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**Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:
Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala | Part III
Edited by Ana Vilenica**

Struggles of vehicle residents in Squamish: Challenging the capitalist and colonial institution of housing

Thomasina Pidgeon

Vehicle Residents of Squamish

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Abstract

Thomasina Pidgeon's life and work has taken many forms including being a professional rock climber, coach, writer, traveler, business owner and mother. Thomasina is pursuing a master's degree in human geography and is interested in how people who live in vehicles are positioned and regulated in society, and how they push back against capital and colonial dominant understandings of home and property..

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In this conversation, Thomasina Pidgeon discusses her decision to live in a vehicle in Squamish, north of Vancouver, in British Columbia, Canada. This was a choice originally driven by the lack of affordable housing, but she continued with it after falling in love with life on the road. Her story sheds light on the broader issues of housing, gentrification, and societal attitudes toward non-sedentary life choices. For Thomasina, living in a vehicle offered a sense of freedom for her and her daughter, despite occasional problems, as well as a deep connection with nature that conventional housing couldn't provide. However, as Squamish has grown more gentrified, particularly after the 2010 Olympics, the town has increasingly cracked down on vehicle residents, categorising them as unhoused and treating them as a problem. These restrictive regulations, according to Thomasina, are part of a larger system that prioritizes property values and profits over human needs, echoing colonial practices that forced nomadic communities to settle for the benefit of those in power. Her story calls for a shift in how we think about housing, urging us to go beyond housing as a capitalist and colonial institution, and towards a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that lead to the so-called housing crisis. Despite facing stress and anxiety due to these crackdowns, Thomasina continues to advocate for the rights of vehicle residents with the organization Vehicle Residents of Squamish, and to connect different struggles from Palestinian solidarity work to struggles against an LNG terminal.

Keywords

Vehicle resident, housing, land struggles, intersectional struggles, Squamish

Introduction

Thomasina and I first crossed paths at Simon Fraser University (SFU) during Nicholas Blomley's course "Law and the Geographies of Power". During my four-month stay in Vancouver, I learned a great deal about the challenges faced by vehicle residents from Thomasina. In this conversation, she shares her personal experiences and illuminates the systemic violence faced by vehicle residents. Thomasina explores how housing, shaped by a history of capitalist and colonial dispossession, marginalizes those who don't conform to traditional norms. This makes the struggles of vehicle residents a critical, yet often overlooked aspect of the broader fight for a "good life". According to Thomasina, the good life is about keeping life in balance and is something that we're losing touch with as society keeps on pushing us forward in the "rat race".

Ana: How did you become a vehicle resident? And why did you choose to live in a vehicle?

Thomasina: In the beginning, it actually wasn't so much of a choice as it was that I couldn't find affordable housing. I was living in Whistler, working two minimum-wage jobs, and not making much money. This was 1998 and already there was a major housing crisis. Finding affordable housing was difficult and often involved living with many roommates. I was subletting a room and living with four people at the time in a very small place. I had to move out because the roommate was coming back. Around that time, I met these people in town who were living in vehicles. When they told me that, I was so surprised, like what - you guys live in vans?! I just laughed... I never heard of that before and yet, it was so normal for them. I checked out their vans and mentioned to them that it didn't seem very bad at all! They told me that they knew of an extra van where I could live. At the time, this seemed easier than finding another room to rent and spending all of my money on rent, so I took the opportunity. It was the first time that I actually saved money

Figure 1

Thomasina in her home. Photo courtesy of Thomasina Pidgeon



in my life! It didn't take me long to realize that this type of lifestyle was really fun...! Totally different from being in a house, without the comforts of heat and running water. Living closer to outside and more exposed to the elements felt completely natural to me and made me feel alive.

Ana: And, for people who don't know the Canadian context, Whistler is a very touristic place where gentrification is driven by touristification mostly. Right?

Thomasina: Yes, Whistler is a tourist town, mainly skiing, mountain biking and the typical tourist entertainments, so there is a lot of work there. I stayed in that van throughout the winter, which meant waking up to frozen water in the morning. Vehicle living is not all dreams, nor is it super easy. There are compromises with comfort but for me, it is worth it. That was 1998. Nowadays, the housing situation is even worse and has spread to nearby towns like Squamish, where I currently live. Squamish has been gentrifying since the 2010 Olympics, which didn't help the housing situation.

Ana: Could you tell us a bit more about the difference between living in a home, in a sedentary, settled way, and living in a vehicle? How would you speak to this difference?

Thomasina: Well, that first van did not drive, so I hadn't yet experienced the benefits of mobility. Once I got a vehicle that drove, the whole world opened up. You could drive a little further to change the view out of your window. Not being anchored to one spot made me feel freer. I also met more people, and internally, I felt more creative. As a kid, I always wanted to go camping or to put my tent in the backyard and sleep outside, rather than sleep in the house. I've always had this urge to roam. There's something about moving and change that makes me feel more alive and stimulated. When I'm living in a house, which I did from time to time, I feel stagnant and stuck, like I'm chained down. Financially, I had to work a lot more so I could afford rent. I've never had a good paying job until now so rent took more than half of my income. This is straining in itself, especially with a young child. Spending your life working at a job that's not very fulfilling

Figure 2
Squamish
Landscape. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



only to have to hand half of those earnings to a landlord, well, that just didn't make sense anymore.

Ana: One of the ways society functions is to regulate our movement. It's sometimes hard to make these kinds of choices. The history of colonialism and private property is the history of regulation of movement. So how do you see this history in relation to your living practice in VR? How are the expansion of land grab, real estate capital, and touristification influencing life on the move?

Thomasina: When I first started living in a vehicle, I was not super aware of these things, beyond learning as a kid how the nomadic Innu of Labrador were forced to settle by the government. Watching them on TV struggling for their rights really impacted me. As for the history of colonialism and private property and its connection to VR, I don't want to compare our struggles to indigenous struggles, but there is an underlying kind of "colonial thinking" that links the way both groups are treated by the State. Take the Innu of Nitassinan (Labrador and Quebec) who have been a traditionally nomadic people. The Innu value their autonomy and see mobility as "the good life". Movement is a huge part of their culture. In 1960, the Innu were the last of Canada's indigenous people to be settled and forced into sedentarization by the Canadian government. The state stigmatized the Innu, claiming that they were "backwards" and needed "modernization", and sedentarization. They were thus forced to settle, which is something that I see as a land grab. Huge parts of their land are now underwater due to hydroelectric dams, and even more has been lost to other industries. This has had huge and traumatizing effects on the Innu, personally, socially and culturally. The discourse that these people are in some way inferior is similar to the discourse used to describe vehicle residents.

I moved to Squamish in 2000, and despite the fact that people were legally allowed to stay on Crown land for 14 days, there's always been some form of regulation. We were kicked out of different areas, "No camping" signs appeared in key spots, and we'd sometimes get a notice from the bylaw or a resident telling us to not park there. However, they did not have any legal tool to enforce the displacement because it was legal to stay on Crown land for 14 days. In 2019, the District of Squamish attempted to pass the blanket ban on camping, as a tool to legalize this displacement. We organized and pushed back, and managed to stall it, but eventually it was passed in 2021. The effects of the bylaw are very extreme. People get woken up at night and are told to move on. Some folks got tired of it and found a more welcoming place to live, while others who found it too stressful moved into a house. The regulations really have a way of getting into your head and controlling our behavior. The lifestyle is not free as it once was.

I think that the real driver of regulation stems from the type of thinking that focuses on capital projects, property value and real estate. The state wants us all to be part of the machine because without us, it fails. When people live in houses, they have to work to pay rent/mortgage, and this helps keep the economic machine going. Also, a piece of "vacant" property is economically more profitable with a condo on it, rather than a group

Figure 3
Squamish
Landscape. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



of campers who may stay there for less than market value. The state sees land through the lens of capital. In Squamish, they shut down the municipal campground despite a huge demand for more campground space.

The real estate boom and gentrification have resulted in demographic change as well, from mainly blue-collar workers to those who are more affluent. With this influx of money, the idea that on the street there shouldn't ever be any unhoused people, or “eyesore vehicles” where someone lives, has increased significantly. I often hear these people say, “I’m not paying super high property tax only to look out my window to see a bunch of garbage and people in vans who just want rent for free.” There is some truth to that, but at the same time, not. I've only seen a few vans leave garbage outside. The complaints are exaggerated, and driven by fear and stigma. For the most part, vehicle residents are respectful of the land we stay on.

Ana: Would you say then that the prejudices, the stigmatisation, the ways in which vehicle residents are seen in society and how this image is constructed are all part of processes of colonial capitalism?

Thomasina: Yes. Since the start of capitalism, unhoused and nomadic peoples have been viewed in a way that works to “Other” them. This stigma stems from colonial capital ideologies that measure people on the basis of consumption and wealth. It claims that we must live the type of lifestyle that they see as correct, which is high consumption and paying rent or a mortgage in order to live in a house. If you live in fixed housing, you are seen as worthy and valuable of belonging. Anyone that is outside of this box, such as nomadic and unhoused people, are stigmatized and seen as less-than, unworthy, and a threat to society. There is no middle ground.

There are many reasons why people live in a vehicle, however. Some folks do so because they lost their housing, they are fleeing domestic abuse, or they have a low-wage job, are priced out of the market, and it's the best option next to a shelter or being on the street.

Some learn that vehicle residency gives them more economic and physical freedom, and that it's a good way to live. However, the regulations do not give any regard to one's personal situations or how they relate to underlying structural problems, let alone one's autonomy to decide what is a dignified way to live.

Ana: The vehicle residents are actually treated as unhoused folks, as homeless, right? This is how the institutional categorization works. There is no space for any kind of alternative between property life and anything else, between unhoused and housed.

Thomasina: Exactly. They are “Othered”, surveilled, regulated and criminalized. However, society seems to have forgotten that living in a house has not always been the norm and that there are other ways to live in the world. People have always been moving and relocating in different ways. Just because people are living in a way that's not the dominant way, doesn't mean that they deserve to be treated as less-than or forced to conform.

Ana: You mentioned recent struggles that you have been a part of in relation to the bylaw that illegalized sleeping in vehicle homes. Can you tell us in a little bit more detail what happened and why you think that the municipality wants to regulate the lives of vehicle residents in Squamish now? What has changed with this bylaw?

Figure 4
Everyday life of VR residents.
Photo courtesy of Thomasina
Pidgeon



Thomasina: The reasons for this are many. The district justifies the bylaw by claiming that there's been an increase in complaints about vehicle residents due to "garbage and human waste" on the street. However, when I did freedom of information requests (FOI), there were only about 80 complaints a year, many of which were merely complaints about the presence of someone in a vehicle, not garbage. This does not seem like enough to warrant outlawing sleeping in a vehicle, which seems unethical. The district also claims that there are 3,000 vans that come in the summer, yet they've never done a count of vehicle residents so this number is hearsay.

Another reason, which I think points the finger more accurately, is the gentrification that resulted from the 2010 Whistler Olympics which included the skyrocketing of the real estate market and property values. More people are living in vehicles for different reasons either due to structural problems –like low wages and issues with housing shortages/affordability– or by choice. When my daughter Cedar was born in 2006, I paid \$600 per month for a one-bedroom place, and if I could buy it would have cost maybe \$150,000. Nowadays, that same place is around \$2,000 per month, and to buy, over a million dollars. People simply cannot afford to live here anymore.

There's a lot more money in Squamish and with that, an increase in NIMBYism, a "not in my back yard" attitude. On social media posts people literally describe vehicle residents as "filth on our streets" and complain that we are getting to live for free in an area where they are paying really high property tax. (Mind you, there is no method set up for us to pay property tax, despite the VRS advocating for that!). So, if there is a house for sale and next to it there is someone living in a van, people see that as an eyesore that's lowering property value. This is a shallow way of seeing the world, I think.

I can only speak for Squamish, but there's a big outdoor scene here, so there are a lot of climbers, mountain bikers and skiers who tend to live more semi-nomadically and live in vehicles for the lifestyle. However, there are also a lot of people living in vehicles because

Figure 5
Squamish
Landscape. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



of the affordable housing crisis and high rental rates. All that said, there is no binary between choice and need. There is a vast gradient for reasons why someone may live in a vehicle, and it is more complex than being “down and out” or living a “life of privilege”. Someone can be living in a vehicle because they can't afford rent, but that same person can also prefer that lifestyle. While there are a lot more people living in vehicles than there used to be, for me the reason why is irrelevant because sleeping, which is a basic human need, should not be outlawed no matter where that activity takes place, be it in a house, van, tent or on the sidewalk. Everyone needs to have a good night's sleep. Having a bylaw that permits waking people by shining lights in their eyes and banging on the vehicle while telling them to move is really unethical, in my opinion.

Ana: How did your life change after this bylaw was passed?

Thomasina: My life changed significantly. I distinctly remember one night when I was trying to go to sleep in this river area that I frequented. I was thinking about the bylaw and wondering: What can we do now to fight it? Everything we tried had failed and it seemed that the only option was civil disobedience. I decided that I was simply not going to obey the bylaw. I was going to remain sleeping on public land and if they woke me, I'd refuse to move. If they gave me a ticket, I'd take it to court.

But mentally, I had this sinking realization. Technically I was physically free, but mentally it was a lost case. The bylaw didn't have to be there physically because they were in my head, controlling my behavior and my sense of freedom. Before the bylaw, I lived discreetly, but I also had no problem getting out of my van and exploring what was around me. After the bylaw, I would park, close my curtains, and stay inside of my van and go to sleep. I wouldn't open the door and I wouldn't get out, so as to not draw attention or complaints. When I woke up in the morning I would leave, whilst before I would relax and take my time. That evening was a dark realization that my life of freedom changed into one of hiding. Like, who wants to get woken up in the middle of the night by the police? I don't know any sane person who wants that.

That was 2020. It's now 2024. The life of changing scenes each night is basically over, unless I drive up rough logging roads out of town, which isn't ideal for the car and time. I stick to a couple “safe” areas now or stay in the campground. I've thought about going back to that river spot, but I've had so many bylaw encounters there that it isn't worth being woken up for. I'll go back there once I feel more capable of dealing with the consequences. I'm a little overwhelmed with other stuff at the moment...

The bylaw is emotionally and physically stressful. I don't want to lose the freedom that I once had, but I have to think about my daughter when in these situations. She finds it really stressful when police come around. Just last week, the RCMP drove around and were taking photos of the camping vehicles. It was only eight in the evening, so not even sleeping hours yet. She immediately asked to not stay there. “They're going to wake us up”, she said. And I was like, “Well, we really don't have anywhere else to go. The campground is full, and it is too late to drive out of town”. We've been safe there so far, so we stayed. The cops didn't come back, but I know it is only a matter of time until we

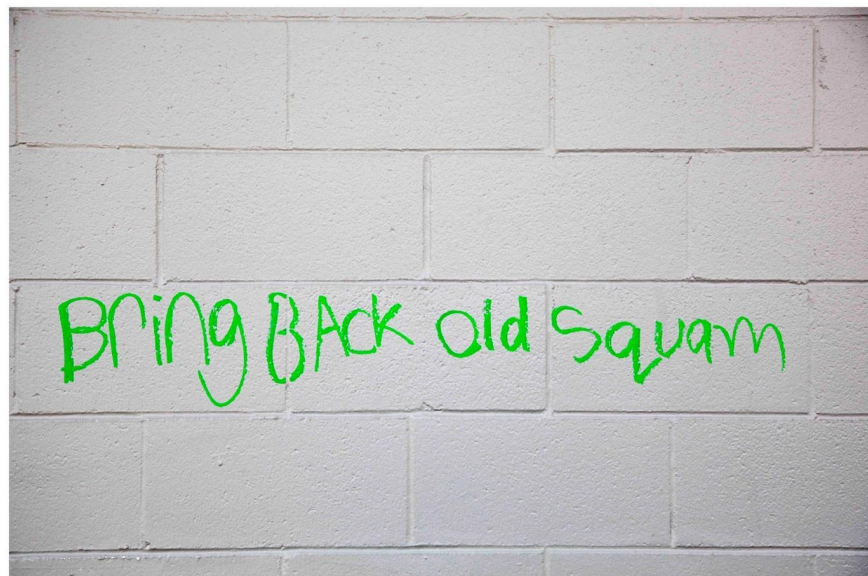
get kicked out because other vehicle residents are learning that it is a “safe” spot, so it’s becoming more crowded and turning into what the district calls a “hotspot”.

When that happens, bylaw police will show up and kick people out. But the thing is, the campgrounds are not a viable option. They are usually full and have a 14-day maximum limit stay per year. There are very few safe places for us to go, and the areas that are safe become crowded and eventually get shut down. This leaves us with the only options of either parking illegally at the risk of being woken up by bylaw police, or drive 20-30 minutes out of the district, up gravel logging roads. This is far and hard on vehicles, especially old vehicles like my own... It also means spending more money on gas, which can be financially stressful if one doesn't have that much money.

There are a few people with large RVs where we are staying now. One of them does not drive and belongs to a guy who usually stays at the shelter. There is an older woman in her seventies who moved to Squamish to be closer to her children, but she can't afford housing. When bylaw comes around, it will be harder for these people to find a place to park.

There used to be a lot of little pull-outs here and there where we could stay. But over the last ten years, we've lost all of them but one to “growth” and “development”. The one that remains is the one where I stay, but that too is slated for development so in five years we will lose that too. I foresee that the only safe place where people will be able to go are privately-owned parking lots, like Walmart, because sleeping in a vehicle on private land is still legal. Walmart is a huge attraction for vehicle residents for this reason. Despite their “No camping” signs, they typically don't enforce it unless it becomes really crowded, or vehicles don't move and become more fixed in their parking lot. This happens at least once a year and they end up hiring security and kicking everybody out. So yeah, the district doesn't give us valid options. It's an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality without any solutions. However, the district should acknowledge that vehicle residency is only increasing and is a viable housing option for many. Meanwhile, the housing crisis is not

Figure 6
Bring Back Old
Squam. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



going away. So rather than punish and outcast us, they should learn to embrace vehicle residency as an alternative form of housing and make it legal. It could be a progressive way of seeing things but unfortunately, they are far from progressive.

Ana: You are part of a group that has been organizing against the bylaw. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Who are the people in this group, and what are the challenges to organizing vehicle residents in this kind of situation?

Thomasina: In response to the bylaw in 2019 we formed the Vehicle Residents of Squamish, which was made up of a combination of local vehicle and housed Squamish residents. We started with high motivation, but that didn't last. After a year of work, it became too stressful for one member so he stepped down, while others had full-time jobs and could not be as present. We have an online group that is organized by different threads, such as "report bylaw interactions" here, "future projects" there, a "VR best practices" section so people can learn how to live in a vehicle in a good way that respects the environment and local community... But nowadays, it's mainly me and a few other folks who help once in a while. We had a couple meetings in April, but there's been little interaction since then. I often suggest something, and there is no response. Unfortunately I can only do so much, and nothing is going to happen without willing bodies. I find this frustrating, and on top of my own school, work and life I now understand why the other person got burnt out. Burnout is a huge thing for us because we live with the bylaw on a daily basis. It's a matter of finding balance between living our life and advocating for the basic right to have a safe night's sleep.

I'll admit, part of me wonders if people have given up. We have had several "opportunities" with the district for changing the bylaw, such as allocating funding for creating inclusive policy. This has taken a lot of effort on our part, yet every single time they shut us down. It is like they tease us with the possibility but in the end, they refuse to do anything but criminalize us. This defeat can make getting back up a little harder. The machine is so big, it can seem insurmountable. But *seem* is the key word here. I have to have hope in change.

For this reason, I think we really need to think outside of the system to find something totally new and different. Simultaneously, some folks talk about doing direct actions such as occupying a parking lot or moving the barricades that they put to close areas where we used to park. Unfortunately, nothing has come out of it, and it's hard to motivate myself to do this alone. We need more people willing to help. It can be difficult to find people that want to take it a step further beyond writing a letter or going to a council meeting.

It is even hard to find people to help with logistical things such as creating an educational vehicle residence code of ethics pamphlet that we could publish. I have all the information yet finding someone with the skills to create something with images is like pulling teeth. Yet, this sort of thing would be so helpful because it shows that we are focused on creating a working relationship with the housed community, while addressing the concerns of the district, such as garbage or overstaying in one spot. We've had other projects in mind such as "meet your local vehicle resident", which could be an attempt to address the local

Figure 7
 Thomasina at
 Home. Photo
 courtesy of
 Thomasina Pidgeon



stigma. People could meet us and see that we are people who work, play, and contribute, just like them. It would be an effort to gain more support for inclusive policy. But again, it comes back to people showing up. There are great ideas waiting to happen, but we need the people to show up.

So, to return to your question, it's hard to find people willing to be involved at the level that we need. I wish you lived here, something might actually get done! Maybe you noticed this while here, but I feel like Canadians are really apathetic. The freedom that we have here is taken for granted because they think we are immune from the stuff we see in other countries. They're not willing to push the power systems back. I find this rather dangerous. Our freedoms are eroding in many different ways, it's just not as obvious. I wish people would be more alert to what's happening, because it's all related.

Ana: Have you been in touch with any other organizations of vehicle residents in so-called Canada, or in any other countries?

Thomasina: Some people from Canmore have reached out to me as they are in a similar situation as in Squamish. In Canmore, the housing costs have skyrocketed and it's also an outdoor mecca with a lot of people who live in their vans for whatever reason. There is zero tolerance for sleeping in a vehicle there, and bylaw police actively ticket people. In response they created a safe parking system where vehicle residents could stay for ten dollars a night, but the parking lot has super bright lights, hired security and limited hours. To me, this is not what vehicle residency is about.

There is some good work coming from the United States with a group called the National Vehicle Resident Collective (NVRC), who are based out of Washington. They recently had a two-day symposium of various workshops, where one can learn about vehicle residency, how to create community on the road, and the increasing criminalization of VR and our privacy rights. The NVRC works with other organizations from around the

States, such as the National Law Center for Homelessness and the US Census, as well as grassroots community groups who advocate for vehicle residents and unhoused populations such as “Find your Manna”, a group in Hawaii that works with unhoused Indigenous people. Part of their work entails pushing back on the “Housing First” idea, which is an approach that wouldn't work for many VRs that I know, including myself. The NVRC tries to shift the cultural understanding of vehicle residency to show that vehicles are an innovative and viable housing option, thus broadening the notion of housing. The discourse is less about being precariously housed as it is about having the right to live in your vehicle, no matter the reason.

There was a recent lawsuit, *Johnson v Grants Pass* that went to the Supreme Court, involving unhoused people, including vehicle residents, who were ticketed for sleeping in public space. Since all available shelter beds were full and the people had no other safe place to go, they argued that the regulation was a cruel and unusual punishment. Unfortunately, the court upheld that the public camping ban was not cruel and unusual, meaning unhoused people can be arrested and fined for sleeping outside, even when a town does not have enough shelter beds and there are no safe alternatives. With over one million people living in vehicles in the States, this will have a huge impact on unhoused people. Aside from those who choose to live in a vehicle, to criminalize someone for being poor or for being in a situation where they are doing their best to survive is really unjust.

Ana: You are also a mother and a vehicle resident. How would you describe that experience?

Thomasina: There were many times when I almost gave up because living in the cold weather was really hard sometimes. The dominant idea of what is a “proper and ideal home”, let alone the “right way to raise a kid”, would sometimes make me question myself. I'd ask myself, am I doing the right thing raising a kid in a van?! At that time, I had little money and there was no way that I could afford rent in Squamish. I eventually applied for welfare because I thought maybe Cedar should be in a house, and for that to happen I needed financial help. Interestingly, I got denied because I couldn't provide a

Figure 8
Squamish
Landscape. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



rental agreement since I was not paying rent! They offered to put me on a two year wait list for housing, which was essentially useless. Around the same time, I asked for help at the women's shelter because it was a really cold winter. Their response was, 'Sorry, you are not a victim of violence or abuse, so we can't help you.' I was so confused. It was the only women's center in town, and they basically told me that there was nowhere that could help. The system is a mess. I felt so degraded after that. Asking was really hard as I'm usually so self-sufficient and I certainly didn't want a handout, but I also wanted Cedar to be warm. This forced me to get creative to make vehicle-living work for us. So I rented a small, heated storage unit and it became a mini-studio where we could spend time outside of the van. There are quite a few people in Squamish who do that, actually. It's kind of like an underground style of housing. It's ironic because I've always lived simply and within my means and had enough money to buy good food, gas, and whatever little thing we needed. And yet they still punish us, while failing to help anyone who is in need. It's moronic.

Ana: How would you explain the proposal for a broader change in society that is coming from this experience? What is different about home and homing in relation to this way of life? Why do you think it's important to advocate for the right to be a vehicle resident today and what are the broader implications of this struggle?

Thomasina: I see a shift here that offers a bigger idea... you can work 100% in the system or be partly outside of the system in more of a liberatory way. For example, research shows that 30% of vehicle residents contest the idea that they're homeless or housing insecure and see their lifestyle as a culture of resistance, in that it is a source of physical, economic and social freedom. For me, I could have opted to put my kid in daycare so that I could work enough and afford to pay rent to a landlord. Or, I could work "just enough", live in my van and have more quality time to spend with my kid and on my own interests. For me it's ultimately about autonomy: economic and social freedom. A lot of the vehicle residents that I speak with think similarly.

For the most part, we are comfortable in the RV. Apart from bylaw, I feel safe in my vehicle and it feels like home. Home is different for many people. I see home as something that is less of a physical structure and more of a feeling of warmth, community, and belonging. It is where one can feel like they can be themselves and be safe. The safety issue is pertinent because that sense of safety is what the bylaw takes away. The only reason I do not feel safe in my vehicle is because I fear bylaw will knock on my door. If the cops knocked on the door of someone living in a house, I can only imagine that this might raise a similar sense of unease.

It's important to advocate for the right to be a vehicle resident because this advocacy makes the claim that it is ok to live differently and to have diversity in housing and society. It is ultimately about the freedom, autonomy and responsibility to decide how one wants to live their life, or how one responds to social issues, and to do so without being treated as an outcast in society. We do not all have to live and work the same way.

Figure 9
Squamish
Landscape. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



Vehicle residency challenges dominant colonial and capital ideas around property, consumerism, and who “rightfully” does or does not belong. It challenges the generic idea of what is a “home”, as well as how much material wealth we need to survive and live comfortably. For example, do we really need running water and a shower every day? There are ways to meet our needs, like eating and going to the bathroom, while living in a vehicle... It’s just done a little differently in a vehicle. I actually make better meals on the stovetop of my RV than some of my housed friends! And while I now have a toilet in my RV, before that, I made use of public toilets. Imagine how people meet those needs when they go camping... It’s similar, but in a vehicle it is actually easier because the vehicle can store things like a stove.

Vehicles are a viable form of housing that challenge dominant Western ideas about a house being four walls, fixed to the ground, and paid for through rent or a mortgage. But honestly, we don't all need to live like that. We don't all need to fit into this Western mold that claims that living in a house is the only dignified way to live, because vehicle residency can be dignified and rewarding in so many ways. Having a cultural shift in how people see vehicle residency is important for recognizing other ways of living in the world, and this open mentality can be applied to other modes of living and being. I am thinking here about nomadic Indigenous peoples, like the Bedouin, or culturally significant minority groups like the Roma and Irish Travellers. These people should have the right to practice and live the way that they want to, as opposed to being forced to settle and conform. But in the end, the oppression and domination that we and other nomadic people experience comes down to serving economic interests, be it for a land grab or gentrification.

One of your first questions asked why the district regulates us. I think that they see us as a threat to the system... If people realized that they could live successfully, comfortably, and have all their needs met in a vehicle, why would they opt to give half of their wages to a landlord?! If more people shifted to this type of living, could this impact the housing,

rental and hotel markets? Maybe... We can ask the same question about the effect this may have on the workforce, especially the lower wage workforce...

People think that in order to live a good life we need to work full time, pay rent or a mortgage, and be a contributing member of society, which typically means paying property tax. I don't think this is all true. I own a small gym here in Squamish, yet I live in a van. Actually, all of my staff live in vans, except for one who lives with their parents. If they didn't, where would they live? Would they be able to afford it? Like many others, they might opt to live in a van, and they should be free to do so. Many of my members also live in vehicles. They join for showers, gym space to stretch, and for the community. They use the public laundromat up the road. Vehicle residency is not an irresponsible or impossible way to live, and is in fact appealing for many. Yet, while we are part of society, legally we fit outside of it.

Ana: You are actively involved in Palestine solidarity work. How are the struggles of VRs and Palestinian people intertwined?

Thomasina: I do not want to conflate the two struggles, as the racism, discrimination and oppression that Palestinians experience is much more intense. We are not being displaced from our homes, bombed, starved and killed. Our lives are not being threatened, only our wellbeing and sense of security. We are simply being woken up and told to move our homes off public land. This is not ok either, but there's a significant difference in the intensity and effect. Simultaneously, we are both "Othered". Palestinians face discrimination and prejudice like being called "human animals" by state officials, while vehicle residents have been called "tax-evaders and filth on our street". The intensity is different, as well as the implications, but there are similarities in the underlying mindset of superiority. I've talked to one of my Squamish Nation friends about the bylaw, and without seeing it as a comparison of their experience with ours, she understood that the core of the problem with the bylaw stems from the same colonial thinking of domination and "Othering" that resulted in the theft of their lands.

Figure 10
Cedar. Photo
courtesy of
Thomasina Pidgeon



The fact remains that people are being kicked off their land, be it for economic projects such as a real estate development, a mine, or an oil and gas project. This land theft was happening long before we were born, and is actively happening now, as we witness in Palestine and Wetsu’wetsen territory in so-called Canada.

Vehicle residents are being kicked off public land and told to live in a certain way (go to the shelter, to the campground or find housing). With this we have limited options for where to sleep safely. And where are the Palestinians supposed to go? They are being forced into smaller and smaller territories, and many are left with nowhere to go. Obviously, the level of displacement and oppression that they're experiencing is extreme, but dispossession stems from the same kind of thinking... the “Othering”, the perception of land as profit... Why can we not learn to see land as a place where people can live together in a good and responsible way? Also, every human being should have the ability to go to sleep safely at night without fear that they may be bombed or woken up by police and told to move on.

I agree with Glenn Coulthard who said that Indigenous and settler people alike have the right to be free, to live as autonomous beings and to fight back against systems of oppression. The system affects everyone, whether in a beneficial way or not. If we take the view that we are all part of the human race, we learn to see that we have a responsibility to each other and that our struggles are entwined. Our “good life” should not come off the back of someone else.

Ana: What other intersectional struggles could potentially ally with the struggles of vehicle residents? Are there any coalitions?

Thomasina: I’m part of the VRS, a group called Rising Tide Squamish, and sometimes I work with My Sea to Sky, which is working against the LNG terminal that they want to build in Howe Sound. We sometimes organize protests, or banner drops or letter-writing campaigns. All of these groups are up against the same colonial capitalist system: be it

Figure 11

A Vancouver protest against the displacement of vehicle residents, 2021. Photo courtesy of Thomasina Pidgeon



government and corporations, the fossil fuel industry, the real estate industry, pro-Israeli lobby groups or big money....

When I asked members of the VRS if I could post something about standing in solidarity with Palestine, nobody objected. There was no question about it. That said, the Palestinian advocacy work has been separate from the VRS work, which is unfortunate. I once asked the people who are active with Palestine if they could come to a district meeting to support vehicle residents and unfortunately, none of them showed. This is too bad because the struggles are related. Another example is that one of the main environmental groups here has not made any kind of public declaration of support to stand with Palestine. I find this incredibly disappointing because, just to give one reason, the environmental impact of the military industry is huge!

There are some people here who are trying to educate on the connection of the struggles, myself included, but it's frustrating because Canadians are so compliant.... We would be so much stronger supporting each other rather than working separately on our own struggles since the system is so huge and the dominant ideas so engrained... It would be a much more powerful show of solidarity if we could make everyone's struggle our own. That's a lot of work obviously, but maybe it would help progress somehow.

I get that energies are limited and admit that I myself have not connected with the Squamish housing struggle, whose conditions have only been worsening since 2010. The vacancy rate here is very low, 0.01 or something ridiculous like that, which means rentals are very competitive. If an affordable rental place is made available, it's gone within a minute. Houses sell within a day. The market is very fast and expensive. In response, more people live in vehicles, but there is also a movement where people are building tiny homes in their backyards and renting them out. They can also be expensive to rent and are illegal, but the district tends to turn a blind eye. In fact, they are trying to legalize them but there are so many restrictions and regulations with building codes that it really hinders more than helps. I have a friend who built a tiny home one inch too tall and they made him fix it which was a huge job!

Ana: Being a connector is an important function. When there is no infrastructure, people make those connections. They are becoming infrastructure.

Thomasina: Yeah, and it takes time for people to understand how important that is. To be honest, when we last spoke part of me had given up, just a little. For these struggles to be sustainable, we need to find balance between not getting so overwhelmed that we forget to take care of ourselves. It's ironic... the whole reason that I like living in a vehicle is because it is a good lifestyle for me. It allows a balance between work and play, and since I really enjoy living closer to the outdoors it makes me feel more alive. But the bylaw attempts to take this sense of the good life away. I have to remember that this is a fight for the good life, and while doing that I have to remember to live the good life and not let the struggle consume me. This is something that I tend to forget. For example, right now I am writing this in the comforts of my RV. The sun is shining, the wind is blowing

Figure 12

Another world is Possible. Photo courtesy of Thomasina Pidgeon



through my open windows and the view is the Stawamus Chief! Not everyone is so lucky to have a home on wheels that brings this sense of freedom!

Ana: I really like this idea of a good life.

Thomasina: Yes, me too! Much of what I read from Indigenous scholars always returns to this idea of the “good life” and keeping life in balance with the non-human world around us. I sense that this “good life” is something that we’ve been losing touch with as a society. So many people are stuck in the “rat race” and forget why we are here. For me, the vehicle residency lifestyle is a good break from that.

Ironically, it is quite common for retirees to take all the money that they saved up over a lifetime of working and go buy an RV and become a “snowbird”, where every winter they travel south for adventures and return back home in the summer. This repeats every year until they find themselves too old or they die. So they spend their entire lives within the rat-race of the system, to only break free to live the “good life” when they are over 60. Socially, snowbirds are more accepted and subject to less regulations than those who live in RVs for, say, economic and housing reasons. Yet, why is it considered ok to live in an RV when older, but not when younger or even as a result of the housing crisis? One thing is for sure, I don’t want to wait until I am old and feeble to live what I know is “the good life” for me. I want to embrace this good life and that’s why I work to defend it.

Ana: I agree with you, and I think that’s an excellent message for the end of this conversation. Thank you, Thomasina, for sharing this important experience with us.

About this Conversation participants

Thomasina Pidgeon’s life and work has taken many forms including being a professional rock climber, coach, writer, traveler, business owner and mother. Since leaving Newfoundland at age 18, she has been exploring, learning, and “nomading” out of various

Toyota vans for over 25 years. Thomasina's semi-nomadic lifestyle has cultivated within her a deep respect and appreciation for natural spaces and instilled the importance of culture, community and minimal living. Feeling a deep responsibility for Mother Earth and human rights, Thomasina is compelled to fight for social and environmental justice, while inquiring into the truth of the matter at hand. Through words and images, Thomasina shares experiences and strives to dig deep and inspire discussion about the reality and kind of future we are creating. Currently based out of the traditional, ancestral and unceded Skwxwú7mesh Territory, Thomasina is pursuing a master's degree in human geography and is interested in how people who live in vehicles are positioned and regulated in society, and how they push back against capital and colonial dominant understandings of home and property.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no-border, and urban activist and organizer from Serbia, currently residing in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project 'Inhabiting Radical Housing' at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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