

But We Are Living in a Material (and Virtual) World

How Tiny-House Blogs are Transforming the Bildungsroman

Almost anyone who consumes popular or mass media on a regular basis has encountered the “tiny house”: a dwelling of about 400 square feet or less, often built on a trailer, serving either as vacation house or as a primary residence. Since about 2010, the tiny house has moved from a fringe phenomenon to an object of consumer desire and fantasy and, consequently, has become a frequent topic in media of all formats. Chance encounters with the tiny house can occur in a network news broadcast, the pages of the *New York Times*, or in one of three reality TV shows (*Tiny House Hunters* and *Tiny House, Big Living* on HGTV and *Tiny House Nation* on FYI). Those with interest in the topic can seek out blogs, books like *Tiny House Living*, ebooks *Life in a Tiny House* or *Coming Home: Letters from a Tiny House*, *Tiny House* magazine, or documentaries such as *Tiny: A Story about Living Small* or *We the Tiny House People*. From full-length memoirs to two-minute news features, from independent documentary to reality TV, the form and content of the stories told about tiny houses necessarily vary widely, although certain themes are common: desires for financial independence, a simpler lifestyle, and environmental sustainability. In this essay, I examine narratives by “early adopters” who built their own houses and who use their stories to articulate

their rationale for tiny living, to document and share the building process, and to explore its effects on themselves. My interest is in the narrative framework adopted by these authors, whose voices and stories have become influential in the tiny-house movement and in the assumptions of consumer-oriented media stories like those on reality TV.

There are two important sources for this framework. The first, Henry Thoreau's *Walden*, is frequently quoted as inspiration or philosophical forerunner. In this essay, however, I investigate the relationship between tiny-house narratives and a narrative genre that is never invoked, but that, I contend, provides an unconscious narrative framework for many authors: the bildungsroman. Many tiny-house stories by early adopters who built their own homes transform the bildungsroman for contemporary audiences and concerns. First, as I will demonstrate with a brief discussion of Dee Williams's traditionally published memoir, *The Big Tiny: A Built-It-Myself Memoir* (2014), the individual's development depends on her material environment as well as her social context. Second, the contemporary media environment, and particularly digital media, open the bildungsroman in two respects, both allowing a wider spectrum of people to appropriate its plot and ideals and making the story of development that it tells narratively porous and open-ended. To demonstrate these characteristics, I analyze Jess Sullivan's *Another Tiny House Story* (2012–17) and draw additional examples from other long-running blogs. None of these blogs is a bildungsroman, since their form and concerns depart too significantly from common understandings of the genre. But the bildungsroman in its canonical form is, perhaps, no longer a viable narrative model, and these stories take up many of the central concerns and plot structures of the bildungsroman, adapting them to today's social, material, and media contexts. Examining them thus permits us to investigate how media, narrative forms, and cultural ideals evolve together, continually influencing each other.

The Problems of the Bildungsroman in Today's World

This narrative openness and focus on the material context of development depart dramatically from canonical examples of the bildungsroman. This German term is sometimes translated as or equated with the “coming-of-age” novel, but “novel of formation” (or self-formation) would be more precise: a *Roman* is a novel, and *Bildung* translates variously to education, establishment, learning, formation, or

constitution. In German, the term *Bildung* is closely associated with Enlightenment optimism and the liberal ideology of individual human development, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written in 1796, is often held up as the genre's prototype. Over the last several centuries, the developmental arc of the bildungsroman has become the core around or against which a plethora of accounts—both fictional and nonfictional—have been constructed across Western culture. Nineteenth-century realist versions, modernist satires, and postmodernist deconstructions alike are animated by its plot, in which the protagonist departs from home, physically and ideologically; has adventures in self-exploration and -expression; and, at the end, reintegrates himself into a stable role in middle-class society.

