

Hippies and #Vanlife: An American Counterculture Critique

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Introduction

Research Question: Both 1960's counterculture and #vanlife phenomenon claim to be a revolutionary escape from society, yet how revolutionary are they really?

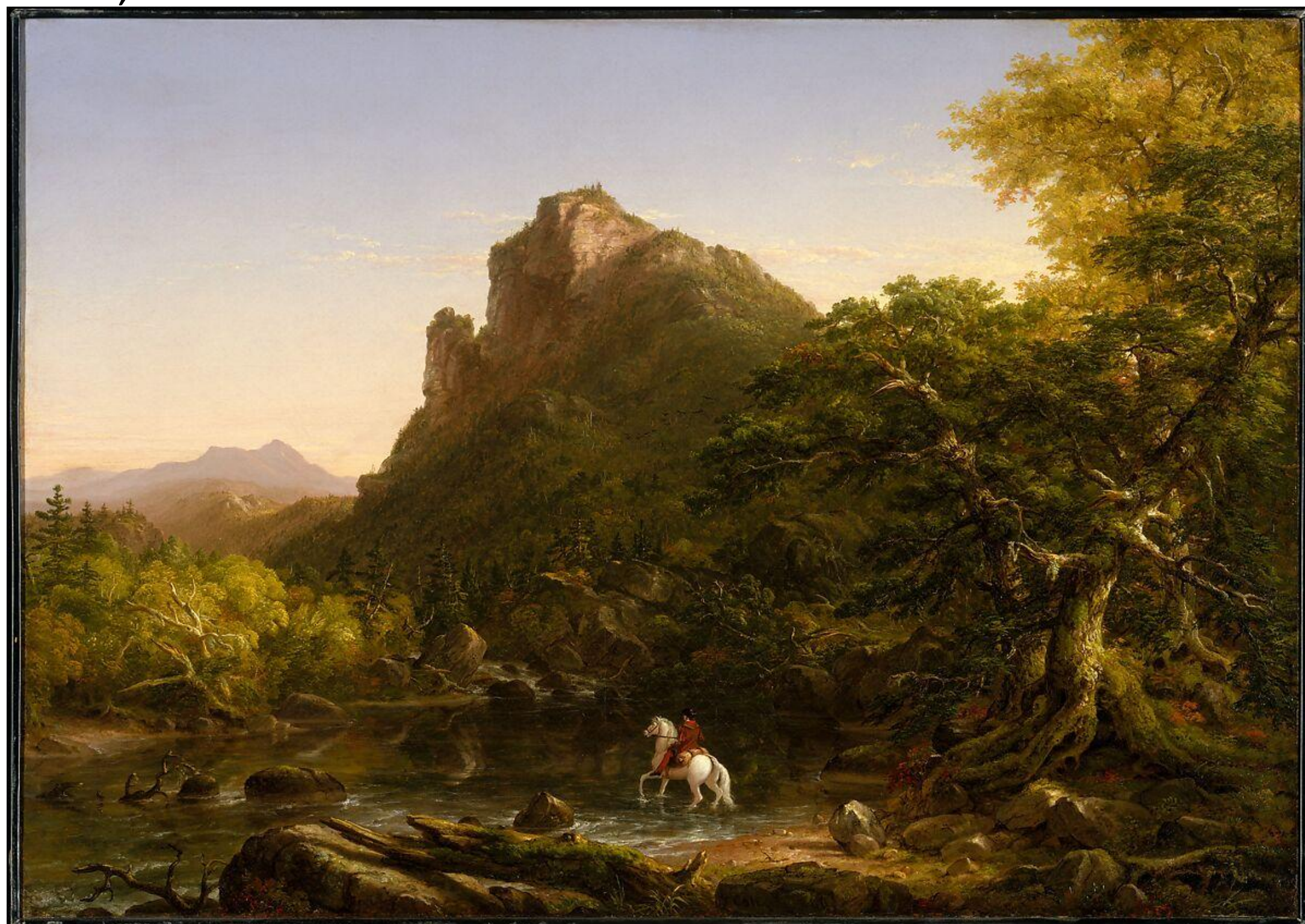
Thesis: While the #vanlife movement has its differences from the 1960's counterculture movement, both claim that land is a pristine escape for them, recreating settler colonial claims of land.

