

Disaster Survivors' Journey Back Home:
An Ethnographic Study of the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire

by
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Disaster Survivors' Journey Back Home: An Ethnographic Study of the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire

This dissertation explores the lived experiences of wildfire disaster survivors, through ethnographic methods including 84 interviews and two-year participant observation. This dissertation extends sociological inquiry to an understudied population—rural communities—in the field of environmental justice, with a focus on the survivors' decisions around home during and after the fire crisis. This dissertation focuses on how place shapes disaster experience, with attentiveness to variations based on class and place attachment.

Although class backgrounds greatly influence the survivors' recovery choices, they are not the only factors motivating the survivors' responses and behaviors. This dissertation sheds lights on the possible non-economic reasons for their choices to increase the understanding of the vulnerability of the rural population. A central goal of this dissertation is to emphasize the importance of place as an axis that structures experiences and social relations in the context of disaster recovery. The rural place characters meant a different kind of social norm under which the survivors operated, largely shaped by how they were connected to place. Such varied connections to place in turn affect their perceptions of home, as in when home is safe or unsafe, when one should hold on to their home and when to give up, where to reestablish home after disaster, and ways to come up with creative solutions to home, such as informal housing like RV homes.

This dissertation concludes that the survivors' experience is culturally and structurally shaped and place specific. Its primary contribution is to foreground the meaning of home during climate crisis, connecting social inequalities in disaster recovery with the

characteristics of place. The findings contribute to environmental sociology, rural sociology, and sociology of place, demonstrating how place shapes experiences of recovery and rebuild, and how gendered care, residence time, and the informality of housing in the rural space influence the experiences of evacuation and recovery.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Pacific Northwest is known for its vibrant old-growth forests, nature trails, rivers, mineral hot springs, mushrooms, and salmon, to name just a few. The McKenzie River watershed is one such popular place, where wild fish like steelheads and salmon live. It supplies drinking water for the Springfield and Eugene metro areas. Known as the “sportsman’s paradise” for fishing, hiking, and boating, amongst many other tourist attractions related to the McKenzie River that flows through, the valley is a well-known place for outdoor lovers. People who move here often call themselves lucky. As a river resident named John Vincent put it, “People come up and they would spend thousands of dollars every year for vacation. And we’re just living here, like we’re on vacation all the time.” Their sense of pride is undeniably attached to the qualities of place. Thus, the McKenzie River Valley is ideal for city retirees like John, often wealthy, to spend the rest of their life in nature, or at least part of their retirement if they have second homes elsewhere. Working-class households raising children, and professionals who work remotely, also find the McKenzie an ideal place to live, mostly for its adjacency to nature.

But in addition to the love of the recreational qualities of the place are the hard-hit communities that were once thriving from supporting natural resources projects such as logging. Following the completion or decline of those projects, these communities are now supporting the tourism, mainly for the purpose of survival. This surviving part of the McKenzie River Valley is concentrated in the town of Blue River, named after the river running through its community. Blue River came to develop when white settlers—workers and their families—migrated to the area for natural resource extractive activities such as mining, logging, constructing dams, and related employment such as jobs in sawmills, the forest service, construction companies, schools, and other supporting businesses like restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, and motels. Even though timber activities have

continued, employment in timber has reduced following the automation in logging operations as well as stricter timber regulations. As such, the town of Blue River has experienced brain drain, becoming a legacy community, tucked in at the rural, forested McKenzie River Valley. An old-timer resident Allen Bells described Blue River as a “ticky tacky” place, “a home for people that can’t afford it” (Interview, 2023). “More low income to no income type folks in this town,” said Allena Beecher (Interview, 2022), a newcomer self-employed entrepreneur. “There was a lot of drug addicts, a lot of alcoholics,” said Renee Anderson, an old-timer renter who grew up mostly homeless on the river. “It attracts people that are trying to get away or to live in the woods” (Interview, 2022). To Nora Helms, a newcomer renter, Blue River is a place where “people have new names new identities.” But most of the river residents can agree that Blue River is also a “peaceful” and “quiet” place with “a lot of fresh air” and “space,” and that it is “a lot of less stressful,” as shared by another old-timer resident, Jack Wimbledon (Interview, 2011). In many ways, Blue River struggled with poverty and other consequences like those of deindustrialization—like drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness issues. Unfortunately, adding salt to the wound, a catastrophic wildfire named the Holiday Farm Fire broke out on September 7, 2020.

Burning a total area of 173,000 acres, the fire destroyed over 500 homes, including most of the Blue River town. During the first day of the fire, at its peak of spread, the fire was consuming 324 acres or 245 football fields every 60 seconds (NWS Portland 2022). This rare but potentially more frequent ecological tragedy presents an opportunity to query into the experiences of the fire victims. How would an already stressed rural town like Blue River recover from this climate catastrophe? How did everyone else in the valley experience the displacement and recover from such a traumatic event?

This dissertation answers these broad questions by examining the lived experiences of the wildfire survivors in the McKenzie River Valley. Specifically, I ask: What was it like for

them to experience the emergency evacuation? How did they recover from the fire displacement and the loss of home, not just physical structures but also their sense of place and security? And more broadly: How does place shape the process in which survivors attempted to restore a sense of home? In answering these questions, I am attentive to variations in people's experiences of the fire, as well as in their long-term recovery. While wildfire survivors shared similar stories, there are variations that reflect both class and place attachment, and these variations are the focus of this work. These are stories in which the survivors' experience with the fire challenges the current practices in disaster recovery, which prioritize housing and economic development. To be home again means to have both a physical home and support for social connections and emotional well-being.

Understanding Climate Disaster as Disruption of Home

This dissertation approaches home as both a physical and emotional boundary where the dwellers can feel safe and secure while conducting daily routines (Borchard 2013; Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013). Climate disaster, on the other hand, is an event that threatens, violates, and sometimes destroys such home boundaries. Under such climate threats, people are forced to make decisions to defend their boundaries and rebuild in case of loss of home. Such responses, as we already know, vary depending on an individual's social location, such as race, gender, class, age, and health. But as research shows, place, as a spatial and cultural context where home is embedded, also influences people's behaviors (Gieryn 2000; Paulsen 2004). For example, people of different place-based identities, living in places of different property laws and regulations, can operate differently towards environmental changes that negatively affect one's home (Harrison 2020; Herbert and Orne 2021). This section will elaborate on the link between home as a source of ontological security and the role of place in understanding home. I then move on to discussing current research on home in disaster recovery, and specific challenges rural communities face in the context of disaster.

Ontological Security

The concept of ontological security is grounded in the human experience of being real, alive, and whole, with unquestionable identity and autonomy (Laing 1969). Such an individual, in Laing's (1969) words, has "a firm core of ontological security." An ontologically secure person can gratifyingly relate themselves to others, while an ontologically insecure person is distracted with maintaining themselves. They respond to ordinary circumstances of life differently. As Laing (1969) puts it:

If a position of primary ontological security has been reached, the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to one's own existence. If such a basis for living has not been reached, the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat. (Laing 1969:42)

Even though Laing (1969) developed this foundational understanding of ontological security for psychotherapists in their care of the schizophrenic patients, environmental sociologists have successfully extended this concept to the understanding of individuals' experience impacted by external factors, particularly the consequences of advanced capitalism and the institutions of modernity (Banham 2020; Giddens 1990, 1991). Modern industry produces both "goods"—better quality of life for most people, and "bads"—environmental hazards, climate change, vaccine-resistant disease, in additions to social ills such as unemployment and lack of health care (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 2006). The pursuits of "goods," mostly driven by endless growth of capitalism generate "bads" as unwanted side effects. As such, nature becomes industrialized, resulting in manufactured uncertainties—risks as a result of more and better knowledge, as well as the inability to know (Beck 2000). Mega-risks, which knew no geographical or socioeconomic limits, threaten every citizen (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991), challenging their ontological security, or "the confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens 1990:92).

In the context of disasters, the survivors' experience of sudden evacuation from their home, loss of home and making their way back home can be understood using the lens of ontological security, which emphasizes the need to experience oneself as a whole (Giddens 1984, 1991; Laing 1969). Routines and norms block an individual from feeling anxious towards unpredictability, and these norms that are often taken for granted in one's interaction with the external world foster ontological security (Banham 2020; Giddens 1991). A key element to ontological security is the notion of trust, with which one feels confident about the social and natural environment. The development of trust chases away anxiety and despair, which means that having a high level of ontological security allows individuals to fulfill social expectations, believing that their positions in the world will remain stable (Banham 2020; Giddens 1991:38-55).

Social scientists have used ontological security, inherently a mental health framework (Laing 1969; Padgett 2007), to understand the lived experience of disaster survivors (Haney and Gray-Scholz 2020a; Hawkins and Maurer 2011). In Erikson's (2006) work on the survivors' experience of the 1972 Buffalo Creek Flood, after the initial "blow" of the flood, the survivors experienced the second trauma—the loss of their community, an integral part of the identity of the rural Appalachian survivors. Displacement like this threatens the displaced on the existential level that results in ontological insecurity (Farbotko 2019). Such needs to address ontological insecurity began gaining some attention in the official disaster response, such as in the Stafford Act, which dictated federal funds for mental health assistance following the 1972 Hurricane Agnes.

As Hawkins and Maurer (2011:146) posit in their work with the 2005 Hurricane Katrina survivors, "the protracted mourning process of the loss of ontological security may increase psychological distress in ways that are not being captured by the standard models of disaster research," and "the losses associated with disasters go beyond the physical and

financial” (2011:154). More recent research uses ontological security to explore experiences in different social groups, as well as identities associated to place—such as gender—where women appear to be more disrupted than men in regard to the loss of familiar landmarks and the loss of routines (Haney and Gray-Scholz 2020a), and work identity that motivated the disaster survivors to stay in the disaster site (Harrison 2020). However, by and large, the field of ontological security in disaster studies has remained underutilized.

This dissertation focuses on the process of restoring ontological security among the rural wildfire survivors. I explore the distinct ways they decided where they chose to settle their post-disaster home and a creative type of home that has emerged onto the disaster recovery scene—vehicle living. I argue that these unique choices by the survivors are in part shaped by place. Besides class differences, place factors such as identities, property laws, and culture pull and push the survivors into and out of place. In the following, I will discuss place in depth and consider how it has informed sociological research on the study of ontological security and home.

Place and Home

Ontological security extends to place, with which an individual builds relationships to practice routines, to build community, and to create an identity for the continuity of the self, as well as to maintain the constancy of the social and material environment (Banham 2020; Gieryn 2000; Hawkins and Maurer 2011; Padgett 2007; Paulsen 2004). We tend to announce who we are by the place we come from or live in, in part because place offers desirable identities (Gieryn 2000:229; Paulsen 2004:247). In Gieryn’s (2000) comprehensive review of the sociological studies of place, he succinctly critiques the absence of place in dominant social science research—quantitative and survey research, for example, which emphasizes traditional sociological variables such as race, class, and gender, as in census data and atlas descriptions. This approach misses the nuances of place in the experience of the people in the

place. Gieryn argues that we cannot equate place to place with similar variables. “Place mediates social life” (Abu-Lughod 1968, cited in Gieryn 2000: 467). It plays an active role in securing tradition as well as expressing class inequalities. Place is at once a geographic location, material form, and “the cultural conjurings of them” (Gieryn 2000:468).

As a conceptual tool of actualizing ways to study place, “place character” (Paulsen 2004) came into play as a mediation between place and social action. As Paulsen (2004:245) defines it, place character is “a set of patterns in meaning and action that are specific to a distinct locale.” It combines geography, structures, and people, as well as imagination, which is particularly evident for places with rich history. Place shapes behaviors through its character, which influences who resides in the place, what resources and goods flow into the place, how social actions are carried out, and what the actions are oriented towards. For example, rural areas tend to have a more difficult time accessing resources, not only because they are geographically isolated but also because of the cultural identity, or rurality, established by the unique qualities of the place such as history, supporting industries, and poverty (Flint and Brennan 2007; Lunz Trujillo 2022; Rivera and Kapucu 2015; Sherman 2021; Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). In a study of the Appalachian residents’ experiences with the Federal Emergency Management Agency after flooding in 2012, researchers described the rural towns in southeastern Kentucky as “a place that binds people together with a powerful sense of ‘being home’ among the deeply rutted dirt roads leading into hollows that shelter entire families” (Oppizzi and Speraw 2016:600). In such a place, the residents often lack understanding of rules and eligibility for federal disaster assistance, leading them to feel devalued and “written off [by the agents] from the start” (605). The gap between resource recipients and distributors thus hinders the flow of disaster recovery resources.

Differing from sense of place, or the understanding of place, place character emphasizes social actions based on the material conditions of the place and the interpretation of the conditions, whereas sense of place, or “a collection of symbolic meanings, attachment, and satisfaction with a spatial setting held by an individual or group” (Stedman 2002: 563), remains “short of the active element” (Paulsen 2004:245). However, despite the different approaches to the study of place, both see place attachment as an important element in the experience of place. As “a bond between people and their environment based on cognition and affect” (Stedman 2002:563), place attachment facilitates a sense of security and well-being (Gieryn 2000:481) that is crucial to identity (Stedman 2002).

In their research on rurality and place attachment, Husa and Morse (2022) find that those who grew up in rural America tend to value the contentment of rural living, connection to family, desire to raise children, appreciation of the culture, and the natural environments, and that these values may not be shared by those from urban areas. Environmental sociologists also argue that decisions regarding place cannot be solely made on the physical and financial levels, as place attachment is a significant predictor when it comes to deciding whether to stay or leave a disaster-affected place (Haney 2019; Morrice 2013). Similarly, Harrison (2020) found that notions of place are deeply integrated into identities of people through the work that they do. Despite experiencing economic, emotional, and physical hardships following the BP oil spill disaster of 2010, shrimp fishers were generally forgiving and supportive of BP, despite blaming them for their hardships. The work of both fishing and oil are related to the unique environment of coastal Louisiana, and are central to the livelihoods and identities of both people and the community. Remaining supportive of oil production, despite suffering from its consequences, served to restore ontological security after disaster.

Central to place attachment and its role in maintaining one's identity is the feeling of home (Windsong 2010). Home is something that can function as a trust-based boundary. Home is a constant space for practicing routines, feeling in control, and building identities (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). The concept of home as a source for people to feel ontologically secure is further extended to the outside of a physical home—relationships with one's social network as well as relationships with the nonhuman, such as forest as a place (Banham 2020). As revealed in Banham's (2020) case study, in which forest serves as an ontological symbol, home extends to the "ontological understandings and considerations of the future." Perceptions of future, together with the practices of routines, control, and identity construction at present, are the key elements of the bargaining chips for an individual to feel balanced on their ontological continuum of security and insecurity (Bondi 2014).

Home not only refers to a physical, tangible object, but also has important social and symbolic dimensions (Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013), and both are fundamental to one's ontological security (Borchard 2013; Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013). Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020:3) succinctly summarized this idea when they noted:

Home is both an emotion and a place imbued with meaning generated through the everyday life routines enacted in it, the sense of protection and intimacy it emanates, and the largely positive memories of the past (and possibly future aspirations) it may elicit.