This plot trajectory and history imply at least two problems for the contemporary context. The first is the problem of exclusivity. The protagonist of the classic bildungsroman is a white male who enjoys the freedom afforded by substantial financial means. As conceived by Goethe's contemporaries, *Bildung* remained inaccessible to women, who, as creatures of nature, could not attain the rational thought required to achieve it; while the term "female bildungsroman" is used frequently today, feminist scholarship has highlighted the incongruities between the paradigmatic bildungsroman form and novels written by and about women (Kontje 6–7, 102–9). Beginning in the early nineteenth century, critics condemned the form as socially and culturally exclusive and decried its inattention to historical and social realities (Kontje 14–22). More recently, the problem of how the bildungsroman might be practiced in non-European contexts, particularly by colonial or postcolonial authors, has been discussed (e.g., Esty; Bolaki). The second problem is much newer. From a standpoint informed by environmental concerns, the bildungsroman plot epitomizes the problems of environmentally destructive Western culture. Its story privileges the development of the individual human at a time when scholars are calling for forms of representation that push back against anthropocentrism. Val Plumwood, for instance, advocates for representing "nature in the active voice," Bruno Latour for establishing a "shared geostory," and Ursula Heise for inventing representational practices that permit an egalitarian depiction of multiple species. Stacy Alaimo contends that such environmentally motivated interventions are part of a broader "material turn" in both scholarly disciplines and social movements, where attention is turning to the inescapable relationships between humans and the "more-than-human" world and to the ways in which the nonhuman environment shapes human bodies and cultures (7–8). All of these

theories and movements have a posthumanist bent, since they focus on humans' enmeshment in and dependence on the material world. Alaimo cites disability and science studies as fields that take such an approach, but it appears in others, as well. In art, Petra Lange-Berndt advocates for a "methodology of material complicity" that grants agency to material, avoids the anthropocentrism implicit in a focus on human-made objects, and acknowledges the reality of a "world where human bodies and their surroundings have become porous" (13, 18). In anthropology, scholars are asserting the inadequacy of "approaches which view material culture as merely the semiotic representation of some bedrock of social relations" and of anthropological study that grants primacy to the individual subject (D. Miller 3). In stark contrast to this current focus on the entanglement of human culture and the material world, Helena Feder translates "bildungsroman" as "narrative of acculturation" and argues that it is "culture's own origin story, the humanist myth of its separation from and opposition to nature" (18).

The Tiny-House Story as Material Bildungsroman

Tiny-house stories do not overcome this anthropocentric frame of reference, nor can everyone write one. But they do approach their "stories of self-formation" differently. *Bildung* here is not strictly a cultural process but also a physical one that is affected by and interacts with the material world in which it takes place. *Bildung* and *bilden* (to build, to shape) are present here in the literal sense: both physical processes and mediated reflections on them play a role in the protagonists' development. In this attention to physical craft, they are part of a wider "material turn" in popular culture. Emerging social groups are pushing back against the digitalization of experience by practicing and, in some cases, resurrecting handiwork. Knitting, woodworking, pickling, beekeeping, and other traditional crafts are drawing hobbyists. Other people are using modern technology, from laser cutters to 3D printers, to design and construct objects. In his 2014 *Maker Movement Manifesto*, Mark Hatch declares that "making is fundamental to what it means to be human. We must make, create, and express ourselves to feel whole. There is something unique about making physical things. These things are like little pieces of us and seem to embody portions of our souls" (1). In contrast to the academic disciplines and social movements that view the relationship between humans and the material world in a posthumanist vein, the popular culture aspects of the material turn tend to show

the continuing influence of the humanist and anthropocentric desires at the core of the bildungsroman: individual self-realization and self-fulfillment. Mark Hatch is CEO of TechShop, a company that has both profited from and helped to drive the maker movement, and his participation points to the commercialization of these ideals in the contemporary consumerist, capitalist marketplace. Still, Hatch's variety of the maker movement does not represent all of those active in it. Many "makers" practice their crafts with the intention of countering consumer culture, and many also practice with an awareness of the interactions among humans, their production processes and products, and the natural world.

Tiny-house stories that operate in the mode of the bildungsroman connect acknowledgment of and experience in the physical world with the satisfactions of the cultural "story of self-formation." In the documentary *Tiny: A Story about Living Small*, Marete Mueller explains that "the idea to build this house really came out of all these questions that Christopher was having about what kind of a life he wanted to build for himself . . . and as I see him working on the house, I really see him working through those questions" (Mueller and Smith 2:47–3:02). Here, development is mediated not only socially, as in the traditional bildungsroman, but also by the process of building the house: the physical object and the subject are constructed together. The *Maker Movement Manifesto* also connects the Enlightenment idea of continual self-improvement to physical making, proclaiming that "you must always seek to learn more about your making. You may become a journeyman or master craftsman, but you will still learn, want to learn, and push yourself to learn new techniques, materials, and processes. Building a lifelong learning path ensures a rich and rewarding making life and, importantly, enables one to share" (Hatch 1). The titles of Goethe's bildungsroman, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, and its sequel, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, echo in this statement. Finally, material processes change their agents. The *Manifesto* exhorts its readers to "embrace the change that will naturally occur as you go through your maker journey. Since making is fundamental to what it means to be human, you will become a more complete version of you as you make" (Hatch 2). The humanist ideal of individual self-realization and self-fulfillment can hardly be more explicitly expressed than it is in this manifesto for crafters, tinkerers, and aspiring artisans.

Dee Williams's memoir, *The Big Tiny: A Built-It-Myself Memoir*, documents the parallel processes of tiny-house building, individual development, and growing self-awareness. Forty-one when she begins her build, Williams is much older

than the prototypical bildungsroman protagonist, but a sudden, life-threatening heart condition causes her to reevaluate her life. Like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or Gottfried Keller's Green Henry, her development as an individual is bound up with the practice of a craft, but whereas the arts provide the context for self-exploration for many canonical protagonists (Wilhelm Meister pursues the theater and Green Henry painting), Williams builds her house. During this process, traditional concerns of the bildungsroman, such as engagement with literature and a quest for beauty, mingle with Williams's contemporary concerns with the material environment and human interactions with it. The agony of giving away her books points to her attachment to humanist ideals, but her motivations for the purge indicate another sensibility as well: "letting go of 'stuff' allowed the world to collapse behind me as I moved, so I became nothing more or less than who I simply was: Me" (Williams 175). Very differently than in the canonical bildungsroman or the anti-bildungsroman of the twentieth century, this "me" inhabits a world where nature and human society permeate each other. Interestingly, in this way, Williams's story and others like it return to a conception of human development resembling Johann Gottfried Herder's eighteenth-century view, in which *Bildung* is shaped by climate and geography.¹ Williams agonizes about the offgas from a synthetic foam mattress, for instance, and notes that, as a state hazardous waste inspector, she realized that "nature was all up inside what I once believed was simply industrial" (44). She reflects frequently on connections between her body and the world, from mundane objects like a toilet paper holder or doorknob, to the materials she uses to build her house, to the people around her (111, 141). "For me," she writes, "the idea of living small has always involved being curious—taking a look at how my day-to-day is connected to the larger world around me, and to the delicate universe that sits between my ears and in my small body" (282). The specific character of the material world also affects her individual development. At the end of the book, Williams lies in bed and conjures pictures around the knotholes in her ceiling, reflecting that "this is the sort of imagination that develops after living with your head a few feet from a beautiful knotty pine ceiling" (284).

In the end, Williams has become physically and mentally stronger and has developed a new understanding of herself, but she has also established herself more securely within a community. This is not the bourgeois community that reclaims the traditional bildungsroman protagonist, since she has quit her job and abandoned the grid. Still, the tiny house has "work[ed] its magic" to connect her to a new community and to the natural and material world (141). This integration into

a community that includes human and nonhuman elements is a common feature of tiny-house narratives. Williams, who went on to consult and speak to those interested in tiny-house living, reports that “in every case, these people wanted a sense of home that included the people and natural environment around them, even if nature was nothing more exotic than the squirrels balancing on the telephone lines in a busy urban neighborhood” (282). The individual growth that happens in these stories is not, as Feder contends about the *bildungsroman*, a “narrative of acculturation” that repeats “the humanist myth of [culture’s] separation from and opposition to nature” (18), but its opposite: a story of growing into awareness of and integration with the natural world. Nowhere does Williams invoke the *bildungsroman* model, nor do I mean to assert that she follows it consciously. But the memoir suggests that she has internalized the *bildungsroman*’s plot.

Tiny-House Blogs and the Opening of the Bildungsroman

For all its differences from the traditional *bildungsroman*, Williams’s memoir still offers a contained, coherent narrative of constructing the house and the self. The format and digital environment of tiny-house blogs takes them a step further from the *bildungsroman*, in part by opening it to broad participation. These blogs illustrate the intimate connection that has grown up between digital environments and participatory “maker” cultures, despite the fact that these cultures often resist the digitalization of the human lifeworld. While participatory culture has been theorized and discussed primarily in connection with media practices, especially online social media, digital media enable participatory cultures to grow up around material practices in a number of ways. According to Henry Jenkins and colleagues, a participatory culture is one

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
 2. With strong support for creating and sharing one’s creation with others
 3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
 4. Where members believe that their contributions matter; and
 5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).
- (Jenkins et al. 5–6)

The relatively easy access to becoming a producer on digital media permits the horizontal communication, informal mentorship, sharing, and expressions of appreciation that are so crucial to “maker” communities in general, and tiny-house bloggers in particular. A cell phone with a camera, a computer with internet access, and familiarity with Blogger or WordPress are all one needs to start a blog. No agent, publisher, or producer is required. The digital domain offers “low barriers” in the cultural dimension as well. These media operate almost exclusively in the mode of what Walter Ong defined in 1982 as “secondary orality”: a mode of discourse that, although technologically mediated, has an informal, social, and conversational tone. Not only are the barriers to production low, but the norm of secondary orality means that cultural barriers to self-expression are also easier to overcome. While Williams’s memoir is relatively informal, it is composed and edited. In contrast, while the writing styles and proficiencies of tiny-house bloggers vary widely, all display the conversational tone of secondary orality and the stylistic and linguistic markers of informal and unedited language, from the heavy use of exclamation points to misspellings or switched homonyms. “Isn’t it the prettiest little house you’ve ever seeeeeen!” Kim Kasl writes with all the typographical markers of digital communication, “ILOVEIT! Tell me you love it!” (September 11, 2014). To reprise an earlier statement, I maintain that tiny-house *blogs* that operate in the mode of the bildungsroman connect acknowledgment of and experience in the physical world with the satisfactions of the cultural “story of self-formation” *in a form that is accessible to many*—a task that is impossible for the high-culture, high-prestige, professionally published novel or memoir.

Still, there should be no illusion that participatory cultures, whether digital or material, are without barriers to participation. Despite their attractiveness for some people with limited economic resources, tiny houses are not accessible to everyone, either economically, materially, or as aspirational objects. Even for those who do the work themselves and use largely repurposed and salvaged materials, expense and time can be prohibitive. Their functionality is also demographically restricted; while there are families with children who choose to live in tiny houses, they are not feasible for everyone. Further, the “tiny house” as possibility, rather than constraint, is only available to those who elect to inhabit a tiny space; choice is a key distinction between the tiny house and the tenement. Nor are the media that enable their sharing equally accessible to all. Ellen Seiter notes that access to both the tools and the cultural capital necessary for media production remains economically stratified and that the idea that anyone can become a media producer is simply false. And not

everyone who could produce media content in the tiny-house movement does so; as S. Elizabeth Bird writes, “true producers [producer/consumers] are a reality, but they are not the norm” (512). In line with these observations, the tiny-house world and many other online maker communities are heavily dominated by white people who have enjoyed advanced education, even if many of them also find themselves in restricted financial situations.

Those conditions hold true for the blog I will discuss for the remainder of this essay, Jess Sullivan’s *Another Tiny House Story*. The blog begins with a post that contains the beginnings of the bildungsroman plot and indicates how the expectations and goals of the blog format break open the form. The post explains the rationale of the blog and the experiences that led Sullivan and her boyfriend, Dan, to decide to build a tiny house. The rationale appears first; Sullivan is writing the blog to thank those from whom she and Dan have received valuable knowledge and motivation and to provide similar support for others. This statement, which echoes the tenets of participatory culture, begins the “how-to” strand of the blog that is its primary purpose and that dominates its content. The story of self-formation makes its appearance immediately thereafter, as Sullivan presents the decision to build a tiny house as a departure from the expectations of middle-class society—the first station of the bildungsroman. After providing a brief sketch of her childhood, the twenty-seven-year-old Sullivan describes the course of her first marriage, which ended under the pressures of traditional house ownership. In short, repetitive, paratactic sentences that close off any room for maneuver, she evokes the social expectations to which she and her first husband tried to conform: “You find a partner. You marry. You buy a home. You fill it with nice things. You have kids. You teach them to do the same. Our story did not go that way” (October 26, 2012). She and Dan, she explains, have chosen to depart from this set of expectations and to take “an exciting journey down a road much, much less traveled” (October 26, 2012). In many ways, the Sullivans remain firmly embedded in a middle-class social structure and its norms. During the course of their build, she holds a corporate job, he finishes school, and they marry. Still, they understand themselves to be leaving the well-trodden path, and this view is justified: two young professionals, they choose to live in a 184-square-foot home without running water. This characterization begins the network of comments and observations that suggests that Sullivan, like the authors of other blogs and tiny-house stories, operates with core assumptions and goals from the bildungsroman, even as the blog format and her audience’s expectations shape the story she tells.

Narrative blogs entail an openness of plot and narrative progression. Although many authors have a plan for a story to be told or topics to be covered, authors' experiences can lead to turns that are unexpected for audiences and authors alike. In tiny-house blogs that tell a story of individual development, then, there is no teleology that determines the direction of development or provides a definitive framework for interpreting it. The potential for story drift is clear in Kim Kasl's *Bless This Tiny House*. This blog, which originally had a different title, does not begin with the tiny house, but with a resolution for continual self-improvement in a religious context: "Always pursuing a better version of myself" (August 15, 2012). Once the tiny house appears, the blog turns increasingly to the experience of and advocacy for tiny-house living. The goal of self-formation remains the same, but the path changes. Others find their way to a story of self-formation only gradually. Macy Miller, an architectural designer, starts building a tiny house with financial and professional goals. Four years later, in a post titled "It's not about the [Tiny] House," she writes that "creating your own tiny house is hard, it's an act of deep introspection, it's physically demanding . . . [living tiny] is about examining what you want from life and making THAT happen for yourself" (January 10, 2016). Sullivan's is a tiny-house blog and story of self-formation from beginning to end, but the development does not occur in a single arc. From early on, she uses metaphors of growth to observe the changes taking place as she and Dan work on the house: "Like the roots of a great oak, [the tiny house project] is ceaselessly stretching, grasping, and growing straight into the soil that is us" (November 12, 2012). After eighteen months of life in the tiny house, she decides to leave her corporate job to start her own business, an event that constitutes a second "departure from society" and prompts her to articulate for the first time the goal of self-discovery and self-realization central to the bildungsroman. Reporting on her first week of "freedom" from her job, she announces her intention to find a fulfilling pursuit and "to get back in touch with who I am . . . was . . . or would like to be again" (March 10, 2015). She begins these efforts by reengaging with creative hobbies—including photography, painting, and writing—that echo the artistic explorations of many bildungsroman protagonists. As the years of working on and living in the tiny house pass, she remarks that she and Dan feel that they have grown, becoming more mature and able to meet difficult situations calmly (September 9, 2013; November 12, 2013; December 31, 2015), and, in particular, she reports increased self-confidence (November 12, 2013; November 23, 2016).

Culled from the years of blog posts, these statements give the impression of a blog of self-exploration that remains as divorced from material concerns as any

canonical bildungsroman, but such a depiction is misleading. These statements appear infrequently, usually as short commentary accompanying extensive descriptions of building tasks: acquiring materials through Craig's List and at the big-box store, weighing the benefits of different heating systems and plumbing configurations, processing and installing used pallets for shiplap siding, and so on. These posts address the interests of the tiny-house community and fulfill the promise articulated in the rationale. Existing alongside the story of individual development, they, like all of the tiny-house blogs I have encountered, open the narrative of self-formation that is the sole focus of the bildungsroman to a parallel engagement with other topics and stories.

In Sullivan's blog, as in many, numerous photos emphasize this focus on the building process. The ease and low cost of sharing both still and moving images is a key factor in the importance of digital media to material participatory cultures. In practical terms, images are essential to the ability to transmit or teach techniques across distance. Learning to knit via verbal or written instruction alone is a practically inconceivable enterprise, but learning from a video or series of photographs is quite feasible. Once possible only for well-funded, popular press hobbyist and women's magazines, the images communicating such skills can now be captured with a smartphone and shared a moment later in a YouTube video that garners millions of views. In the case of tiny-house narratives, the images depict the materials, tasks, and results in detail, and although one could not build a tiny house simply by looking at them, they provide valuable information for anyone who views them for that purpose: the color of wood before and after an application of tung oil, the proper installation of flashing around a window, the placement of pins in a curtain being sewn.

The photo-rich environment of Sullivan's blog and others distinguishes them from a memoir like Williams's, and from the traditional bildungsroman. In these novels, images sometimes spur protagonists' development, as is the case for Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* or Stifter's *Heinrich Drendorf*, or become a medium of that development, as is the case for *Drendorf* and Gottfried Keller's aspiring artist *Heinrich Lee*.² In such novels, extensive ekphrastic passages render detailed verbal pictures. With rare exceptions such as Stifter's, however, these novels subordinate visual descriptions to the account of the individual's development through time; formally, description is subordinate to narration, and thematically, the physical objects described are subordinate to the protagonist's interior development.

In many tiny-house blogs, this relationship is balanced, if not inverted.

Photographs often dominate the space of the blog and anchor its design, reflecting the relative importance of the accounts of tiny house and tiny-house builder. In Sullivan's blog, in addition to the photos embedded within and alongside the narrative, many posts end with large segments of minimally captioned photos irrelevant to the story of Jess and Dan. The photos also fulfill a different function than they do in the canonical bildungsroman. Rather than serving as vehicles for the protagonists' interior development or readers' understanding of it, they point to the material world, the world of things with which people in material-based participatory communities are passionately engaged. Beginning with Roland Barthes, theorists of photography have emphasized the direct connection between the photographic image and the objects it captures, even as they take pains not to accept it naively as a guarantor of transparency or truth. Barthes writes that the photograph and its object "are glued together," so that "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (6). In technical terms, the relationship arises from the photochemical trace that is the material link between represented object and medial representation. In the terms of Charles Sanders Peirce's taxonomy of signs, photographs belong to the category of the index: signs that are "in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other" (107). As many have noted, the advent of digital images circumvents the physical connection that obtained between the photographic image and the material world, interjecting a symbolic buffer of *is* and *os* between them and opening images to (additional) modification and invention. But this decoupling of object and image has not destroyed the sense that digital photography offers access to the details and reality of the physical world. As Mary Ann Doane writes, the "indexical imaginary" continues to exert a strong force (5). In fact, the desire to maintain the referentiality of the image is likely related to the desires that drive the turn to material practices. In Doane's words, "the desire for a photographic logic has only been intensified by the emergence of the digital" (4). Particularly in the mass and popular media, the domain of the tiny-house story and other participatory culture communications, this imagined relationship between photograph and physical world underpins the production and reception of the vast majority of images. And the photographic image allows practitioners and would-be practitioners to appreciate material objects in ways that would be difficult from descriptions alone: to see the texture and color of a yarn, the grain of a board, the feel of a space.

It is the work with these materials that spurs Sullivan's development, so that the

construction of the house contributes to the construction of the self. Motivated by the successes of the house build, she and Dan decide to fabricate centerpieces for their wedding, and she reflects that “we made these things together, by hand, as we will our new life” (August 29, 2014). Although the link between material processes and individual growth is metaphorical here, in other places, it is not. Early in the process, as Sullivan prepares for the adjustments ahead, she commands herself to “START THE MENTAL AND MATERIAL TRANSITION” (November 12, 2012). A year later, she cites a trip to the hardware store as a moment of realization about how much she has grown; walking in, knowing what she needs and where to find it, she feels “like a badass” and moves through the store emitting an aura of “Yeah. I build shit” (September 9, 2013).

Observations over time indicate repeated moments of awareness about the connections between her physical environment, her bodily experience, and her state of being. Several of these reflect on her relationship with water. While one of their broad goals for the tiny house is to unhook from the grid and practice a sustainable lifestyle, Sullivan gives particular attention to water stewardship. As they contemplate plumbing choices, she tests out a bucket shower, and this trial convinces her that they can forgo plumbing: “it was way more than I expected. . . . It was quiet, peaceful, and there was something about the act itself that seemed more purposeful and aware” (February 5, 2013). Water also prompts Sullivan to reflect on the ways in which the tiny-house experience has connected her to the world around her. Discussing what it is like to live for two years with a composting toilet, she expresses her happiness that they decided not to “cling with fear to the porcelain bowl. An effect I didn’t anticipate is perhaps my favorite: I feel so much more connected to everything around us, now that we are completing the true nutrient cycle . . . what we cannot use, we put back” (November 1, 2015).

As is the case for Williams, this closer relationship to natural processes is paralleled by the integration into a human community that shares goals and supports the endeavors of its members. And, again like Williams, she sees the tiny house as being about that connection. “I believe,” Sullivan asserts, “life is about finding happiness and finding connection. So far, the tiny house living has brought us both in excess!” (July 29, 2014). Many of these human connections are forged through the blog itself. While the tiny-house build is the motivation for the connections, the blog’s narration generates them, and because of their exposure there, the Sullivans receive offers of assistance, make friends, and are invited to speak about their experiences at live events and in audio and video interviews shared online.

The blog's engagement in a participatory culture leads to human relationships, but the development of these relationships in the space of the blog also changes the narrative of self-formation it contains. The traditional bildungsroman, retrospectively narrated from a stable narrative stance in the closed format of the novel, permits only passive, identificatory, or imagined participation in the protagonist's development. In blogs, conversation between readers and authors, which takes place in the comments and the external communications to which they sometimes lead, can affect the author's development and her interpretation of it. When Sullivan feels overwhelmed by a long list of tasks still to be completed after two years of hard work, she calls out to her readers for support and advice (August 14, 2014). In the next post, titled "Batteries = RECHARGED!," she reports feeling "spunky and ready to work" after the encouragement they received from the community that has taken shape around the blog (August 21, 2012). Tiny-house blogs, like every corner of the internet, are also home to trolls, and authors' responses to these interlocutors can lead them to define their goals and reflect on their development. Kasl and Miller both devote posts to refuting those who question the financial wisdom of a tiny house or deride the tiny-house lifestyle, and, in doing so, they articulate how living in a tiny house has changed them (Kasl July 12, 2015; M. Miller April 12, 2017). In these blogs, it is not only the tiny-house experience that is participatory but also the narrative and experience of the individual's development.

To end my discussion of Sullivan's blog, I would like to point to what is, perhaps, the most important difference from the bildungsroman in narrative terms: there is no clear end point. "How-to" tiny-house blogs typically end when the construction is finished, since their goals are fulfilled when information about the build process has been shared. In blogs that begin as or become stories of self-formation and the tiny-house experience, however, the writing and reflection often continue to include the experience of living in the tiny house; such is the case in all of the narratives discussed here. Differently than in the traditional bildungsroman, the story of development is not a closed story that ends with the protagonist's reintegration into a stable role in society. The reader follows her into that life to see what it is like. Neither author nor audience knows when the story will end, and development becomes an open process, rather than a closed one. The story of development as told in a blog may thus avoid the accommodation to society and the final stasis that has prompted readers' critique since *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* was skewered by the German Romantics.³ Of course, in the process, it may cease to be a bildungsroman; in Franco Moretti's understanding, it is precisely the tension

between the open “transformation” of the youthful exploration phase and the determinate “classification” of the mature protagonist that characterizes the genre (6–11). In all of the blogs I have discussed here, the openness to further development includes the recognition that the tiny house may not be home forever. At the time of the writing of this essay, the Sullivans had moved out of their tiny house to be closer to work, and the last post reflects on the tiny-house habits that they continue to maintain after three months of “conventional” living (March 14, 2017). This departure from the tiny house should not be seen as abandoning the “transformation” stage that the tiny house represents, however; Sullivan uses her last post to enumerate the lasting changes that living in the tiny house has wrought in her personality and daily life and maintains that she and Dan will return to a tiny house in retirement. It remains to be seen whether this post, written six weeks before this essay, will be the blog’s final chapter.

In closing, I should confess to my own fascination with tiny houses, but I should also make clear that I do not write to glorify the movement or its stories. As the introduction notes, tiny houses have been thoroughly commercialized and have become a new, and very large, type of consumer good. While the people whose stories are discussed in this article make (or made) their tiny house their primary home, in part in the interest of sustainability, many commercially produced tiny houses are sold as second homes, and making it cheaper and easier for people to acquire a second home is not a sustainable practice. Nor, as discussed in the section on participatory culture, are tiny homes or the tiny-house story available as a practice for everyone. Finally, describing a narrative as “open” is not tantamount to celebrating it. Still, that these narratives appeal to so many suggests that they offer a potent combination of familiar ideals and desires, on the one hand, and features that attempt to respond to contemporary needs and values, on the other. The creation of stories that unite the conceptions and aspirations of liberal individualism with an appreciation for limited material claims is, it seems to me, valuable for culture today. That these blogs’ readers sometimes decide to buy or build a tiny house indicates, too, that the combination of narrative and material practices provides a model and a support structure for others to take action. If nothing else, reading tiny-house blogs as a new manifestation of the bildungsroman plot may revise our understanding of participatory cultures. Not only can these cultures center on material practices, but they can also connect them to a broader spectrum of cultural products—and a much longer cultural inheritance—than is usually recognized.

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■ NOTES

1. For a summary of Herder's views, see Kontje 2–3.
2. Tove Holmes and Bethany Richetti both provide analyses of the importance of images in the development of bildungsroman protagonists. Holmes focuses on *Indian Summer*, invoking *Wilhelm Meister* as a comparison, and Richetti discusses the novels by Stifter and Keller, as well as Theodor Fontane's *L'Adultera*.
3. For a summary, see Kontje 11–13.

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