A House is Not (Necessarily) a Home: Nomads, American Truck Drivers, and the Creation and Conception of Home

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A HOUSE IS NOT (NECESSARILY) A HOME: NOMADS, AMERICAN TRUCK DRIVERS, AND THE CREATION AND CONCEPTION OF HOME

by

BROOKE MARSHALL

Under the direction of Dr. Emanuela Guano

ABSTRACT

What is home? Is it simply a place, or is it something more than that? What is the nature of home for truck drivers? Where does it occur, and how do they create and conceptualize it? I examine the literature on home, concluding that home is not a place but rather a relationship that occurs between an individual and a place. I then draw upon autoethnographic research to communicate how truck drivers conceptualize and create home.

INDEX WORDS: Trucks, Truck drivers, Trucking, Truckers, Over-the-road drivers, Transportation, Nomadism, Home
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BROOKE MARSHALL

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Dedication

For Matt.
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1. Introduction

I-85 southbound runs 669 miles from Petersburg, Va. to Montgomery, Ala. It’s a typical U.S. freeway, a tiny slice of the 47,182 miles of road that make up the Interstate Highway System (U.S. Department of Transportation 2010). But there’s one stretch of I-85 linking Durham, N.C. and Atlanta that turns into something special when I’m the one driving on it. See, my mom lives in Raleigh, and when I still had a car — my beloved black, ’99 Honda Civic, which I affectionately named “Civvy” — I used to drive up to see her. Driving that southbound stretch back toward Atlanta was always a pleasant experience. I’d feel recharged, full and well rested the way you only can after a weekend of home-cooked meals, sleeping in, and relaxing with family. At the same time, I’d be eager to get back to the home I’d made for myself in Atlanta: the soothing routine of work, the energy and excitement of going out with friends, the comfort of my own bed.

But the last time I did that drive, it was a different experience altogether. On August 23, 2012, I found myself traversing that same stretch of road in an 18-wheeler. I was coming from Virginia, and Pennsylvania before that, and Indiana before that. Instead of anticipation for Atlanta, I felt dread. It seemed too small, too confining: a cell, not a home. Instead of satisfaction, I felt panicky and frantic, desperately trying to soak up every last bit of the trucking experience while I still had a chance. The truck, the road, and the lifestyle had become my home, you see, and I was on the way back to the company terminal to just give it all away.

When I crossed the state line in Georgia that day, I stopped singing along with my music. When I saw the hazy Atlanta skyline just off in the distance, I cried in spite of myself. And when I sat in my truck for the last time, having emptied my belongings from it and dropped the keys off with the mechanics, with nothing left to do but wait for my ride to come pick me up, I hugged
the steering wheel and, bitterly aware of the melodrama but without a trace of irony, told the truck aloud that I would miss her.

Same person, same road, different experiences, and vastly different definitions of “home.” Back in the Civvy days, if you’d asked me where home was, the question would call up images of my apartment and perhaps the city of Atlanta as a whole. But driving a truck taught me that what one calls “home” is actually much more nuanced than just the place one lives. This could strike some as odd, since some people might not think of truck drivers as even having “homes” at all, or that the relationship they have with it is strained by distance. Easily half the people I’ve told about my research have responded by saying something along the lines of, “Oh, right, because truck drivers don’t really have homes.” It’s not hard to see why they might believe this. After all, what most people in the U.S. would identify as “home” is a place over-the-road truck drivers only visit briefly and occasionally. Truck drivers travel the country for days and often weeks at a time, carrying out their lives in the truck and on the road (Belman et al. 2005: 76; Apostolopoulos et al. 2010: 287). They perform daily rituals normally viewed as private — showering, eating, brushing their teeth, using the restroom — in public spaces such as truck stops and rest areas. Their social networks are wide and diffuse, maintained through phone calls, text messages, social media, video chat, emails, and post cards. The rootlessness of the lifestyle can be stressful, and statistically, truck drivers are at a higher risk of developing depression, becoming estranged from friends and family, and even committing suicide (Apostolopoulos et al. 2010: 288).

It wasn’t always like this. From the 1910s through the 1960s, truck drivers could make a comfortable living while still returning “home” fairly often. However, rising fuel costs in the 1970s spurred a series of independent truck driver strikes that culminated with the passage of the
Motor Carrier Act of 1980, a federal law that financially deregulated the trucking industry. The legislation was initially hailed as a victory by drivers and trucking firms, who felt it would lead to higher pay. However, it ended up having the opposite effect. Intense competition ravaged the industry. Wages were slashed, and drivers found themselves forced to choose between working longer and longer hours or simply not making a profit. Big rigs were essentially transformed into sweatshops on wheels (Hamilton 2008: 188, 230).

In response to concerns about the public safety hazards posed by overworked truck drivers, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration created what are known as Hours of Service (HOS) regulations. These dictate that drivers may work a maximum of 14 hours daily, no more than 11 of which may be spent driving. Drivers must park the truck and rest for 10 consecutive hours every day. If a driver works 70 hours within a seven-day period, he or she must park the truck for 34 consecutive hours in what is known as a reset period (Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration 2007). Moreover, drivers are paid per mile rather than an hourly wage or a fixed salary. The exact amount depends on the driver, but generally rookies make between 28 and 32 cents per mile (cpm), whereas seasoned drivers may make around 45 cpm. Thus, drivers vie for loads that take them long distances. If they must do a short trip, it’s best if it needs to be delivered soon. A 2,000-mile trip to be completed in four days would be considered a “good load.” A 300-mile load to be completed in four days, on the other hand, would be terrible. It is a complicated system to navigate, made more so by the scheduling decisions of shippers and receivers. Dispatchers and load managers, who coordinate loads among a team of drivers they manage, must take all this information into account when scheduling who goes where and when. Although they do their best to route drivers back home in a timely fashion, it isn’t always possible.
And so truck drivers spend most of their time living out of their trucks, a space that is both workplace and home. A set of thick vinyl curtains separates the cab from the sleeper berth, but the boundary between drivers’ work and home spaces is a bit blurrier. Although the act of driving can only occur in the cab, this space also serves as a place to relax after a day of work. Conversely, when a driver is waiting for his trailer to be loaded or unloaded at a warehouse, he may take the opportunity to relax in the sleeper berth, watch some television, read a book, or even take a nap. Although a class of drivers known as owner-operators purchase their own trucks, they constitute a shrinking percentage of the trucking population. A new truck is an enormous investment — easily six figures, and that’s not factoring in fuel, insurance, and repairs. Owner-ops may find loads through a freight broker, or they may drive exclusively for one company. The advantage of being an owner-op is that they are paid more — more than a dollar per mile — but if they cannot find enough profitable loads, they may fall behind on their payments and get their truck repossessed. A more financially sensible option that the majority of drivers choose is to be a company driver. These drivers are assigned a truck by their company, and they have little say in what they get. Although they are expected to take care of it and may personalize the interior and exterior in a show of self-expression, at the end of the day, they do not own it (Ouellet 1994: 169-170).

When work and home lives are highly integrated in this way, it can be difficult to draw a distinct boundary between the two, and, by extension, to form a sense of self-identity (Ashforth et al. 2000: 481). Work, after all, is a place where one’s performance is supervised and where there are expectations one has to meet; it is important for the development of self-identity to offset that pressure-filled situation with free time. In situations such as trucking, where the employee works remotely, the employer may keep tabs on him through indirect supervision. This
can make the worker paranoid, compelling him to work harder to prove he isn't neglecting his responsibilities, and taking away from valuable private time (Sennett 1998: 57).

Do these challenges mean that truck drivers don’t have a home? Absolutely not. Truck drivers experience “home” in the same way as anyone else — it just looks a little different, is all. Of course, this raises a number of questions. What is home? What are the features that make it recognizable? Is it even a place at all? Could home be better described as a *relationship* with a place or even multiple places? How do people form this relationship, particularly in a nomadic context? Finally, how do truck drivers, modern-day American nomads that they are, negotiate a sense of home in a country that values stability and conceives of home as a stationary place?

In order to address these questions, I first outline the literature on home as perceived in the United States, and then as experienced by itinerant populations. In the following chapter, I detail my research methods and justify the use of autoethnography in the third chapter, which examines the nature of home for truck drivers. I return to these questions in the closing chapter, where I conclude that for truck drivers, “home” is a complex relationship not with a single place, but across, among, and between a variety of places.
2. What Is Home, and What Does It Mean?

In this chapter, I make the argument that “home” is the relationship one shares with a place rather than the place itself. I first examine the factors that constitute this relationship in the United States. I then explore the relationship as experienced by mobile populations, specifically migrant workers, retirees who live in recreational vehicles (RVs), and people who travel for work. In order to present a complete picture of “home,” I draw upon a wide array of disciplines, including anthropology, history, architecture, philosophy, literature, and pop culture.

Definitions of Home

The term “home” is generally used in the United States as shorthand for a family dwelling (Lawrence 1995: 57). However, exploring the concept in a bit more detail reveals that popular and analytical definitions of “home” identify it as an affective core imbued with elements of control, ownership, and self-expression. It is associated with family as well as with security, privacy, and refuge. It contributes to a sense of rootedness and belonging. Finally, a home serves as both a literal and physical boundary between the individual or family who lives there and the surrounding sociocultural environment (Rapoport 1992: 27-28, 32-33).

These emotional connections are not exclusive to a family dwelling. Individuals as well as families can feel a connection to a place, and that place need not be a house. It could be a city, state, country, or even a landscape (Rapoport 1992: 30). A person who does not have a permanent address is not necessarily homeless; conversely, nursing home residents, hostages, and prisoners reside in a dwelling that they may not consider “home.” Residents of the U.S. rarely live in the same house all their lives; indeed, it is common to move multiple times over the course of a lifetime. Social networks centralized in a single location are also rare, and with the proliferation of the Internet, it is easier than ever to maintain social relationships across long
distances. With all this in mind, it becomes clear that “home” is a relative concept not necessarily
tied to a single permanent space (Lawrence 1995: 58, 60-61).

A cross-cultural perspective reveals an even deeper level of nuance to the concept of
“home.” In his work with nomadic Aboriginal populations of Australia, the existential
anthropologist Michael Jackson (1995: 4) explored the ways in which people create a sense of
belonging and “home” without setting down physical roots. Not everyone likes to be rooted, after
all, particularly when home feels suffocating rather than secure. For some, comfort and stability
are housed within four walls and a roof; for others, these sensations can only be found in the
wandering life (Jackson 1995: 203).

Jackson (1995: 110-111) coined the term “being-at-home-in-the-world” to describe the
relationship an individual shares with home. The term is more apt than the phrase “having a
home,” which implies a sense of ownership that may not apply in a cross-cultural context. Being-
at-home-in-the-world is akin to being in love — which is precisely how the writer Antoine de
Saint-Exupéry described his feelings toward the desert, and how filmmaker Ingmar Bergman
described the way he felt about the island of Faro — in that it allows a person to feel free to truly
be him- or herself (Jackson 1995: 47, 50). The individual and the surrounding environment exist
in reciprocal harmony. A balance is struck between the power of the world to shape the
individual and the power of the individual to shape the world in turn (Jackson 1995: 110-111,
123). When someone feels at-home-in-the-world, they feel a sense of control and connectedness
— that they matter, in other words, and that their actions matter (Jackson 1995: 154).

Jackson’s (1995: 123) body of work is rooted in existential philosophy, and informed by
a central question: "How do people transform givenness into choice so that the world into which
they are thrown becomes a world they can call their own?" Being-at-home-in-the-world is one
such way that people address this existential dilemma. The relationship occurs when one *chooses* to accept the world he is given and, by imbuing it with symbolic significance, makes it his own. The act of giving significance can take the form of physically shaping the world, or by assigning significance to it as it exists — by cutting down a tree and building a log cabin, or by sitting beneath its branches and making the decision, conscious or otherwise, that this in some way is “your” tree (Jackson 1995: 149, 155).

Thus, it can be concluded that home is ultimately neither a static place nor a static concept. Home is instead a relationship with a place. Having a sense of home ties someone to a specific social, spatial, and temporal point of reference, which instills them with a sense of comfort and balance (Terkenli 1995: 325-326, 329-330). This emotive relationship can be experienced in a number of different locations and different ways. In the following subsections, I shall more closely examine how people can form a relationship with place through the following methods: social networks, territoriality, and acceptance.

*Home and Social Relationships*

"Home, let me go home,  
home is wherever I'm with you."
— Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros

“Well I don’t need anybody 
because I learned, I learned to be alone.  
I said anywhere, anywhere, anywhere I lay my head  
I’m gonna call my home.”
— Tom Waits

Meaningful social relationships have the power to transform an anonymous place into a home. This process starts at birth. The first environment a newborn infant explores is the body of her parents. Thus, her first relationships with place are inextricably tied up in the security and sense of belonging that come from a loving embrace, the ache of longing when that body is not
nearby, and the joy of reunion (Jackson 1995: 121). As we grow older, we learn how to develop other kinds of relationships — the unique love we may share with siblings, sons and daughters, extended family, pets, friends, neighbors, teachers, mentors, and so on — and in turn learn that there are other ways to love places. Of course, love is a deeply individual emotion that can be difficult to define. For the purpose of this piece, it can be defined as a shared connection, an intimate relationship between the self and other, one that creates a sense of understanding so profound that the line between those two seemingly bounded entities blurs or disappears entirely (Jackson 1995: 122). In a sense, a person and a home can be one and the same — or at the very least, home is profoundly tied up an individual’s identity. For instance, residents of the U.S. may identify themselves as “Americans,” in a sense equating themselves with a place. In the travelogue The Songlines, Bruce Chatwin (1987: 179) writes that the Sufi manual Kashf-al-Mahjub states that when a dervish has nearly completed his pilgrimage, he ceases to be the wayfarer and transforms into the Way. There is an analogue to this idea among Australian Aborigines, who believe that by walking the paths and singing the songs of their ancestors, individuals eventually become the path, the song, and the ancestor.

The social aspects of home are not limited solely to the realm of philosophy. Home can also be construed as a group of people who give one’s life meaning, such as a family or friends (Jackson 1995: 66). The setting in which these meaningful social interactions take place can, through a sort of social osmosis, become the physical embodiment of these emotional patterns and personal habits (Terkenli 1995: 332). Cheers is a good example. The popular 1980s sitcom is about a neighborhood bar, Cheers, and the relationships shared among its patrons and staff. To an outsider, it’s just another watering hole, and from a strictly objective perspective, it’s a building, nothing more. But for the regulars, the space is steeped in memory. It’s a place where
they’ve established a routine, where they can expect to see friends, where their actions matter, and, as the theme song so famously goes, “where everybody knows your name” (Portnoy and Angelo 1982).

The social relationships embodied by home also play a role in creating larger social distinctions. Juhani Pallasmaa (1995: 137-138) draws upon novels, poetry, film, critical commentary, and the field of contemporary environmental design to argue that home structures social life by forming a physical boundary between an individual’s public and private personalities. Home is a place where secrets can be safely kept, and where an individual may feel comfortable doing and saying things he may not do in public for fear of social recrimination. In geographical terms, this function of home is described as a “pocket of local order” where people can experience privacy (Ellegård and Vilhelmson 2004: 283). A healthy amount of privacy is necessary in order to create a sense of selfhood (Schwartz 1968: 752). Violations of privacy are experienced as violations of self, and may result in a sense of powerlessness. If one does not have the freedom to decide what people do and do not see, every action is subject to the intrusion and dishonor of constant scrutiny (Schwartz 1968: 747-748).

Of course, it is worth mentioning that what constitutes a healthy balance between public and private life is highly individual. Moreover, definitions of “public” and “private” are temporally and culturally specific. The boundaries that delineate personal space in the United States and in Western Europe are not shared by other cultures and have changed throughout history. The idea of home as a private place for intimacy and retreat is tied to the rise of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe in the 17th century. Before that, the term “home” was a state of being associated with one’s village and family (Jackson 1995: 87). Even actions most people might assume have always been considered more-or-less private, such as using the toilet, are not
the same across time or cultures. In ancient Rome, for instance, public latrines were designed with 20 seats or more all in one location. In medieval England, toilets had multiple seats, and London’s Hampton Court Palace — designed in 1514 — had a bathroom that could accommodate 14 users at once. Finally, Mount Vernon, where George Washington made his home in 1761, had a bathroom with two toilets situated side by side (Bryson 2010: 60, 124).

*Home as a Relationship With a Physical Location*

“You cannot travel on the path before you have become the Path itself.”
— Gautama Buddha

Home, I have established, is a relationship rather than a place, and its emotional impact is not inherent in the physical structure itself. However, physical structures *can* possess functional and symbolic values that influence the range and nature of interactions one may share with them (Pallasmaa 1995: 136). In the case of a house or apartment, for instance, a wall allows for a different set of physical interactions than a door, and a door a different set of physical interactions than a window. These structures have symbolic value as well. Walls may evoke a sense of security (or of enclosure), whereas windows may make one feel connected (or exposed) to the outside world. A sense of atmosphere is created in the interplay between these spatial, material elements — known as “potential environments” — and the mood of the individual, which constitutes the “affective environment” (Pennartz 1999: 95-96). In an anthropological study of housing projects in the Netherlands, a pleasant atmosphere with place was described as capable of enabling communication, relaxation, and the sensations of being free from both responsibility and boredom (Pennartz 1999: 99-101). Spatial characteristics, such as the size and shape of rooms, as well as the way they are arranged and connected, contribute to the range of social interactions that can take place in those spaces, and thus to the creation of the atmosphere.
This is not a new concept; the ancient art of feng shui is rooted in these relationships.

The anthropologist Roderick Lawrence (1995: 63-65) makes the argument that the cultivation of domesticity is necessarily an intentional process. The natural world does not provide dwellings for humans, so they must be constructed. This intentional use of space, time, and resources reflects a psychological and physical sense of ownership and contributes to the construction and expression of the self and social identities. The home is designed to be as a seat of order in a world of disorder, a haven of meaning, significance, and predictability that can be readily understood (Benjamin 1995: 298-299). One such example of this behavior is the act of decoration, which can be read as a means of symbolic self-expression. It can take the form of creating a comfortable atmosphere within a dwelling, or communicating a message about the household through the appearance of the dwelling’s exterior, that material threshold between the public and private spheres (Cieraad 1999: 2, Dolan 1999: 62, Hirschon and Gold 1982: 69).

Communication through decoration and customization of the home with the purpose of establishing and maintaining territory is a process known as “territoriality.” This process depends upon (and helps contribute to) a shared set of symbolic meanings assigned to the decorations (Hirschon and Gold 1982: 63-65).

But forcing physical change upon a bounded environment through processes such as territoriality is not the only way that people create a sense of home — indeed, this is a rather ethnocentric notion rooted in capitalistic ideals of ownership and dwelling-as-home. This relationship also arises from acceptance of a place. This is a key factor in understanding how nomadic populations experience a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world — a notion that may seem alien to some Americans. After all, permanence, boundaries, and structure form the
preconditions of meaning in the American context, and thus constitute the means by which we understand the world. Homes, neighborhoods, cities, states, countries, continents, hemispheres, and planets are all entities defined by boundaries. We even cut time up into boundaries and use these bounded entities to establish routines. We draw a clear distinction between “mine” and “yours,” “ours” and “theirs.” We view people as bounded individuals. Open spaces make us nervous, and the people who occupy them, who do not share an affinity for the permanent and bounded — such as nomads, drifters, and vagabonds — are perceived as untrustworthy, uncivilized, and primitive (Jackson 1995: 84-87). Their rootless existence challenges the very notion of boundaries, and calls the meaning of nation (and national identity) into question (Silverstein 2005: 364). Yet in other cultural contexts, nomadic populations are admired for the relationship they are able to share with the wider world. Indeed, Bruce Chatwin (1987: 178) even goes so far as to assert that, “[w]andering re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man [sic] and universe.”

The notion of nomadism as harmonious with the larger world is an important one. To an outsider, the wandering life may seem rootless, but the nomad has just as strong a relationship with home as his sedentary counterpart. I shall explore this concept in a bit more detail in the following section.

*Mobile Populations and Their Conceptions of Home*

“I don't live anywhere,
I live everywhere,
the road is my home.”
— Joe Bonamassa

For migrant workers, such as Mexicans who come to the United States to find work, or Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, “home” is the sum total of the place they came from,
the place they are, and the physical, social, and emotional ties they maintain between the two (Striffler 2007: 674; Constable 1999: 203). This relationship is known as a “transnational migrant circuit” (Striffler 2007: 675). Rather than viewing migrants as moving between two distinct communities, the circuit as a whole serves as the setting for migrant workers’ lives (Striffler 2007: 677). The home village may not be a physical part of the daily routine, but it still forms a part of the migrant workers’ identities. It can be looked upon nostalgically as a place of belonging, where one’s actions are readily understood and accepted (Striffler 2007: 684; Constable 1999: 208). However, returning home can also be an ambivalent occasion. For some Filipina domestic workers, returning to the Philippines serves as an opportunity for personal reinvention, to create a new identity in their old environment. For others, Hong Kong gives them a sense of independence they may not have had in their home country, and returning home may feel stifling, as they are expected to reassume social roles they view as less prestigious than the ones they occupy abroad (Constable 1999: 213, 223).

These ambivalent returns can even be detrimental to one’s health. A study of U.S. businesspeople who frequently travel internationally for work found that they tended to submit more health insurance claims than their stationary counterparts, and that these claims were mostly for psychological disorders. The travelers reported feeling isolated while away from home, and awkward and out of place upon their return (Espino et al. 2002: 309). Tensions arose from a number of issues: missing special events, awkward readjustment periods, long absences, separation from loved ones, and general stress from traveling (Espino et al. 2002: 317-318).

Why do U.S. businesspeople experience tension with the home they leave behind, while Mexican and Filipina migrant workers may find a sense of meaning and personhood in their experience? There are a few possible explanations. First, whereas the migrant workers had the
opportunity to set up more-or-less stable, personalized dwellings in their new locations, the
business travelers lived out of hotel rooms. It could also be possible that since migrant work is a
common means of making a living for residents of Mexico and the Philippines, absence is easier
for the travelers and those they leave behind to accept. U.S. society, with its emphasis on
permanence, boundedness, and the idea of house as home, does not have a role model in the
cultural imagination for the business traveler, except perhaps as lonely, dissatisfied, and
perpetually out of place. There could be a “culture of migration” in the case of Mexico and the
Philippines that does not exist in the context of the United States. Finally, the isolating nature of
traveling for business makes it difficult, if not impossible, to forge a community — and through
it, a home — based upon the shared experience of migration (Striffler 2007: 685).

Experience-based community is an important part of the lifestyle of people who live and
tavel in recreational vehicles (RVs). The culture of RVing includes a code of conduct that insists
upon reciprocity, which creates a sense of community even when one is among people one has
never met (Counts and Counts 1992: 155). This is particularly interesting when one takes into
account the fact that RVers tend to be retirees, a group of people who are at an increased risk of
suffering from social isolation, even when grouped together into a common area such as a
retirement home. The RV lifestyle constitutes a meaningful, inclusive relationship based the idea
that its participants share a common experience — a community where people may feel at home,
in other words (Counts and Counts 1992: 169, 175).

RVers go on to symbolically express this sense of community through a process of
territoriality. They tend to include the area where their rig is parked as part of their home, and
establish this territory through the use of patio furniture, awnings, and other such items.
Spending time in this outdoor setting allows them to meet and interact with other members of the
community, particularly when they are parked in an area where RVers congregate, such as RV parks (Counts and Counts 1992: 177). They also customize and decorate the interior of their vehicles to reflect their personal tastes and, symbolically, to organize and structure the space into something that feels like home (Counts and Counts 1992: 175). These decorations, whether functional, aesthetic, or both, may also contribute to the formation of identity. Consumer research has found that possessions serve as physical connections to the symbolic realms of one’s personal history, cultural values, and meaningful social and cultural relationships, and may even serve to buffer the self from change (Bardhi et al. 2012: 510). Acculturation research argues that possession attachment becomes more salient in mobility than in permanence, because possessions serve as anchors to the homeland. Indeed, a study of geographically mobile families found that the more effort families put into investing a place with meaning, the more it felt like home. This investment takes the form of personalization and control over the environment, a process of repetition that can create a sense of rootedness and belonging (Bardhi et al. 2012: 512; Allen 2008: 90, 93).

However, for RVers and other mobile populations, the limited amount of space in their dwellings means they must restrict the objects they bring with them to the essentials. As a result, they often value detachment and flexibility over ownership and attachment. This mindset is particularly true of global nomads: people who serially relocate and travel internationally for short periods of time, and who do not base their identity on a fixed location. An example of a global nomad is an international volunteer, such as a member of Doctors Without Borders, who spends so much time in different locations that he or she does not identify one of them as “home.” The choice to be unmoored from place changes the dynamic these individuals share with their possessions. Like some RVers, global nomads have what is known as a “liquid”
relationship to possessions: temporary and practical, with value stemming not from
sentimentality, but instead from portability/immateriality and a wide array of uses in a wide array
of situations (Bardhi et al. 2012: 510-512, 518). When one’s lifestyle is unpredictable, and when
one must transport one’s possessions to far-flung locations, often with very little notice, learning
how to cultivate possessions based on practical functionality and how to let them go when they
have outlived their usefulness is a valuable coping skill (Bardhi et al. 2012: 519, 521). This
mindset is pervasive, and for global nomads, the concept of “home” itself ceases to be construed
as a possession at all. It becomes a relationship shared with the world rather than a single,
stationary place over which the individual feels a sense of ownership (Bardhi et al. 2012: 515).

Through such methods as the expansion of “home” to include multiple places, the
creation of community based on experience rather than place, and a liquid relationship to objects,
nomadic and migrant populations may find meaning in the ephemeral over the physical, and
imbue a wide area with the sensation of home. They feel a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world
rather than merely being-at-home-at-a-specific-location. Truck drivers, I argue, utilize many of
these same methods to create a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world akin to the transnational
migrant circuit — an intranational migrant circuit, if you will. They accomplish this through the
processes of territoriality/acceptance, a community based on a shared experience, and traditional
and liquid relationships with possessions. I shall explore these assertions further in the
ethnographic portion of this piece. In the following section, however, I first present a discussion
of my ethnographic methods.
3. Research Methods and Interpretive Strategies

Participant observation is the methodological cornerstone of anthropology, but there is very little uniformity in the way it is conducted. Some ethnographers lean more toward observation, whereas others actively participate. For the first year and a half of my research, I utilized the former strategy. I hung around in a trucker bar and a truck stop and drew conclusions about the lifestyle from what I saw and what my informants told me during what were usually brief, one-time interviews. And in my defense, this was all I could reasonably commit to at that point in my educational career. But the shortcomings of pure observation became amply clear once I took the plunge into participation and became a truck driver myself.

For three months during the summer of 2012, I was a member of the team at ChillCo, a trucking company specializing in the hauling of refrigerated trailers (known in the industry as “reefers”). I hauled french fries from Idaho to Washington state, cookie dough from Texas to Pennsylvania, catfish from Tennessee to Indiana, and beer from New Jersey to the Texas panhandle. I’ve crawled up steep grades in Utah and Montana and Colorado at 35 miles an hour, feeling the weight of 60,000 pounds of frozen food trying to pull me back down. I’ve heard the roar of my Jake brake — slang for the engine brake, a device that uses the retarding forces in the engine to help slow the truck — as I eased my way down winding mountain passes in New Mexico and West Virginia and Arizona. I’ve driven all night from the east coast to the Midwest, singing and counting mile markers to keep myself awake. I saw the sun rise in Ohio that morning, and it was the most beautiful sunrise I've ever seen. I felt like Apollo, like I was driving a chariot instead of a truck, like I was solely responsible for hauling the sun halfway across the earth to cast its first tender gray light over a fog-shrouded field. I had one of the worst moments of my life, sitting on a concrete barricade outside of a Pilot truck stop, watching trucks slide by
me into the fuel island while I wept uncontrollably. I felt so lonely then, like I had died and been forgotten; in retrospect, it was culture shock. I also had one of the best moments of my life, listening to "Let it Be" and then "Across the Universe" as I drove through a construction zone on I-90 through Snowqualmie Pass, stealing glances of the sun setting over the Olympic mountains in the distance. The clouds looked like bruises, and the sky was the color of lemon juice. All I could do was laugh.

Suffice it to say, the experience taught me a lot about trucking, not the least of which is that truck stops are only a tiny sliver of the culture, and trucker bars even less so. (In fact, they’re frowned upon by most drivers, not to mention the companies that employ them.) It was only by subjecting my body to the same experiences as my informants that I could even begin to understand the culture. I use the word “begin” because the experience was also deeply humbling, and taught me that the more you learn, the less you know. If I could be so wrong about trucking from the research I did in truck stops and trucker bars, I’ve reasoned, I could also be wrong about the conclusions I have drawn from my month on the road. It’s also significant that I was still very much a rookie when I quit. The stressors I faced were usually a direct result of my inexperience, and the things that inspired and amazed me could be chalked up to being in the honeymoon phase with the lifestyle. With all that said, please take this work with a grain of salt.

Observant Participation vs. Participant Observation

There is a name for what I did: observant participation. The sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2004: vii-viii) coined the term as a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago, where he learned about African-American boxing culture by joining a boxing gym on the city’s South side. He trained for three years, went to the gym every day, competed in tournaments, and even considered quitting his academic career to turn pro (Wacquant 2004: 4). His methodology is
rooted in Bourdieu's theory of habitus: the idea that what we call "the social order" is taught and learned through bodies (Bourdieu 1990: 69, 71). Thus, without a bodily commitment to your research, Wacquant taught, all you're doing is relaying what you have seen and not what you have experienced.

Wacquant may have coined the term “observant participation,” but he was not the first to employ it. Zora Neale Hurston's brilliant *Mules and Men* (1935) challenged the then-dominant paradigm that truth could only be found in strict objectivity. Hurston’s subjective account of her fieldwork experience revealed nuances a staid, “scientific” approach would never have uncovered. Through her unique, vibrant literary style, she allowed the reader to draw her own subjective interpretations of the text rather than laying out grand theoretical truths (Hernández 1995: 156). Hurston joined her informants at work and out fishing, to parties and to juke joints, where she drank “coon dick,” danced, flirted, and on more than one occasion, got swept up into bar fights — all in the service of the collection of folklore. In the latter half of the text, she describes her initiation into the world of hoodoo under the tutelage of several respected practitioners. Hurston truly takes part in the culture, with no qualms about engaging emotionally with her informants and their traditions. Of her initiation into the world of hoodoo, she writes, “rest assured that no one may approach the Altar without the crown, and none may wear the crown of power without preparation. *It must be earned*” (Hurston 1935: 198). She was speaking literally, of course, but this sentiment could be extrapolated to encompass the initiation into any culture, be it hoodoo, boxing, or trucking. It must be earned indeed.

Ultimately, the strength of observant participation is this: There is a difference between being told and being taught. When I simply interviewed truck drivers, the dynamic of the conversation was that of an insider answering the questions of an outsider. Even if they wanted
to be totally honest with me (and not all of them did), that dynamic still had an effect upon the kind of information they shared with me, as well as the way they presented it. But when I was becoming a truck driver, they shared information for the very practical reason that they wanted me to know how to safely operate the machinery. When I was conducting research, a story about jackknifing a truck in icy weather would have been bragging; when I was learning how to drive a truck, it was a sober cautionary tale.

Fieldwork: A Relationship Between Informant and Ethnographer

Ethnography is best read not as a description of a culture, but rather as the result of the meeting of two or more cultural traditions: the ethnographer’s and the informants’. The reader stands to gain a deeper understanding by keeping this interaction in mind (Fischer 1986: 200-201). With that said, a few words about my background may help elucidate the relationships I was able to forge with my fellow truck drivers, as well as the conclusions I draw from my experience.

If I had to identify the most influential factors in negotiating a relationship with my informants, it would be my age (26 at the time of my fieldwork) and gender (female). It’s also worth noting that I rarely went a day on the road without receiving compliments about my physical appearance, and that I have a tendency to be flirtatious, often without realizing it. Initially, I tried to refrain from flirting, since I was afraid I might lead people on, not to mention come off as unprofessional or unscientific. Although anthropologists have come a long way toward recognizing the realities of sexual tension and relationships between informant and ethnographer, fraternization of this kind is still somewhat taboo (Cole 1995: 178). However, by the end of the summer, I loosened up a bit, and even used flirtation as a means of establishing rapport with informants. Flirting is a social ritual. It’s a muscle people like to flex. It makes them
feel attractive and powerful. Moreover, most reasonable adults understand that friendly flirtation usually doesn’t lead to a physical relationship. If I got the impression that a person I was flirting with expected it to escalate to a level I wasn’t willing to reciprocate, I gently headed them off at the pass.

As a result of these factors, I experienced both special treatment and stereotyping throughout my experience on the road. “You’re at a distinct advantage out here,” a male driver around my dad’s age once told me. He had just finished helping to direct me while I backed into a particularly tricky parking spot, spinning his hand in the air to tell me which way to turn the steering wheel. At one point, he even shoved a dumpster out of my way so I’d have more room to maneuver my truck. I didn’t have to ask him to do this — like the majority of drivers who helped me back into parking spots and loading docks that summer, he saw me get out of my truck to double-check the position of my trailer, and approached me to offer some assistance.

“You’re a tall, good-lookin’ blonde,” he continued. “Just get out and look a couple times, and you’ll have guys runnin’ across the parking lot to help spot you. But you’re also at a distinct disadvantage out here, because you’re a tall, good-lookin’ blonde. Take care of yourself.”

It was true what he said. When ChillCo first turned me out on the road as a solo driver, I was pretty shaky when it came to backing up my truck. I could do it on my own maybe one time out of every 10, and then only when it was an easy spot to get into. Still, I had no problem parking my truck, because other drivers would offer to help in order to get a chance to talk to me. (Had I been male, there’s no way that driver would have shoved a dumpster out of the way for me. This isn’t to say male drivers don’t help out other males, but they certainly don’t go out of their way to offer.) Frankly, I’m grateful for the help; without it, I’m positive I would have gotten into a minor accident, probably within a few days, and thus ended my trucking career.
However, this could be annoying when I wanted the opportunity to practice parking on my own, and condescending once I learned what I was doing. There were also times when I felt obligated to be polite to the drivers who helped me, even if they made comments I found insulting or inappropriate. When my patience wore thin, I acted aloof or rude, in part to avoid having to deal with this unwanted attention, and in part because I was embarrassed and frustrated with myself.

When that driver told me I was at a disadvantage for being a “tall, good-lookin’ blonde,” he was obliquely referring to the threat of physical violence. Although I was initially afraid of this as well, it didn’t take long before I realized I was perfectly safe. All summer, truck drivers told me to look out for other truck drivers, all while helping me park, asking me about my research, and proving that, at least in the trucking world, chivalry is not dead. However, as a female, I did face the ugly, pervasive stereotype that women cannot drive as well as men. To be honest, it messed with my head. Every time I couldn’t back into a spot, I would tense up and eventually become enraged. If I were a male, my behavior would be written off as a rookie ironing out the kinks in his abilities, but because I was female, I was believed to be somehow inferior and inherently incapable of this task. I would turn this rage inward, seething at myself for perpetuating this stereotype through my own incompetence. In the back of my mind, there was also a panicky little voice suggesting that maybe I really couldn’t do this because I was a woman — not to mention reminding me that my academic career depended upon my ability to produce an ethnography based on my experience as a truck driver. If I couldn’t drive a truck, I couldn’t write the ethnography; if I couldn’t write the ethnography, I couldn’t go on to get a Ph.D.; and if I couldn’t get a Ph.D., that panicky voice would shriek, my life would come to an end. Eventually the tension would reach a fever pitch, making it nearly impossible for me to focus. On one notable occasion, it took me about 20 minutes to back up to a dock door at a
warehouse. The other drivers at the neighboring doors had done it in a tenth of that time, and I knew they were snickering at how much trouble I was having. When I had finally docked, I thanked the man who helped me, calmly retreated into my sleeper berth, and, for the first and only time in my life, punched a wall as hard as I could.

In addition to being a young woman in an older man’s world, I also stood out because I’m educated, intelligent, and, like a lot of cultural anthropologists, a little socially awkward. I make no effort to hide it. When I speak, I like to use interesting vocabulary, and I can sometimes be overly formal, especially when I’m nervous or meeting a new person. (However, at other times my speech is littered with verbal tics, namely “like.”) I despise small talk, and I tend to steer conversations toward what I find interesting — personal or philosophical territory — even if the situation isn’t appropriate for it. When I’m having a stimulating conversation, I tend to get very enthusiastic, speaking excitedly and gesticulating wildly. Some people may find this charming, whereas others may find it exhausting, or perhaps just strange. However, I found that I could temper this side of my personality and communicate the nonthreatening nature of my research by playing up my goofy, nerdy side.

“Anthropologists are just gigantic nerds,” I’d tell drivers who seemed distrustful of my research. “We think people and cultures are interesting. I think trucking is cool and super-important, but most people don’t realize it. I want other people to see trucking the way I do.”

When I self-identified as a nerd, it seemed, drivers could apply this stereotype to me, understand my presence a little better, playfully tease me, and perhaps feel less threatened about my role as a researcher. It also served as a way to lessen the intensity of the sexual tension I experienced with male drivers while on the road. I don’t mean to sound self-aggrandizing. Women, particularly young, attractive women, are few and far between in the trucking world,
and the attention they receive can sometimes overwhelming. (I once had a conversation with a truck stop cashier around my age who complained that she couldn’t go a single shift without a truck driver aggressively hitting on her. “One old guy said, ‘I bet if I flashed a thousand bucks at you, you’d sleep with me,’” she told me, wrinkling her nose.) Casting myself as a “nerd” was an attempt to desexualize myself, and from there, to cultivate a relationship where I seemed more like a family member than a potential sexual partner. Although Sally Cole (1995: 179) bemoans a daughterly relationship to informants as promoting subservience and dependence, I fully embraced it. Construing a male-female relationship fraught with the potential for unrequited sexual attraction in familial terms is a method I have used in my personal life to let men down easily, showing them I still value their friendship while eliminating the possibility of a sexual relationship. It was easy enough to use this strategy in the trucking context. Sometimes it was advantageous to portray myself as a daughterly figure, usually in relationships with older males. In a sense, I gave them permission to nurture and protect me. When I was the older one in the relationship, I would adopt a supportive, nurturing, parental role of my own. Finally, I would act the part of a sister when I wanted to evoke a sense of mutuality, equality, and playful antagonism tempered by the sense that siblings stick together no matter what.

Embracing the “goofy nerd” identity also helped me deal with my increasingly conflicted feelings about academia and the blue-collar lifestyle. I come from a rural, blue-collar background. I grew up on a farm at the end of a two-mile dirt road; my dad was a construction worker, and my mom stayed at home until my parents split up. I view this background with a bit of ambivalence. On one hand, I associate the blue-collar experience with the pride that comes from doing a good job even when the work is hard and you may not want to do it. On the other hand, I put my head down and did well in school so I would never have to experience the stress
of an existence lived paycheck-to-paycheck. (And then I decided I wanted to be a professor…) I viewed college as an escape, the people I left behind as ignorant, and the lifestyle as small. I feel like a snob and an ingrate, but I can’t help it: To this day, I grapple with the contradiction of admiring a lifestyle I would never want for myself.

Yet at the same time, I am enamored with the idea of trucking. When I was a little kid, I used to want to run away from home — not because I didn’t love my family or my house, but because I wanted to live out of a backpack, carrying only what I needed, and waking up in a different place every day. When I first got my driver’s license, I used to fantasize about getting in my car and driving west and never looking back. Fast-forward eight years: College was behind me, I had an office job making good money, and I was in a stable relationship that looked like it had a promising future. Life was good, but I wanted out. I used to daydream about driving a truck, but it always ended with me wondering what I was thinking. Me? Drive a truck? That will literally never happen. And so I did the next best thing: went to grad school to study trucking culture. For me, driving a truck as research was acceptable in a way that driving a truck as an occupation was not. Of course, once I actually joined the trucking community and engaged in the lifestyle, I realized that it was what I had wanted all along. For a person like me who loves to travel and feels antsy when forced to stay in one place for a long time, the trucking lifestyle is ideal. I try to minimize my attachments to people, places, and things, and trucking was an environment where those qualities were beneficial rather than alienating. I’m an introvert, and trucking gave me ample time to be alone. Trucking started to seem more “real” than anthropology. The work was straightforward, and its results were tangible, whereas academic anthropology started to seem frivolous. I daydreamed about staying out on the road and never coming back. What can I say? I went native.
A lot of the people I met over the summer joked that when I was done with grad school, I should be a truck driver. And to be honest, I considered it. But something about the idea still does not sit right with me. I cherish the memories of my time on the road, I admire the culture and contributions of truck drivers, and there is a part of me that is attracted to a rootless existence free from the social pressures of academia or another career steeped in so-called social capital. Yet at the same time, I know deep down that trucking will never be more than Plan B for me. It seems too easy, almost, or like it would be a waste of my other talents and abilities. Is this a manifestation of my desire to eschew attachment, to look forward instead of back, to try new things and embrace a wide range of life experiences? Is it a fear of happiness — or a fear that if I actually dedicated myself to trucking, the rosy picture I have of it now would change irreparably, and the experience that means so much to me would become just another job I kind of hate? Could it be a lingering prejudice toward the blue-collar lifestyle that I refuse to admit to myself? The answer could lie in one or several of these questions. I honestly cannot say.

*The Case for Autoethnography*

Observant participation, which plunges the researcher fully into the culture she studies, makes her experience inextricable from the information she gathers, and thus is ideally suited to autoethnography. The rhetorical possibilities and implications of this method extend far past the simple use of the pronoun “I.” Autoethnography recognizes and embraces the presence of the ethnographer, the factors that may influence her interactions with informants (such as race, age, and gender), and the power dynamics that arise as a result of these interactions. As such, it presents a more realistic picture of “culture” and of the cross-cultural dialogue that is fieldwork. Moreover, its use of evocative literary strategies may give it additional persuasive power (Hernández 1995: 151, 157).
It is tempting to think of “culture” as an unchanging set of rules practiced uniformly by a bounded group of people, but little could be further from the truth. Culture, like the people who practice it, is an infinitely complex, infinitely beautiful mess. It is created, performed, modified, and stabilized as a dynamic relationship, shot through with power differentials, between individuals, each with their own unique history, personality, and set of motivations that may change depending on the day, the setting, and any number of other variables that have an effect upon the way people exist in the world (Clifford 1986: 15; Pratt 1986: 30). As much as she might deny it, the ethnographer is not an inconspicuous observer. She is a person, and as such, a part of this beautiful mess. Her presence has an effect upon the society she studies, which goes on to affect her in turn (Firth 1989: xxviii). The subjective experiences of the researcher are thus central to the research process; indeed, they can be said to constitute the research process (Clifford 1986: 13). By utilizing autoethnography, the researcher more accurately portrays both the fieldwork experience and the dynamic nature of culture. The charge that autoethnography is self-indulgent is unfair, rooted in the idea that the ethnographer can somehow be separated from the culture she studies (Grant 2012: 2). This simply is not the case. If ethnography's aim is to represent people and relationships, it is woefully incomplete if it omits the relationship central to the creation of the ethnography itself — that is, the one that exists between the anthropologist and her informants (Clifford 1986: 13-14). The omission of the ethnographer's experience is as blatantly disingenuous as airbrushing a person out of a photograph.

The roots of autoethnography stretch back to the beginnings of anthropology. Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) is one early example. Another is the work of Ruth Landes, who conducted fieldwork in Bahia, Brazil from 1938 to 1939. The personal side of her experience — her presence in the community, her thoughts, her feelings, her position as a woman, and the
dialogues she shared with informants — formed an integral part of her ethnography (Cole 1995: 167, 170-171). Autoethnography is also rooted in the long-practiced inclusion of the personal narrative in early chapters of “conventional” ethnographies, as well as the emergence of the subgenre of the fieldwork account in the 1960s. These practices have contributed to a change in perceptions of the position of the ethnographer. The ideal of the coolly detached observer has given way to the researcher as an active participant in the culture. In fieldwork accounts, the ethnographer was given a space to share the at-times unsavory and unflattering interactions that can occur in the field: desire, confusion, tension, economic transactions, and the like. Meanwhile, personal narratives serve to recount the ethnographer’s arrival in the field. In doing so, they mediate the contradiction between scientific and personal authority, which can serve to avoid alienating and dehumanizing the group being studied (Clifford 1986: 13-14; Pratt 1986: 31-33). Yet more honesty about the relationship between ethnographer and informant is the acknowledgement of the power relations the ethnographic encounter may reflect or enact, even as it attempts to challenge them (Clifford 1986: 9). The anthropologist, for instance has power over informants, because she will go on to represent their experience in the realm of the academy. Through her ethnography, she draws a line between cultures, running the risk of essentializing them, freezing them in time, or defining them in terms of irreconcilable differences. Yet at the same time, the informants have power over the researcher, because they are the keepers of the cultural information. Without them, the ethnographer is nothing (Rosaldo 1986: 92). The anthropologist may negotiate a relationship with her informants through the exchange of Western commodities. Although this is done with the intent of creating a nonexploitative relationship, it at the same time enacts a power differential and adulterates the “purity” of the culture being studied (Pratt 1986: 38).
Acknowledgement of the at-times contradictory nature of fieldwork does not necessarily undermine the rhetorical authority of the ethnographer. Indeed, Vincent Crapanzano (1986: 52) argues, it is quite the opposite. The traditional rhetorical authority of the ethnographer places her in all places at once yet invisible, and as objective and detached despite her own self-interest. Through the frank and forthright acknowledgement of the relationships and power dynamics that arise as a result of the fieldwork experience, the researcher more accurately reflects the complexity of human interactions, particularly in a cross-cultural context, and thus comes across as trustworthy (Crapanzano 1986: 52-53).

Done well, autoethnography is both a realistic snapshot of a given culture at a given moment in time as well as a textual representation of cross-cultural interaction. Moreover, by introducing a human element, it has the potential to persuade through its evocative power. When the ethnographer puts herself in a vulnerable, intimate position, blurring the position between herself and her informants, she can inspire empathy and understanding in the reader (Kidd 2009: 982). One could even go so far as to say that an honest autoethnographic representation of the ways in which ethnographer and informant mediate their differences could provide clues as to how these differences can be overcome in everyday interaction. Autoethnography could, in a sense, show us how we can all get along.

It is also a particularly appropriate rhetorical method when examining the trucking experience because of the solitary nature of the lifestyle. Thus, in the next chapter I present my own experience in the hopes that it will give the reader an idea of how a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world can be cultivated in the at-times rootless context of trucking.

The United States, I have argued, is a society where people conceive of home as a single stationary location and where mobile populations are perceived as existing on the fringe. Yet the “fringe” group of truck drivers make an essential contribution to the everyday conveniences that allow for the physically rooted lifestyle most people take for granted. Drivers not only haul the products sold in gas stations, restaurants, grocery stores, shopping malls, and the like, but also the commodities used to construct the very buildings and roads themselves. Pretty much everything you own has been on a truck at some point. Truck drivers are the lifeblood of the U.S. economy, carrying things from where they are to where they need to be. In a sense, these men and women are nomadic so everyone else need not be.

How do truck drivers negotiate their experience of home in the face of these conflicting cultural mandates? How do they form a relationship to home? What does that relationship look like? I argue that in the context of trucking, home is a relationship that occurs between the driver, the truck, and the places where the truck takes them. It is an intranational migrant circuit, one constituted within and between a stationary home base and the driver in his or her truck.

Before I begin, I must clarify that my experience of the trucking lifestyle is not universal. Truck drivers, like everyone else, are unique individuals who experience the world in uniquely individual ways. However, my experience does address my research questions by demonstrating one of the myriad ways in which the truck — and by extension, the road — can become a home. I am also fairly confident that it is not entirely anomalous, and that it parallels the experience of at least some of the drivers who feel at-home-in-the-world in the context of trucking.
Beginnings: Classroom Training in Atlanta

When I first signed the paperwork to enroll in trucking school, I was anticipating a fieldwork experience I'd have to grit my teeth to get through. My home was in Atlanta — a shabby but loveable house I rented, a vibrant group of friends, a pleasant routine that took me from my house to campus to my tutoring job and to my favorite coffee shop in the center of the hip, townie neighborhood of East Atlanta Village. I hadn't owed a car in a year and a half and commuted exclusively by bike. I couldn't imagine that I'd be a good truck driver, or even a decent one, and before I started classroom training, I had stress nightmares about crashing my truck almost every night.

It was during this time that I began to forge a closer friendship with my key informant. Derek is a driver of 8 years in his 30s who I met through a mutual friend. He’s quiet and thoughtful, choosing his words carefully and speaking them in a lilting Virginia accent. He's intelligent, but in a quiet way that sneaks up on you. You'll be in the middle of a conversation with him and he'll say something insightful or beautiful, and you'll be struck. You'll realize then that you're not talking to an ordinary truck driver — or an ordinary person. Our first meeting consisted of a two-hour interview that meandered comfortably from supervisory methods in trucking to philosophy, literature, and his love of the road, and ended with him giving me a ride around the block in his truck. He had since helped me with every single paper I’ve written on trucking, and encouraged me to work as a truck driver as part of my thesis research.

When I was preparing to attend trucking school, he was living in Atlanta full-time, having quit his job to look for something more lucrative with another company. He took time out of his job search to help prepare me. He gave me an old driver’s atlas, a CB radio, a hat for good luck (that one was my idea), and innumerable pointers. He let me practice driving his car, a stick shift,
to help me get the hang of it before trying it in a semi. And most significantly, he did his best to assuage my fears.

“Don’t worry,” he told me on more than one occasion, over the phone or coffee. “Most of these guys are ignorant slobs. If they can do this, so can you.”

Derek, I should note, has an ambivalent relationship with other truck drivers. Although trucking and blue-collar masculinity form a large part of his identity, he tends to think other drivers give the profession a bad name. He defines himself in opposition to what he perceives as the stereotypical truck driver, making it a point to wear a uniform when interacting with customers, to eat healthy and exercise, to maintain a clean-cut appearance, and to keep his truck tidy. He even listens to NPR all day. And although he is entitled to his opinions about other drivers, as a researcher, it was my responsibility to keep a more open mind.

At Georgia State, I talked a big game about how the United States would crumble without truck drivers and how much I respected them, but way, way deep down, buried under layers of denial, I too thought of them as ignorant slobs. When I was doing my classroom training at the ChillCo terminal in Atlanta, which prepared us for our written permit test, I would come home and make fun of the guys in class to my friends. I'd whine about how dumb they were and how idiotic the training was. I didn't want to be associated with them. I thought they dressed badly, spoke poorly, smelled bad, and weren't smart enough for me to talk to on any sort of meaningful level. At the same time, I quickly grew accustomed to preferential treatment and attention for being a girl, yet reacted to it with annoyance.

After our week of classroom training, one of the teachers wished us luck on the next leg of our journey: a two-day bus ride to the ChillCo terminal in Salt Lake City, where we would do the hands-on portion of our training and learn how to operate a truck. He then playfully
instructed the guys to, "Take care of Brooke." I rolled my eyes.

The bus trip was an agonizing 44 hours long. The bathrooms were poorly ventilated, and whenever anyone used them, the other passengers would hoot and holler. In response, I clenched my teeth and turned up the volume on my mp3 player. The only sleep I got was in small snatches, sitting upright in the uncomfortable seat. My feet swelled up. I tried to text my friends, but our conversations dried up almost immediately. They simply couldn't relate. The one exception was Derek, who told me which landmarks to look for out the bus window. By the time we arrived in Salt Lake, it was 10 p.m. and all I wanted out of life was to take a very hot shower and then go to bed. I was on the phone telling my sister the harrowing tale of my journey when the shuttle for the hotel pulled up to the curb. When I got there, everyone else had filed in, and the last seat had been taken.

"Not enough room!" the driver said. I looked at him archly. No one moved.

"Can't I squeeze in?"

"No. I'll be back in half an hour."

"Are you serious? Are you serious? You're going to let me stand out here all by myself?" I couldn't believe the words that were about to out of my mouth. "But I'm a girl!"

"You're not a girl," one of the guys quipped. "You're a truck driver!"

I wish I could say this was the turning point in my relationship with the other students in my cohort, but it took a much longer before I finally realized that I was in the wrong.

During this beginning stage of my fieldwork, I was a nervous wreck. I clung to the idea of the built environment of Atlanta, the social networks I maintained, and the routine I had established, as my home. I felt no sense of community among truck drivers, with the exception of Derek, who I considered a friend and an exception to the rules of trucking culture. Indeed, I
actively resisted joining the community. The Greyhound trip is a rite of passage of sorts for many truck drivers, not just ChillCo recruits. It is a chance for people to bond with their cohort, but instead I alienated myself, electing to cling to what was comfortable, to a home that retreated further into the distance with every rotation of the wheels over the road.

Range Training

The week and a half my class spent in Salt Lake City was a whirlwind: a permit test and six days packed with all the basic information we needed to know in order to operate an 18-wheeler. We took turns behind the wheel of the school trucks — old, worn-out pieces of machinery with temperamental transmissions and parking brakes that only worked correctly if we pushed in the knobs just-so — and learned how to back up between long lines of cones. We went to Rookie Road to learn how to shift, and to an industrial park to learn how to position the tractor and trailer when going around curves. We took brief forays into the city and over the mountains and memorized the different components of the cab, engine, truck, trailer, and linking mechanisms we were required to check during our pre- and post-trip inspections. When we weren’t learning how to use the machine, our teachers drilled the core values of trucking into our heads, namely a sense of responsibility and self-sacrifice. I remember one bitterly cold day near the end of our training, standing on the range with three of our instructors. They had their heads down and their hands shoved deep in their pockets. Their shoulders hunched against the cold.

“You’re gonna miss birthdays,” Art said solemnly, looking at the ground. “You’re gonna miss graduations. You’re gonna miss recitals. But you’re gonna provide a better life for them. They’re not gonna want for anything.”

He stopped, and everyone was quiet for a moment. The only sound was the crazy screaming of seagulls dipping and swooping on the wind.
Each day after class, I would go back to my hotel room to study what we had covered in class, and to text or call Derek to tell him what I had learned. At that point in my research, I still thought of Atlanta as home, though I didn’t miss it as much as I thought I would. This was partly because I had my own hotel room to myself — one of the perks of being the only girl in my class. I had unpacked my things, organizing them so I could easily find what I needed. This was not an expression of self-identity or personalization as much as it was a practical convenience. I relished the privacy of the room, but I did not think of it as home. Like the traveling business people in Espino’s study (2002), I knew the hotel room was just a temporary place to sleep, and so did not form an attachment to it.

Using our cell phones on the range or in the truck was strictly forbidden, so my classmates and I made small talk while we waited for our turns behind the wheel. I began to warm up toward them, and once I stopped being so aloof, they warmed toward me. I still did not feel a sense of community within the culture of trucking school, but I also recognized that I had to overcome my shyness, introverted nature, and snobbish tendencies if I was going to learn about the culture of trucking.

On the day of the CDL road test, the nervousness was palpable. I did my best to be positive and supportive of my classmates. When the proctor told me I passed, I grinned from ear to ear and strode across the range to the cluster of my classmates. They were supportive and enthusiastic — “You were doing cartwheels across the tarmac!” one driver said — but later I was confronted by an administrator, who told me a rumor was floating around that I had traded sex for a passing grade on the test. I was a little embarrassed and offended, but I also figured the rumor was started by one of the students who had a habit of giving everyone a hard time. I decided to let it go. After all, I probably wasn’t going to see these guys again. We were all
getting ready to move on to the next step of the training process: Four weeks on a trainer’s truck, where we would take our knowledge about how to operate the machinery and spin it into knowledge about how to drive a truck.

_Trainer No. 1 and the Relationship With Truck Stops_

Training is commonly accepted as one of the more difficult parts of the process of becoming a truck driver. The student is put in a space the size of a large closet with a complete stranger. No matter how respectful they may try to be, conflicts are bound to arise. The teachers at the Salt Lake terminal prepared us for this reality and told us to stick it out and act like adults. Nevertheless, I ended up switching trainers three times

My first trainer was a talented driver and a generous person, but we had vastly different definitions of what constituted appropriate boundaries between a male teacher and his female student. I had very little personal space when I drove with him. If he was awake and I was driving, he would attempt to engage me in conversation, and his preferred topic was sex. Moreover, I was not allotted the space that the rules of the company specified would belong to the student: that is, the top bunk in the sleeper berth. After about a week, my trainer piled a bunch of heavy stuff on my bunk, giving me no choice but to sleep in his bed. Since he typically drove while I slept, this generally did not present a problem. However, on more than one occasion, I woke up to a parked truck and my trainer crawling into bed with me — oriented head to foot, but still an infringement on my personal space and very much against company rules. I was perfectly justified in feeling uncomfortable, but I felt guilty nonetheless. On the road, my trainer provided all my food and refused to let me help pay for it. He had also introduced me to his family, and I had spent the night at his house early on in my training, eating a delicious home-cooked meal and then jumping on the trampoline with two of his children. I felt terrible
that I didn’t trust their father, and didn’t want to ask for a new trainer for fear that the news might make it back to them and make them dislike me — or worse, distrust their dad.

During this challenging time, I found a sense of refuge and privacy in a rather unlikely place: truck stop showers. In these private rooms, which usually also include a toilet and sink, I could enjoy a little alone time, get a break from my trainer, and brush my teeth without having to feel like I needed to offer an explanation to the stranger at the sink next to me. "I never got used to brushing my teeth in public," I confessed to Derek once.

"It takes awhile."

"Yeah, it's like, it's an oddly personal thing, brushing your teeth."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm used to it now. I mean, I still prefer to do it at truck stops rather than rest areas, 'cause truck stops, it, it's not as surprising. At a rest area I still get funny looks from four-wheeler [passenger vehicle] passengers. People walk in there and they're like, 'The hell is that guy doing?'"

Daily access to a private bathroom is a luxury truck drivers simply do not have. They must perform activities typically thought of as private in a public setting, which opens them up to unfair and unwelcome scrutiny. And if brushing one’s teeth in public can make one feel exposed, using the toilet is even harder.

Figure 1. The author outside Iowa 80, the world's largest truck stop.
At one point near the beginning of the 2004 stoner comedy *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, the two main characters are on the run from a campus cop who’s trying to confiscate their marijuana. They hide out in a ladies’ restroom, and much to their dismay, two hot girls walk in, complaining about having “the worst case of taco shits” (Leiner 2004). The women, making the best of an awkward situation, decide to engage in a game of what they call “Battleshits.” The resulting noises and smells are so revolting that Harold and Kumar decide to take their chances with the campus cop, and run, horrified, out of the bathroom. The DVD extras feature a segment that describes how the sound artists obtained the fart noises for this raunchy scene: putting microphones in a truck stop bathroom. The humor is predicated on the idea that truck drivers take notably loud, notably disgusting shits. However, this charge is completely unfair. The vast majority of trucks do not come equipped with toilets, so drivers have no choice but to use public restrooms. Still, this illustrates why truck stops are rarely considered homes: If home is indeed, as Pallasmaa (1995: 138), Ellegård, and Vilhelmson (2004: 283) assert, the realm of the private personality, then having to perform a private ritual in a public place would make it difficult, if not impossible, to feel at home in that place. Furthermore, if home is a place of control where what one does matters and makes sense, how could one feel at home in a place where one’s actions are regarded with suspicion, confusion, or criticism (Jackson 1995: 154)?

Finally, it is worth noting that truck stops are ultimately capitalistic spaces, and any comfort drivers take from them comes at a price. The emphasis on the bottom line is hard to miss, and as such, a sense of reciprocal harmony and balanced power between drivers and this environment is conspicuously absent (Jackson 1995: 110-111, 123).

Derek summed up the ambivalent relationship drivers have with truck stops nicely. "Truck stops," he said with a sigh. "Eh, they're just something to be dealt with. ... Sometimes it's
more of a necessary evil than anything else. I do like to park in truck stops because they have food and bathrooms." Truck stops are a practical place to visit since they provide food, fuel, facilities, and ample truck parking, but practicality alone does not make a home.

_Trainer No. 2 and the Acceptance of the Trucking Community_

After a few weeks, I couldn’t take living with my first trainer anymore. The learning environment was toxic, and even though he had changed his behavior at my request, I still felt uncomfortable around him. The damage had been done, so I was reassigned to a female trainer. Unfortunately, she disliked me immediately. Within a few hours of meeting me, she had expressed misgivings about both my research and my ability to drive, called me a “tramp,” and accused me of lying about being harassed by my first trainer. The night ended with her screaming at me after I accidentally got us lost while trying to follow a detour. A few days later, her GPS gave us some faulty directions, and as we navigated back toward the freeway, I brushed the side of the truck against some low-hanging tree branches. This is a common and often unavoidable occurrence, but my trainer insisted that the incident constituted an accident — a fireable offense — and sent a report to the safety department. She did this without my knowledge, and when we were told to return to the terminal, I thought it was so I could switch trainers yet again. Imagine my dismay when I found myself in a meeting with the head of the safety department, who told me they’d have to let me go. I was shell-shocked, but I managed to offer an explanation and beg him to reconsider. After hearing my side of the story, he told me he would discuss the extent of the damage with the mechanics in the shop, and that he would let me know the next day whether I would be allowed to stay.

I returned to my dorm in Building 2, a tiny, cold prison of a room with white concrete walls and bunk beds, and grabbed my wallet, my journal, and my phone. A group of drivers sat at
the picnic tables outside the building, but I ignored them when I walked back out. I was frustrated and overwhelmed, on the verge of hysterics, and wanted two things and two things only: to be left alone, and to have a drink.

The reports of truck drivers as a group of hard drinkers have been greatly exaggerated. Although some drivers drink, the practice is forbidden by most companies and frowned upon by most of the drivers I spoke with while I was on the road. Strict alcohol laws forbid the presence of alcohol in trucks, and even drivers who are on their rest period are not allowed to be in the truck when they have been drinking, as it technically constitutes a DUI. Drinking technically constituted a breach of my contract with ChillCo. I didn’t care. I sat at a table in a nearby restaurant with my thoughts and a beer. I felt desperately alone. I never heard from my friends in Atlanta anymore; for all I knew, they had forgotten me. Atlanta seemed like another world, and a faraway one at that. Not that I wanted to go back. I wanted to drive a truck. I knew I was capable, and I knew my research (and, by extension, the future of my academic career) hung in the balance. I felt so powerless, as though I were completely at the mercy of people and decisions beyond my control. The whole world seemed like it was against me. I felt defensive but at the same time incredibly angry with myself. If only I were a better driver!

I drained my first beer and ordered a second. I considered calling my mom or dad, but explaining the story seemed like a monumental task. The nature of the experience was too esoteric, rooted too deeply in the culture of trucking, and unless I explained all those nuances, they wouldn’t understand. Neither would my sister — not that I could call her anyway, because she was in Japan doing her own research for the summer. The people who’d known me my whole life wouldn’t understand what I was going through — in a sense, wouldn’t understand who I had become. The other drivers wouldn’t understand either. How could I communicate to them
the pressure I felt as a graduate student? They’d probably just think I was a snob. They probably agreed that I was an unsafe driver, that I had no business being there. Tears slid down my cheeks, and I wiped them away as discreetly as I could. I felt cut loose from any semblance of a social network, like I didn’t belong anywhere, like no one would understand.

Only I knew that wasn’t true. There was one person I could talk to. I paid my tab, walked out into the cool night air, out into the undeveloped desert that lay waiting just beyond the comfortable boundaries of the restaurant, and called Derek. He picked up after the second ring and asked how it was going. I felt a pang of guilt. He had been so supportive during the ordeal with the first trainer, assuring me that the behavior was inappropriate and encouraging me to ask to be transferred to a woman’s truck. He was the one who told me that brushing against tree branches wasn’t a big deal. He had put up with so much of my whining, and he was getting nothing in return. But I had no one else to talk to. Only Derek would understand my dilemma from both the trucking and academic perspectives.

“Are you busy right now?” I asked, trying to hide the tears and beer in my voice.

“Nah, I’m just cleaning out some stuff from the attic. What’s going on, driver?”

I took a shaky breath and let it all pour out: the frustration, the alienation, the isolation, the sense that no one back home understood me and that everyone at ChillCo hated me. This last part made him laugh. "How is a pretty girl the least popular person at trucking school?" he asked. And for the first time all summer, I realized that the problem was me. I needed to drop my superior attitude, let down my shields, make the effort to be friendly. If I opened myself up to the possibility of friendship with other truck drivers, I reasoned, they would come to understand me, and maybe even like me. And what choice did I have, really? They were my only option for a community. The only reason I felt excluded was because I had excluded myself. Well, not
anymore. I resolved then and there that I would stop resisting and embrace this new community.

The very next morning, I walked out of Building 2, spotted a group of older truck drivers sitting at a table, strode up, and asked, "Is it all right if I join you?" They looked at each other, shared a smile, and said, "Sure." And that’s how, blithely unaware, I sat right down at a table full of trainers — the trucking equivalent of walking past a bunch of college students and popping a squat amongst the professors. They let me in on the joke after a few minutes. I was embarrassed and offered to leave, but they insisted I stay. Someone produced cheese and crackers, and we passed a pleasant hour talking about fishing, camping, trucking, and, eventually, what exactly I was doing there. I came away from the interaction with a sense of optimism. Maybe I really could make a place for myself in the social context of trucking.

My experience is illustrative of the complex nature of creating and maintaining meaningful relationships within the context of trucking. For truck drivers, social networks are broad and diffuse, and are constituted by the presence and absence of two major poles: on one end, the deeply rooted bond shared with physically distant friends and family, and on the other, the shallow but immediate experience-based community of truck drivers. Their social networks, all the feelings of home that these relationships engender, and the distance between and across which they are constituted may be described as an intranational migrant circuit (Striffler 2007: 677).

Truck drivers do not see their families or members of other stationary social networks on a regular basis. They also face a number of obstacles that stand in the way communication: unpredictable schedules, switching between time zones, the danger of using the phone while driving, road noise, and esoteric nuances of the trucking experience that may be hard for non-drivers to understand. In the face of these challenges, I allowed all but my most meaningful
social relationships to atrophy. This was in part because I knew my experience as a truck driver was temporary, and that once I returned to a stationary lifestyle, my friends, family, and I could pick up where we left off. However, this was not the only factor at play. This isn’t one of my better qualities, but unless I’m deeply emotionally invested in a person, I won’t make much of an effort to communicate with them if doing so would be inconvenient for me. Don’t get me wrong, this makes me feel guilty, but guilt is easier to deal with than with what strikes me as the overwhelming responsibility of maintaining regular conversations with all the people I used to know. I’ll even sometimes go so far as to convince myself that those people don’t mean anything to me, and never really did. It’s an obvious defense mechanism, and an effective one.

I share these personal reflections because I’m certain I’m not the only person who feels this way. However, for some drivers, staying in touch is a worthwhile hassle — or not a hassle at all. For instance, Peter, a driver of four years, emphasized the importance of staying in touch with his fiancé through phone calls, letters, and inviting her out on the road with him whenever she had the chance. By staying in touch, he made her presence a part of his life on the road, and their relationship actually flourished. Technological advances have made it easier than ever to maintain relationships and mitigate absences through the use of cell phones, video chat, email, instant messaging, social media, and even multiplayer online video games. Nurturing these emotional connections gives truck drivers like Peter the opportunity to maintain a sense of identity, understanding, and belonging rooted in the relationships they share with the people and places “back home” (Striffler 2007: 684; Constable 1999: 208).

Of course, it’s worth mentioning that Peter planned on quitting his trucking job when he got married, and so long-distance was a temporary inconvenience. For career drivers, the long-term effects of being away from loved ones can be devastating, as I learned from an interview
with Sammy, a driver of more than three decades. It was around 3 p.m. on a weekday, and we
were sitting in Southern Comfort, a trucker bar, drinking Coors, chain-smoking, and chatting.
Sammy answered my questions willingly enough, if a little halfheartedly, until one in particular
— how do you define home? — seemed to strike a nerve.

“I live alone,” he said. “If I had somebody to take care of, my wife or kids or whatever,
then that's okay. I'd still bitch. But living, being a single truck driver and paying the rent I pay,
there's no sense in paying the rent. But what am I gonna do? I got a lot of stuff. So.”

“And that's basically what your home is, just a place to keep your stuff?”

“Pretty much.”

I thought for a moment, and then took a plunge: “Does that make you sad?”

“Absolutely,” he answered immediately. “I can't have a relationship. Had a girlfriend over
here. Met her in here. ... Two years, almost, was it, 'bout two years ago. I lost her. ... When you
meet somebody, that, that was special.” Here his voice got thick, and he paused, and to my
mortification and horrified fascination, I could see tears gathering on his lower lids. “I can't be
with her.”

He began to weep. I had no idea what to do. I'd just met this guy and within 30 minutes
had made him cry. I stood up and gave him an awkward hug. He halfheartedly returned it with
one arm.

“It's okay,” I said, unconvincingly.

“It's not okay,” he said, weeping. “I haven't been in love with somebody for years.”

“It's okay,” I repeated, and, casting about for something optimistic to say, I offered,

“Have you considered trying another career?”
“What? I don't know anything. I could drive a forklift, or... I'm computer illiterate. ... Spent my life. It's all turned around and just fucked me.” He was still weeping.

Quietly, I said, “If you want me to stop recording, I can.”

“It was a g—,” he choked. “It was a good life.”

I tried to cheer him up by babbling about how valuable truck drivers are. He smiled wryly and responded that he had hauled Jack Daniels and Jim Beam and cigarettes and Zippos out of Pennsylvania. Choking back fresh tears, he said, “It's sad what this fucking shit has done to people. That that's all they have.” He picked up his pack of Marlboro Reds and regarded it wearily. “It's all they have.” He steeled up slightly. “Sorry.”

“It's okay. You don't need to be sorry.”

Sighing, he said, “It's just, it's just so sad. This country, politics, or whatever. Just. There's a lot of sad truck drivers out there.” He began to cry again. “There is.”

Sammy’s lifestyle as a truck driver had taken its toll on his personal life, contributing to the demise of a meaningful romantic relationship. This is a common occurrence among people who travel but attempt to maintain a social network in a fixed location, such as the traveling businessperson who endures isolation in a hotel room, only to return home to find that all the missed interactions have rendered him awkward, irrelevant, a stranger (Espino et al. 2002: 309, 317-318). However, it isn’t necessarily the case for all truck drivers. Indeed, Derek’s last romantic relationship blossomed as a direct result of his lifestyle as an over-the-road driver.

**Derek:** She wasn't that interested at first, but I asked if I could send her a postcard. She said, “Sure!”

I put a lot of work into those postcards. A *lot* of work. A lot of times, I would sometimes buy multiples of the same postcard, just to use them as drafts. See if I could make everything fit. Or, you know, see how I could say it in the space available or something. So I would write it out, “Oh no that doesn't work, I need to cut that sentence shorter.”

**Me:** That's really, really sweet.
**Derek:** That's how I got her. It wouldn't have worked without the postcards.

**Me:** What kinds of things did you say in the postcards?

**Derek:** Trying to make some kind of statement about what I had seen or how it relates to the experience or, you know, life in general, or the human condition maybe, or silly, philosophical nonsense. You know, sometimes it was just something funny, like a funny story.

**Me:** That’s sweet.

**Derek:** I liked it! I used to send a lot of postcards. You know, send 'em to grandparents and friends, not just girls I was trying to hook up with, trying to woo. But the nice thing about it is that, you know, when I'd have to sit down to write the postcard it would make me reflect on where I was, what I had seen during the day, how the experience of the trip had been. And it put things in different context a lot of times. 'Cause I'd have to reflect on it and try and say something interesting about it. I'm not the kind of person to send a postcard, like, “I wish you were here. Sunset was beautiful.” I don't want those postcards. [With quiet emphasis.] I mean, I wrote postcards. They were full. And small writing so that I could fit more sentences on there. And there were lots of times where I didn't get much sleep 'cause I was up too late writing postcards. I got blisters on my fingers sometimes from writing so many.

Derek’s use of the old-fashioned medium of postcards, the personal touch of his own handwriting, and thoughtful musings about the wandering life allowed him to tap into a cultural model of the truck driver as a worldly traveler (Jackson 1995: 84-87). He effectively communicated the romanticism of the wandering lifestyle, depicting the “harmony … between man and universe” (Chatwin 1987: 178). In reflecting upon and sharing the philosophical richness (and funny stories) that emerged from his experience on the road, he was also forging a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world. Those postcards bridged the distance between his solitary lifestyle and the people with whom he felt a meaningful social connection, pulling them into his own personal intranational migrant circuit, and imbuing the larger physical and emotional settings of his experience with the various homelike meanings inherent in his social networks (Terkenli 1995: 332).

The postcards worked, and Derek and his girlfriend dated while he drove over-the-road. When the company he worked for went under, he returned to Atlanta, where he could see his
girlfriend every day. It wasn’t long, he told me, before he longed for more space. Ultimately, he made the decision to return to over-the-road driving, and his girlfriend broke up with him shortly thereafter. Absence, for Derek at least, seemed to make the heart grow fonder.

I share this anecdote not to dispute the significance of Sammy's experience, but instead to illustrate that meaningful social and romantic relationships can be nurtured, maintained, and even created within and across the space of long distance. Yet even Derek has his doubts about his ability to maintain relationships with people “back home.” After interviewing Sammy, I sent a text message to Derek telling him about the experience, which had left me deeply shaken. "I like being by myself, and I like living in the moment, but god damn, I don't want to end up 60 and broke and alone and crying to a stranger in a bar," I wrote him.

A few moments later, my phone lit up with a new message from Derek: "Neither do I, and frankly that possibility concerns me."

I would like to shift my focus away from long-distance relationships and toward the nature of interaction among truck drivers. After all, the notion of home is tied up in the web of social interactions in which the home is situated, which may not necessarily include family. Just as the shared experience of RVers allows them to forge a meaningful community and to feel at home even among strangers, so too do truck drivers find a sense of belonging in the common experience of trucking (Counts and Counts 1992: 155, 169, 175).

I have many fond memories of swapping "trucker stories" with other truck drivers. Talking shop in a Love's parking lot at 4:30 a.m. before I hit the road and the other guy hit the sack. Standing outside of my truck on a hot Nashville evening, shrieking with laughter at the tall tales this one driver kept spinning. ("Old drivers never die," he repeated to me with a mischievous glint in his eye. "They just get their Peterbilt." To this day, I'm still not quite sure
what the innuendo was supposed to be.) Listening patiently to a driver who cornered me during my post-trip inspection of my trailer and talked my ear off about all the times he'd been screwed over. I spent my Fourth of July sitting in a mom 'n' pop place in Idaho, making conversation with a driver who paused after he decided he could trust me, reached into his pocket, pulled out a lump of silver metal, and placed it in my palm, which immediately sank with the weight. "That's platinum," he told me, taking it back and putting it in his pocket. "I'm gonna be rich."

Truck driver conversations tend to revolve around where the driver has been and where he is going, what company he drives for, how much he gets paid, and how much home time he gets. Usually, drivers complain that they don’t get home enough, with frustration stemming not just from missing loved ones, but also from a sense of powerlessness. After all, a driver may put in for home time weeks in advance and then be told the night before he is due home that he simply can’t go. For truck drivers, who may value their job because of the independence it gives them, this is particularly frustrating.

Other drivers seem to accept the fact that they are away from home for long periods of time. Some may even enjoy the break from the responsibilities they have there. For instance, Derek once told me that going out on the road felt like a vacation for him. When he was home, he had to worry about things like paying bills or fixing the leaky sink. When he was on the road, though, all he had to do was drive.

Drivers may also gripe about their dispatchers giving them undesirable loads or about laws and regulations that unfairly target truck drivers. They may also complain about poor driving on behalf of “four-wheelers,” or passenger vehicles, as well as other truck drivers. Finally, they may tell stories about times when they’ve successfully navigated tricky driving situations. These stories may seem like bragging, but they can also present an opportunity to seek
out other drivers' opinions about how to react to a given situation without actually having to ask point-blank for advice (Ouellett 1994: 116-117). Peter said he found a sense of solidarity and community among drivers discussing their occupation: “Even strangers, you know like, you can talk to ’em. And I've run into a lot of people that I've set there and talk to for hours. … I've got their phone number and everything, and now we keep in contact with each other.” However, not everyone gleans this same sense of community from trucker stories. Sammy, for instance, said he finds other drivers and their preferred topics of conversation — money, lack of home time, traffic tickets, and the like — annoying:

It's just story after story. I been there, done that with, you know, with the stories. I don't even like going into the truck stops to eat. ... One side of my head to the other, about this and that, cryin’ and moaning. We call 'em truck driving stories, and after bein' on the road this long, I'm tired of truck driver stories, you know?

Ultimately, the amount of influence social interaction has in the creation of home is personal, and depends upon the unique attitudes of the individual. It may also depend upon how long the driver has been on the road. However, the abilities to maintain meaningful social relationships with one’s home base as in a trans- or intranational migrant circuit, as well as the ability to create meaningful relationships rooted in a shared experience rather than a history or place, are valuable mechanisms for the creation of a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world even in the rootless world of trucking. The community shared among truck drivers transforms the solitary experience of driving into a social act. It situates drivers’ personal experiences within the larger, more broadly meaningful context of the trucking lifestyle.

*Trainer No. 3 and Falling in Love With the Road*

When I returned to the safety department, they gave me good news: I could continue my training. I was obviously relieved, but at the same time, quite anxious about meeting my next
trainer. Would I have to endure more low-level sexual harassment or verbal abuse? What if he or she was even worse than the first two? How could I possibly endure 10 more days of this kind of treatment? I grappled with these questions as I sat across a desk from the training coordinator. He looked at me sitting there, shoulders hunched, trying to make myself seem small, and with a little smirk, asked, “Do you want a male or a female trainer?”

“I want someone who won’t yell at me!” I blurted out.

Still smirking, the coordinator looked up at a guy standing in the office, leafing through paperwork.

“Jim, you taking on any students?”

Jim looked a little pained. "I just upgraded Danny."

"How'd he do?"

"Passed with flying colors."

I sat there, listening awkwardly. I felt like a kid in a room with adults talking.

"Well, she only needs a 10 days."

Jim and I looked at each other. He was skinny, with a pointed beard and shaggy hair shot through with steely gray. I squinted, imagining his camouflage cargo pants were black skinny jeans and placing a purple beret at an angle on his head, and decided that maybe he was an aging beatnik hippie.

Jim cocked his head. "Well, I guess I'll have to tell my granddad I'm missing the fireworks."

We hadn't even gotten out of the Salt Lake City limits before he was talking about Obamacare, death panels, and a Palin-Rice ticket for 2012. I distinctly remember thinking something like, "It's gonna be a long 10 days." I couldn’t have been more wrong. A week and a
half later, when we were rolling back into Salt Lake, I was fighting back tears. Despite our superficial differences, Jim and I treated each other with mutual respect, and discovered we shared a great deal in common. Although I can’t speak for Jim, I can say that I viewed our differences as a means of learning from each other. I’m so grateful to have met him, and I’m proud to call him my friend.

I did not consider Jim’s truck to be my home, but I did feel more at home there than anywhere else I had stayed all summer. In fact, when we returned to the terminal for my final test, I opted to stay in my bunk in his truck rather than have a dorm room to myself. This sense of feeling-at-home occurred in part because he gave me privacy and personal space. Rather than the feelings of powerlessness and violation that I experienced with my first two trainers, I felt safe with Jim (Schwartz 1968: 747-748). Moreover, the truck was a setting in which we had shared meaningful social interactions, moving from strangers carefully navigating the conversational waters to friends who shared personal conversations predicated on trust — not to mention a set of private jokes. The truck soaked up these interactions, becoming a sort of physical embodiment of our friendship (Terkenli 1995: 332).

It’s worth noting that Jim didn’t consider the truck home either. Although he used the term casually — as in, “I keep my truck clean, but I don’t make my bed. An unmade bed looks lived-in. Makes it seem like home.” — he also told me he had no special attachment to the truck. He had been a driver for decades, after all, and had driven many different trucks over the course of his career. He appreciated the craftsmanship of the machine — a brand-new Peterbilt — but it wasn’t the truck itself where he felt a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world. That’s because the magic of trucking isn’t inherent in the truck itself. Instead, it’s the nature of the interactions that driving the truck enables. The truck allowed me as a driver to experience the road in a way I
never thought possible. It made me big enough to drink in the entire country.

Jim was, simply, in love with driving. His grandfather, who was his hero and his mentor, had taught him how to drive a truck when he was only a pre-teen, and he had worked either in or around trucks ever since. Yet even though he had been driving for about as long as I’ve been alive, he still approached it with the enthusiasm of a rookie. He had no wife and no children, and although he had a few places he liked to visit, he told me he felt most at home when he was driving. “Sometimes I just listen to the sound of the wheels on the road,” he told me once. “That’s the most beautiful music there is.”

Driving a truck, I learned from watching Jim, is far more than just using a tool. When the right person is behind the wheel, it can be a meditative experience that comes to shape the way the truck driver defines himself and his relationship with the world. When I worked as a truck driver, driving became my reality and my default state of being. Everything else — sleeping, eating, getting out to stretch, loading and unloading — felt like pressing pause. The world just didn’t look right unless it was speeding past me at 65 miles per hour.

I’m not alone in feeling this way. The act of driving and the identity of being a truck driver are often described in visceral terms. As Eileen, one of the classroom instructors at ChillCo with seven years of trucking under her belt, told me:

It gets in your blood. You start going down the road, and you get the itch. You wanna keep moving. If you’re not out there drivin’ and goin’ places, you feel too sedate. And everything else becomes too mundane and routine and confining once you get used to going down the road, and the longer you stay out there doing it, the more it becomes that way. You just, "I gotta go. Gotta go."

Eileen evokes a bodily relationship with the act of driving through her use of the words “blood” and “itch,” as well as in the description of its antithesis, staying still, as “confining.” Anthropologist Lawrence Ouellet (1994: 104) also describes truck drivers as “having the road in
their blood." This visceral imagery, the idea of the road as a physical part of the driver, speaks to
the sense of identity formation that comes from driving and the connection and dissolving of
boundaries that comes from the relationship people share with a place they know as home
(Jackson 1995: 84-87, 122). In the United States, the road represents escape, adventure, and
possibility. Since truck drivers have the road in their blood, they are seen as embodying these
mythical connotations. Like the wandering dervish who becomes the Way, truck drivers become
the road (Ouellet 1994: 103-104; Chatwin 1987: 179).

The potential environment of the truck allows the driver to experience the road as an
affective environment (Pennartz 1999: 95-96). The journey becomes the action that provides the
sensation of being-at-home-in-the-world, evoking feelings of stability and comfort, of meaning,
order, and predictability (Jackson 1995: 23; Benjamin 1995: 298-299). Driving is an interaction,
a relationship, between the driver-in-truck and the road. Knowing how to recognize which
elements of the driving environment may be dangerous (construction zones, potholes, debris,
dangerous drivers, steep grades, sharp curves, ice, snow, water, and unpredictable traffic lights
are just a few that come to mind) and how to react to them in a safe, responsible manner
contributes to a sense of reciprocity and connectedness with the world. The environment of the
road shapes the driver’s experience; through her reactions, she shapes the experience. Being able
to safely pilot an 80,000 pound vehicle may give the driver a sense of control, ownership,
belonging, and self-expression — hallmarks, it is worth noting, of home (Jackson 1995: 110-111,
123, 154; Rapoport 1992: 27-28).

Thus, the road has atmosphere. It enables a mode of communication between driver-and-
truck and the wider environment. Even though this interaction technically counts as work, it’s
enjoyable work that can still engender a sense of freedom, relaxation, and absence of boredom.
As I got used to the lifestyle, the road came to be a place of order, meaning, and predictability (Pennartz 1999: 99-101; Benjamin 1995: 298-299).

It also serves as a constant reminder of humanity and society. I remember one evening when I was driving SR-26 through Oregon. The sun had set, but the sky was still illuminated yellow-orange. I crested a hill, and the land stretching out in either direction as far as the eye could see was brown and dotted with scrub brush and cut through with the long black ribbon of the road, empty. I thought about the engineers who designed the road I was driving, and the construction crews that built it. The road running through that vast, unforgiving landscape seemed like a small, brave assertion of the existence of humanity, tiny handwriting on an enormous blank wall: “We were here.” I followed it, pulling 60,000 pounds of french fries behind me.

The road is the one constant in trucking. It is always driver-and-truck and the road. And I knew that if I followed it, it would take me wherever I needed to go. After they've been driving awhile — a year, maybe, or two — truck drivers carry a map of the United States in their minds. The longer a person spends as a truck driver, the more of the country they get to know well. Certain areas hold special significance for them. The road becomes a place where they feel at-home-in-the-world. I had begun to feel at home there, too.

After my 10 days on the road with Jim, we returned to the Salt Lake terminal, where I took and passed my upgrade test. ChillCo hired me on as a driver, and then gave me the news that I would be returning to Atlanta to pick out my new truck. After a month and a half, I was going home — or was I?
Returning “Home” and Meeting Mrs. Bear

As soon as I arrived in Atlanta, I started making up for lost time: celebratory drinks, staying out late, sharing stories, catching each other up, and relishing with newfound appreciation the convenience of traveling by bike or by car. It was great to see everyone again, but at the same time, I found that I no longer fit in the way I had. My social interactions bore the mark of my absence. There were pauses in conversation that hadn’t been there before. Yet even though my return was somewhat awkward, I also felt a sense of self-reinvention, and even prestige. It was pretty cool to be able to tell people I was a truck driver (Espino et al. 2002: 309; Constable 1999: 213). All in all, I took the awkwardness of my return in stride. It wasn’t like this was a nuclear family of which I was an integral part. It was just a group of friends from which I’d temporarily uprooted myself. They would be there when I eventually returned from my summer adventure. In the meantime, I couldn’t wait to get back to the lifestyle I had fallen so deeply in love with.

When I went to the terminal to pick out my truck, I ran into two of my classmates. I was happy to see them, and felt somehow more comfortable with them than with my social network in Atlanta. My friend Gregory told me there was an old Volvo available, but that he’d heard there was a nearly new Freightliner that had just come to the lot less than an hour before. My other friend, Thomas, slouched against a wall, pouting a little. He had gotten to the lot earlier than I had, and was assigned an older truck. He wasn’t happy that, as the only other driver picking out a company truck, I had first dibs on the new one.
Gregory and I stepped out onto the lot, where we were greeted by the sight of two trucks sitting side by side. One was a beat-up white Volvo that was several years old. It had the sort of outdated on-board computer (known as a QualComm) that I hadn’t used in my training, and and smelled foul, like feces and body odor. The other truck was a red 2012 Freightliner Cascadia that sat gleaming mellowly in the sun. It had a brand-new QualComm, tall ceilings, a spacious sleeper. I couldn’t believe my luck. It was love at first sight.

First things first: I had to pick out a name. It was pretty easy — my bike’s name is Mr. Bear, so I decided to play matchmaker. The day before I began driving solo, I spent a sweltering afternoon decorating Mrs. Bear, sweat dripping down my face as I taped pictures and mementos to the wall, strung up scarves and a Tibetan prayer flag over the bed, stocked one of the cabinets with a stack of books I intended to read, and painstakingly hung pretty purple curtains over the thick, ugly vinyl curtains separating the sleeper berth from the cab. I draped a man's work shirt over the passenger seat and hung a trucker’s cap on the armrest to give the illusion that I was sharing the truck with a husband or boyfriend. The decor was more excessive than most drivers may put up, but I wanted my new living space to express my identity and feel like home.
Everywhere I looked, I saw something I liked or that was useful in some way, and I felt I had cultivated a pleasant atmosphere.

Decoration is an example of how truck drivers may intentionally create a pleasant atmosphere through the manipulation of potential environments in order to develop a positive affective environment (Benjamin 1995: 298-299; Pennartz 1999: 95-96). Through a process similar to territoriality, I created a relaxing environment that reflected my sense of identity. The truck may technically have been ChillCo property, but by physically altering it with my favorite pictures and decorations — symbolic links to my history, personal and cultural values, and meaningful social relationships — I made it, in a sense, my own (Pennartz 1999: 100; Hirschon
and Gold 1982: 63-65; Bardhi et al. 2012: 510; Cieraad 1992: 2; Dolan 1999: 62; Allen 2008: 90, 93). These practices are not uncommon among mobile populations, such as RVers and truck drivers (Counts and Counts 1992: 175; Ouellet 1994: 169-170). For instance, a particularly friendly and gregarious driver who asked to be referred to as Papa Smurf once proudly showed me the cab of his truck. He had separated it from the sleeper berth with a wolf blanket, and kept a Papa Smurf doll on his dashboard. Derek also felt a definite attachment to the truck he had driven at his first over-the-road job with CarpetHaul, readily admitting, "That's my home, more than my apartment is, to be honest. 'Cause that's where I spend most of my time, and I have everything set up just the way I like it. It's like a little apartment." Having ridden in his truck with him, I could see why he felt this way. His guitar hung on a wall, his skateboard leaned against the wall behind the driver's seat, a small library and a stash of snacks occupied a storage space above the windshield, and the entire space was clean and well organized. When I asked him if he ever got homesick for Atlanta, he responded:

I have everything I need in the truck. What am I supposed to miss? ... I put a lot of thought and time and work into that truck. Like, I liked my truck. The truck was 1884, that was the truck number. That was mine. And, you know, even if they'd offered, I mean, they did offer me upgrades to newer trucks, and I turned 'em down, because that was mine. And I personally, I customized it. I went to the junkyard and bought interior parts that didn't come with mine. I installed cabinets that weren't originally there. ... I made it mine. I customized the interior a lot more than just installing a guitar hanger. I did a lot to it. I built shelves inside the existing cabinetry so they looked stock, even though it wasn't. ... So, yeah, I mean, it definitely had a sense of home. I definitely — a lot of times, I felt more comfortable in the truck than I did at home, like in my apartment that I rent. ... And there were plenty of times where I would be in Atlanta for the night, parked across the street from my apartment, and I slept in my truck.

For drivers like Papa Smurf, Derek, and me, the truck meets many of the criteria of home: a place of control and connectedness. Through customizations large and small, we infused the physical environment with meaning and self-identity (Rapoport 1992: 27-28; Terkenli 1995:}
However, not all drivers personalize their trucks to this extent. Audrey, a driver of eight years, told me that she used to bring books with her and unpack her things in the truck, but that it was annoying to have to move them back into her house. Peter was the same way. Although he kept his truck well organized, he had not made any attempts to personalize it. Instead, he viewed the truck as a temporary place to sleep until he got married and could quit driving. Both Peter and Audrey exhibited a liquid relationship to their possessions, keeping their trucks clear of clutter and limiting what they brought to just the basics in order to minimize the hassle of moving them back and forth between their trucks and houses (Bardhi et al. 2012: 519, 521). Sammy, too, viewed the personalization of his truck in a utilitarian way, though he put it in slightly more grim terms:

> I have privacy. I have two sets of curtains, one that goes all the way around, you know, the windows in the front, and I have the one pretty much in the middle of the cab. ... My bunk is pretty spacious. Now these people that have smaller bunk space when they, lot of them don't have that outside curtain. When they close the inside curtain ... it's like sleeping in a coffin. ... It's confining anyway, don't get me wrong.

In describing the affective environment of his sleeper berth as “confining” and obliquely drawing the comparison to a coffin, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the potential environment of his truck — and perhaps, by extension, to his living situation as a whole (Pennartz 1999: 102-104). Rather than changing his environment to create a more pleasant atmosphere, he seemed to make the choice to grudgingly endure it, approaching it with a distinctly blue-collar attitude, "that essentially masculine self-esteem of doing a hard job well" (Willis 1977: 52). Maybe he was jaded after decades of driving, something I, a rookie who’s never even had her own apartment before, simply cannot understand. Of course, it is also worth noting that he was slightly intoxicated when we conducted our interview. Drinking has a
tendency to either put people in a great mood or a dour one, and I seemed to catch him on a downward slope. Had I come earlier in the evening, he may have sung the praises of his truck and his lifestyle.

Driving Solo: The First Half

I arrived at the terminal on my first day as a truck driver overdressed and a bit hung over from one last night of revelry with my friends. I got my load information, coupled my tractor to an empty trailer, and then, awash in disbelief, drove through the gates. There’s no way this is right, I thought. What the fuck am I doing behind the wheel of a semi truck? I was filled with the crazy urge to turn around and give the truck back. I silenced my self-doubt by cranking up some music — specifically, the over-the-top cocky “Touch the Sky” by Kanye West. I turned onto I-285 westbound, and once I got up to speed, I burst out laughing and yelled victoriously, “Holy shit, I’m driving an 18-wheeler!”

The feeling wouldn't last. I missed my exit off I-20 in Alabama, and then immediately found myself in a construction zone with traffic slowed to a crawl. It took me an hour to get back on track. I got lost again on SR-59 in Tennessee and had to drive 18 miles through even more construction before I could turn back around. I still made it to my pick-up location an hour early, where I struggled to back up to the dock, eventually having to ask another driver to help me. The same thing happened at my second pick-up location. As the day wore on, I began to get discouraged and tired, and mentally slapped myself for staying up until 3 a.m. the night before. I couldn’t stop, though — I had to do some miles before I could justify going to sleep. While on a break, I got in touch with Derek. He was going to be passing through Chattanooga that night, and encouraged me to meet him there so he could give me an old CB radio he wasn’t using anymore. “There are a lot of big-box stores you can park behind!” he promised me.
I got off at the exit he recommended with my QualComm nagging me that I only had an hour of drive time left. I was exhausted, barely able to keep my eyes open. I saw the stores he was talking about, but I rolled past them, holding out for a better option. There was none, and I realized with growing horror that I was driving my 18-wheeler directly into a residential neighborhood. The chances of finding a place with enough space to turn around were slim to nil. I’d have to back out. I couldn’t even back up to a dock door without someone directing me. I was screwed. All hope seemed lost. “This is SO BAD! THIS IS THE WORST!” I screamed, and then, like a gift from above, a bank with a spacious parking lot appeared on my right. Thank god! I got turned back around, but I was still so frustrated and exhausted that I could barely register what was happening. Up ahead, I spied a trailer parked behind a Rooms to Go. “YES!” I screamed, and turned into the parking lot, drove around behind the building, and parked my truck crookedly across several parking spots. I changed my logbook status to “Sleeper Berth” and shakily put my head down on the wheel for a moment before I texted Derek to let him know where to find me.

The handwriting in my fieldnote journal that night was a barely legible scrawl: “Unless you’ve done this job, you have no idea how emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting it is. I’m so tired I don’t even want to walk across the street to use the bathroom.”

Things got easier after that first day. I made my deliveries on time, and my QualComm would make a little noise to tell me about my next load, another nice few hundred miles. And then, a week in, my dispatcher called me to tell me about my next assignment. I had to repower a load (which means hauling a trailer for a driver who does not have enough hours on his drive clock to complete the delivery) going from Jonestown, Pa. into Elizabeth, N.J. — the city, incidentally, where my mother was born. After that, my next load would go all the way to Los Angeles.
“Are you serious?!” I exclaimed.

“It’s a good little load,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. 2,700 miles at 28 cents per mile is a good little load indeed. My very first solo cross-country run. I was thrilled and terrified at the same time. The east coast is notorious among truck drivers for jug-handle turns, low bridges, narrow roads, and aggressive drivers that make it rough going in an 18-wheeler. It seemed like a proving ground. I didn’t want to let my dispatcher down.

The other driver was late getting to Jonestown, and while I waited for him, I sent a hopeful little email to my academic advisor. I had given it some thought, and I felt more time on the road would help me get a better sense of trucking culture. I was really getting the hang of it, and enjoying myself in the process. Whereas school sometimes felt suffocating, even the bad days in the truck made me feel free. If she thought it was all right, maybe I could stay out until December?

She didn’t think it was all right. I was disappointed, but I also understood. I tried to stay optimistic: I had three weeks ahead of me to soak up as much of the trucking experience as I could. The next afternoon, I hummed down I-78 through rural Pennsylvania and into New Jersey. *New Jersey isn’t so bad!* I thought. *Maybe all those other drivers were just yankin’ my chain.* They weren’t. Suddenly, without warning, the lines on the road became indistinct, redirected for construction, and the cars started driving erratically, like angry hornets. The four-lane cramped down to two, and I didn’t realize that I was an exit-only lane until it was too late for me to get over.

*Whatever,* I thought, trying to maintain my optimism. *I’ll just get back on.* And then I realized with abject horror that there was no outlet, and the road was piping me directly into downtown Newark. To my right were roads spanned by low bridges, 10 feet and lower, far too
low for my 13’6” truck to fit under. I’d have to make a left-hand turn across the two lanes of traffic coming in the opposite direction with no turn arrow. To top it all off, it was 4:30 p.m. on a weekday. Hysterical laughter bubbled up in my throat. It was sort of funny, how terribly wrong this situation had gone, but I had to hold it together. “You’re going to get through this,” I told myself. Images of my truck smashed into a pole, news crews taking pictures, being fired and returning to Atlanta in shame flickered through my head, but I pushed them away. Failure isn’t an option in trucking. It’s not even a possibility.

I stopped at a light and plugged my destination into my GPS. I was five miles away. The light turned. I got in the left lane and put on my signal and pulled up to the next intersection. No one let me across. I sat there, blocking traffic, for two rounds of the traffic light, but the cars just kept zipping by, blithely unaware of me sitting behind the windshield, growing increasingly desperate. And then a car in the left lane stopped. Behind the wheel sat a man in his late 40s or early 50s, distinguished-looking, with graying hair. He flashed me across and looked me in the eyes. He saw me, not just my truck. But what about the other lane? I held up my hands: “What do I do?” He just nodded at me, without breaking eye contact. You can do this, that look told me. You just have to do it.

I cautiously pulled forward, and the driver in the right lane stopped. I cranked my wheel as hard to the left as I could, but the turn was tight, and the front of my truck came up against a utility pole. I couldn’t go any further. A moment of panic. I looked back at the driver who had flashed me across. He was still looking at me. He gave me that nod again. I steeled myself. I was in this. I had to do it. Can’t take a knee, I told myself. Can’t let yourself fuck this up, so just accept that what happens happens, do this to the best of your abilities, and go for it with everything you’ve got.
I cranked the wheel hard to the right and backed up, to jackknife my tractor against my trailer and buy a little more room. Then I pulled forward again, cranking my wheel as hard to the left as I could. I missed that pole by the barest inch, but I missed it. I pulled onto that side street with my trailer slowly following behind, straightening out. I looked in my rearview to check my trailer — the wheels were riding over a curb, but I hadn’t hit anything. I pulled forward far enough that my trailer was out of the road and put on my parking brakes and burst into tears of relief. That man saved me. I’ll never know his name and I’ll never be able to thank him, but he saved me.

These hysterics lasted for exactly two seconds before I said aloud, “Pull it together, Marshall! You’re not fucking done yet.” There was still the matter of making my delivery. The warehouse closed in a few minutes, and there was no way I could make my delivery time, but maybe I could catch someone working late and explain my situation. Maybe, I thought, I could park there for the night and get loaded first thing in the morning. Regardless, I had come this far, and I wasn’t about to just go back to a truck stop now. I followed the directions on my GPS and tried to calm myself down, but I couldn’t help but notice with growing apprehension that the route was taking me under a series of lower and lower bridges. 14’2, 14 even, 13’8, and then I pulled over onto the side of the road and looked with horror at what lay before me: four bridges, one right after another, marked with 13’6” signs. What was I going to do? I felt that crazy laughter bubbling up again, but I quelled it and looked around. There was a driveway I might be able to turn around in, or I could try to back up into the street… in 5 o’clock traffic. Worst of all, I was a mile and a half from the warehouse. So close and yet so far.

Just then, a young guy with dark hair driving bobtail (that is, not hauling a trailer) pulled up next to me and made a motion for me to roll down my window. “Follow me!” he yelled.
“I’m thirteen-six!” I yelled back, desperately.

“It’s okay!” he yelled. “You’ll make it, I promise!”

All I could think was, Okay. My brain felt sprained. I decided to just trust this guy. What choice did I have? It was a strange sensation, sitting there behind the wheel of a semi, admitting that I was powerless, and just letting the current take me. I rolled slowly after him, keeping my tires in the ruts in the road, and craned my neck to look out my window and watch with amazement as the bridges cleared the roof of my truck and trailer by the barest sliver of space. Maybe an inch. But I made it. When I slid out from under that last bridge, I broke into an enormous grin. The driver who helped me pulled into the right lane, and I yelled a thank you. He waved and smiled. That made two strangers who saved me that day.

I made it the rest of the way to the distribution center, and sure enough, they were closed. But I ran into a couple of employees on their way out to their cars and explained my situation to them. “She should find Sonja,” one of them said.

“Yeah, she should find Sonja.”

So I found Sonja, who let me get about a quarter of the way through my explanation before she just waved at me to shut up and told me to pull up to dock 41 to get loaded. I did as she said, and a yard dog — a driver in a small, highly maneuverable tractor whose sole job is to hook up to trailers and back them into dock doors — backed my trailer in as I sat in the cool, dim, quiet beer warehouse, watching the lumpers loading my truck and collecting myself. They got me loaded in a lightning-fast 20 minutes and then sent me on my way. I still had six or so hours on my drive clock, but once I got out of New Jersey, I pulled into the first rest area I could find, parked for the night, and slept like a stone.
These were the kinds of experiences I was dreading before I began my fieldwork. I never could have guessed that they would ultimately be what endeared me to the lifestyle. The careful intention and deliberation I put into my decorations turned out to be only partially responsible for my sense of feeling at home in the truck. Those two stressful days served to make the truck a refuge in a world that could be unpredictable and threatening (Rapoport 1992: 27-28; Benjamin 1995: 298-299). Retreating to the sleeper berth after surviving those experiences was the best feeling in the world. I could sleep. I could process what had happened. And I could reflect upon the fact that even though I was scared, I had survived.

That first week saw me not only surviving stressful experiences, but also becoming more adept at driving and at time management. And now I had nothing but three days of Interstate driving ahead of me. No immediate deadlines, freeing me up to make my own schedule and decide when and where I wanted to stop for breaks or to park for the night. I felt powerful, in control, and safe, and my truck in turn began to embody those feelings (Rapoport 1992: 27-28; Terkenli 1995: 332). Indeed, the truck was becoming more than just a tool I used, a vehicle I drove, an environment I existed in. I began to view it not as “it” but as “her,” as Mrs. Bear. Personifying the truck made it easier to accept its idiosyncrasies. For instance, shifting in a truck is different than in a car. The driver has to time it just right, otherwise he’ll hear the distinctive gnash of “grinding gears.” Everyone grinds gears once in awhile, but if it happens too often, it can cause damage to the transmission. This being the case, it was stressful to grind gears when I was driving with my trainers, because I was damaging their personal property. Moreover, my trainers were tasked with keeping an eye on me, judging my actions to ensure I was learning how to safely operate the truck. For this reason, I could never really consider their trucks “home,” even though I felt at home with Jim. If home is a place of privacy and security, judgment — even
if it’s totally justified — may preclude the development of that relationship (Pallasmaa 1995: 138; Ellegård and Vilhelmson 2004: 283; Jackson 1995: 154). When I was driving solo, however, there was no one to scrutinize my mistakes, giving me a sense of privacy and comfort. I didn’t treat this newfound privacy as license to make mistakes — quite the opposite, in fact. Shifting too early or too late and hearing the grind of the gears called up the natural instinct to yell something like, “Oh god, I’m so sorry, Mrs. Bear!” And I really was. My truck was a home, an area of reciprocity and comfort, and so I felt sorry for it when I “hurt” it (Rapoport 1992: 27-28; Jackson 1995: 122). That feeling of comfort applied to far more than just forgiving myself for the occasional mistake. In the truck, I sang songs at the top of my lungs, talked to myself, and sometimes just made weird noises just for the sake of being weird. Home is the embodiment of intimacy and comfort, a relationship that allows a person to let it all hang out, doing and saying things he or she would hesitate or refuse show other people (Rapoport 1992: 27-28, Ellegård and Vilhelmson 2004: 283). It’s a lot like being in love. And in a very real sense, I loved my truck. I had the power to make the truck do what I wanted, and it had the power to help me experience the world in a whole new way. I mattered and my actions mattered in and through the truck. When I was driving Mrs. Bear, I was powerful and brave. I could trust myself and be myself (Jackson 1995: 50, 123, 154).

The truck is where drivers spend most of their time. Because the sheer size of the vehicle limits the places drivers can go, it becomes a sort of built habitus. The driver can resist this, resent the truck for its size and see the challenges it presents as limitations. Alternately, she can accept these things she cannot change and embrace the challenge as a puzzle of sorts. Choosing to accept the frustrating realities of the lifestyle is a way of asserting control, which can in turn imbue the truck with the symbolic significance of home (Jackson 1995: 149; Terkenli 1995:...
Moreover, the trucking lifestyle may take a person away from the stability of a rooted existence, but the truck serves as a constant in this lifestyle. The comfort of this cannot be understated — my truck was order in a world of disorder, a haven of predictability. Even when the road was hard, Mrs. Bear was still there for me (Benjamin 1995: 298-299). At the end of each workday, after I’d parked and eaten and gone for a long walk, run, or bike ride, after I’d taken pictures of the exotic locales where I’d ended up — Anderson, Ind.; Moriarty, N.M.; Stockton, Cali.; Austin, Texas — after I’d showered, I would return to Mrs. Bear. I would sit in the passenger seat and look out the window, watch the slow, methodical dance of trucks filling the empty spots in the truck stop parking lot, maybe listen to a podcast, or just be alone with my thoughts. I’d pull back the curtains of my sleeper cab and lie on my bed, crack a book or fiddle with my phone or just close my eyes and fall into a well-deserved sleep. It didn't matter where I was parked — indeed, the ever-changing scenery and the chance to visit small towns I’d otherwise never see was a thrill — because I felt fully at home, fully at peace, in my truck (Rapoport 1992: 27-28; Terkenli 1995: 332).

However, not all drivers feel this strong sense of attachment to their trucks, although they may still think of it as home. Audrey and Peter come to mind. Audrey made a point of keeping her truck clean, and had a ritual of always removing her shoes before entering her truck. "I get in my truck and I take them off at the door, because you don't know what they've tracked through, and I don't want that in my truck," she told me. This practice was informed by a sense of practicality and hygiene, both of which seemed very important to her. She relayed several stories of seeing men urinate in truck stop parking lots, throwing garbage out their windows onto the ground, and even defecating into plastic bags and throwing it out of their trucks. Keeping her personal space clean seemed to be the way she asserted a sense of control over her immediate
environment (Rapoport 1992: 27-28). Peter chuckled when he told me his truck is "just a place to sleep," and went on to tell me that, "It gets old. It gets really old, yeah. But I gotta do it, so..." He and Audrey maintained a relationship with their stationary home bases, and thought of trucking as a job.

The trucking experience is a highly individualistic one. For some drivers, trucking is an economic necessity; for others, like Derek, it is a dream job. During one of our first interviews, while telling me about finding unique places to park his truck, Derek grinned broadly and spoke quickly, leaning forward, eyes sparkling:

There's this spot in Montana at a specific exit number right along the Yellowstone River, where you can park a truck right there on the riverbank in a canyon. It's great! You can go to sleep listening to the sound of the Yellowstone. Wake up in the morning and see the sun come up over the mountains, the Yellowstone River. That's pretty cool!

Part of what makes Derek’s relationship with the truck meaningful is the fact that it allows him to get closer to the outdoors. He views the natural world as a sanctuary, a place of mutual acceptance, and a majestic break from the ordinary. The truck serves both as a means of experiencing nature and as a boundary that keeps him safe (Rapoport 1992: 27-28, 32-33). It did for me too.

*Driving Solo: The Second Half*

This summer, I experienced some of the most beautiful country I've ever seen. Mrs. Bear and I traveled together through the Virgin River Gorge in Arizona, a violently beautiful 20-mile stretch of road that runs through the earth split open, the stratified rocks like the rings of some unspeakably massive ancient tree surrounding us above and below and on all sides, and then suddenly and without warning spit us out into the Nevada desert, with grey mountains off in the distance like a line of circus elephants and the road ahead whispering the promise of California.
Together we experienced the majestic landscapes of New Mexico and the crazy rock formations of Utah. We climbed the mountains of Colorado and coasted the long, straight hills of Oklahoma like waves frozen in space and time. I tried to pull over every chance I got to take pictures of the gorgeous scenery, but time and space constraints often made this impossible. At first, this was upsetting, and made me feel antsy, like I was being robbed of an opportunity. I only had a limited time on the road, after all, and I wanted to remember it. But when I did take pictures, I felt removed from the immediacy of the experience. If you’ve ever been on vacation and found yourself wondering if you’re having an experience or just taking pictures of it, you know how I felt. Gradually, my mindset started to shift. Sometimes, I learned, it’s best to accept an experience as temporary, and just let it happen rather than trying to hold onto it. In a sense, I developed a liquid relationship with the environment. I accepted it rather than trying to possess it, and in doing so, felt a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world (Bardhi et al. 2012: 510-512, 518; Jackson 1995: 149, 155).

Another benefit of traveling the country is the opportunity to see friends and family who might otherwise live too far away to visit. This unexpected perk of the job intensified the bond I felt for my truck and for the lifestyle that enabled it. For other drivers, the opportunity to see friends and family serves as a diffuse social network, the creation of points in an intranational migrant circuit that allows the relationship of home to occur in and across a number of different places (Striffler 2007: 675). For Peter, these interactions were the reason why he did not consider himself outright homeless:

**Me**: How do you define home?
**Me**: [Laughs.] Um. [Pause.] Do you consider yourself homeless?
Peter: Ohh, wow. [Slight pause.] Sometimes I do. Sometimes I really do. I mean, I know I'm not, 'cause I've always got a place to sleep, you know, and I'm not out there begging for money. I'm not out there, you know, asking people for stuff, but, [pause] you know, sometimes you think you are. You think, “Man, I'm out here for so long, I feel like I don't even have a home.” You know. But, in all out, though, no, I really don't think, I... 'Cause I got, I mean, I got family in Arkansas, I got family in Oregon, I got family, you know, my fiancé’s in Dallas. I can go there anytime. So no, I really don't see myself as homeless.

For Peter, home could occur in a number of places because of the range of social networks he could access while on the road. This illustrates the importance of social networks to the creation of home and deemphasizes the idea of home as a static place (Jackson 1995: 66). Of course, these are not the only social interactions that drivers experience while on the road. There is also, of course, the community of trucking. The longer I spent driving, the more I learned that the trucking community encompasses far more nuances than the simple swapping of trucker stories. Traffic, for instance, is a means of communication. I learned to see the humanity in simple gestures of kindness on the road: a flash of the headlights to indicate that it was safe for me to slide back in front of a truck I'd passed, or the quick blink of brake lights in front of me after I'd let another driver back in, or the little wave truck drivers give each other when they pass and are passed. Then, of course, there was the chatter on the CB, which is not as pervasive a part of trucking culture as it once was but still provides an arena for drivers to warn each other about hazardous conditions further on down the road, or simply to pass the time. These elements of reciprocity, even among strangers, render the road a community (Counts and Counts 1992: 155). It is a meeting place and a proving ground and the fodder for a thousand ruminations, reflections, and conversations. Thus in a sense, even when drivers are by themselves, they are never truly alone on the road.

Of course, it’s worth reiterating that I’m an introvert. For people who don’t enjoy being alone, the inescapable social isolation of trucking can take its toll. Eileen put it well:
It's a very solo industry. ... When you're driving down the road, it's you. That's it. That's all that's there, and it's, you have to be a person that has no problem with solitude, that has no problem being alone, because you're going to so many unfamiliar places all over the country, and you're doing it by yourself. You're sitting in restaurants eating by yourself, you're hanging out in the truck at night watchin' TV or surfin' the net or readin' a book or whatever. You're by yourself. It's up to you. You have to be able to handle the solitude, because there's a lot of it. If there's one thing that gets to drivers more than anything else, that's probably it. They can't deal with the solitude.

It’s easy to sit in my room in front of my computer and write about intranational migrant circuits and ephemeral interactions and diffuse social networks, because I’m not forced to be alone. I could, right now, walk out into my living room and chat with my roommates, who are sitting out there watching TV. Would I have drawn the same conclusions after five months solo instead of just one? What about if I were an extrovert? There’s not really a satisfying answer to these questions, just the reality that every driver experiences trucking a little differently.

*Saying Goodbye*

The dread I felt about returning to Atlanta deepened with every new load I got, because they moved me further and further back toward the east coast and a lifestyle I couldn’t imagine being a part of again. I felt that my career as a driver was just getting started, and now it had to come to an end. After getting paid to travel, I couldn’t imagine shelling out money to slog through boring books and sit in a classroom. And how exactly was I supposed to write about trucking? How was I supposed to distill this life-changing experience into mere words? I felt like putting it on a page would only flatten it. But I had no choice. I picked up my last load in Hershey, Pa., and then I began the journey back to Atlanta. And before I knew it, it was my last night on the road, my last night as a truck driver.

I spent that night at a truck stop off I-77 in Virginia. I treated myself to a meal at the diner inside. I did a halfhearted interview with another driver for my research. I walked around the
parking lot, writing “I didn’t do my pre-trip” in the dirt on the backs of other drivers’ trailers. It’s a prank I liked to play — if they did indeed do a pre-trip inspection, they’d catch what I’d written and wipe it off. If they didn’t, they’d probably got hassled over the CB (and justly so). I sat on a hillside and watched the sun set over the tops of pine trees and on the surface of a small pond. I lay down in my sleeper berth and sighed and hugged my pillow.

I woke up at around 3:30 a.m., giving me enough time to get a coffee and brush my teeth in public one last time. I was on the road by 4. The fog was so thick I could barely make out the road ahead of me, and I pushed ahead slowly, 45 or 50 miles per hour, following my headlights through the pea soup pooled in the Interstate's dips and valleys. I kept an eye on the reflective paint sliding out of the fog and listened to the rumble of the wheels on the pavement and the comforting metronome of my four-ways. The sun started to rise and the fog started to brighten and burn off, just a little, enough for me to see the silhouettes of trees. It was pretty and it made me smile, which made me sad because I knew it was going to be the last time I experienced this sensation. I didn’t want it to end.

The last thing I expected from my fieldwork was to get attached to it. A white, educated, 26-year-old woman who hadn't owned a car in a year and a half driving a semi, showering in truck stops, sleeping in her truck, and forming lasting relationships with other truck drivers? It sounds pretty implausible. And yet through that lifestyle, I could be myself, express the most private parts of my personality free from judgment, and experience the sensation of a journey, the freedom of the open road, and the adventure of traversing this country in a way that was deeply personally meaningful. I had found, and made, and then given up, a home for myself.

I admit that this may seem like a soup of contradictions. Sometimes the truck is home; sometimes the road is home; sometimes the community of truck drivers is a home; sometimes
the driver-in-truck is at-home-in-the-world-on-the-road. It lacks consistency or uniformity of place. That’s just it, though: The relationship of home erases the boundary between “person” and “place” and melds them into one (Jackson 1995: 122). Whether one is in a truck or an RV or on foot, whether one is driving a road or wandering a desert, the journeying life most certainly can and most certainly does create the sensation of home. It’s a matter of choice, really. The angst some truck drivers feel about home is not an inevitability, but instead arises out of resistance to the lifestyle. Accepting the realities of the trucking life, like accepting the flaws in a person, allows for the cultivation of unconditional love, and through it, the cultivation of home.
5. Conclusion

"It's a way of life," Eileen told me of driving a truck. "I tell people, 'Don't get in this looking for a job. If you're in this just looking for a job, you're in it for the wrong reason.' Because it is a way of life. It changes everything about how you live your life." Indeed it does. The experience of trucking takes a person out of a traditional U.S. lifestyle that conceives of home as a single place and that values permanence and boundaries and thrusts them into a nomadic existence.

The literature on home identifies it not as a place, but rather as a relationship that one shares with a place. Home both defines and is defined by social relationships. It also reflects and is reflected by sociocultural values. It can occur in a single place or between and across a multitude of places. It can occur as a result of personalizing a space or accepting it, or both. The relationship an individual shares with home is as deeply individual — and deeply meaningful — as the act of falling in love.

For truck drivers, home may be centralized in one or more of a number of places of varying personal importance: a static building; a meaningful town, city, state, or landscape; a community of family, friends, or colleagues; their truck; the road. For some truck drivers, home may be constituted in the space between and across these sites. The creation of the relationship of home with, between, and across these sites occurs through a variety of mechanisms that drivers may rely upon at different times throughout a single day or an entire career. These mechanisms fall into two broad categories: intentional customization of the environment to reflect personal values and identity, and acceptance of the realities and influence of the lifestyle, the people, and the environment.
The trucking lifestyle is a unique brand of American nomadism, one that imposes boundaries even as it transcends them. It falls somewhere between the mobile businessperson living out of anonymous hotel rooms and the retired RVer seeking adventure on the road. The truck driver goes where he is told and gets paid to do so, but at the same time, he may bring home with him — and find it — wherever he goes. It is possible, trucking teaches us, for one to live a lifestyle that is nomadic and yet incorporates and exists within the very boundaries it transcends. The truck, for instance, is a workplace and living space, an inanimate tool and an extension of the driver. The driver, meanwhile, is a solitary sailor whose at-times lonely existence makes him part of a rich and vibrant community rooted in a shared experience. And, of course, there is that fastidiously constructed strip of asphalt that dictates where the driver-and-truck may go, neatly laid out with white and yellow lines, named, intentional, rational, routed, with clear beginnings and clear ends, that is at the very same time a long, gray ribbon that stretches on and on, renewed and renewing, road without end.
5. Epilogue

I’ve spent enough time and stained enough pages mucking about in the abstract realm of anthropological theory. Now it’s time to come back to the real world. I want to close with a simple request on behalf of the truck drivers who were kind enough to let me get a glimpse of their culture. Here it is:

Trucks are huge and heavy, and when they’re involved in a collision, it’s usually fatal. They also take a long time to stop, longer than you think. So when you drive near a truck, *please be careful.*

If you’re stuck behind a truck, don’t tailgate it. Leave four or five car lengths between the front of your car and the back of the truck. Any closer, and the truck driver can’t see you. This is doubly important when stopped, and even more so when stopped on a hill, because trucks can roll backwards when the driver is shifting into first.

When you pass a truck, do it quickly and decisively, and get out of the way as soon as you possibly can. Don’t hang out next to a truck, and never, ever, *ever* pass a truck on the right. Trucks have enormous blind spots, and if the driver doesn’t know you’re there, she could easily run you over if she has to shift lanes. When you merge back in front of a truck, make sure you leave four or five car lengths between the back of your car and the front of the truck. If you’re feeling fancy, tap your brake gently, twice. The blink of the brake lights means, “thank you.” Don’t tap hard enough to slow down, though. Never cut a truck off, and never stop suddenly when there’s a truck behind you. This happens all the time, and it’s incredibly nerve-wracking for truck drivers. If the truck can’t stop in time, it will hit you, and you probably won’t survive the impact.
If you see a truck trying to change lanes, let it over. The driver may be trying to avoid debris, which can damage the tires and potentially cause a blowout — an extremely dangerous situation. He or she may also be giving space to a broken-down vehicle on the shoulder, a courtesy that can save lives. Or maybe an exit-only lane crept up on the driver, like the one that crept up on me in Jersey. Remember, it’s much harder to turn around when you’re lost in a truck than in a car. Don’t subject a driver to the stress I had to endure that day.

If you’re stuck behind a truck, just take a deep breath. It’s not the end of the world. Yes, it’s frustrating. Yes, you have places to go, and you’re probably running late. Yes, the truck is big and loud and slow. Just remember, everything you eat, wear, use, and own has likely spent time on a truck just like the one in front of you. That driver is making an enormous, for the most part thankless sacrifice on your behalf. The least you can do is be respectful and patient.

And for god’s sake, don’t text and drive.
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