Taken together, home is more than a shelter, because of its geographic dimensions of connecting to the place and the society (Goyer 2016). People make sense of home through their pursuits of stability in both physical and emotional structures of home, which is made possible through their material and interpretative experience of place. To better understand one's decisions for home after a disaster, I argue that it is important to consider the experience of home and the aspiration of home for the future, all connected to their relationships with place.

Home in Disaster Recovery

One key debate in research on disaster recovery regards the differentiation between home and home ownership. The structural commitment of home ownership shifts the burden of responsibility for citizens' welfare away from the state and its institutions and onto the individuals, their home, and their nuclear family (Mallett 2004). In doing so, both the building and real estate industries, and governments with particular social agendas, gain from this ideological agenda to increase economic efficiency and growth. FEMA's approach to disaster recovery assumes "homeownership, high computer literacy, nuclear family status, the ability to navigate bureaucracy, and access to insurance and other resources enabling households to return to their pre-disaster economic status and lifestyle" (Mueller et al. 2011:293). Among the marginalized groups are lower-income renters, who are routinely left out, as FEMA's recovery framework is centered on wealthier homeowners (Laska, Howell, and Jerolleman 2018).

In the book *Markets of Sorrow*, Vincanne Adams (2020) critiques the disaster recovery process after Katrina as "a privately organized, publicly funded bureaucratic failure" in which public funds were funneled through for-profit companies, who then distributed it to the victims of disaster. Not only are for-profit companies winning in disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), but nonprofit sectors such as charities and faith-based groups also emerge to make use of federal funds to the extent that economy dictates needs, instead of otherwise.

Researchers have also critically examined the ways that FEMA's approach to disaster recovery may be biased and may exacerbate existing inequalities (Emrich, Aksha, and Zhou 2022; Howell and Elliott 2018, 2019; Reid 2013; Verderber 2008a). Worry, economic instability, and loss of ability to make long-term plans are commonly felt by survivors who attempt to navigate the FEMA systems (Reid 2013). In Browne's (2015) ethnographic study

following one large African American family's recovery experience after Katrina, disaster survivors experienced challenges and stress from living in FEMA trailers without access to a kitchen to cook traditional food. The exacerbation of trauma through the engagement process leads to further disengagement and a reduction of agency (Laska, Howell, and Jerolleman 2018). As a whole, this research reveals inequalities in disaster recovery under the notion that having a home equals owning a house, even though research has shown that "feelings of at-homeness, is not synonymous with home ownership" (Windsong 2010:205).

With an explicit focus on home, this dissertation joins this discussion on home and home ownership in disaster recovery, furthering the argument that disaster recovery appears lopsided with its current material recovery approach, calling for a paradigm shift from its housing-centric model to a model that is oriented to the restoration of a sense of home.

Rural Communities in Disaster Recovery

This dissertation refers to the following definition of environmental justice specific to wildfires:

when all people, especially those that have not been historically engaged, consulted, and meaningfully involved in governance processes that affect their environment, are inequitably located in high fire risk areas and/or under conditions that make them more susceptible to prolonged exposure to wildfire impacts, smoke or post-fire hazards such as flooding. (Thomas et al. 2022: 3-4)

Rural communities are one such understudied field in environmental justice.

Research has shown that after a disaster, rural areas tend to experience greater difficulties in accessing resources (Oppizzi and Speraw 2016). Furthermore, pre-existing inequalities that exist in many rural communities tend to be reproduced in disaster recovery outcomes (Dye et al. 2021). For example, in a study of the experiences of rural Appalachian residents with FEMA agents in a 2012 flood, Oppizzi and Speraw (2016) found that rural residents often lack understanding of rules and eligibility for federal disaster assistance. The

vulnerability in rural areas is further worsened by poverty, geographic isolation, and low resource availability.

Rural identities also contribute to delayed or, sometimes, rejected resources. For those with such identities, a psychological attachment to the rural place often leads to a distrust of experts, or anti-intellectualism (Lunz Trujillo 2022). Rural identifiers often believe that outsider experts and intellectuals devalue and dismiss their experiences, and that intellectuals and experts from the cities look down on rural areas and stereotype the rural populations as undereducated, ignorant, and, therefore, inferior. The resentment that many from rural areas feel perpetuates isolation from urban-affiliated professionals, experts, and the federal government (Cramer 2016, Hochschild, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019, cited in Lunz Trujillo 2022). Due to the failure of key institutions, people in rural spaces dismiss their dependency on institutions (Sherman 2021). The victimhood of rural residents is particularly salient among the ranchers, loggers, and farmers, whose beliefs that resources are limitless meets governmental regulations for land and water. For these reasons, disaster recovery in rural areas relies heavily on local groups such as faith communities and on individual efforts, thus making marginalized groups even more vulnerable. While we know much about the limitations the rural communities face in the context of disaster recovery, how people living in these communities bounce back from disaster remains understudied (Pellow 2016; Thomas et al. 2022). Further, few studies examine ways that wildfires are affecting people's homes (Thomas et al. 2022: 12).

My dissertation fills this gap by investigating the rural survivors' decisions around home. The decisions include those made during the emergency phase of the fire and those made during their long-term recovery—how they reestablished their post-disaster home after experiencing a catastrophic wildfire. I next describe in depth the research site, the McKenzie.

The McKenzie River Valley

The McKenzie River Valley runs through the Willamette National Forest, in the eastern part of Lane County, Oregon. The valley has seen her days with floods, snowstorms, and, more commonly because of her forested location, wildfires. Wildfires are a natural and common occurrence in the forest. However, more recently, as a result of climate change that has brought hotter and drier weather to the area (Koffel 2021; Rattner 2020; Reilly et al. 2022), they have become a greater concern for residents as more evacuation orders were made and private properties were burned. Smoke from the fires naturally became one of the characteristics of the McKenzie River Valley, and the rest of Oregon, as everyone breathes the polluted air.

In addition to wildfire, the valley has experienced other changes related to human activity. Mining for gold in the old days created hollows in the forest. Dams for hydropower and flood control forever changed the course of some underwater activities, such as the life cycles of salmon. Even though mass production of timber dwindled following changes of markets and regulations, such as the protection order of the spotted owl, timber businesses—especially those on the private lands—are still active. Clear cut and tree farms patched the forested area on the McKenzie. This uneven patchwork of timber management not only is aesthetically affecting the valley, but also has real impact on the safety of the river residents. Once facilitated by favored weather conditions, wildfires can spread quickly on these artificial forest lands, giving less time for people nearby to prepare to escape (Harris et al. 2021).

Along the river or the Highway 126 exist eight unincorporated communities—Cedar Flat, the closest community to the city proper of Eugene and Springfield, then Waterville, Leaburg, Vida, Nimrod, Blue River, Rainbow, and the McKenzie Bridge. Originally, it was home to the Indigenous people, the Kalapuyan Tribe. Both the settlers' invasion and disease

chased out the Indigenous population from the area (Beilharz 2014). The modern-day white settlers mainly have relied on private property ownership and income from working in the mines, dam construction, timber industries, and forest services. More so, the white settlers and their practices with the land, largely driven by the extraction of natural resources for profit, shaped the whitening process of the rural land, making today's rural spaces dominated by white communities (Hormel 2024; Sherman 2021). The McKenzie in this case study is no exception.

Being the most densely populated community among all, the town of Blue River—named after the river that empties into the McKenzie—was the most vibrant when workers employed in those nature exploitation and alteration industries frequented the area. But it has since gone quiet after labor was no longer attractive, following both automation of the timber industry and the decline of mass timber activities. Like other small communities in deindustrialized areas in the country, Blue River experienced brain drain. Young people found it easier to be employed elsewhere, especially if they had no elders to care for at home. More so, informal housing—such as manufactured homes, mobile homes, and trailers that used to accommodate workers who had since left the area—attracted in-migrants looking for affordable housing. The community in general had been aging and poor, and for some, that is sad and depressing.

Despite these downward social conditions, Blue River and the majority of the McKenzie River Valley remains attractive to tourists, rich professionals who call the valley home or own second homes there, and an ideal place to retire. They were drawn by the natural ambience of the McKenzie River and the Willamette Forest, and for some, they moved to the area to raise their kids in a close-knit community. But this was brought to an abrupt end on the night of September 7, 2020.

A wildfire broke out near the small community of Rainbow and was rapidly spread westward by the high wind from the east. Known as the Holiday Farm Fire, as it was named after the Holiday Farm property next to the alleged starting point of the fire, it burned through the majority of the historic town of Blue River, along the McKenzie River Valley, to the forested area of Leaburg. Days before the fire, red flag warnings that indicated high fire risk were issued statewide (NWS Portland 2022). The weather was hot, dry, and windy, setting a perfect condition for wildfires. Once the fire was ignited, for 58 days, the fire burned a total of 173,393 acres, destroyed more than 450 dwellings, displaced over 2500 rural residents, and killed one person (NWS Portland 2022). (See Figure 1.1 below.) Throughout this dissertation, I will use “The McKenzie,” “The McKenzie River Valley,” and “The Valley” to refer to this area, as these are expressions commonly used by the residents when they describe their home.

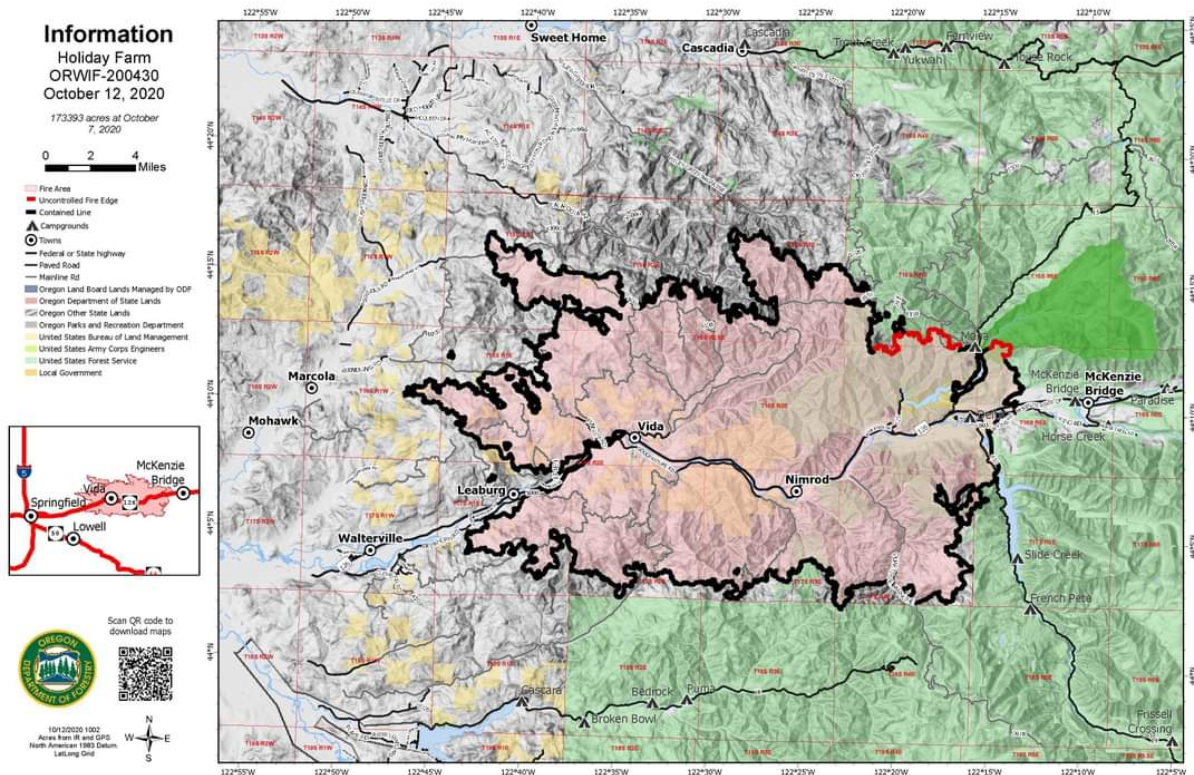


Figure 1.1. Reference map of the McKenzie River Valley (InciWeb. 2020).

Methods and Data

For this dissertation, I used ethnographic methods to examine the lived experience of wildfire survivors, from the moment of evacuation to the third year after the fire.

Ethnography is well-suited to investigate the survivors' experiences in this case study for several reasons. First, to write about people's experiences, especially the experience of the people whose culture is different from mine, it was best to do so in a way that allowed me to experience, on a deeper level, the place where they lived. I was born and raised in China, where forests are mostly nationally owned, so it was important for me to visit and spend time in homes that were part of a forest. I wanted to spend as much time as I could with homeowners to fully understand their sense of pride for owning a piece of private property and the link between their desire to own and the pursuit of independence. I admit that after a few years of living in the US, I felt the temptation of purchasing a home in order to achieve the supposed American dream, as these two are often closely related, so I can to some degree relate to the survivors' desire to prioritize properties in their disaster recovery.

Second, given that place played such an important role in this research, it was important for me to establish various connections to the place and the people. Ethnography "invokes the self and rich description and interpretation as a means to knowing" (Stephen and Speed 2021:134). And as I spent more time in the McKenzie community, I increasingly noticed the similarities of Blue River to my own hometown in China, which is a small coal mining district in a mountainous area. Like Blue River—a town that used to thrive on the now-deindustrialized logging industry—my own hometown was also impoverished in the exiting process of the coal industry. As a child from a long-established family in my hometown, I am like many who left Blue River for better education and employment in order to escape poverty. But even though I and many of our neighbors left, my family never did. It would be nearly impossible to persuade my parents to live elsewhere because from both their

words and my observation, they do not feel they belong in any new places. To them, no matter how depressing my hometown may seem to others, my parents feel at home there. They have their communities—relatives and friends. They know who lives in which building and what their stories are. They can easily afford the lower cost of living with their retirement pension. Also, they often refer to the mountains and rivers when they talk about my hometown, just like the old timers in the close-knit community on the McKenzie.

As a newcomer to Blue River, I experienced being both a renter and the owner of an RV home. I can relate to some of the feelings among some of my research participants, such as the precarity of renting. I was evicted once when I rented a space to park my RV home in Eugene, because a neighbor who had a history of not getting along with my landlord reported my residence to the county. When the county officials came, they notified me that full-time RV living on that property was not permitted, but implied that they would not have enforced this rule if my neighbor had not complained. When my research participants shared their concerns of potentially being evicted in their RVs, it reminded me of the weeks after I was evicted. I could not immediately secure a long-term RV space to call home, so I travelled around in my RV, worrying how I was going to continue my school without a long-term place to park my home. Luckily, an RV space was open soon before the new school quarter began, but the stress and anxiety I felt at the time still feel real. This experience is consistent with what I observed in my fieldwork, that many renters and RV living survivors worried about the stability of their home, which was often out of their control.

As a former homeowner in China, like many of the newcomer homeowners on the McKenzie, I was also driven by economics when I purchased my home as a newcomer. My first thought when considering the purchase was to use it as an opportunity to accumulate wealth. I also took advantage of the reputation of the place being coastal and international, an enjoyable place to live. My then-social network was the work community through my

university teaching job and communities outside the place like my family, but much less with the old timers in the place, just like most of the newcomers on the McKenzie. Taken all these together, both my professional and personal experiences strengthened my understanding of the survivors' recovery experiences, and my relationship with the McKenzie.

Working as a cashier at a local general store provided me with a rare opportunity to experience the business side of the McKenzie community, where I regularly interacted with both residents and tourists. Among the locals, I observed patterned differences of consumption habits between old timers and newcomers. For example, the store where I worked sold products such as herbal tea drinks and organic foods with vegetarian and vegan choices, catering mostly to middle-class newcomers and tourists who preferred healthy diets, arts, and live music. Customers who preferred bars with alcoholic drinks, and country style dining with formal meals like steak and briskets, mostly patronized another café nearby, which was owned and supported by old timers. Word spread quickly after I began working in the store. I had customers who came to the store to talk with me about my research and their experiences. Through conversations like this, I secured interviews and had a convenient venue to meet up with my research participants who chose the store for follow-up interviews.

Knowing many survivors left the McKenzie after fire but maintained remote connections with the community, I recruited on a popular online community bulletin board. As soon as I posted my recruitment information, I received endorsements from community members whom I had met in person. One response went like this: *“FYI folks - I think I first crossed paths with Haisu at the Blue River Park where she was one of the folks who helped plant. Then I crossed paths with her at Finn Rock Reach (once again volunteering). And also at Valor Farms. I enjoyed my chats with her.”* Supports like this helped me find several fire survivors who privately messaged me to schedule interviews.

Ethnography also provides opportunities for me to follow the changes my research participants experienced over the years. I repeatedly interviewed many of them during scheduled and spontaneous visits, during which I observed changes of their decisions regarding their home and these changes are critical in understanding the struggles of the disaster survivors. For example, among a small group of survivors, in my first rounds of interviews and visits with them, it felt that they would never leave the river, or they would not return to the river after they had left. But a year or two later, I was informed that they were going to do the opposite, either return or leave after their initial decisions. These changes are important data to understand recovery, which would not have been captured if I had not invested in building relationships through spending a substantive amount of time in the field.

During the two years intensive fieldwork on the McKenzie, like the survivors in my study, I also experienced changes in my life, which in turn enriched my understanding of their experiences. For example, as I was interviewing my research participants about their process of losing home and rebuilding, I was also grieving over the loss of my own home due to the sudden end of a long-term relationship and rebuilding my own sense of home. I vividly recall the words of a research participant during an interview, *“Wildfires are like divorce, you never think it would happen when you are married.”* Interviews like this can often go off the topic but digress often turned out to be a great way to build rapport and trust. When appropriate, I shared my personal experience with my research participants who then were generous with their time listening. From them, not only did I learn about their fire stories, but I also learned ways to bounce back from my own personal struggles with their wisdom. I regularly received phone calls from them, checking on me to see how I was doing. They also invited me to their homes for holidays and festivals, or simply when I needed to rest. I risked sharing my vulnerability with my research participants. In return, I felt accepted by them.

I conducted the fieldwork during 2021 through 2023, when we witnessed lives lost during the COVID-19 pandemic and the suffering of the minority groups as demonstrated in the Black Lives Matter movement, amongst many other challenges that disproportionately impacted the disadvantaged groups. As a member of the Black, Indigenous and the People of Color (BIPOC) with an international background, such expansive exposure and immersion in my primarily white study community during heightened political divide in the country would not have been my priority without training in Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD). I do not have a black belt as it is not the purpose of the training. Instead, ESD focuses on theories and discussions on the feminist approach to gender-based violence, and the hands-on practices of tools to help trainees to effectively set boundaries to prevent potential violence from occurring. Physical defense is one component in the training where I learned essential methods to stop and keep distance from aggressors. As part of ESD training, before I entered my research field, I also took trainings in crisis de-escalation and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). These trainings empowered me to engage my fieldwork with confidence.

In all, through these ethnographic efforts in data collection, I spoke with 74 fire survivors and 10 disaster recovery associates. The disaster recovery associates are officials and representatives from disaster recovery organizations, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state long-term recovery groups, and local disaster relief centers. Of the 74 survivors, 44 were women (59%), 29 were men (39%) and 1 identified themselves as being genderless (1%). About 89% of the fire survivors were white, with the rest consisting of Hispanic, Black and American Indian, each taking up 3%, and 1% is Asian, which was representative of the demographics in Lane County (Census, 2022). About 20% of the interviewed survivors had annual household incomes under \$25,000, 150% poverty based on the federal poverty guidelines (2024).

In my interviews I asked questions in four primary topical areas. First, I began with the biographies, such as where they were born and raised, school, work, and what brought them to the McKenzie River Valley. Then I proceeded by asking about the fire—what happened the night of fire, and how and where they sheltered. I asked them how they decided to rebuild or move away, what the rebuilding process was like, what resources were available to them, what their experience was interacting with the agencies provided those resources. Then I asked how they managed stress in the recovery process, what support they received, and what resources they wished to have (See Appendix for Interview Guide). Each interview ends with how they think about the future of the place and their advice to others as someone who's experienced the fire. Each interview took at least 90 minutes, some as long as three hours. This study received the Institutional Review Board's approval at the University of Oregon in August 2021 (ID#: STUDY00000184). All research participants were given an opportunity to identify a pseudonym they would like to use in my dissertation, and for those who did not, I developed one.

Data Analysis

I used the Otter.ai software to transcribe the interviews and the Dedoose qualitative data analysis software to code the transcriptions and fieldnotes. Informed by grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006), I used an iterative approach (Tracy and Tracy 2013) to refine analytic categorization, in which both class and place attachment appear the most influential in the survivors' reports. Class is mostly indicated in homeowner insurance, income levels and employment, while place attachment is shown in the survivors' place-based identities: old timers who lived in the community for more than 20 years, and newcomers less than five years on average. I engaged in a reflexive process of focused coding and memo writing during which I reviewed the transcripts multiple times to ensure the quality of my analysis. I

used both open coding and codes informed by literature and my interview guide to identify core themes.

Chapter Outlines

This dissertation explores the lived experiences of the wildfire survivors, with a focus on their decisions on home during and after the fire crisis. I will build my case through three empirical chapters. In chapter two, I describe the survivors' experience with the fire—the emergency phase of the disaster. A central theme in these accounts is the changing perceptions of home and gendered care response to crisis. Despite red flag warning of extreme fire danger, due to exceptionally dry and windy weather, most fire survivors decided to stay home. Even after the power went out, most of them went to bed. Many of them had their phones either off or away from them. A few residents who packed earlier than others share the following characteristics: newcomer women, and men with caring roles in their family for either children, sick or elder relatives. Men in general showed less readiness in packing for emergency despite the warning signs they had already sensed. In general, they took wait and see response to the fire risk. Those who stayed or tried to stay behind despite the emergency evacuation order also tended to be men, either single or with spouses who relied on them for mobility. This chapter shows that risk responses and evacuation behaviors are associated with the survivors' perceptions of both power and powerlessness, linked mostly to gendered differences in care. Gendered responses to emergency are largely shaped by the survivors' care of their personal safety, the safety of their properties, as well as the well-being of their community. Their care during emergency, as indicated by the survivors' experiences, is to a large extent shaped by the characteristics of the place.

Chapter three follows the survivors to their longer-term recovery. I ask the following research questions: How did wildfire survivors decide where they wanted to settle after the fire? What factors did they consider in their decisions for home? And how did place shape

wildfire survivors' experiences, actions, and outcomes as they attempted to rebuild their homes? The survivors' choices as to where they wanted their post-disaster homes varied greatly depending on how they were connected to the place before fire, and how they reattached themselves to the place after fire, both affecting their economic conditions and social connectedness. Place tends to pull back the survivors who had land tenure as well as social connections with their chosen communities and to push out those who generally did not own land and are less socially connected in the Valley. Among the most struggling are the poor and isolated rural members of the old timer's community and the newcomer renters in the Valley with weak ties to the community and precarious financial conditions.

My final empirical chapter—Chapter Four—continues with the longer-term recovery, focusing on a marginalized yet popular home option—recreational vehicles (RV). In this chapter, 23 RVing survivors shared their experience acquiring their RVs, opportunities and challenges living in RVs and their aspired home after the RV phase. I ask the following research questions: What is the process for the fire survivors to remake their home in RVs? What affected the different experiences between the two groups of RVers? Further, how does RV living provide a sense of home for the RVers? If RVs are practical solutions to home after disaster, how may RV living survivors be better supported in the future? I find that RV living after fire is both an economic choice and a choice associated with the identities of the RV occupants. Such identities include old-timer identities with which the survivors feel at home for being back to their communities on the river, and RVers' identities associated with mostly the experience of living the van life as they continued to recover from the fire. The rural full time RVers appear to be a distinct class of survivors, partly isolated from the organized disaster recovery.

This dissertation contributes to three important areas of inquiries: understanding home in disaster, foregrounding place in social inequalities, and rethinking disaster recovery. The

primary contribution of this dissertation is the sociological documentation of the destruction and reconstruction of “home” for people in both the physical and symbolic sense.

Specifically, it connects the history of the land with the current time rural inequalities and the suffering of the predominantly rural white population victimized by climate disasters. A central goal of this dissertation is to emphasize the importance of place as an axis that structures home experiences in the context of disaster recovery. The rural place characters, indicated in this case study of the McKenzie River Valley, meant a different kind of social norm under which the survivors operated as they experienced the extreme weather and the transformative wildfire. Such norms influence their perceptions of home, as in when home is safe, unsafe, when one should hold on to their home and when to give up, where to reestablish home after disaster and ways to come up with creative solutions to home, such as the RV homes. This dissertation illuminates how home remains a central struggle for the traumatized wildfire survivors as they figured out housing that fit their financial and cultural expectations. Home is an experience with both material and emotional dimensions. It is what makes us human. To rethink disaster recovery is to shift the current housing approach to the restoration of home, with considerations of the characteristics of the place. Such paradigm shift of disaster recovery will create opportunities for a more inclusive and trauma informed society as we move forward in the era of rapidly changing climate.

Finally, this dissertation contributes methodologically to qualitative research in regard to positionality. As I demonstrated in the Methods and Data section, I began this research as a complete outsider to the community under study. With carefully crafted strategies to overcome outsiders’ barriers, in two-year intensive fieldwork, I felt accepted through my experiences with living and working in the community that the community members opened up to me, inviting me to public and private events, and their homes. This process enabled me to collect rich ethnographic data and built long-term relationships with key community

members, critical in understanding a diverse range of home experiences among the survivors. In turn, this project, which took three years to complete, was also life-changing for me who have willingly and unwillingly changed home in my 41 years of life. The personal stories of my research participants moved my understanding of home, which I will elaborate in the following three empirical chapters.

CHAPTER II: CARE DURING CRISIS

Just like any other normal Labor Day. ... We were all working at the [business] coz it was busy. It started out just like every other day, other than the fact that it was hot. And we hadn't had rain, in a lot of days. It had been warm for a long time. Everybody was worried. But we had gone five years with fires all around us. But, that day was different. We went from straight clear blue sky with sunshine to socked in with so much smoke you couldn't breathe. Everybody was like freaking out, losing their minds not sure what the heck was going on. And so we all just kind of, you know, kept going like normal, trying not to freak out because it was just, it was eerie. And but, again, we've been dealing with smoke all summer, because of all of the other big fires around us.

We had probably 10 minutes because the fire was coming over the hill. I grabbed five family pictures off the wall, and my bag that my sister made for me [pause, voice trembling]. I left the house, locked the door [sound of swallowing tears], got in the car and started the convoy down the river with the rest of our family. We went to Thurston High School and sat in the parking lot from one o'clock in the morning, until I think they finally got us hotel rooms sometime around one o'clock that afternoon. Then we spent four and a half months there.

—River, female, 40s, Blue River resident of 30 years, total property loss

River is a second-generation Blue River resident, who moved from California with her parents when she was 13 years old. After high school, River stayed and helped her family with their retail business. She regularly interacts with residents in Blue River as well as the seasonal tourists from out of town. Over the years, River became a popular figure among locals, a living encyclopedia of Blue River. River's name repeatedly came up as my research participants regularly recommended that I talk to her.

I was initially hesitant to reach out to her because she had frequently been interviewed by media as a key participant in local recovery efforts. I did not want to crowd fire survivors like River with yet another ask to relive their fire experience—something that would risk retraumatizing my research participants. So I waited. In March 2022, nearly 18 months after the fire, I interviewed River on a quiet snowy morning in the trailer where she was working as a staff member at the disaster relief center. Inside the trailer, three other relief staff were working. River and I sat at the table across from the entrance, where visitors would also have

a chance to join our conversation. I asked how she felt about interviewing with me while sharing space with others. She said it would not be a problem. She then introduced me to her staff who were either related to her as family or longtime friends. I was struck by such high sense of trust among the group. Later, as I knew more fire survivors who were also old timers like River, I understood how closely connected they were to each other. Their old-timer identities meant a strong sense of belonging to the place that after the fire, many of them organized collective efforts to rebuild the place as well as their community.

As River recounted her experience, she tried to hold back her tears. Each time immediately wiping her face dry, she continued regardless. The hardest part in each of my interviews was the recall of the day when the fire broke out. Recalling evacuation experience often brings out intense emotions by the traumatic fire event where the survivors were forced to leave their home behind, and some, like River, had to part with their loved ones who chose to stay behind to fight the fire. Under such extreme pressure that concerns life and death, the residents made critical decisions to ensure personal safety, and for some, the safety of others as well. Dislocated, disoriented, the survivors experienced a sudden loss of the familiar and routine. Such a sudden and unexpected loss constitutes a traumatizing experience. Research on this shows that “the illusion of permanence, predictability, and stability that is established through routines and the structuring of familiarity was unmasked. In the process, the ground of being for those directly (and in some ways indirectly) affected was both literally and metaphorically shaken resulting in a sense of disorientation” (Cox and Perry 2011:400). However, while River’s experience is commonly shared by many survivors, residents varied with regard to the way they had prepared for the risk of fire and the need to, or plans related to, evacuate. While many did not expect to be evacuated, some residents had packed early and were generally more prepared for emergencies. Some evacuated right away upon

evacuation orders or warnings from trusted sources including environmental cues, but some stayed.

Despite extreme weather events and urgent warnings from the scientific community, not everyone took such warning seriously. Reasons for such inaction are complex. Research explains inactions towards climate crisis with social inertia, a concept that refers to “the interrelated cultural, institutional and individual processes that inhibit actions” (Brulle and Norgaard 2019: 887). Climate change inaction or denial is partly a result of avoidance of the systematic disruption of the cultural basis of a social order, or cultural trauma. To avoid traumatic experiences associated with actively facing climate change, people tend to uphold social order. Would this be also the case for the rural Oregon valley? What is their social norm when experiencing extreme weather like that on the Labor Day weekend of 2020? Why did the river community by and large stay home despite of the extremely high fire risk? How might we explain the variations of behaviors among residents regarding preparation and evacuation?

This chapter addresses these questions through the narrative accounts of wildfire survivors’ evacuation experiences, from the moment when they felt unease about the weather, or risk perceptions, to the ways that they responded, or risk responses. Despite red flag warning of extreme fire danger, due to exceptionally dry and windy weather, most fire survivors decided to stay home. Even after the power went out, due to the high winds they had been warned about, most of them went to bed. Many of them had their phones either off or away from them.

A few residents who packed earlier than others share the following characteristics: newcomer women, and men with caring roles in their family for either children, sick or elder relatives. Men in general show less readiness in packing for emergency despite the warning signs they had already sensed (Grajdura, Qian, and Niemeier 2021). In general, they took the

wait-and-see response to disaster risk. Those who stayed or tried to stay behind despite the emergency evacuation order also tended to be men, either single or with spouses who relied on them for mobility.

To be sure, being prepared for a fire did not necessarily mean a greater likelihood to evacuate early. The official guidance on evacuation advises residents leave the area when they feel unsafe due to conditions in their area, even without receiving an evacuation notice (Lane County Evacuation Information). There are three levels of evacuation notices: Level 1—Be Ready, Level 2—Be Set, and Level 3—Go. Most residents, including the women who packed early, did not generally leave home until they received evacuation notices equivalent to Level 3, which meant they must leave immediately. Since many residents missed the emergency alerts that came over their phones, they relied on information from unofficial sources, such as neighbors, family, and friends who received evacuation notices, and some through the online local bulletin board. Additionally, they relied upon environmental cues, such as unusual noise from outside, the intense smell of smoke, and the sight of flames, which generally meant the fire was close to them. Since the whole community evacuated only when the fire danger was classified as level 3 emergency, there is a reason to suspect that place-based factor may have shaped the risk perceptions and evacuation behaviors of the valley residents. Such place-based factor includes the rural geography of the place, the history of the place, especially its extractive and fire suppression culture, which tends to reflect dominant forms of masculinity.

Prior research on disaster risk perceptions in evacuation has been mostly written about experiences with hurricanes (Peacock, Brody, and Highfield 2005; Stein et al. 2013; Trumbo et al. 2013, 2016), with fewer on wildfires (see: Forrister et al. 2024; Gordon et al. 2010)). While the research on hurricanes can inform understandings of other disasters, such as wildfires, wildfires are in many ways different from hurricanes. For example, hurricanes

tend to have longer warning times and affect a larger land area (Kristiansson 2020; Kuligowski 2021). Besides, greater accuracy can be predicted for areas prone to hurricanes, but resulting from weather changes and landscape, prediction is difficult for areas vulnerable to wildfires (McCaffrey, Wilson, and Konar 2018). Among the limited research on wildfire risk perceptions, as Dye and colleagues (2021) demonstrate in their work on wildfire evacuation vulnerability in rural Pacific Northwest towns, wildfire preparedness is not simply a concern in high-frequency fire regimes, but also areas where wildfires are infrequent but of high severity. Places vulnerable to wildfires are usually located in remote, heavily forested, and mountainous terrain. The towns in Oregon's Willamette valley are considered "areas of concern" for wildfire evacuation, particularly because of their poor road networks overlapping with other high fire hazards (Beverly and Bothwell 2011; Dye et al. 2021), and these areas are currently understudied.

Disaster risk perceptions and evacuation behavior research also largely relies on quantitative and survey research, which tend to focus on traditional social determinants such as race, class, gender, and age, as well as residence time. For example, researchers have investigated factors that influence the time between risk perception and risk response including evacuation (Forrister et al. 2024; Grajdura et al. 2021; Sadri, Ukkusuri, and Murray-Tuite 2013). A common reason that extends this time gap is the "wait and see" risk response. Such delay is believed to improve the chances of both protecting their property and increasing the safety of themselves and their loved ones (Paveglio et al. 2014; Strahan and Gilbert 2021). People also perceive waiting and staying in place as low risk or a safer choice (McLennan, Paton, and Wright 2015). Gender research shows such time delay tends to happen among men with averagely more than 15 years residence time (Grajdura et al. 2021). While these findings offer important cues in understanding risk perception, risk response and other evacuation related behaviors, less attention has been given to subjective experiences

with wildfire disasters, that can inform our understandings of how other variables—notably place-based culture and identity—can shape behaviors and outcomes.

This chapter examines the evacuation experiences of wildfire survivors. While these experiences are mostly in line with what has been previously found, I add to the conversations by focusing on the place-based considerations that shaped the survivors' fire experiences and evacuation behaviors, including actions taken upon sensing fire risk. I find that gender is a significant factor. In the following, I will first show the general patterns of responses to fire risk among the rural residents in the McKenzie River Valley, paying attention to the variations of behaviors, in which women tend to be prepared more quickly than men. Then I move to the general patterns of evacuation behaviors, with gender variations where men tend to stay behind once evacuation order was issued.

Background: The Day of the Fire

On September 2, 2020, five days before the Labor Day Fires broke out—the Holiday Farm Fire being one of them—the National Weather Service (NWS) in Portland mentioned the potential for hot, dry and windy weather, and issued a Red Flag Warning, an official message to the public that indicates a high risk of fire and a higher likelihood of a rapidly spreading fire in the central and southern Willamette Valley including Lane County (NWS Portland 2022). On September 4, the NWS Portland shared an increased concern over social media about the high winds and low relative humidity. On September 5, Red Flag Warnings were upgraded with the winds continued to speed up to 75 mph north of Mt. Jefferson, with the relative humidity dropped to 8%, indicating significantly dry air. While actively communicating with the public about the fire danger, the NWS Portland office was expecting the fire weather to fully blow out on the September 7, which was Labor Day of 2020 (NWS Portland 2022).

Responding to High Wind: "Taking It in Stride"

Back on the McKenzie River, most residents were aware of the strangeness of the weather, and some took notice of the red flag warnings. Yet, with varied degrees of worries and concerns, the majority of the residents went on about their day as a relatively normal Monday holiday, after responding to their best knowledge of what they should do to stay safe. Jack Wimbledon, an old timer of the McKenzie community, shared the following:

We knew that there was a wind event and we knew that was coming from a predicted high wind. We get what we call the east winds every September, usually. And so they get strong. And so they come down from Central Oregon. And they can actually, you know, increase fire danger. I've worked in the woods back. There's been many, many times I've been up high in the high country, cutting timber and we had to come home because the winds were so strong. And so we knew the wind was coming. We knew it was with the fuel load, and with the temperatures, and it was the so-called Perfect Storm opportunity. But with the wind, you know, I mean, you just take it in stride. So that night, the night the fire actually ignited, was about eight o'clock. We lost our power here, which is not unusual. But it was strong enough, when it sustained enough that I jumped. Usually what to do is I jumped in my pickup, and I went down and I go down the hill here and towards Finn Rock and just see if there's any trees on the line. So I came home and I told Rose. I said, 'Yeah, that's a pretty strong wind.' When I got there, a few trees [were] falling down here. So we went to bed. I mean, what else are we gonna do? No television? No nothing, you know. So it was dark. It was just going to bed. 12:15 that morning, somebody was trying to pound on the front door here and it was Lane County Deputy Sheriff. He was screaming. He says, "Evacuate now! Go now! Go West!"

Upon sensing high risk of fire, Jack, an experienced former timber worker and an old timer in the Valley, responded by following his routine going to check damage of power lines at his familiar location. His concern was the potential sparks from power lines hit by fallen trees by the wind. Upon seeing no damage to the power lines, he pursued no further actions except going to bed.

Another resident, Bud Richardson, who also had prior experience with working in the woods, newcomer in the valley responded similarly by stopping where he thought he had done what he knew he should do. He said,

The forecast that day was a Red Flag warning, which has an extreme fire danger. And then it was compounded with high winds. So everybody kind of was on edge. The conversation amongst some of the people that I know on the river and just coworkers

was I hope we can get through this day because of the forecast. And so everyone was actually kind of nervous because people were really concerned about the day because it was just high temperatures. It was hot, close to 100 degrees. And then the wind was going to blow from the east. Everybody was kind of nervous, but I went to work and kind of got it out of my mind.

When Bud returned from work, he had dinner with his relative who left early because of the concern of smoke—“He’s got a small child. He wanted to get him inside because there was smoke,” said Bud. After the power went out about eight o’clock, like many residents on the river, he went to bed. He said,

I had to work the next day. I had started a couple generators to keep the refrigerator and appliance freezers going. And then I decided since it was getting close to dark, I was going to go to bed. I went to bed that night about, it was early earlier than normal, about 8:30.

Despite their prior experiences with fire and work in the woods, both Jack and Bud opted towards routines that felt familiar to them. Their routines, such as checking the conditions of power lines and using generators to keep appliances operating, are not out of the ordinary in rural living, where power becomes unstable during extreme weather. Such actions were out of care for the community, as in Jack’s response to check the power lines, and out of care for one’s home and well-being, as in Bud’s reactions. Nearly none of the residents living on the river anticipated in any way that the scale of the fire event would be so overwhelming that many of them would not be able to return in several months, or years.

Hesitancy to Leave Home

In addition to prepare for possible power outage, which is common in rural areas, another norm associated with rural living is when windy, stay home to avoid damages or injuries from fallen trees. Within the context of these norms, most of the survivors chose to wait and see inside their home.

Janet, a newcomer resident who had close experience with the 2018 Terwilliger Fire also in the valley, had been following up with updates from both online and phone calls from

friends that alerted her and her parents that they should leave. But she decided otherwise. She said,

Everybody that hears about the fire is telling my parents we should leave. And I'm saying we don't want to drive that highway with all these trees coming down. And so we decide that we're going to stay. And because, you know, at the time, when the power went out, it was five miles upriver. And so I just, I mean, I've stayed through fires closer than that, you know, like I said, the Terwilliger fire that was up there was closer to my house than that. So, I went to bed.

Janet relied on her prior experience with another fire that was closer to her than five miles. Because she was safe then, she assumed she would be safe also through this fire event. Like other residents on the river, she did not anticipate the power of the high wind could accelerate a fire to burn so fast and with so much ferocity. In general, no one with whom I had interacted in this research considered an alternative scenario that the fire could indeed travel through the community, destroying everything in its way, an imagination that can feel traumatizing. The residents were meeting the social and environmental expectations of staying home during extreme weather. Leaving home was not a viable option for its known danger—the fallen trees. Such concern and care for safety out of the nature of the place shaped the collective action of staying home throughout the day of the fire, despite the official warnings of high fire risk. In other words, despite the fact that people are aware of the science behind the fire risk, and understand it, they carry on with their regular activities.

For the rural valley residents, either with prior fire experience or not, they generally followed their routines and did what was familiar to them. Their concerns were mostly around personal safety from falling trees, so they stayed home. When power was out, they prepared to rest for the night. I repeatedly heard from many other fire survivors about their activities the night of the fire, like the one shared by Luna, also a newcomer having to work early morning shifts like Bud. She said:

We were just having a normal night. I had been baking brownies and cookies all day to send out to family on the East Coast. And the wind started getting really heavy that night and I've gotten all the cats, made sure all four of them were inside and safe. And

then we lost power. I just made dinner right before we lost power. We had meatball subs for dinner that night. And the power went out and we just were used to the power going out, you know living out here. It's pretty common to happen. Not necessarily during the summer as much as the winter. But it is what it is. We're pretty just, pull out a book and some flashlights or a board game, you know, light some candles. We just chit chatted and hung out for a couple hours and decided we just go to bed early because I don't know if he had worked the next day. I'm sure he did. But I had work. The next morning, I was supposed to go to [business name].

Before the residents learned about the fire that broke out on the river, they in general followed their routines. Such routines for the rural residents include sheltering in place or stay at home, to avoid danger from fallen trees, turning on generators to keep appliances running after the power was out, spending quality time with family on a holiday, and going to bed. The residents' concerns were mostly around hazards from fallen trees, which meant staying home was safer than travelling. Despite her instinct that she should evacuate with her son, Joanna felt powerless, turning to her family for advice that she should stay home. She recalled her conversation with her relative:

I said, [relative's name], I think I should go. She was scared, too. She's like out in the field with her husband. She says No. [Her husband's name] says you need to just stay home because there's a lot of trees on the highway and you don't want to get out on the highway. He said the safest place where you'd be is at home. And I said, okay.

Like Joanna, despite their instinct that a voluntary evacuation was the right thing to do, many survivors chose to shelter at home. They were following the norms of living that they knew of, in the rural forested area, which was to shelter in place and waiting out the crisis. The type of "wait and see" among the survivors, was an inaction—in terms of voluntary evacuation, after taking all the actions they could have—making sure their home was safe and staying inside. Home was a haven upon an unknown future, a choice that made the survivors feel less powerless, at least for the time being.

Early Preparation for Evacuation

While the majority of survivors reported they went to bed after the power went out, some did not because they anticipated emergency in case of a fire event. They packed early

and generally stayed up to date with information via phone or the Internet. And such prepared group tend to be mostly newcomer women and men with caring roles in the households. One household voluntarily evacuated before the first level evacuation order was issued, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

A few residents—mostly women—reported that they packed early for evacuation and was ready to leave home when they had to. They kept up with both official and unofficial information from friends, family and neighbors and residents who posted updates online. Allena Beecher is one such early packer who immediately started packing upon the notification of the fire. I got to know Allena during a community replanting event in one of the local parks that were destroyed by the fire. In her early 60s, she had been living on the river for 10 years. She shared her decisions on the night of the fire as below:

As soon as we heard that there was a fire in the Rainbow area, that's when we decided let's go ahead and pack up things. And just in case we have to go to town, because the wind, as we knew was blowing westerly. We knew it was coming our direction. So keep in mind, this is like eight o'clock at night, eight nine 10 11, 11:45 is when we left our house. So by 11:45, I had plenty of things packed up. I had everything I needed for my work. I had all my fine jewelry. I had my passports. I had all my backup drives for photos and things like that. I had all the clothes I needed for work for a good week or so. What else did I do that was important to me? But mostly it was things that I felt that I just couldn't part with the most. And it wasn't a total lot, but it was a lot of the key things, medications, things like that.

As Allena was sharing her packing experience, I couldn't resist remembering the voices of many others who barely escaped the fire, being forced to leave everything behind. I continue to feel puzzled about the clear contrast in preparedness between this small group of early packers, who are mostly newcomer women, and the rest who did not have a plan. As this puzzle continued to grow, it was increasingly clear to me that these individual behaviors of early packing or no packing explain the lack of organization in disaster preparedness in the rural valley. The residents' well-being in emergencies like this is heavily reliant on individual responsibilities because there is little systemic effort to prepare the residents for emergencies like this, or at least the current system was behind the pace of the changing climate.

Miranda Brown, a newcomer retired resident had her to-go bag ready during the day and was ready to go when she had to. She said:

I had sort of packed to-go bags before and so in the afternoon I was kind of ready for that and I think in the afternoon I did a bit of work thinking ‘Okay, it’s going to be windy, so making sure things were sort of ready.’ I was having trouble sleeping so I repacked my go bag that night, added hand sanitizer and masks, because my go bag had been packed before COVID and just sort of put aside. The reason I had to go bag is because George has been like super aware. We need go bags. We need this. We need that. We need all this sort of stuff. We went back to bed at like, I don’t know when. But 12:22, I didn’t hear the first alert come in on my phone. But I heard the second alert at 12:22, there was basically said, Level Three Go Now! And so, I’m grabbing my go bag. I’m kind of stressing because I want to go. George isn’t ready cuz unbeknownst to me he hasn’t packed his to-go bag!

When I asked George what happened, he said, “I had developed a list, and gathered a bunch of the stuff on the list but did not take the last step and put it all in one place that was easily accessible. Miranda did, so she was ready to go. I wasn’t.” As I probed, George remained silent. The inconsistency between knowledge and action, like that of George’s is shared by many survivors who grew up in rural areas being familiar with preparing for emergencies. At home, they are used to preparing things for emergency use, with which they could stay home for a number of days when necessary, during an emergency. They may have practiced packing to go bags but since they rarely used them in prior emergencies, to go bags were more of a formality than being practical. Like mentioned earlier, their preparation was based on the shared expectations that home was safe during an urgent event like the fire. Frequently reported by the evacuated survivors was the thought that they would still have a home to return to after the emergency was gone, so until the last minute of evacuation, most of them did not pay attention to what they may need when they had to leave home.

Some residents tuned in to the scanner mobile application on their phones to access live communications among firefighters. With the information from the live conversations among firefighters and first responders, these residents acted early. Katy is among those who used the scanners to keep up with the local firefighting information. She was alone juicing

pears that day. “I just remember it feeling so apocalyptic. I saw all this wind and all this dust, like, I’d never seen anything like it. It was kind of dark and I was getting, I was like, what do I grab, like pants?” After the power went out, she also lost water because her electrical pump stopped working. Her plan was to join her family at their house as they had a well for water access.

We have an artesian well. Water automatically comes up out of the ground from the pressure. And so it’s really nice. And we have like food stored there. As I was gathering stuff, I was checking Blue River Bulletin Board about the power outage. I had run across the street where my brother was working at the store at the time, and I was like, I’ll see you at dad’s. So I ran back to my house, tried to grab clothes. And then that’s when I saw that there was potentially a fire that has started upriver. And so I got on the scanners on my phone. And I was listening to the scanners as I was driving to my dad’s house and it just started sinking in and how fast it was moving.

When Katy arrived at her dad’s house, she put her phone on the only corner in the house where had cell service, then she saw how unprepared her dad was. She said:

I got there and my dad was asleep on the couch with a candle burning. I’m like, ‘Oh God! He could have lit the house on fire.’ But I was like, ‘Hey, there’s stuff happening. I heard about the Delta campground. People are getting trapped there. And I was registering that it was really, really happening. And so I called my grandparents. I woke up my dad. Then, literally a minute later, I got an evacuation alert on my phone. They were evacuating.

Like most survivors who recalled the day of the fire, Katy had a hard time believing it was real. “I saw this map where it was Level Three immediately.” she said, “I was like what is happening. And then I realized that there was potentially a fire on this side and potentially a fire on that side. And we’re in the middle of it.” Actively engaged in gathering information and trusting her instinct and reasoning, Katy organized her family to evacuate to safety before most of the residents on the river.

While most of the rural residents considered their home to be safe in extreme weather, a few of those who lived in substandard housing, such as RVs, did not think the same. Concerned their home would be damaged by the trees, they evacuated early. Maria Cohn had

been living in an RV, and knowing her RV posed as high risk of personal safety in case of fallen trees on the roof, she organized others sharing the same property to evacuate. She said:

It just was really windy. And I am a weather fanatic. So I was looking at the Weather Channel. And I knew it was coming. And I know that winds don't come out of the east and that's very strange. And September for winds to come out of the East, especially that strong because all weather comes from the west and it was just like, wow, what if a tree falls on the RV? We gotta go. We gotta go. We got to do something. So we went to the house. Nothing in my mind had thought of a fire. I was just thinking of trees falling because of the wind. You know, people get killed by trees falling on them all the time and they fall on their cars or whatever. And then a fire was up and then it was just such a whirlwind. Nobody had flashlight batteries. There was one flashlight with batteries. So that was difficult. Because we had to get two kittens, one cat, four children, five dogs and injured chicken and six adults and three trucks and get out of there.

Sensing the strangeness of the weather, Maria was concerned about her immediate danger, trees falling by the winds that may destroy her RV home. Perceiving her home being unsafe, she risked leaving home, exposing herself to opportunities of fallen trees on her evacuation route, which many residents living in conventional housing tried to avoid.

In general, women like Allena, Miranda, Katy and Maria stayed awake and acted sooner than most other residents. For different reasons, they connected the extreme weather with the potential loss of their personal belongings and safety, and followed up on this connection, without prolonged hesitancy. Their care of the safety of their own, as well as others, became a salient motivator to leave home.

Even though such care was reported by mostly women, men also participated as active caregivers, and like those women, became early evacuees. Bart, a retired police officer in his 50s, originally moved to Oregon to care for his adult son who had been suffering from chronic respiratory diseases. Together, they moved to his newly purchased property on the river the year before the fire. After learning about the predicted high winds days ago, Bart had kept up with the local information. Bart's most concern was access to water, because once the power went out, like the case for Katy who went to her family's house for well water, he wouldn't have running water. "No water was a big thing," Bart said, "So I got on

Facebook and people were talking about the power out. And then somebody said there was a fire up about 20 miles upriver from me, east of me. It was windy. It was blowing really fast, like 40, 50 miles per hour gust.” On the scanner application of his phone, he tuned into the live conversations by firefighters and first responders for the fire.

I heard a fire personnel say there was a flash fire, about five miles of river from where I live. And he said everybody on the north side of the river, west of this spot needs to evacuate. I decided we were going to leave.

Access to water after the power went out prompted Bart to stay on top of the local updates, but it was the fire that later concerned him the most, because his son who relied on medical equipment such as oxygen would need more time to evacuate when the official notice was sent out by the county, for which Bart decided they were not going to wait.

Bart had his neighbors in mind as he was leaving. He reached out to them, sharing his decision to leave, but they all decided to stay. As Bart shared his early evacuation experience, he repeatedly shared that his neighbors may have thought of him as a coward for leaving his property so early because it was an unmanly thing to do. But he insisted regardless of how others may see him, because his anxiety of being near the evacuation zone was too great for him to stay put. More importantly, he wanted his son who needed assistance to be safe and healthy, the main purpose of Bart’s presence in Oregon.

To sum up, this section focuses on risk perceptions among the rural residents on the river. Despite that the official red flag warnings and physical senses of the strangeness of the weather, nearly the whole community seemed to continue business as usual. The majority of the residents in this study went to bed after the power went out and for some, they chose to rest even after hearing about the fire that broken out near the Holiday Farm property. A small group of the residents stayed awake and prepared for emergency. This group consists of mostly newcomer women and men, many of whom had caring duties in their households. However, as indicated in the survivors’ reports, their version of “wait and see” amidst the

weather chaos was in fact full of actions. These actions concerned their personal and community safety, and for the few who considered these actions were not enough, mostly out of care for themselves as well as others around them, they went further to pack and leave sooner than others.

The Fire Is Here—The Evacuation Experience

When the residents realized they must evacuate, either through official or unofficial sources, the majority of them evacuated without hesitation. A few exceptions, which I will discuss later in this section, are cases where the residents took on personal responsibilities to defend their properties, delayed or did not evacuate because they believed it was safer to stay. Among them are mostly men who have some knowledge about rural living and firefighting.

As mentioned earlier in the last section, most of the residents did not leave home, until the last minute. Home was a haven in such extreme weather. When they had to leave home, since few of them prepared for evacuation, they had very little time to pack. Some barely escaped for life. John Smith and Carol Smith, are both retired newcomers in the valley, living full time in Holiday Farm RV Resort, after which the fire was named due to its proximity to the fire. Spending summers in the McKenzie River Valley and winters in their other home in Arizona, where is warmer than Oregon, as John said, they enjoy the best of both worlds. I got to know them through another resident in the park, Anne Webster who sold crafts that were themed the Holiday Farm Fire. I stumbled into the RV park when I went to pick up my T-shirt at Anne's. Surprised at how fast the park recovered from the fire, I asked Anne if there would be space available for rent so that I could move in my study site to do my fieldwork. Anne shared that the Smiths may have plans to rent their space out for the winter, offered to walk me over to the Smith's home, a 40-foot motor home parked on a rectangle cement pad. Behind the motor home was a newly painted tool shed. On either side of their home was a spacious yard lot, decorated with a hammock, ceramic frogs of different

sizes, and outdoor furniture that formed a sitting area to hang out. I said Hello from outside, like how I had been used to from travelling and living in multiple RV parks in the past. Often, there is no need to call in advance to make an appointment with a neighbor for a visit. One just needs to show up and knock at the door.

The door of the Smiths' huge RV was closed. I knocked and said a loud Hello, stepped back to give space. A woman in short hair and a flowery dress answered me from inside the RV. Carol was bare footed, stayed right inside the entrance, looked bothered by the wildfire smoke, implying the conversation was going to be a short one. As soon as I introduced myself and shared my intention to rent their place for the winter, Carol said, "My husband will talk with you." Then she called John with a louder voice, pointed us towards him at the back of the RV, before she shut the door. John emerged from the back of their RV, in his safety glasses, visibly perspiring on a hot September day. When I was with others during my fieldwork, even if it was outside, I would wear a mask to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. On a warm day like that, it was extremely uncomfortable to wear a N95 mask because it was above 80F, and the mask had a poor air flow. But without a mask, the smoke was sickening me. Also, I would expose myself to the people I talked to, risking spreading the virus.

After checking with John about masking, I learned that John had not been vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus. He believed that natural therapy, such as sunbathing, was better than receiving vaccine shots. I decided to unmask to be like him and sat outside in the yard from a distance for a chat. Without a mask, I could also be heard more clearly, except that I risked being sick from the wildfire smoke, which indeed happened after my visit. From our conversation, I learned their lot was for rent during exactly the winter term where I would be remotely working as a teaching assistant at the university. After we quickly communicated the essential information, such as rent and utilities, which was the most important things to

consider on an RV park lease, we started talking about the day of the fire, which I documented in my fieldnote after the visit (September 6, 2021):

It was about nine o'clock. John heard sirens running on the highway 126. He went out and asked the first responders what was going on. He could see that the tree, at which he was pointing, the blackened one with a split on the top, was caught on fire by a downed power line. It was a Level Three evacuation order which meant "Must Go Now!" John asked the first responder how much time they had, and the first responder asked how much time he would need. John said he would need about 20 minutes, but he was told he had only 5. I was impressed by how fast John was able to pack his RV and have it ready to go in 20mins because I usually needed much more time than that, mostly due to securing loose items inside so they wouldn't be flying as the RV was in motion. But five minutes! I would need more time than that to retract the stabilizer jacks and I couldn't imagine driving the RV with the jacks still hanging underneath. Carol drove the van and John followed behind driving their 40-foot motor home. As he was about to turn the corner in the RV park, a tree stopped them. He saw Carol jump out of the van, move the log on her own. 'It must be the adrenaline rush,' Anne who was also listening commented because knowing how Carol had felt weak with her chronic health conditions it was hard to imagine she would move anything, not to say a tree log. John said they could see the fire swallowing their site as they pulled out. As they reached Vida, John said, "I cried only twice in my life. The first time was when my dad died, and the second time was when we were at Vida, realizing we barely made it.

Like John and Carol, all survivors including those who did not lose their home and those who lived outside the official disaster boundary, were shocked, disoriented, deeply traumatized by the evacuation experience. As another resident, a Forest Services professional Adele Anderson said,

I didn't think anything was imminent. Fires never happened that quickly. I never really believed that Blue River would burn down. It never seems like that would happen. I was in denial that anything would happen. It's like when people have heart attacks, they don't believe it, like, 'Oh, this can't be true.' And when I heard about the fire, from experience, we evacuated my office at work. One or two years before, the people were evacuating their homes for two weeks driving their belongings to Eugene and Springfield. And that fire was just creeping around. So this was so unusual that a fire would travel so quickly in so many miles and burn that much in one night. And then the next day, that's unheard of for Oregon. It's not like we have those fires in California that seem to do that a lot more. We're just not used to that here. So that's what was surprising. I think it just all kind of hit me gradually what had happened.

While some residents received the evacuation order from officials and from other unofficial connections such as neighbors, many others relied on environmental cues, especially those residing away from others. Willow and her husband George were asleep in

their river house, located downriver, about 20 miles from the fire. As Willow recalled that night, she said:

The night of the fire, we had no idea. On my god, this howling, I mean, I've never heard anything like it except on TV when they demonstrate what a tornado sounds like. I mean, seriously. And then crap, boom, crap, boom like hell. I got out of bed, put my gray sweater on, had my gray T-shirt on. I must have grabbed my stupid water bottle, cuz there it is. It was not your average everyday forest fire. They did even say that on the news. I called it a firenado. It was a tornado with fire in it. And it was pissed. And it was in a hurry. We left about 4:30 in the morning. Everybody else was already out at midnight. I mean, there were cops going up and down the road bull horns and we never heard anybody. We never heard anybody.

Like Willow and George, Tucker Jackson and his wife Tessa Jackson also lived in a house tucked away from the highway. They were also the last ones to leave in their neighborhood. They recalled the following.

Tucker: It was scary going down the highway and not knowing because we didn't know if we'd ever see our home again. We didn't know where we were going to be. We didn't have anything with us. It was like your whole life changed.

Tessa: You start thinking about all the things that you have that mean so much. There's stuff that you have, that doesn't mean anything, and then you have a lot of stuff, that sentimental stuff or photographs and any of that stuff that you think about that would be gone.

As reported by the survivors, the evacuation experience was life-changing on multiple levels. They questioned their past denial about climate change—thinking the fire on this scale would never happen, the effectiveness of government—feeling neglected and poorly informed, the meanings of life and material possessions—feeling at loss about the purpose of having them. Shane Foss recalled the moment as she joined the caravan on the highway, “There was this calm moment. I thought things are never going to be the same. It was like I was saying goodbye to the past. Like this is such a delineation in light, like right now nothing's ever going to be the same.”

Further onto the highway, the only evacuation route—Highway 126 East—was known to the local residents as a dangerous road because of drivers who ignored the speed limits, and the frequency of accidents. But it looked different the night of the fire. “It was this

quiet surrender,” said survivor Christy Brown, who was part of the caravan on the highway.

“This is what we’re gonna do, not gonna fight it.”

Staying Behind: “I don’t know what I was doing. But I felt like I was doing something”

As the majority of the residents, women, men, children, the elderly, with their animals and belongings were quietly surrendering on the highway, a few decided to stay. The main reasons for staying behind, as reported by the survivors, were caring for the safety of their properties as well as themselves, believing it was safer to stay than leaving.

Bud Richardson, 50s, had his relative for dinner that night for the Labor Day holiday. His relative left early that evening because of his concern of smoke for his child. Bud shared the following:

I didn’t start packing anything or gathering items until about 10:30, a quarter to 11. I started packing stuff up and pack suitcases and valuable items and paperwork and any type of valuables that I had I gathered up and I have a trailer. And so I loaded up my pickup. And by that time it was getting close to midnight and they evacuated the Blue River High School and they rode back into town and I was now under in that evacuation zone. So I was supposed to evacuate at that time. I did not. I stayed and so I stayed through the evacuation warnings. And I ended up staying until four in the morning.

Bud stayed to firefight around his property so his home would have a chance to survive the fire. Sheriffs and the first responders stopped by and asked him to leave but did not force him. He said,

I was literally out on the highway, and I had a shovel and I was walking back and forth on the highway because the wind was blowing. These giant burning embers at that point were landing in the orchard across the street along the highway. So I was just walking back and forth and taking a shovel and putting these small grass fires out. I don’t know what I was doing. But I felt like I was doing something. I wasn’t panicked because I knew that I had my vehicle hooked up and most of the stuff I could pack in a trailer that was valuable. I was confident because my plan was I was gonna evacuate down the road for five miles to my [relative]’s house who was also down there with his family and he was packed up and he was ready to go, so they were just they were all kind of in a waiting mode. And then it was about four o’clock. A sheriff come by.

This time, Bud followed the sheriff’s instructions as he realized the scale of the fire.

He said:

You can see the glow coming. It was like a massive red glow coming from the east. I think it was at that point when I can really see the glow of the horizon because if you are looking at it, I'm standing out in this dark black highway 126 and there's no traffic and no power and there's no lights and the wind is blowing, but the entire eastern sky is just glow red because you have this massive wildfire. I think at that point, I realized that I don't think that property is going to survive.

Also driven by the desire to protect their property, the Bells family of four, mom, dad and their son and daughter, stayed, although for a somewhat different reason. Riding in one vehicle, they initially joined the organized evacuation on the Track Field in Blue River. As Frank Bells said, "I felt safe in the field. There was a fire truck going around the outside of the field water everything down. But I didn't feel an imminent danger once I got up there. Personally, I'm just worried about the property." They acted upon their worry, left the field to check on their property. But as they returned to the evacuation site, they missed the organized evacuation. Everybody had already left. They tried to catch up but decided to turn around because it was too dangerous to keep driving west. Frank's son Henry Bells recalled their drive on the highway 126:

We tried to go to town, got about four miles downriver and it was burning so hot on both sides of the road. It felt like an oven and a huge boulder come down. I told my dad to turn around, come back here. And then we stayed here. It was too hot. It was like an oven. It was burning on both sides. A lot hotter going further. I just didn't want to risk. It was just a split decision, just to come back.

Even though they did not mention Mrs. Bells's health condition—Helena was terminally ill and bed ridden—having Helena in the car as they drove down the hot oven like highway 126 could be another consideration for turning around and going back home. But regardless, protecting their home led to their delay of evacuation, which eventually led to all four of them staying home, because they believed it was safer.

Also believing home was safer and decided to stay behind, were Nora Helms and Bryce Hunter, two neighbors living east of the fire. Both caretaking for property owners and living deep in the woods away from the highway, asleep with their phones off, they did not

know what had happened until they saw the officials at a local grocery store the next morning. Nora recalled the following:

They told us to go to the golf course. That was our new evacuation point. And I told Bryce right then I said we are not going into [the golf course] and getting stuck there. Because there's one way in and one way out. It's not happening. We're going back to the house. We're gonna wait it out till daylight. Well, we did.

When asked why he did not want to leave, Bryce said, "Nora was here. I felt like I was leaving people, the people that were here. I just wanted to be here, and I felt like we were all in this together. That's why I didn't want to go." After getting to know both Nora and Bryce for almost three years, I have observed the special friendship between Nora and Bryce, and that Nora's decision to stay largely influenced Bryce, to whom staying meant to be with his friends and community, which made him feel safer than leaving. Like the Bells, Nora and Bryce believed staying at their home was safer than evacuation. In this context, the heat, the location of the evacuation site, and absence of community presented as high risk perceived by the residents like them who subsequently made the decision to stay in their homes.

Discussion

This chapter begins with three questions: What is the social norm in this rural Oregon valley when experiencing extreme weather? Why did the river community by and large stay home despite of the extremely high fire risk? How might we explain the variations of behaviors among residents with regard to emergency preparation and evacuation? As shown in the survivors' experience, on the day of the fire, upon the official red flag warnings and the high winds, the residents in the river community in general went about their day, chose to "wait and see." Such "business as usual" or "taking it in stride" risk response is consistent with what they were used to during strange weather in this rural area in the past. Their concerns were more about personal and property safety by fallen tree hazards, than a fire. And that a fire would severely burn their home and their community, like in the Holiday Farm Fire did, was beyond anyone's imagination. Leaving home was against the social norm

among the river residents because of the tree hazards due to high wind, until home was no longer safe when the fire was too close that leaving home quickly became a new norm. For some, during evacuation, home became a haven again when leaving was too dangerous despite the fire. In general, based on past experience, the residents considered their home to be safe during extreme weather, except mainly those who were actively seeking local firefighting information, and a few of those who lived in informal housing such as RVs.

The residents practiced their routines with familiar activities such as checking on trees and power lines, irrigating properties, turning on generators to fuel electrical appliances such as freezers after the power went out, and hanging out with family and friends for the holiday weekend. The residents did many things expected within their knowledge of rural living and the understanding of the environment changes they were experiencing that day. Through these activities, the residents maintained the status quo or the existing social order, believing they would wait out the strange weather like how they had done in the past. Their actions, mostly place-based, to care for themselves as well as their rural community, translated into inaction on the day of fire, leading to last minute evacuation. Although in some ways, the residents' responses to the fire risk may be explained by the concept of social inertia because the thought that a fire would cause massive destruction to their home and community was too disturbing to imagine or trauma triggering for the residents, I argue that beneath the appearance of social inertia in the river community are actions. Such actions were mostly out of care for the well-being of themselves, as well as their community.

Such care act was also gendered. A few newcomer women and men who tended to have caring duties in their households chose to act sooner to be ready to leave home. Most of the residents, including both old timers and newcomers chose to wait out the extreme weather crisis. Newcomers, especially women with either higher education backgrounds or with young children or elderly relatives in their households tend to stay alerted on updates and

prepare sooner than their male members in the family. As in the case of Miranda Brown and her husband George, while she was ready to go, he did not despite that he was the one who encouraged Miranda to pack. Those who prepared early includes men who played the care giving roles in the family. In the case of Bart and his family, not only did they prepare early, but they also evacuated sooner before the official evacuation order so that his son who was assisted by medical devices would have enough time to move to safety. As indicated in the women and men's experience preparing sooner than others, their active responses to keep their family prepared for emergency indicate the degree of their ethics of care that their sense of home was more about personal safety than the safety of the physical structure of their home.

To be sure, this is not to say the women or men in the old-timer community do not care about their safety. As the concept of social inertia suggests, inaction is a product of interrelated social processes on individual, institutional and cultural levels. Individual factors are only one part of the making of social inertia, which can meet resistance by the other two structural causes of inaction. Individual agency requires one to practice assertiveness in maintaining their boundaries, which is often hard to achieve due to patriarchal social norms. As indicated in this chapter, the social norms in this rural study site includes staying home during extreme weather. Another norm is the perception of leaving one's home as being unmanly. The out of norm response among the newcomer early prepper women and care giving men, could be explained by first their newcomer status. Since they had not lived in the area for very long, on average less than five years, they had not been rooted as deeply as the old timers. Such short time connection to the place could mean that they are culturally less embedded in the rural norm than the old timers. While staying home was the norm among the rural residents, they questioned the safety of home in such extreme weather.

Second is another place-based factor, informal housing in rural areas. Residents living in informal housing perceived their home to be less hazards proof than conventional housing. As indicated in Maria Cohn's case, when she sensed the high wind, her immediate reaction was the vulnerability of her motor home being potentially compromised by the fallen trees. Such concern prompted her to act sooner to get ready to evacuate.

Gendered responses were also observed in evacuation behaviors, with men being more likely to delay evacuation or stay behind. The findings of the delayed evacuation response among the few residents, mostly men, are partly consistent with the evacuation behavior literature where the desire to defend one's property lowers the probability of evacuation (Kuligowski et al., 2022; McLennan et al., 2013; Mozumder et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2022) and increases the delay time (Paveglio et al., 2014; Strahan and Gilbert, 2021).

As this chapter shows, such delayed evacuation can also be understood as gendered care. In the case of Bud's delay, he shared that "I don't know what I was doing. But I felt like I was doing something." Staying behind was for care of his property, as well as his own need to feel good because for Bud, evacuation meant missing an opportunity to save his property. In the case of the Bells, also driven by the worry of their property, they removed themselves from the organized evacuation, leading to them being left behind. They did try to catch up but by then the evacuation route became too risky to pass as the fire progressed fast, leading to their decision to return and stay. Staying behind was a safer option than driving through high heat and possible fires. Similarly, Nora and Bryce, two newcomers living off the grid, resisted the official guidance to stay at the evacuation site, believing the site was unsafe so they stayed home instead.

This chapter concludes that risk responses and evacuation behaviors are associated with the survivors' perceptions of both power and powerlessness, linked mostly to gender. Gendered response to emergency is largely shaped by the survivors' care of their personal

safety, the safety of their properties as well as the well-being of their community. Their care during emergency, as indicated by the survivors' experiences, is to a large extent shaped by the characteristics of the place.

CHAPTER III: AFTER FIRE: WHERE IS HOME?

McKenzie means community. It means resilience. It means being stubborn. Sometimes it means being too stupid to give up. We're a bullheaded group of folks. If you tell us we can't, we'll do it just to spite you. And if you say it can't be done, we'll figure out how to do it. There's been more than one person that has said that we'll never make it here. 'It's never gonna work. You don't have the right demographic. You don't have enough people. You'll be closed in a year.' That was 22 years ago. It's made it here! My store was the only thing in continuous operation in the middle of Blue River since 1945. So sometimes even the brightest people don't know what they're talking about. Just because it doesn't look like it's going to work on paper or by the numbers, it doesn't mean it won't. Part of the reason our store worked is because of who is running it. It's not because of what's in the building. We had a lot of people who were very loyal to the business because it was us who were running. I would really like to find those guys, who basically were like it's never gonna do anything, and be like, yeah BUT if it hadn't burned down on September 7 of 2020, it would still be doing all right. Maybe you were a little wrong.

McKenzie also means family because there's a lot of people up here will tell you that they are family, even if they're not really family. There are generations of people who are from here and have stayed here and will always be here and will always have ties here too. I hiked that hill when I was 13. I've walked every inch of the McKenzie River trail. I've walked every inch of the Delta old-growth trail that no longer exists. So... sorry, it makes me emotional for some of that stuff. I want it to be new. I want it to be brighter than it was before because I know that there are a lot of parts of the McKenzie that are not thriving. But I also don't want it to lose its character. The McKenzie has always had a very unique vibe. It's always home.

—River, 44, 30 river years, female, business owner, returnee

During my field work, I often heard narratives like the above from River among the old-timer survivors. Old timers are residents who have generally lived on the river for more than 20 years. To them, The McKenzie meant both the people and the place, which the survivors held close to their identities. In their eyes, perseverance to overcome hardships is part of the McKenzie's character, a unique vibe that, as River shared, was often confusing to many outsiders because it did not seem to be worthy of the risk. Even though many old timers lost their physical houses in the fire, returning means to be back home, a metaphorical home, a place for the old timers to restore their sense of belonging as in *who they are*, versus *what they have*, as it was more common to many newcomer residents who moved to the area more recently. Unlike the old timers, the newcomers' relationship with the place was as more

of a vacation or retirement home. For example, I spoke with a newcomer named John (70s, 6 river years, male, retiree, returnee). John stated that he thought of where he lived as “a vacation spot.” Sitting under the shadow of a lucky tree that survived the fire and overlooked the river, he went on to say:

People come up and spend thousands of dollars every year for vacation. And we’re just living there, like we’re on vacation all the time. It’s just special because you can just sit out and watch the river go by and do that all day long. It’s really easy to do. You just get a big pitcher of lemonade and put it next to you and have a glass of ice and you’re ready to watch the river go by.

In my conversations with the newcomer survivors, many shared similar accounts of the place to John’s as a forefront comment on their river life. Their relationship with the place was built in general upon their interests in the recreational and property values of the river, and their decisions whether to return were highly driven by insurance and other economic choices. This is not to say that the old timers do not value the economic benefits of living on the river as they returned after the fire. They do, as class certainly matters to the experiences of the survivors’ recovery, especially on the levels of comfort and speed. But the two groups of survivors were rooted differently in the place that they prioritized differently as they decided where they wanted to call home after the fire.

This chapter is about the place-based differences connected to the unique character of The McKenzie as in the survivors’ decisions on the location of their post-disaster home. I ask the following questions: 1) How did wildfire survivors decide where they wanted to settle after the fire? 2) What factors did they consider in their decisions for home? And 3) how does place shape wildfire survivors’ experiences, actions, and outcomes as they attempt to rebuild their homes? I find three major migration patterns within the first three years after the fire: return, relocate and re-orient. While the returning and relocating groups appear more determined in their choices, the re-orienting group somewhat hesitated. The re-orientors consist of survivors who either left first then returned or returned first and then left. Their

change of mind reflects the changing nature of home, as well as the uncertainty faced by the survivors as they tried to anchor themselves down for a sense of being settled. Their experiences cement the understanding of the decisions by both the returnees and relocators, and expose challenges met by each of two groups. More importantly, it shows how the meaning of place and home evolves over time for the survivors. Specifically, I focus on two important indicators from wildfire survivors' experiences that influence their decisions: health and work. Next, I will discuss literature on the main debates in disaster migration and disaster recovery. I then discuss the three major migration patterns, and how these patterns are connected to the place character of The McKenzie.

Economies and Emotions in Disaster-induced Migration

Disaster-induced migration is the movement of people away from areas where there has been significant disruption to the way society functions. This disruption can involve significant losses or impacts to people, property, the economy, and the environment, and the displacement must be greater than the ability of the affected community or society to recover by using its own resources (Chumky et al. 2022). Prior research on disaster migration centers the debate on whether migration decisions are affected by either economic or other non-economic factors such as place attachment (Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Stedman 2013; Harrison 2017; Husa and Morse 2022; Morse and Mudgett 2018; von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2014; Stedman 2006; Windsong 2010). Many post-disaster migration analyses use demographic approaches—survey or quantified data—to understand triggers of in-and-out migration (Haney 2019). Such research explicitly shows social inequalities in traditional sociological variables such as race and ethnicity, class, and age (see Katrina studies such as Fothergill and Peek 2015; Fussell and Harris 2014) and also gender (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek 2018; Gorman-Murray, McKinnon, and Dominey-Howes 2014; Haney and Gray-Scholz 2020a) . While research like this is important in understanding the general human flow after a

catastrophic event, it misses the nuanced meanings disaster survivors make about home, and these meanings and perceptions about home and place guide the patterns and practices emerging about who moves where, in response to disaster and climate change.

Qualitative research on post-disaster migration tend to focus on the desires of the displaced to return, or the perceptions of the returnees. A central argument based on these qualitative or mixed methods reports is return decisions are mostly emotionally driven by place attachment, not necessarily based on material conditions (Haney 2019; Morrice 2013). In Morrice's (2013) study on survivors of Hurricane Katrina, that devastated New Orleans in 2005, people's decisions to return to the city were reflective of nostalgia that is rooted in place and perceptions of home, despite feelings of loss and uncertainty following the storm. While findings like this are important to understand the driver of desire for home in return migration, they lack explanations for why economic factors were not prioritized in return decisions, and why some survivors would choose to relocate—if place attachment pulls so strongly among the returnees, why isn't it the same for the relocators? The missing data on the economic considerations in return migration and those who relocate show only the partial picture of disaster impact (Arcaya, Raker, and Waters 2020). This chapter fills these gaps by centering the voices of survivors who have settled either in or outside the disaster zone within the first three years following the disaster. In their reports, they emphasize the meanings they make about home connected to place—the McKenzie—as well as demonstrating ways they finance their decisions. These meanings include both economic and emotional factors in their recovery, with variations of their tenure living on the McKenzie, as well as the consequences of their land tenure have on their post-disaster home.

House and Home in Disaster Recovery

Debates on disaster recovery, at least in the context of the United States, are largely centered on its dominant housing model and how this model reproduces inequalities

(Comerio 2014; Fussell and Harris 2014; Mueller et al. 2011). This housing approach assumes private funds and/or insurance will be used for housing repairs and that a family that lived in poverty before disaster can afford higher post-disaster housing costs (Comerio 2014; Schultz 2011). After the initial and short-term emergency response such as that from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—which is operated under the assumption that disaster victims are equipped with the capability to use computers and fill out forms (Mueller et al. 2011)—long-term recovery mostly relies on the state- and local-level governments to direct resources to rebuild the place, primarily focusing on the physical losses (Fritz 1996). Housing recovery policies tend to favor homeowners who are more likely to have new homes sooner than renters whose post-disaster homes tend to be mostly outside the disaster area. Compared to the market renters, disaster victims who are assisted by Section 8 and public housing have a better chance to be in new homes (Fussell and Harris 2014). As a result, survivors who own homes but do not have the resources to navigate bureaucracy, and those who do not own homes nor are not connected to the government housing system are limited in support and resources help them recover and restore their quality of life.

In addition to the discriminative process in the material recovery, researchers have persistently argued for the urgency of addressing the emotional and psychological suffering following the disorientating experiences of the survivors (Cox and Perry 2011; Erikson 2006). The material and emotional experiences of home are interlinked in ways that for the homeless survivors, their emotional well-being can in fact shape the process of having a physical home (Borchard 2013), and that the emotional support for the survivors should be part of the long-term recovery (Ewert 2021; Haney and Gray-Scholz 2020b; Hawkins and Maurer 2011). This chapter joins this debate by revealing how the survivors' decisions on where to call home after the fire is motivated by pursuit of home for healing both their emotional and economic wounds and how such actions vary among social groups connected

to place in different ways. Their decisions on where people want to live after disaster are not only about their financial abilities to secure a physical dwelling, but also about their sense of belonging associated with non-economic factors such as community, work, and services tied to the place (Comerio 2014).

In the following sections of this chapter, I first examine the returnees' experience, the meaning of their return connected to the place, including the restoration of their sense of belonging for the old timers, as well as the restoration of the recreational and property values among the newcomers. I then examine the relocators' experience, where health for the elder old timers and the variations of homeowner insurance for the newcomers shaped their relocations away from the river. After that, I examine the re-orientors' experience, how the changes during recovery affected their decision making and I introduce a unique type of home—recreational vehicle living—that increased their mobility, which will be the focus of Chapter Four. Finally, I discuss core findings, relationship to prior research, and broader implications.

The Returnees

My in-depth interactions with the returnees began once I moved to Blue River in the winter of 2021. As a resident, I ran into my survivor neighbors during my daily routines walking in the neighborhood, going to the library, and attending local events. During our casual interactions, I learned about their experiences with the fire displacement and located some who expressed interests in interviewing with me. As a volunteer builder of tool sheds, I had the opportunity to meet with the property owners when they were onsite meeting the building team. They let us know where they would like the shed to be, which direction they would prefer the shed to face. Thanks to my team lead who always intentionally created space for me to share my research with the property owners, I secured private visits with

some of them for interviews and other informal gatherings where I had the opportunity to learn more about them and their communities.

Working directly on the land that had recently been transformed by the fire, on a project that intended to build hope, as the name of the project Sheds of Hope suggested, I experienced the juxtaposition of ruin and hope. I had no idea how or how long it would take for the survivors to rebuild their home and community, and I was figuring it out with the survivors as they inched forward towards having a home that they could call their own. As I spent more time on the river, I saw more houses—often big houses—being built. I saw sites being cleared up for construction, as well as destroyed properties that had no signs of rebuilding even three years after the fire. Such variations on the visual progress of the rebuild added to the puzzle of motivations to return and rebuild. The old-timer community generally saw rebuilding as the only option to have a home again, despite having limited funds and resources to rebuild, whereas the newcomer community appeared to have more options about where they could call home, and their decisions were largely based on insurance and other economic factors.

Conn Tucker, 75 years old—with 66 of those years living on the river—was retired from operating heavy machines for logging at a logging camp on the river that no longer existed. I had met him on the street as I was building a shed for another survivor. Later, I paid a visit for a formal interview in his home located at almost the end of a long and winding forest service road. As I turned off the highway and drove up to his driveway, I imagined what it would have been like for Conn and a few other households also living on that road—the only option to safety—to evacuate that night of the fire. Now as I am writing this, I envision Conn in his shorts and tennis shoes driving in his pick-up truck, racing down the road in the middle of the night, chased by the fire, till he ran into a tree on the freeway. He was going to shelter at a friend's house but found himself instead on a hospital bed. He had

broken his leg in the accident. I thought about his comment on how he felt after the fire, “I didn’t care about living or dying.” He had a total loss of his property, and a broken leg. Even though this was an extreme example—certainly not everyone found themselves in a hospital bed—it shows how tightly the old-timer survivors were connected themselves with the place. When the place was gone, as demonstrated in Conn’s experience, so gone could be their hope to live.

But after all was said and done, Conn decided to rebuild. “I’m just lucky,” he said, “God took care of me. If it wouldn’t have been Him that He took care of me when I had the wreck, I could have been dead. But He did say it wasn’t my time.” Conn told me this when he and I sat inside his newly purchased single wide manufactured home, a replacement of the three-bedroom double wide that he had lived in before the fire. He had downsized. As he said, he didn’t need that much space anymore because after losing his wife to cancer, he had been living alone. Also, he could use the funds saved from the downsizing to rebuild his garage where he had stored all his tools but lost them all in the fire. “I would not have been able to afford the \$1000-plus rent. This way, I don’t owe anything.” When I asked him whether he had considered moving away, he said, “I had no place to go. I’ve lived here all my life, and I have all my friends here.”

Common among the reports by the old-timer survivors, the river symbolizes almost everything to them. They equated the destruction of the place with the loss of their senses of self. Return and rebuild, as shown in Conn’s story, served as a way for the old-timer survivors to find a purpose to live. Return meant hope. Like River in the opening quote of this chapter, Conn also takes pride of being part of the unique character of the place and being a useful community member. Conn said about seeing other survivors in need on the river, “I will help but I’m not going to buy stuff for people right now because my fund is low.”

Similar to Conn, Radar, who was 60 years old, saw returning as her only option as she couldn't see herself living anywhere else. She said:

I have nowhere else to go. I could go live with my father. Not a good idea. I mean, we get along great. But no, I don't want to live with my father. None of my siblings have room and I don't want to live with them. I have no other resources. You know, when you make less than \$1,000 a month, you can't make rent.

Radar had lived in the house that her family had built in the 1930s rent free for 27 years. The house was so small that, as River said, "I could literally go to the bathroom, wash my feet in the tub and wash my hands at the sink all at the same time."

Six years before the fire, the insurance company refused to insure the house because the house was 90 years old, and Radar had not pursued any insurance for the house afterwards. Without insurance, which would mean a major part of the funding to rebuild, Radar managed to secure FEMA assistance and with the help of relatives, with which she purchased a travel trailer and lived in it on her family's property. She said:

There was a community. That was a major part of living on the river, especially with the food pantry, because I would work with both the haves and the have-nots. I'd have to include the people that had money, to try and get funding because we were self-funded. And then I'd work with the ones with nothing and help them and get them food and get them in with whatever services were available.

Getting to know the old timers on the river, especially those like Conn and Radar who struggle financially in their recovery but still be there for others, I witnessed a deep sense of community and desire to see their community thrive. Returning carried a notion of being useful despite their own struggles, as well as feeling safe.

Feelings of safety was central to what Renee discussed during our interview. Renee, age 50, had lived on the river for 41 years. When young, her parents were never able to afford a property, so they had been renting and at times, homeless living in tents. The fire burned the cabin Renee was renting at the time, after which she received a donation of a travel trailer, which had since become her new home. When asked about her return, she said the following:

I've been here since I was nine years old. It's just home. Just everything about it. I love just the quiet of the nature, just that we have such clean rivers and lakes and just places to go, and places to just get far away from people. But yet, you can be connected to people as quickly as you want. And it's just kind of like, kids go back home to their childhood home, their neighborhood. I go home to the McKenzie Valley. It's definitely a place where my heart feels at home. I feel safe, even though with the fire and all that's happening. I've always felt like when I'm here because I know it so much [It's] such a space of a part of who I am that I feel safe here. I feel like I can call on people, I have community here.

Like Renee, many return old-timer survivors connected feeling safe with being back on the river. Their sense of home is much larger than the physical home, such as the trailer Renee was living in; it extends to the landmarks, the people, and the community. Specifically, the extractive industries on the river gave birth to communities and provided them with financial security and a deep sense of belonging. But after the logging industry declined, the community experienced the state of impoverishment, but their sense of belonging and identity that connects to the place remained. Such connection between identity and actions to return became even tighter after the disaster. Many of the old-timer survivors saw returning as the only option for home. To them, returning meant hope, being able to live, to feel safe, and to be who they are.

While old timers prioritize their identities and belonging connected to the river, and for some, a sense of survival, the newcomers have more of an economic relationship with the place, and of course, the river being a major part of this connection. The year before the fire, Sam, 52, had moved to a rental cabin on the river a few months before the fire and had since picked up cleaning jobs for vacation rentals. About the place, she recalled the following:

It was my 50th birthday. I sat on my desk, and it was just my favorite thing in the world to do. I just talked to my dad for like an hour. It's probably like the longest conversation I've ever had with him. I just sat and watched the birds come by, and the ducks, and the eagles come by. There was an osprey, and then there was a big turkey come by. I'm like this is so weird. And then there was three, four and there was five, like oh my god, it's like the birds are giving me a break for my birthday. I was just so happy. I knew that was the happiest I've ever been in my life up there in that place.

After the fire, Sam shared that she wanted her rental cabin back so she could continue to enjoy the river. She wanted the recovery groups to give her landlord the money, so they could build her cabin.

So I will have a place to come back to, you know. That was my need, like what am I, you know—I can't do anything. I don't own property. I don't even have a washing machine. It took a long time to realize that that's never coming back you know. I'd never gonna go back there. That was a really tough realization because that was my favorite place on earth. I got the happiest I've ever been in my entire life.

Indeed, Sam tried to be back. A family member donated a used travel trailer where she shared with her friend. With a place to live, Sam went back to her cleaning work. She said:

We just started helping. We had a roof over our heads, had food donated. And we just went back to work. I'm not good at doing the forms or finding anything. We had [her friend's family member] trying to look things up and see what things were out there to help us. I think we got like \$400 or something, \$800 to split one time. And I just didn't really fill any of this stuff out. I just went back, went back to work, you know.

As an uninsured renter without a formal lease, which was not uncommon in the valley, Sam was on the margin of the official disaster recovery.

For newcomers like Sam who are barely rooted in the community, it was especially devastating because not only did they not have strong social support helping them navigate life after the disaster, but they also had difficulties navigating the recovery process as most recovery resources required proof of residence on the river. In my interactions with them, it seemed to me their return was almost like the return of many of the old timers that they had no better places to go but going back to the river as they figured out their next step for home. But for other newcomers who were in better financial situations, their decisions whether to come back were highly driven by insurance and economic choices.

Two years before the fire, Ray and his wife Michelle bought the home on top of a hill on the river. Their nearest neighbor was about a hill away. They lost everything in the fire but when I showed up the first time as a builder of their tool shed, which was about 17

months after the fire, I saw not only a newly built house, but also a brand-new garage where Ray showed us their newly purchased antique car, a replacement of the one lost in the fire. “I didn’t really want to rebuild that house.” Ray said in our interview:

I did, because I want my wife to be happy. The insurance company wouldn’t give us the money unless we rebuilt the house. You can do whatever you want to do with the property, but if you want more money, like the cost that would cost you to build the house, you’re gonna have to build the house.

Then Michelle said: “We’re kind of like, are held as prisoners. Either that or you lose money. We literally lost money because it wasn’t a cheap home. We could have went to just sell the land, [but] we would have lost a lot of money.”

Like Ray and Michelle, many wealthy newcomers shared their decisions about where they wanted to settle after fire with maximizing insurance benefits through rebuild. “They [the insurance company] would cover rebuilding in the exact location exact spot, the exact type,” said Weege, a newcomer retiree in his 80s, who also thought the best idea for him and his wife to do after the fire was to rebuild. Weege still felt “it’s [The McKenzie River is] a peace of mind. It’s comforting. Very enjoyable. It’s just an all in all, just a wonderful place to live.” But Weege and his wife Gracie disagreed on where they each wanted to settle and their main argument was around the concern of their age and health.

Weege: “I wasn’t excited about wanting to move down to the city because I wanted to stay out of the city area.”

Gracie: “I thought it was an opportunity to do something different. And that I still think that way. But I’m also okay about going upriver. Am I excited? No. But I’ll be glad to try it again. But initially, as soon as I saw the property afterwards, I just said I don’t want to rebuild and that’s the way I felt from the gut. And I still sometimes think it was the wrong decision to rebuild. But I’m willing to go ahead and try it with the option that we don’t stay up there longer than we should. I would like to live in Washington. Let’s go to Washington. So I would be more adventuresome. And ‘cuz I don’t have kids here. And my thought was, oh, I’ll be close to the airport. I can go down to California. It wasn’t a battle I wanted to fight. It’s fine. Okay, we’ll do it. I was also concerned about money.”

Weege: “It took a long time for me to convince her that the best thing for us [was to rebuild]. She was concerned that, you know, she’s 71 right now. So knowing that we were getting elderly that it might be better for us to... and then some of our friends have moved to town also that this should be closer into the hospitals, and the doctors

and things. So that was her concern at the time. Maybe this is just a time for us to, as they say, bite the bullet and make the move. So anyway, I convinced her that the best thing for us to do is to recoup our money from the property we have put to rebuild, and we're both in as good as our health can be for as old as we are. And so we could live up here for a few more years. And then if we can get to the point that we need to move closer to town, we can. We can sell and we'll have a house up here that is going to be more valuable than what we had previously."

Despite their different opinions about the rebuild, Weege (80s) and Gracie (70s) shared the same worry about being in old age that living in the rural area may count against the practicality of being elderly and needing medical care. They also both agreed that their potential financial loss if they had relocated elsewhere would be too great, in which case they would lose the opportunity to claim the rebuilding benefits from their homeowner insurance. They reached an agreement to rebuild on the condition of the temporality of living on the river, and the length of their river residence would depend on their health. In this way, they negotiated a pathway for their future which helps settle the unsettledness between the desire for financial security through rebuild and the fear of risking health due to the remoteness on the river. Though a tough decision for many elderly survivors, returning meant being able to enjoy the river again, which was largely why they originally felt drawn to the place.

The Relocators

The type of insurance and the ways the survivors felt about the process of rebuilding shaped some survivors' decisions to relocate. Finding research participants who had already left the river wasn't as easy as recruiting returnees. In addition to snowballing from the returnees who knew people that had relocated away, I used the Internet and posted my research in a popular local group online. From there, I got to know Janet, 56 years old with 6 years living on the river before fire. We met in her new home in the city of Springfield, the closest city west of the river. About her former home on the river, she said, "I always called it my little utopia. It was right on the river, about the same size as this place, with kind of the same sort of setup, but I had these big windows that faced the river. I had the upstairs like a

loft, so it was all like an open design. It was super quiet. I was fairly close to the highway but there were big, huge trees. Nobody knew it was there.”

Like many other newcomers, Janet enjoyed the solitude and privacy of her river life. Also similarly shared among the newcomers is their support systems that were mostly located off the river, as the newcomers commonly felt difficult to fit into the old timers’ culture.

Janet said:

Everybody had lived there for a really long time, so they all knew each other, and they were very close knit. I didn’t really ever get to know anybody there. There were a couple of people that I knew out there but not anybody that lived anywhere near me. It was a little strange. They’d have these events every once a while like potluck for Fourth of July or something like that. I went one or two times, and I always felt a little uncomfortable. Nobody knew who I was.

Janet’s recall of her time on the river shows the contrast of the relationship to the place, shaping the rural divide between the old timers as in *who they are* and the newcomers as in *what they have*. After the fire, this divide seemed only wider in the disaster recovery because in the middle of the wildfire recovery was the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the supply chains for building materials. For example, between 2020 and 2021, exactly when the rebuilding was happening, the cost of framing lumber was nearly four times of the cost pre-COVID (Helper and Soltas 2021). Also between 2020-2021, the US was experiencing a 3.46% increase of inflation, and this increase continued to 2022 with a record high inflation rate of 8.0% (Srinivasan 2024). In the context of both the global and national disasters, while it became extremely challenging for the old-timer survivors relying on fixed incomes, many better-resourced newcomers like Janet felt they could not anchor back down to the river after fire.

When asked how she had decided to relocate after fire, Janet shared that she could not rebuild because the lumber prices were too high, so was housing. She requested her insurance company for a maximum pay out, with which she would be willing to find a place to live. But the process took a toll on her mental health. She said, “I had to prove every last thing. When I

did my inventory. I mean, it took I don't know how many hours and hours. And I eventually just gave up because I didn't want to fight with them." Then she referred to her new home where we interviewed, a condo in the city.

I had the reason why I bought this place. It's because it was the best way to get them to pay me. It was to buy a new place where the value of this house was what they paid me out with the maximum amount. So once I did that, they paid me the maximum amount.

In meeting her goal with the insurance company, Janet swallowed financial loss for mental health. She said:

Technically, I could still be submitting certain things, like replacement thing. But it's not worth it. I'd rather just eat the cost and not have to deal with them. They did pay me out a certain amount of my inventory that I had already done. But then what they do is if you replace this stuff, they'll pay you like the difference because they give you a depreciated value. It's not worth it. I cancelled my insurance policy with them. And I just don't want to ever deal with them again.

As shown in Janet's experience with her insurance company, navigating the bureaucracy with insurance companies induced paramount stress, which turned into a secondary trauma after experiencing the traumatic fire. Such complications of trauma have a lasting effect on the survivors. As Janet shared:

It was a hard thing to give up [the property]. But I knew I couldn't live up there. Even here you know, I hear sirens, or I smell smoke or something. And I'm not going to ever use that fireplace. I put a bunch of stuff in there because I'm just not ever going to use it, because I think I would be thinking constantly there's gonna be some sparks coming up and it's gonna burn my house down.

Like Janet, many relocators shared their unbearable fear of fire and smoke after experiencing the disaster. Living on the river would mean constant reminder of the trauma from the fire and the displacement that followed. As soon as they settled with their insurance companies, such newcomers moved away. Retiree McKenzie Kidd shared similar stressful experience engaging his insurance company. He said:

I want to keep things as simple as possible. It was already complicated. For the rebuild, all the permits. It's really a hassle. It takes a lot of energy. It's frustrating. It's traumatic already with a fire and I didn't want any more trauma with all the bureaucracy and the permit things. I had full fire insurance. I got reimbursed for the

value of the home. I started to [itemize for more insurance payments], thinking it's gonna be worth it to do that. But it got so exhaustive and complicated. And it didn't seem to do any good anyway because we talked on the phone with the insurance people. They weren't about to budge after the initial payment. They weren't about to, even though I've started to itemize. They could see whether there's more value or other things. There's gonna be too hard to follow through on that. But anyway, they paid me right away after fire within two weeks. So I was just happy to get that initial payment, even though it might have been a little more.

Both Janet and McKenzie Kidd struggled in their insurance claims and reported stress associated with their engagements with the insurance agents. They recouped as much finances as possible from their insurances and started new life away from the river. As much as they had loved the river, they no longer desired to be part of the place after the fire. It didn't call them in the same way that the place called the old timers to return. The old timers are rooted in the place, and are called back to it, but the newcomers' commitment to the place was a vacation or retirement home, and the like. Their decisions after fire were primarily driven by insurance and other economic factors. The place, after all, had changed such that it no longer felt like being on vacation in a secluded utopia.

While place shapes the experiences and identities of who lives there, it also influences the physical health of the people living there. By this, I mean health issues, such as respiratory diseases, cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, that prevent the survivors from continuing to live on the river after the fire. Because the place lived many residents at retirement age, health concerns shaped the relocation of many elder survivors, particularly the old timers. For the relocated old timers, economic factors also matter, but they left or decided to leave mainly because of their deteriorating health that prevented them from safely living on the river.

Grandma E, 72, knows almost everyone in the community. Growing up on the river, she worked for her family business throughout her life. After the fire, she moved away to be closer to her son and his family. When we did our video call on the phone, Grandma E was sitting in the living room of her new home in a 55+ community, a manufactured home

complex for residents who are more than 55 years old. She had just gone shopping for supplies she needed for her grandchild's birthday party, and she was going to join them after our interview. Like the other old timers that I discussed earlier, Grandma E shared the same sense of belonging about the river. She said:

McKenzie River is home. It's my childhood. It was my life. I just moved when I was 70. When I would come up, visit, as soon as I hit the river, I just get a warm fuzzy feeling. I'm home. It's just how pretty it was. Warm, fuzzy feeling. Don't get that anywhere." As much as the McKenzie felt home to Grandma E, she could no longer live there due to illnesses. She said, "I had COVID just before the fire. I had cancer before that. So I had chemo, but I worked through chemo and cancer. And with the COVID, I couldn't physically do it.

Others also shared health concerns. Cheryl, 75, prepared for her departure from the river. With a walking stick in hand, Cheryl came to the house where I was staying that belonged to her friend—I was house sitting. We shared lunch while she was waiting for her laundry. I helped her pour some water to her glass as her hands trembled. Cheryl said:

I have Parkinson's, which is a really desperate disease. I was diagnosed in 2006. For 14 years I had no symptoms. Like, no problem. No shaking, no hesitating, no stumbling, none of that, which is just a blessing. But then last year, I think it was because of the stress from the wildfires, because I was evacuated three times on that property. The stress has been considerable. And the symptoms just started just rolling. It was really hard initially when I originally sold [the property] because I didn't really want to but you can't continue doing what you've always done with Parkinson's. I simply cannot. It doesn't work. Nothing works. So I knew that the end was coming. Not the end-end. I mean, I hope I don't die. But you know, people with Parkinson's die earlier.

Cheryl's health declined fast within the year I had known her. From at first not being able to chew, to losing sight in one eye, to using a wheelchair and depending on her husband for mobility. When I asked her how she felt about her land, she said the following:

I really don't have any interest in the property now. It just made me feel very insecure and worried all the time, worried ALL the time. Whenever the wind came up every summer after that, when there was a high wind and dry and high temperature, I just get fretful.

Despite seeing the river as home for most of her lifetime, Cheryl can no longer maintain her sense of security on the river, neither physically nor emotionally. From the

experience of the elder survivors with severe illnesses, I learned that place shapes such health patterns among the survivors because the river is largely a retired community for both the old timers and the newcomers. Such pattern almost dictates their decisions to leave, or at least becoming a stressful concern, like that for the newcomer elders Weege and Gracie.

Not all elders were able to relocate despite their concerning health conditions. Within the first three years of the fire, three of my returned research participants passed away, and I learned from community members that five other residents had passed away, mostly due to terminal illnesses.

One of these individuals was uninsured survivor Radar, who I mentioned earlier was returned while living in her travel trailer because she had no other places to go. Radar survived three summers after the fire. Regarding her health, she said below during our interview:

I have not been physically healthy. With the open heart, I've had five heart procedures. I've had my neck fused. I've had three knee procedures. I've had head to toe, something. So not physically healthy or mentally healthy. I've been seeing a counselor about a year. That's about it. I was in a counseling for a long time before that, but that was years ago. Counseling is okay, I guess. Mostly I manage my mental health by staying away from people.

The death experience among the old-timer returnees further shows their relationship with the place that the river was their home, and they held on to their sense of belonging till their last breaths.

Moving away for health reasons did not happen only among senior adults, although more elders tended to relocate due to health concerns. The fall before the fire, in 2019, Bart purchased a home at the foot of a hill so that he could look after his sick son as well as enjoying his retirement life on the river. Bart reported that his son, who was in his 20s, "suffer[ed] from his condition which prevents him from walking, even to the bathroom. He can't because he'll get out of breath. He can walk but can't walk very far. He is having a surgery this next month." Bart went on to say the following:

He's had probably eight or nine surgeries. And that's no exaggeration since I moved to Oregon in June of 2019. But this next surgery is going to be a major surgery. They're going to remove a portion of his right lung, the middle portion. And hopefully it will correct the problem that he has. So he can breathe. So he can breathe normally and live a somewhat normal life.

After the night of evacuation, Bart's son never went back to the river, not only because Bart had lost his home to the fire, but also because the smoke during the fire season that covered a substantial part of Oregon made the river no longer a habitable place for him to live.

To sum, those who relocated lost interest in the land for reasons of health as well as alternatives with their homeowner insurance. Health was a defining factor some survivors considered when they relocated, especially among the elder old timers whose health no longer could sustain their life on the river. In contrast, the elder newcomers who reported having concerning health issues chose to rebuild as primarily a way to build equity for their future departure from the river once they had to leave and live closer to medical facilities. In addition to health, the newcomers, unbounded by their homeowner insurances to rebuild, moved away after securing their insurance benefits. Relocation was an intentional choice for them as they were no longer interested in being part of the place.

The Re-orientors

The re-orientors are survivors who either returned or relocated after the fire at the time of my first interactions with them but changed their minds about where they wanted to live in reference to the river during my fieldwork. Even though they had different experiences, they shared three things in common: 1) declined health mostly among the elders, 2) changing transactional relationships with the place and 3) the mobility through RV living. Learning from their experiences, I find that home can mean more than one place, and this appears particularly more common among those who have moved from place to place earlier in their life. For them, the meaning of home tends to be more fluid, less limited by the

boundary of a specific geographic location. But since they are still connected to the river on various degrees, they moved back and forth as they figured out where home was going to be in a more permanent sense. For some, their mobility after the fire largely owes to their unique way to feel at home through living in recreational vehicles, or the RVs.

1) Health-Related Reorienting

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned old-timer elders like Cheryl who returned after fire but shortly began to prepare for her departure from the river due to Parkinson's. She had planned three summers living on the river, after which she was unsure if she would continue to live on the river. Her other option was to move to her second home in a warmer state. Seeing her health deteriorated over the two years during my fieldwork, I witnessed her love of the river. She couldn't stop talking about her garden, the kitten visitors to her yard. She enjoyed making arts with broken porcelain pieces, attaching them to a tall column. She saw it standing at an iconic building on the river, as a legacy of her and her love of the river. Over the two years of knowing her, the time we could chat during each visit quickly diminished as Cheryl needed to rest. But when she was awake, like the last time I saw her during a garage sale in her yard, she was sharp as a tack. She bargained with the buyers but mostly she was just telling them the stories of the items for sale. She talked about a fur hat of hers, a stylish brown fur hat with both sides long enough to protect the cheeks. It's from the 60s, said Cheryl, when she was going to college in New York. Following each visit with her, it was clear to me that Cheryl was ready to part with her past, including her life on the river.

Another elder, old timer Agatecreek, 72 years old, moved a few times after the fire, each time further away from the river. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's and cancer, Agatecreek lived with his partner in a house that sat on a former logging camp. A logger himself, Agatecreek had major injuries from working on the trees, after which he developed his love of education and Indigenous culture. When I first met both Agatecreek and his partner Biku

tye, they each were tending a booth at the local library's open house. Agatecreek was at the Indigenous culture table where had the display of obsidian tools, baskets, books on the Indigenous population on the river. Next to him was Biku, tending a table full of old photographs of the small communities along the McKenzie River. Only later after I had a chance to chat with Biku, did I know that Agatecreek had Alzheimer's. But over time, as I visited the couple more often, Agatecreek's forgetfulness was more obvious. On a spring day, we were sitting outside enjoying some tea, instead of dunking the tea bag in his cup, Agatecreek started tearing up the tea bag. Within a year, