it gives them a certain voice and contributes to a feeling of pride in knowing those on the "big screen." One commenter personally knew two of the vandwellers playing in *Nomadland,* and praised them for their genuine appearances and truthful portrayal of their reality:

It was wonderful. I watched it twice now. Swankie and Linda just winged it and did a fabulous job. I've known Swankie for 5 years and she was just her wonderful authentic self. The video from Swankie to Fern towards the end was an actual video that Swankie did on one of her kayak adventures. (User 4, Facebook, 2021)

Nevertheless, despite the positive comments with regards to the realism of the film, some community members feel that *Nomadland* further contributes to the pursuit of the #vanlife. To them, this gentrified and glorified version of their own nomadic lifestyle promotes unrealistic expectations and an increase in the number of people who will "hit the road," so to speak. By doing this, it is implied that the #vanlifers will strive to live lives (albeit, in a more temporary manner) that may impede on vandwellers habits or resources. It also implies that more "outsiders" may try to peer into the nomadic lifestyle, by participating in community meets like the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous. An active *r/vandwellers* community member, the user lennyflank captures the worry:

But I fear it will just inspire an entirely new flock of wanna-be's to do stupid things and make more trouble for all of us. :(We do best when we stay under the radar, unknown and unnoticed. […]

The movie is, I think, sadly gonna make things ever harder for us, by exposing an entire new wave of people to the "hashtag vanlife!!!" and encouraging them to go out try it--and many of them will fuck it up for a few months and quit, do more stupid

things in more parking lots, and cause more problems for us. (lennyflank, Reddit, 2021)

Indeed, while some vandwellers celebrate an accurate portrayal of their lifestyle, others worry that it may become temporarily overrun with #vanlife millennials, causing irreparable consequences to those who have adopted the lifestyle as a permanent living solution. This is further corroborated by an informal conversation with a long-time vandweller during my time on the road: they believed that the 2022 Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzsite, Arizona, would be full of #vanlifes, "who are there for kicks and to take Instagram-worthy photos" (Field notes, July 12, 2021). They believed that the popularity of *Nomadland* was a significant contributor to the overall effect.

The effects of *Nomadland* were felt heavily on social media and in online communities, which is unsurprising: the far-flung and highly mobile vandwelling neo-tribe uses the platforms to connect virtually to each other, when they are too distanced geographically. That being so, it is important to note that these effects occurred in the "real world" as well: thus, the overall post-Hollywoodized effect on my fieldwork was undeniable. Indeed, in an already guarded community, immersing myself into their realities and striving to be accepted by them proved to be a noteworthy constraint, especially considering my relatively short, 90-day stint in the field.

4.4.2 Community perceptions of researchers: remaining an outsider

In the wake of *Nomadland*, the vandwelling lifestyle was put under the microscope. Journalists attempted to understand and dissect the community, to different levels of success. While Jessica Bruder (2017) successfully managed to become an insider to the community in the research for her book *Nomadland: Surviving American in the Twenty-First Century*, it was through sheer determination and by serendipitously meeting a few key people who facilitated her acceptance by the other members. In other cases, the journalists are shut out from the community, ignored by the members. For example, on June 16, 2021, a journalist posted on the Facebook group *Vandwellers Facebook: Live in your van* (see Appendix 10). In their short publication, they requested an interview with full-time vandwellers in the UK, for a feature in the newspaper *The*

Telegraph. Unsurprisingly, there is no engagement whatsoever on the Facebook post, hinting at the lack of interest in partaking in such interviews.

While this holds true for journalists, it is also the case for researchers. In my own experience in the field, I was unable to build a feeling of trust with potential informants, as I believed that I was consistently perceived as an outsider. I wondered at the time, "do vandwellers worry that journalists or researchers will portray them as hobos, or drifters, as homeless?" (Field notes, June 16,2021)

Meeting a few vandwelling camp hosts during our time on the road, a few general themes emerged from our short, informal conversations, such as their passing judgement on those who used the pretense of a nomadic life to live a highly mobile life of luxury. As a camp host/workamper guided us to our campsite in Wyoming, we began chatting about our small and battered travel trailer. Comparing Kiwi to the large megabus parked a few meters away from us, they couldn't help but say: "These rich people in their expensive rigs. They call themselves "nomads," and yet the home they drive is larger and more luxurious than many permanent homes in large cities" (Field notes, May 26, 2021). They passed strong judgement (and to some extent, a feeling of disdain on this way of travelling), marking a clear distinction between themself (as a working vandweller) and the people traveling in the large bus. It was clear that not all those who attributed themselves the "vandwelling" label were to be automatically accepted by community members. I took note of this: their comment prompted further short-term transformation, with a particular focus on impression management (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

I doubled down on my efforts to integrate the lifestyle, to understand their struggles, to live like them. Before arriving in the field, I thought that we would be accepted as one of them despite our temporary situation. I thought our story had a good ring to it: we quit our corporate jobs, bought a small travel trailer, and decided to roam the USA for a few months before heading home for the winter. I wondered, "how do full-time vandwellers perceive me? Do they feel like I'm a vacationer, that I'm testing the waters for a short period before committing full time?" (Field notes, July 23, 2021). Two-months into the field, the realization finally dawned on me:

> We were clearly outsiders to the nomad community – from the temporality of our
> trip, to our professional plans when we get back home, to our level of education (I

often felt like I was being perceived as "stuck up" or "full of it" because both JF and I have higher education), the clothes we wore, and to the fact that we consciously strived to share a glorified version of our trip visually (through photos on Instagram)… we were definitely more part of the #vanlife community. And [the vandwellers to whom I spoke] could most likely tell. (Field notes, August 20, 2021)

Regardless of my attempts at immersing myself fully into the vandwelling community, short-term transformation and impression management, the reality was that I was not aligned with their way of thinking and could not fully commit to the lifestyle. We knew that we were not going to adopt this lifestyle in the long term. My background, my professional plans for the future and the brands of clothes I wore during our time on the road drove a wedge between myself and the community I tried to integrate.

I undeniably appeared closer to the #vanlife than I did to full-time vandwelling: the line is fine, but there are clear markers to distinguish them from one other. One clear identifier is the frequent use of visual media (photos and videos) to share an often glorified and aesthetically pleasing version of experiences, through social media channels (i.e., Instagram). In my experience, I consciously used Instagram to share a glorified version of our trip and of our life in the trailer, a practice that aligns with the writings of Gretzel and Hardy (2019: p.3). I purposefully omitted the hardships we faced, and focused on creating a curated story of our experience (Field notes, August 20, 2021). For me, it acted as a photo journal to relive our positive experience and share them with acquaintances. Other markers, such as searching for seasonal jobs, were not possible for us to overcome: knowing that we were on the road for a mere 90 days without a work permit, we dismissed the idea of working in a campground completely. Furthermore, we didn't want to sacrifice the nature of our travels: it was, if you recall, to be the "trip of a lifetime." The association made to the #vanlife was enough to seemingly brand me as an outsider to the community, despite my attempts to mask it. From a research perspective, this made recruitment (both in person and online) more difficult, as each conversation began with a guarded and closed attitude towards me. Indeed, "nomads don't want people curiously peering into their lifestyle. They don't want to glorify it" (Field notes, August 20, 2021). Even if I managed to get their agreement to participate in my research project, "how can I show them that I will depict them accurately and fairly?" (Field notes, July 13, 2021).

4.4.3 Attempting to recruit informants as a #vanlifers

To my greatest relief, I finally met a vandweller who was willing to speak with me, after weeks of lack of opportunities and unsuccessful attempts. I had reached out directly to them following a post I shared in the Facebook group *Vandwellers Facebook: Live in your van* (see Appendix 11). They had been on the road for over four years at the time of our exchanges and were interested in helping me "de-glamorize parts of this lifestyle" (Field notes, July 12, 2021). We exchanged for about a week via Facebook Messenger, and they answered a few of my basic questions: *Why did you choose the lifestyle? What type of rig do you live in? How did you come across the online community? Do you think you'll live this lifestyle forever?* They mentioned being quite solitary in nature, a trait that was common for the vandwellers they knew.

On July 12, 2021, we spoke on the phone for over an hour. They explicitly stated that they were happy to be part of a study that aimed to paint an accurate picture of the vandwelling community. However, when I explained my situation, sharing that I was only living in Kiwi for a season and was working on a research project for my degree, their tone changed: while they still provided interesting insight into their lives, the conversation was no longer revolved around the "we." Rather, it slowly began to shift between the "I" and "you," marking the differences in our lifestyle and my non-belonging to their community. At the end of our conversation, they mentioned that they were interested in a second call, the following week. Shortly after, to my dismay, they sent me a message retracting their participation, stating that they didn't want any spotlight on their own lives, on the choices they made, that they didn't want their story out there in the world (Field notes, July 13, 2021). They accepted to refer me to a few of their friends, but to no avail: the vandwelling friends in question shared their concern for privacy, especially with an outsider like me. In a parting message, the initial participant shared that vandwellers don't necessarily want to share much, due to the increased popularity of the lifestyle. In the wake of *Nomadland* and the increased media attention (be it traditional or social media-driven), they did not want to contribute to creating any kind of draw to the way of living (Field notes, July 13, 2021).

Following this informant's retraction, I was at a loss. Being a researcher and an outsider to the community, it was challenging to develop trust with vandwellers, especially considering that the ones I met were few and far between. My association to the #vanlife aside, I did not have

sufficient time in the field to build in-person relationships of trust with vandwellers: had I immersed myself in the field for six months, or a year, or two, I may have overcome these challenges. A more prolonged field experience leads to more spontaneous and chance encounters and events (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994: p.485), and I've no doubt I would have managed to meet a few key informants, allowing me to answer my original research question. (i.e., understanding the vandwelling lifestyle and consumption practices during the COVID-19 pandemic). The sole informant's retraction from my research project acted as the second pivotal point[9] in my overall endeavor. While I continued to attempt to recruit participants through social media, the emergence of this factor contributed to the inevitable evolution of my research projects.

Upon my return to Canada, I doubled down on my online recruiting attempts, by privately contacting members that frequently published in the vandwelling Facebook group. I expanded my field of participant research by reaching out to members of workamper Facebook groups, namely *RV Hosts & Work Campers of America* and *Work Camping*. I quickly realized that my attempts were in vain: building rapport and a sense of reciprocity is near impossible while "cold messaging" individuals that you've never met (Field notes, July 12, 2021), especially in a guarded community like this one. Even though I managed to communicate via Facebook Messenger with a few potential informants, they unequivocally declined to participate, either explicitly ("*Thanks, but I'm not interested in participating*") or implicitly (by no longer responding to my messages). Nearly a month after my return home, I noted:

> I may have been too optimistic – I imagined us chatting people up and sharing stories. What I didn't know then was that the community as a whole is relatively discreet. They do not want outsiders peering into their lives, out of sheer curiosity. (Field notes, August 20, 2021)

At the start of my research project, I had set out to explore a community living in the margins, composed of people who already did not enjoy outsiders curiously peering into their lives. I entered boldly, taking for granted that I would meet vandwellers along my travels and that they would be willing and open to participate in my research project. However optimistic I was, I had underestimated the effects of increased media attention on the discreet community, in the wake of

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[9]As a reminder, the first pivotal point was our need to abandon our boondocking endeavors in favor of paid campgrounds, such as private RV parks (see section 4.1).

the film *Nomadland*. My perception of myself as a researcher was diminished: I felt deflated and discouraged. Nevertheless, however discouraged I felt, there is a parallel to be made with CCT and applied ethnographers: they too often do not have much time in the field and must juggle considerable constraints and expectations. Thus, my inability to fully integrate the vandwelling community in the wake of considerable media attention could yield insight into further discussions into field preparation and researcher identity.

Though I tried to fully immerse myself into the reality of the objects of my study, I had a few constraints to abide by and a way of living that was my own. Though we boondocked, became nearly energy autonomous and lived some of the realities vandwellers do, I was nevertheless an outsider to the community: from the purpose of my travels to the temporality of it, to the use of photos to share my experience on social media, I felt that I had been branded as a #vanlifer. While similar in nature to their vandwelling counterparts, it set me aside from the people I was interested in interviewing. For all my short-term transformations, my attempts to become an insider to the community and my embracement the shifting nature of researcher's identity (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012: p.278), I was unable to convey a self that put the vandwellers whom I met at eases. It created doubt that I would represent their lifestyle accurately, that I would not depict them as homeless, or drifters, or gypsies. It further underlines the construct of researcher identity in fieldwork: while impossible (and somewhat unethical) to *fully* construct a new researcher identity, how does one go about integrating a guarded community, like that of the vandweller? In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, how does one gain trust, without altering their identity in a misleading way?

In this chapter, I've discussed the four overarching themes that were present during my data collection experience, over the course of my 90-day immersion into the field: the search of the ethnographic field, the human component of ethnographic fieldwork, reaching the vandwelling community in a context of crisis and the vandwelling community's attitude in a post-Hollywoodized reality created conditions that were unfavorable to an ethnographic approach, especially with regards to the long interview. While my initial plan and expectations for my research project were geared towards understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the vandwelling community's lifestyle and consumption practices, the autoethnographic data gathered throughout my experience in the field has value for CCT and applied ethnographers alike, who are planning on immersing themselves into an unknown and uncertain field. Indeed, although the chapter above

highlights some of the hurdles I faced, it underlines the necessity of adaptability and resiliency, as well as a certain degree of planning for the unpredictable aspects of fieldwork. It further touches on the logistical factors affecting fieldwork, the ethics of fieldwork in a pandemic context, the notion of success versus failure in the context of ethnography under the CCT lens, and the researcher's identity while performing fieldwork.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Over the course of my 90-day immersion into the field, I attempted to integrate the guarded and skeptical vandwelling community, while navigating the challenges involved in the actual *living* in the field. My resilience, my problem-solving capabilities, and my relationship were put to the test. I came face to face with the realities of attempting to collect data in the face of a global pandemic. I questioned my identity as a researcher in the field and felt that I was labelled an outsider to the vandwelling community. Upon my return, I felt lost, and believed my research project was somehow in jeopardy. And yet, as ethnography is an emergent process, my fieldwork experience prompted an adjustment of my initial research question: from understanding the reality and consumption practices of vandwellers in the face of COVID-19, it evolved into understanding the realities of ethnographic fieldwork, in a context of uncertainty. While the road I went down was a bumpy one, I believe that the autoethnographic insights discussed in Chapter 4 may help both consumer researchers and applied ethnographers better prepare for their future research endeavors. In a world where uncertainty will gradually become the norm, it is imperative to further grasp the realities of the ethnographic field, for both the success of the research projects as well as the well-being of the researchers themselves.

Achieving immersion into the vandwelling community is no small feat, especially in the wake of *Nomadland*. In addition to the realities of locating this geographically dispersed, hyper-mobile neo-tribe, vandwellers have become increasingly wary of the interest of outsiders, including journalists and researchers. While they easily accept other vandwellers (be it in physical social gatherings or on social media), they are quick to label those who do not belong to their community, making sure to mark the differences during informal conversations. Due in part to their private nature and in part to the fear that it may alter their way of living indefinitely, they are concerned that the spike in curiosity with regards to their lifestyle will bring their marginalized lifestyle into popular media culture, thus making it even more attractive to #vanlifers; as a consequence, this popularization would alter they way of living, and change the nature of their gatherings, like the RTR. Indeed, their minimalistic consumption habits (Harris, 2016; Bruder, 2017; Monroe, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020) and modest lifestyle (CheapRVLiving.com, 2017) clash with that of #vanlifers, who strive to glorify the nomadic lifestyle, with a particular focus on

creating aesthetically pleasing visual content. Moreover, the heightened attraction of their way of living may have long-term effects on their job prospects: as more and more people commit to nomadism (be it true vandwellers or their #vanlifers counterparts), the number of seasonal jobs available might will most likely remain the same. Consequently, once COVID-19 subsidies have dried up, vandwellers may have a more challenging time finding seasonal work, which may in turn put a damper of their mobility. It is thus no wonder that they do not extend a warm welcome to those that do not fully belong to their community.

Notwithstanding their suspicious attitudes, some journalists and researchers do manage to gain the trust of the neo-tribe, due to sheer determination, serendipitous encounters with well-connected vandwellers, and a certain level of commitment to the lifestyle. In this particular context, a successful integration requires the researcher to experience first-hand the concept of "houselessness" and the deterritorialization of the concept of home, which "refers to the unmooring of individual identities from location or territory" (Craig and Douglas, 2006, as cited in Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould, 2020: p.511). To vandwellers, the concept of home is very much attached to their vehicle (Bruder, 2017; Duff and Rankin, 2020; Gretzel and Hardy, 2019; Harris, 2016); consequently, the researcher interested in integrating the community must fulfill the basic vandwelling requirement of living in a home on wheels, be it by purchasing (or borrowing) a travel-trailer, RV, van, or converted school bus. Moreover, as this lifestyle is characterized by self-sufficiency and constant mobility, the vehicle in question must be adequately prepared to withstand the trials of the road: without adequate preparation, the researcher will inevitably spend a considerable portion of time repairing equipment failure and tending to their basic needs. In addition to understanding the concept of home (a key aspect of their identity), researchers must further embrace their minimalistic ethos (Duff and Rankin, 2020) and frugalness. Concretely, this immersion translates into several "rites of passage": researcher's must strive to ensure their energy autonomy; locate and camp in dispersed campgrounds; hunt down sanitary amenities; reduce ones material possessions to the minimum; and experience workamping first hand. In our case, the latter was not possible, due to our time constraints and our travel visa restrictions. Workamping would undoubtedly provide further insight into the community, while creating several opportunities to meet vandwellers in their work environment. Finally, the researcher interested in the community must further strive for an appropriate short-term transformation, with an increased focus on managing their impression (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995): branded clothing, new vehicles,

expensive technology and top-of-the-line equipment should be reduced to a minimum or concealed, so as not to promote the impression of being an outsider.

While the vandwelling context is an intricate and complex one and merits further exploration in itself, this specific context can be seen as the research project's "field of play", allowing to further advance CCT theories. Indeed, "consumer culture theorists do not study consumption contexts; they study *in* consumption contexts to generate new constructs and theoretical insights and to extend existing theoretical formulations" (emphasis added, Arnould and Thompson, 2005: p.869). Thus, the findings discussed in Chapter 4 highlight several theoretical considerations, that may spark reflections in other fields of ethnographic research.

5.1 Ethical tensions in a climate of uncertainty

First, from a theoretical standpoint, there is further discussion to be had around the ethical tensions faced by the researcher during their fieldwork. By definition, ethnography involves the researcher immersing themselves into the field, with the objective of becoming an insider to the community. There is talk in CCT, consumer research and anthropology about impression management and short-term transformation (Gonçalves and Fagundes, 2013; Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Turner, 1967), yet the literature considerably lacks insight on the physical safety of fieldworkers during their immersion (Clark and Grant, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 1992). While some contexts are more dangerous than others (studying librarians vs. studying drug dealers, for example), the fieldworker must sometimes *knowingly* put themselves in potentially dangerous situations at the risk of illness, injury, or even death (although the latter is quite rare) (Williams *et al.*, 1992: p.344). While some authors call for "foresight, planning, skillful maneuver, and a conscious effort at impression management" (Sluka, 1990: p.115), as well as relying on both intuition and common sense (Williams *et al.*, 1992: p.361), the reality is that said immersion may nevertheless have tangible repercussions on the researchers' physical health and safety. The literature further fails to address the ethical tensions between the behaviours the researcher must adopt to fully integrate the community of interest and their personal safety preferences. As the researcher is the main instrument of data collection, I argue that a greater

attention should be given to personal safety preferences during ethnographic fieldwork, as a lack thereof may have negative consequences for the project as a whole.

In the context of my research, I aimed to study the vandwelling community's lifestyle and consumption practices during COVID-19. Consequently, it was inevitable that I would brush up against the reality of a pandemic during my time on the road. Before leaving Canada, I was a sanitary measure-abiding citizen, and took considerably precautions to neither catch nor spread COVID-19. Throughout our preparations, we weighed our options, deciding to cross the border regardless of the sanitary context: we believed that we would manage to navigate the realities we would face. Before crossing the border, I had managed to get my first dose of the vaccine, and planned to receive the second while I was abroad. Despite feeling reassured once I got even just the first dose, I felt nervous getting physically close to people, falling back on the distancing habits we developed since March 2020.

And yet, immersion calls for understanding and, to a certain extent, mimicking the actions of the community of interest. There was an almost palpable ethical tension between the behaviours I *ought* to exhibit as the researcher to gain the status of insider within the community of interest, and the behaviours that were aligned with my preferences and values. For instance, some individuals came up to me in boondocking sites, and went straight for a handshake and hug (Field notes, May 20, 2021): should I have said no, so as to respect my preferences? Should I have said yes, to avoid marking the psychological distance between us and them?

On other occasions, I had to make a conscious decision to miss interview opportunities, because I did not wish to invite a potential informant inside my trailer (due to a swarm of bugs (p. 68) or rain (p. 68-69)), careful as I was of COVID-19. While these episodes may have hindered my data-collection process, as a human being I wanted to remain true to my own set of beliefs and preferences with regards to my personal safety: specifically, I wished to avoid catching or spreading COVID-19. Despite the initial aim of my research project (i.e. studying the lifestyle and consumption practices of vandwellers during the pandemic), this research sacrifice best aligned with my personal beliefs and ensured a larger feeling of well-being.

In these example, we can note an internal ethical dissonance between the researcher's identity and that of the human being performing fieldwork. Considering the role of main instrument of data-collection, it is inevitable that the researcher must pay a certain attention to their

safety and health, considering that an illness or injury may bring the overall research project to an abrupt halt. In our case, had either JF or I contracted the coronavirus, we would have had to self-isolate for weeks, possibly be treated in a healthcare center, and may have been forced to cut our trip (and my fieldwork) short. Thus, while it may cause impediments on the overall data-collection process in the short-term, researcher's safety must remain a top consideration. And, while this notion of researcher safety has been explored in anthropology literature (see Williams *et al.* (1992); Clark and Grant (2015); Morgan and Pink (2018)), there is very little guidance in a context of pandemic, no obvious path forward.

COVID-19 was the factor at play in our research context, but it can be replaced with the consequences of climate change, war, political turmoil, civil unrest, or an overall dangerous research context. Regardless of the specificities of the context itself, the ethical tension between what the researcher *ought* to do to achieve immersion, and the preferences and beliefs of the human being performing the research must be considered before entering the field and during the fieldwork period. This research underlines the importance of the researcher as the main instrument of data-collection, thus prompting consumer researchers at large to ensure that there overall preferences and beliefs are respected, and that they will manage to exit the field without having been harmed or fallen ill.

5.2 Researcher's identity in the field

Next, researcher's identity during fieldwork warrants further discussion, specifically from the perspective of the human aspect of immersion and the short-term transformations required to adequately integrate the community of interest. In consumer research literature, the concept of researcher identity has been somewhat explored by Hamilton *et al.* (2012); yet, Coffee (1999) notes that there is little overall attention paid to the emotional and identarian dimensions of research, affecting the individuals themselves. Drawing on Turner's (1967) work, it can be argued that the new "selves" adopted by researchers in order to become an insider to the community can result in conflicting identities and emotions.

Moreover, few published articles in CCT and consumer research address the identarian transformation undergone by the authors during their fieldwork experience. Indeed, there are several examples of well-regarded publications in which the individual transformations the researchers experienced are ignored: Belk and their team of researchers barely addresses it in the context of the 1986 *Consumer Behaviour Odyssey*; Peñaloza (1994) just scratches its surface as they immerse themself into the realities of Mexican migrants; Schouten and McAlexander (1995) do not bring attention to their short-term transformation process as they integrate the Harley-Davidson community. In contrast to these articles, Hill (1991) is one of the few authors who dares share some of their fieldwork realities, from an identarian and transformation perspective. In the context of their research on homeless women, they blend into the environment of a women-only shelter as a volunteer and strive to manage the impression they projected, in order to gain the women's trust and a status of insider. Throughout the process, they note their transformation from the role of volunteer in the shelter to interviewer. And yet, although one of the few authors who addresses the notion of researcher identity and short-term transformations, Hill (1991) doesn't delve too deeply into the matter, focussing their attention on their findings. Considering the relatively concise format of academic publications, it is not surprising that the focus would not be on the researcher's own identity during fieldwork.

However, this aspect's textual absence does not reflect the true reality of ethnographic fieldwork. I argue that, by paying more attention to researcher identity and the transformations required to integrate the community during field immersion, it lends the researcher credibility: it positions them as a reliable source on the matter, one whom may actually be trusted by the community of interest due to their understanding of what makes them an "insider". This, in turn, may make it easier for them to freely discuss their perspectives and the details of their lives. Moreover, it further contributes to the education of graduates and less-experienced ethnographers, by providing them with additional guidance during their data-collection process.

Over the course of my own research project, I straddled a dual identity (Reed-Danahay, 1997), that of both a researcher and a traveler: I attempted to develop and reinforce both identities individually, as it was not always appropriate that they coexist at all times. Indeed, as Amit (2000) argues, the compartmentalization of the fieldwork experience from their personal lives and identity as an individual (and in my case, as a traveler) is not always as straightforward as it seems. From

a researcher perspective, I attempted to create an impression and identity that was approachable and relatable, while maintaining a certain professional distance. I tried to live like the objects of my study to gain the status of "insider", even though it created some strain, from a logistical and psychological perspective. Although I strived to curate an image that I believed vandwellers would respond positively to, I unfortunately lacked the true commitment to the lifestyle that would have made me an accepted member the community. I was consequently under the impression that I had been labelled a #vanlifer, a temporary traveler seeking to share my experience through social media. For all my short-term transformations, my attempts to become an insider to the community and my embracement of the shifting nature of researcher's identity (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012: p.278), I was unable to convey a self that allowed for relationship building or acceptance. The vandwelling reality highlights a challenge that some researchers will face in other contexts: despite impression management and trying to "blend in", the researcher may continue to be considered as such, a researcher.

In addition, researchers may have to contend with the reality of their demographic and fundamental aspects of their identity, such as their age, gender and ethnicity (Gonçalves and Fagundes, 2013), as these characteristics contribute to the potential informant's impression (and ultimately acceptance) of them. During my research project, such characteristics did influence my immersion and the community's perception of me: specifically, my age (28 years old) and my resulting belonging to the millennial generation facilitated my association to the #vanlife community. Indeed, had I been in my forties, I may have had more leniency in terms of this label, as my age would not necessarily have automatically been associated to the nomadic movement. Moreover, my level of higher education created a wedge between myself and the community of interest, despite my attempts to conceal it, as it became apparent as soon as I disclosed the objective of my research project. My Caucasian ethnicity, for its part, blended into American society, regardless of the states through which we travelled: amidst the current climate of racial unrest in some parts of the USA (triggered by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, 2020) (Wikipedia, 2021e), the color of my skin did not make me stand-out amongst the mostly White vandwellers and RVers that we met along the way. While I do not know for certain if I would have felt more ill at ease had I been Black, Hispanic, First Nations or Asian, my own ethnicity nevertheless did not constitute an element that what discussed or observed by the people with whom we interacted. Finally, my female gender sometimes served as a trust-building tool as it

allowed for other women to feel more comfortable around me. While I was unable to leverage this positive demographic trait often, it serves as an interesting lesson for future research projects.

From the perspective of a traveler, I made efforts to enjoy my experience by undertaking activities that we enjoyed, trying to be a good partner to JF, and identifying the next hike I was itching to do. My travelling-self focused on overall satisfaction with our trip, while paying close attention to the financial expenses we incurred. At the end of this experience, I consider myself transformed on an individual level: my outlook of life and my ability to navigate personal uncertainty has changed for the better, as did my confidence in my own abilities. Although these two identities (researcher and traveler) share many commonalities, there are also some considerable differences, the most important of which is our way of travel. From a researcher's identity, my goal was to boondock as much as we could, and later stay in campgrounds where vandwellers may be working; from a traveler's perspective, my goal was to be comfortable, and enjoy our broader experience. This seemingly trivial distinction was, in fact, an instigator to the dissonance between both identities: it impacted my motivation, my desire to keep pushing on from a research perspective. It forced me to compromise on many occasions. In this context, it is unclear on how to reconcile both these identities in a way that is both conducive to research and authentic to my identity as a traveler.

Next, the immersion into the field that was required to build and maintain the researcher identity entailed psychological effects which influenced the course of my project and data-collection abilities. Indeed, in ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher is the most important instrument of data-collection. Yet, in CCT and consumer research literature, the notion of individual psychological consequences of fieldwork is rarely addressed: even in the case of Hill's (1991) work, the researcher does not address their own psychological transformation, rather focussing on the high-level transformations required to integrate the community. Drawing on Turner's (1967) work on the process of separation, Hamilton *et al.* (2012) explain that this phase results in mixed psychological feelings as the researcher adopts their newfound identity. Despite my resilient, self-sufficient and problem-solving nature, there are moments where I experienced emotional turmoil, temporarily preventing me from continuing my research project adequately and further pushing the notion of short-term transformation and impression management to the back of my mind.

The present research shows that their newfound identity and subsequent psychological state can hinder the overall research project, especially in a context of uncertainty. In light of the findings, consumer researchers must adequately prepare for their immersion, while paying particular attention to their overall mental and physical well-being: by doing so, the transition to the adopted researcher identity may be more successful, meriting a proper immersion into the field of interest.

5.3 The fundamental step of exiting the field

While field immersion rhymes with impression management and a curated research identity, the return home from the field constitutes a key moment in the researcher's overall transformation. Expanding on the notion of researcher identity *during* fieldwork, Turner (1967) postulates that the impact on researcher's identity is also felt upon the researcher's exiting the field. Further corroborating this, Coffey (1999) argues that the overall research process can have a lasting impact on the individual perception of self, beyond the parameters of fieldwork. Upon returning home, some researchers will experience what anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1968; 1970) refers to culture shock upon ones return home (reverse culture shock), a psychological reality that is deemed relatively common amongst researchers returning from the field. It is characterized by an "attitude of being something of an outsider in [ones] own society" (Powdermaker, 1970: p.344). The fundamental step of exiting the ethnographic field being inevitable, it is worth exploring the different factors that impact the researcher *after* they've completed their fieldwork, contributing to this long-term researcher transformation. While the authors mentioned above have somewhat examined the researcher's transformation upon existing the field, they fail to address how this transformation further affects the analysis and writing process once the exit is complete.

In the context of my research project, I felt its effects on my mental well-being and perception of selfhood upon my return to Canada: while the ripples of our travels were slowly beginning to ebb, I began to feel like I didn't belong in the reality that I had embraced, up until the day of our departure. My newfound desires to "go with the flow" and to be in movement were thwarted by a schedule that was forced upon us by our loved ones. We became suddenly

overwhelmed with social interactions and expectations. JF and I suddenly were not alone in our bubble. Taken together, these aspects of reverse culture shock had an impact on my perceived identity. In my case, my identity was suddenly muddled: as a result of my feelings of "outsiderness", I no longer knew where I fit in. I no longer felt like a researcher, nor did I feel like a traveler. I was equally unable to immediately fall back into my pre-field frame of reference. This, in turn, led to a feeling of "turning inwards", and a refusal to discuss the details of our experience with our loved ones, as the identity no longer felt like my own. Four months after our return, I've now fallen back into something akin to my pre-field identity; yet, it is obvious that the field has had a permanent impact on it. All things considered, the experience of fieldwork had a significant transformative power on my perceived identity as a researcher, a traveler and an individual. Yet, it is only upon my return that I could take stock of the changes that have occurred to my identity.

Furthermore, the return had impacts on the analysis of my data and the subsequent writing of my autoethnographic account. Indeed, as researchers, "we relieve our fieldwork experiences many times during data analysis and through our attempts to disseminate our findings" (Hamilton et al., 2012: p.280). In the case of my own experience, we lived moments of psychological distress, fear for our safety and stress on our bodies: reading and analyzing my fieldnotes thus often came with moments of "flashbacks", in which I reexperienced the original emotion, granted to somewhat of a lesser degree. The analysis was occasionally a psychologically heavy process, both for me and for JF (with whom I validated my findings and insights). These feelings sometimes seeped into the writing of my autoethnographic account: my first drafts were quite emotionally charged, and I struggled to distance myself from the data collected. I made conscious efforts to not succumb to the "diary disease" (Geertz, 1988: p.89), and strived to find the balance between how much to include, and what to set aside (Holman Jones, 2005). Thus, exiting the field cannot be considered void of challenges; rather, it constitutes an important part of the overall research project as I involves both the analysis of the data and the writing of the paper. It is inevitable that the experiences encountered in the field and the subsequent researcher transformation play a key role in the overall execution of the final research product.

While the fundamental step of exiting the field is somewhat addressed in CCT and consumer research literature, it may warrant further examination. Indeed, as the return coincides with data analysis and ultimately the writing of the research paper, the transformation experienced

by the researcher in the field may have a resulting effect on the final product. The current paper showcases the need for a better understanding of said influences and consequences; consumer researchers must bear in mind the transformative effect of the field on their identities, and on their research process as a whole.

5.4 Success and failure in ethnographic fieldwork

Finally, the findings discussed in Chapter 4 bring to light the absence of criteria to evaluate the success (or failure) of ethnographic fieldwork in CCT and consumer research literature. Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.336) believe that this is due in part to the researcher's desire to "keep face", and in part due to the belief that failure and mishaps are not conducive to theory-building conclusions. I argue that the latter is not necessarily true.

In the context of my fieldwork experience, I had set key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate the overall success of my fieldwork experience (live in a trailer for 90 days, meet 3-5 vandwellers, and interview them between 4-6 times each) and believed they would be the defining factors in my success. My business school background dictated that these measurable, goal-oriented outcomes of my research project constituted the main factor in determining if it had been a successful attempt or not; yet, from an anthropological perspective, it is the iterative process of discovery in itself that generates the most interest for researchers. As ethnography is an emergent research tradition (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001), it is expected that the research design will adapt to the changing field conditions and insights, which in turn will force the researcher to requestion their original research plan. While business and anthropology are often considered distinct from one another, significant work has been done by John F. Sherry Jr. and other authors to "incorporate (or to help reinstate) a cultural, anthropological frame into consumer and marketing research" (Sunderland and Denny, 2007: p.29-30), closing the gap between anthropology and the business world. It is worth noting, however, that business and anthropology often do not have the same criteria to evaluate success in the field, causing some discrepancies when it comes to its final evaluation. Thus, in the context of my own research project, it is necessary to forgo a purely managerial background in favor of a more anthropological perspective: while I may not have succeeded in meeting my business school KPIs, I nevertheless managed to

unearth findings of interest. Indeed, although I did not achieve my initial research objective (i.e. studying the vandwelling community's lifestyle and consumption practices during COVID-19), I don't believe that I failed my fieldwork. The current paper brings to light a relevant topic, particularly in the current climate of uncertainty: that of understanding the realities of ethnographic fieldwork from a CCT perspective.

While I now understand the iterative and evolving process of fieldwork, it was not always the case during the immersion process: there are times where I truly believed that my research project was in jeopardy, as I had not met any potential informants. Throughout my attempts to integrate the vandwelling community, I was faced with what Gill and Temple (2014) qualify as intrapersonal and interpersonal factors: first, from an intrapersonal perspective, I underestimated the emotional toll and personal sacrifices my immersion would require, focussing rather on the theoretical aspects of preparation. According to the authors, this perhaps increased the odds of "dealing with deception, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed" (Gill and Temple, 2014), which most likely affected my perception of the success of my endeavour. Moreover, I experienced Gill and Temple's (2014) interpersonal factor of failure, which pertains to the accessing the groups of interest, while assessing the "goodness of fit" and developing relationships with its members. In my experience, I struggled to negotiate the intricacies of the vandwelling identity, from searching for the field, locating its members and attempting to build rapport with potential informants. This further entailed my perception that the community had labelled me as a #vanlifer, an "other" not accepted by the neo-tribe. All things considered, these hurdles and "factors of failure" constitute important insights in the context of my *current* research project, that of understanding the realities of the ethnographic field during times of uncertainty. Consequently, although the existing literature briefly touches on what constitutes a failed fieldwork experience, it cannot be assumed that this constitutes the full truth. The researcher's resiliency, intellect, agility and hope in the face of pivotal moments are key components in defining the success or failure of a field endeavor. Therefore, should a researcher choose to pivot away from their initial objective in the face of hardship, it can hardly be considered a failed attempt. Indeed, if the original insights allow to further explore a different perspective (and thus building on theory-advancing conclusions), these realignments are of positive nature.

For less experienced or aspiring researchers, the mishaps and failed attempts experienced during fieldwork can be understood "as a means of contributing to and encouraging a holistic development of ethnographic research practice and reporting" (Gill and Temple, 2014). Citing Snowden (2003: p.1) and Weick and Sutcliffe (2001), Jemielniak and Kostera (2010: p.335) further argue "that stories of failures and near-failures are more important for learning than success stories." Thus, why is failure so noticeably absent in academic literature? There is a need for more researcher transparency in this context, as these field "blunders" may help shed the stigma of less-than-perfect field experiences, while providing additional colour to their research findings. On the whole, CCT and consumer research literature would benefit from such nuances, as it lends further credibility to the researcher's findings, and provides valuable guidance for future immersions. Consequently, there is a call to re-assess the criteria which characterizes the concept of success versus failure in the field: although stories of failure may not be pleasant and easy for the researchers that experience them, they are nonetheless important in the overall advances of social sciences. To paraphrase Thomas A. Edison, these failures may not be failures at all, but rather successful attempts at identifying research tactics and immersions that do not work. This research shows that these so-called failed attempts may constitute the foundation of theory-advancing conclusions; thus, there is a call for additional transparency on the part of consumer researcher, so as to underline the less-than-perfect aspects of their research projects.

5.5 Research implications and limitations

The last 10 years have seen few articles published in CCT-centric or marketing journals that use the term "ethnographic fieldwork." As a methodology, the literature depicts it as being understood, as a smooth process that ethnographers can apply at will. Yet, the literature does not take into account the reality, the *how*, of said ethnographic fieldwork, especially in a context of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter 4, the factors affecting the data-process collecting were explored. Namely, the search of the ethnographic field, the human component of ethnographic fieldwork, reaching the vandwelling community in a context of crisis and the researcher's identity in a post-Hollywoodized reality. Moreover, in addition to the *how* of ethnographic fieldwork, rare are the authors (especially in CCT and consumer research) who

explore the psychological and ethical aspects of fieldwork from the perspective of the researcher. Even fewer address the fundamental step of exiting the field, and the ensuing transformation the researcher may experience. And even less address the absence of criteria to evaluate the success (or failure) of the field experience. While these may be noticeably lacking in the literature due to the relatively short format of the academic journal, or whether it may be attributed to researchers' desire to "keep face" (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010: p.336), I argue that these factors are essential in further driving theory-building conclusions in CCT and consumer research, specifically in a context of uncertainty. With the objective of challenging the taken-for granted concepts and techniques of ethnographic fieldwork, I believe that the more that is understood and shared about these facets of research, the higher the chances of researchers experiencing fewer bumps in the road during their data-collection.

As with all scientific research, there are certain research limitations that are worth addressing, to ensure an adequate portrayal of the data collected and to lend credibility to the research project as a whole. In the next section, said limitations shall be addressed, followed by the implications of the findings for CCT and consumer research.

5.5.1 Research limitations

Although the current research project highlights the reality of the ethnographic field in times of uncertainty and provides theoretical reflections for the future of the methodology from a CCT perspective, it is not without limitations.

First, while autoethnography and the role of reflexive ethnography can create a more nuanced narrative within CCT and consumer research projects, it is sometimes openly criticized as lacking objectivity. In this specific context, I was my own research subject: despite my attempts to distance myself from my data, it is inevitable that the emotional nature of some of the described events contain a significant subjective component. During the data collection period, I was faced moments of psychological distress, which led to my research project being relegated to the back of my mind: in fact, there are periods of several weeks that I don't have fieldnotes to account for. The effects of psychological strain were further felt upon my return, during the data analysis and ensuing writing phases of my research project. Indeed, the "flashbacks" experienced during data

analysis somewhat hindered my writing process. Truthfully, there are episodes that were omitted from this research paper, due to their triggering and negative psychological effects on me during recall: thus, while I believe that I've put forward the most important elements of data to accurately describe the reality of the ethnographic field in times of uncertainty, it is possible that some relevant examples were missed. I believe that distance from my data could have lessened its impact on my well-being: had I waited a few months before delving into the thick of it, I believe the result may have been somewhat more diffuse.

Moreover, the duration of my field immersion constitutes another limitation. Ethnography, in the traditional sense, typically calls for longer-term immersion into the field of interest, to allow for sufficient integration into the community and a higher chance of fruitful, spontaneous encounters or events. In the context of my research project, I was bound by certain obligations which did not allow me to extend my fieldwork experience past the 90-day marker. Had I been immersed in the field for longer (say, 6 months or a year), I would most certainly have had a higher chance of answering my initial research question.

Finally, as my travels included both research and personal interests, I was unable to have a singular focus on my research project. In that sense, it is very likely that the data contains some form of bias. Thus, it would be interesting to further investigate the data validity of my claims, by an impartial party's experience and immersion into a different (yet comparable) context.

5.5.2 Implications for CCT and consumer research

Together, the findings put forward in Chapter 4 are relevant to CCT researcher, while also extending outside the realm of the social sciences. Indeed, the broader audience of applied ethnographers, marketing managers interested in ethnography and anthropology (as those describes by Sunderland and Denny, 2007), and professionals affiliated with organizations like EPIC could benefit from the findings, as it may better prepare them for their immersion into the field, especially in a context of uncertainty (like the global pandemic we are currently still experiencing). Indeed, the ability to adapt to changing and ambiguous environment will increasingly become to norm: COVID-19 aside, environmental factors, climate change, civil

unrest and political turmoil will most likely become more apparent as time passes. Thus, by taking into account these factors, researchers and practitioners will inevitably avoid certain pitfalls during the course of their ethnographic fieldwork.

There are many opportunities for future research, stemming from the research context, findings and theoretical contributions listed above. First, it goes without saying that the vandwelling community is an interesting one, and it would be relevant to further investigate their consumption practices, especially in light of COVID-19. Indeed, such research could yield insight into the lifestyle and consumption practices of geographically dispersed and marginalized communities, as well as their perception of the external "Other"

From an ethnographic fieldwork perspective, additional exploration of the concept of researcher identity (during and post-field) could produce conclusions that would help social scientists and practitioners facilitate community integration, while increasing our understanding of the psychological factors that come into play during data-collection. In a context in which the community members are weary of public attention and curious outsiders, a deeper understanding of researcher identity could certainly be beneficial.

Finally, there is a need for research that better defines the criteria for success or failure in CCT-centric ethnographic fieldwork. As the business world and anthropology are brought closer together (Sunderland and Denny, 2007), I believe there will be further collaboration in the future between anthropologists, ethnographers and business managers: a better defined set of criteria to evaluate performance and success would be useful to increase collaboration between these groups.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The world is changing, that much is for certain. The past 30 years have seen remarkable advances to our way of living and consuming, and the next 30 will surely be just as significant. In a world becoming increasingly more uncertain – be it due to disease, climate change, civil unrest, political turmoil or social awakening – it is important for CCT and consumer researchers to adapt to the changing reality of fieldwork, so as to better prepare for their own immersion into their fields of interest.

This research paper challenges the "taken-for-granted" approach to ethnography, by shedding light on the reality of CCT-oriented ethnographic fieldwork, specifically in a context of uncertainty. The reflexive narrative produced aims to share a transparent account of the realities of fieldwork, and the challenges the researcher must prepare for. Through a 90-day autoethnographic immersion into the American vandwelling community, some aspects of ethnographic fieldwork are uncovered, many of which that are frequently omitted from academic journals. These factors include the search of the field, the human component of fieldwork (including the researcher's physical and psychological well-being), reaching the community members in a context of crisis and the vandwelling community's attitude in a post-Hollywoodized reality, such as in the case of the vandwelling community. Moreover, these context-specific findings further contribute to academic literature by underlining more generalizable theory-building ideas: these relate to the logistical factors affecting fieldwork, the ethics of fieldwork in a pandemic context, the notion of success versus failure in the context of ethnography under the CCT lens, and the researcher's identity throughout the data-collection process.

Finally, this dissertation underlines the fact that the road to answering its research question was (sometimes quite literally) filled with potholes, that the overall data-collection process was not without a hitch; yet, it is through authentic accounts that we can unearth findings and theoretical contributions that are relevant to scholars and practitioners alike. It is by shedding light on the *how* of ethnographic fieldwork that we can hope to provide timely guidance to those wishing to immerse themselves into a field characterized by uncertainty. And, in times like these, uncertain research contexts may very well become the norm.

Afterword

My field notes are now safely stored in my desk's bottom drawer. My hiking boots are packed away for the winter. Our photos were printed, and then framed. My computer background is a photo of the desert. Kiwi is winterized, and is parked behind the garage at JF's grandparents'.

90 days and 25,000km later, what a ride that was. Four months after our return, there are moments when we miss the road, the lack of responsibilities, the ability to just *go with the flow*. On the road, I tested the limits of my resilience, my problem-solving capabilities and my adaptability. As a researcher, I learnt the value of taking a step back to gain a bit of perspective and to adjust to an ever-changing field. I learnt that uncertainty is the only constant: as researchers and as people, it is up to us to make due with the situation and adapt as best we can. I know the experience will have a lasting impact on who I am as an individual: the transformative effect of ethnographic fieldwork on my dual identity of researcher and traveler is manifesting itself in a very real way. Indeed, those close to me have noticed that I am not the same person I was when I left for the field. From a research perspective, I've had to shift away from my business school background to embrace the anthropological and ethnographic process, shying away from the KPIs that I was taught were the very essence of evaluating success. My research project taught me to question myself frequently and to implement a more reflexive approach to research, even if that meant drifting towards a new course of action.

As I write these final lines of my dissertation, I can't help but wonder: what now? We toyed with the idea of keeping Kiwi, our home for a season. We talked about maybe heading out with it next summer, go camping again. Maybe replace the awning that was torn off by the wind in Utah. Make some more improvements inside, repair the fridge, increase the fresh water reservoir capacity.

And then we laughed and laughed and laughed, and said "never in a million years. Put it on Kijiji". Maybe I'll add *"Quirky, but sweet"*[10] to the description.

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[10] See Preface

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Appendix
Appendix 1: Kiwi, our 17ft travel trailer

Image 1 (above): JF and I parked in the Utah desert, with our trailer

Image 2 (above): inside view of our trailer (clean and unlived in)

Image 2 (above): inside view of our trailer (clean and unlived in)

Image 4 (above): inside view of trailer (during our travels, lived in)

Appendix 2: Itinerary map

The below map represents a map of our approximate itinerary. It depicts the broad strokes of our trip, without going into the details of each individual day trip.
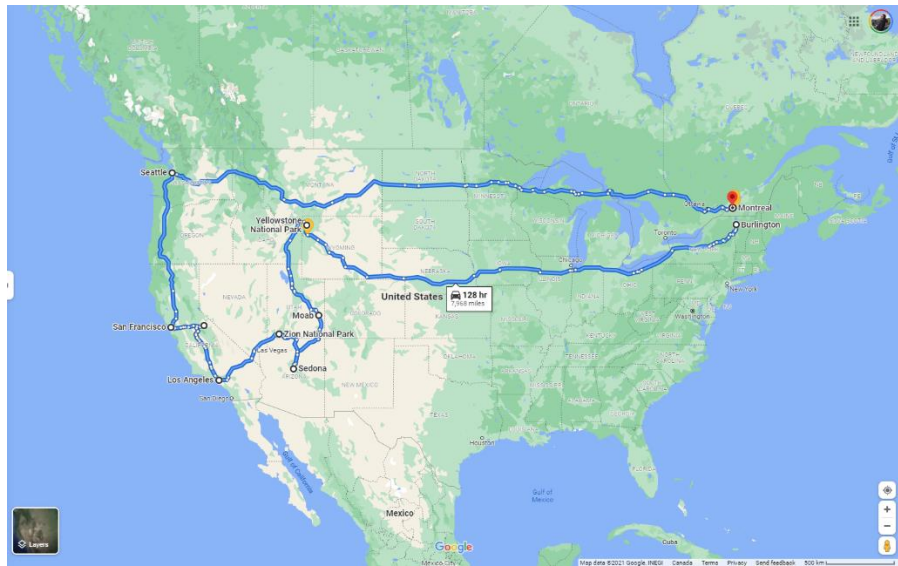
Appendix 3: Mobile applications used to navigate to boondocking sites

An overview of the mobile applications used
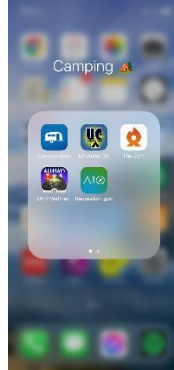
Campendium
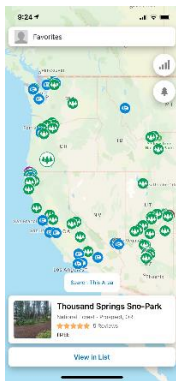
The Dyrt
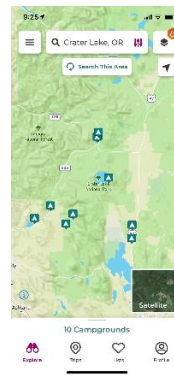
Ultimate CG
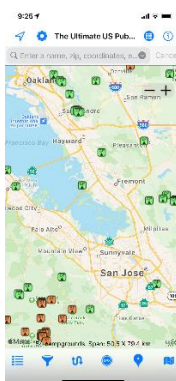
AllStays

Appendix 4: April 16, 2021, provincial border closure announcement

The image below is a screenshot of the LaPresse + article shared on April 16, 2021, at 4:32 PM EST.

Appendix 5: Flying over the US border

Appendix 6: List of equipment failures
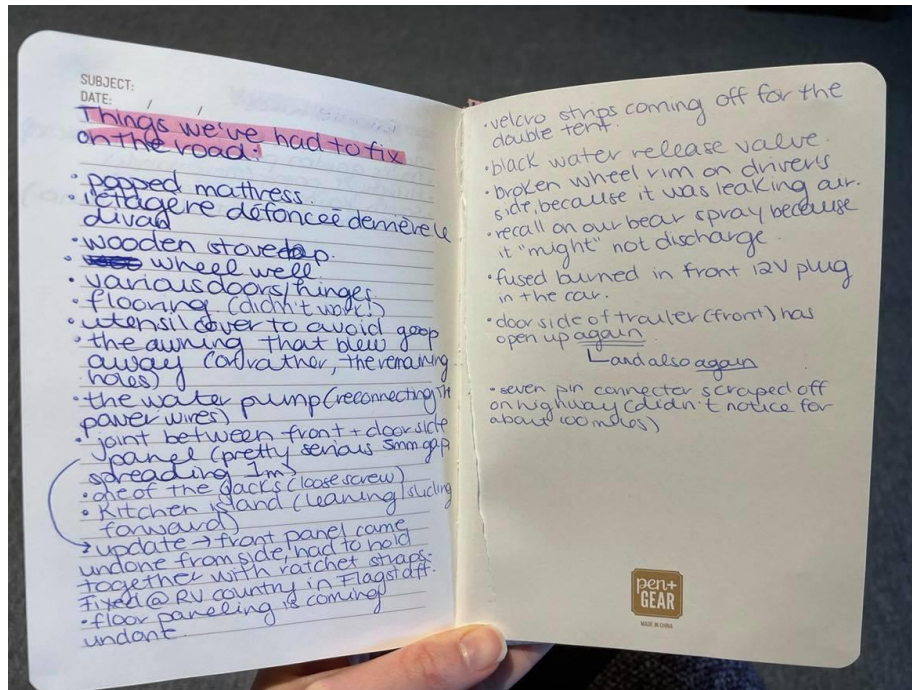
Transcription of the list above:

Things we've had to fix on the road:
1. Popped mattress **(x4)**
2. The cabinet that gave out behind the couch
3. Wooden stovetop
4. Wheel well
5. Various doors and hinges
6. Floor paneling
7. Utensil cover to avoid goop
8. The awning that blew away
9. The water pump
10. Joint between front and door side panel **(x2)**
11. One of the jacks
12. Kitchen island that started leaning forward
13. Velcro strips coming off the double tent
14. Black water release valve
15. Broken wheel rim on driver's side
16. Recall on our bear spray
17. Fused burned in front 12 V plug in the car
18. Seven pin connecter scraped off on highway
19. Broken fridge (not included in above, hand-written list)

Appendix 7: Trailer failure example

Appendix 8: Examples of extreme temperatures experienced

Image 1: Temperature reading at the visitor center at Death Valley National Park, taken at 10 a.m. local time.

Image 2: Temperature reading on our car's dashboard, in Fresno, California.

Appendix 9: Map of western USA fires, July 28, 2021

Source: Crump (2021)
"U.S. wildfires map, update as California, Oregon and Washington blazes burn nearly 1.5M acres"

Appendix 10: Facebook post from journalist

Appendix 11: Recruiting message shared Facebook group

Facebook Group: *VanDwellers Facebook: Live in your van*
Publication date: July 8, 2021

Rachel Sicotte
July 8 ·

Hello 'dwellers !

I've been in this group for a few months now, and following you has inspired me to take the plunge! At the beginning of May, I quit my corporate job in Montreal and have been living full-time in my 2001 Jayco Kiwi travel trailer (also sometimes known as "the tin can"). My boyfriend and I have been on the road for just over 2 months, and we are loving it. Of course, we've made every rookie mistake in the book - so many things have broken (the most infamous one being our black tank pipe that cracked during a bumpy ride to a boondocking site), our awning blew off in Utah, all of our food has gone bad multiple times during the west coast heat wave, and we've had major spillage while dumping our tanks. You live and you learn, I tell ya'.

During my time on the road (who knows until when), I've also decided to take on different kind of project... As part of my graduate degree, I'm working on a research project on the vandwelling community - and more specifically, on workcampers. I'm looking to better understand the impacts of covid on work camping and the vandwelling lifestyle in general. I've struggled over the past few months to just adapt to this fab lifestyle, so I can only imagine how challenging 2020 must have been.

I'm looking for a few participants to interview over the course of the next few months (and to maybe meet up with if our paths cross!). There is no large time commitment or work to be done... simple a chat once and a while (phone, email, in person...), where I ask you a few questions about you and your life experiences (completely anonymously, of course!). It's informal, it should be fun, and I will definitely provide drinks if I can!!

Any of you want to help a girl out?

If this interests you, I would be ETERNALLY grateful if you could send me a private message so we can connect 😊

Looking forward to meeting some of you! If not for this project, then maybe on the road! 😊
Cheers,
Rachel

13   4 Comments