Settler Colonial Land Claims

- ❖ 1492 Christopher Columbus came to the Americas prompting Europeans to flock to the Americas in waves. The colonists described the Americas as being a pristine and untouched wilderness, open for them to explore, exploit, and settle .
- ❖ This was untrue, the land was populated and continually altered by Native Americans. Yet colonialists dismissed this, seeing them as a part of nature to justify their claim to the land.
- ❖ This ideology of land being for the white settler to explore, and exploit continued throughout American history.
- ❖ Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir described Yosemite, the first National Park, as pristine and untouched wilderness. Yet the park, like many other public lands were established through the forced removal and killing of Native People.
- ❖ Even today, marginalized communities continue to be left out by settler colonial land claims.

Sources: Denevan, William M. "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (1992): 369–85.

Treuer, David. "Return the National Parks to the Tribes." *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2021.



The Mountain Ford, Thomas Cole, 1846

Hippies: 1960's Counterculture

The 1960's counterculture movement was popularized in 1967 during the Summer of Love. A summer long event that took place in the San Francisco neighborhood of Haight Asbury, where mostly white college age people from all over the US came to exchange and preach their ideals of free love.

They critiqued the structures of society, saying that it was too far removed from nature and too reliant on the nine to five workday and material goods. Many hippies then started living collectives in rural areas in an attempt to escape society and live a life they felt was more connected to nature and each other. Their foundational views of nature were as follows:

- ❖ Nature as pristine and untouched
- ❖ Indigenous People as Part of Nature and Historical
- ❖ Nature as an escape
- ❖ Nature as Part of Frontier Life

The hippie culture's view of land reproduced settler colonial land views by claiming the land for themselves and their own goals. They ignored the violent history behind the US obtaining this land and allowing them access to it.

Sources: Rorabaugh, W. J. *American Hippies*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Moretta, John. "Down on 'The Technicolor Farm' of Summertown, Tennessee: The Hippie Era's Most Eclectic and Visionary Commune." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2016): 276–321.

The San Francisco Oracle, 1966-1968



California Hippie Commune, 1960s

Vanlife: The Social Media Movement

In 2011, a white man named Foster Huntington bought a VW van and left his job as a designer at Ralph Lauren to live in his van. He posted aesthetic pictures of his life traveling in his van, calling it: #vanlife, This started the vanlife trend which consists of spending thousands of dollars to turn a van into a chic living space, traveling to remote places, and posting about it on social media. It relies on seeing nature as:

- ❖ Nature as a pristine and untouched
- ❖ Land and nature as a publicly accessible escape for themselves
- ❖ Land as open to claim for home in van

Many marginalized communities do not have easy access to public lands and natural spaces due to financial and time constraints. Vanlife reproduces settler claims to land by reinforcing these ideas of nature and ignoring the exclusion of marginalized communities.

Sources: Whitson, Joseph. "Indigenizing Instagram: Challenging Settler Colonialism in the Outdoor Industry." *American Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2021): 311–34. Pruss, Graham, and Karen Cheng. "The 'Punitive Push' on Mobile Homes." *Citiescape* 22, no. 2 (2020): 87–94. Bowles, Nellie. "The #Vanlife Business Is Booming." *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, sec. Technology.



Vanlife, Valerie Wheatley, 2022

Conclusion

- ❖ Hippies and vanlifers are not revolutionary, they instead reproduce settler colonial land claims failing to challenge the structures of the society they claim to escape.
- ❖ Are hippies and vanlifers evil? No! It is just important to critically analyze movements that are claiming to be revolutionary so we can work to better reform societal structures and combat settler colonial power hierarchies.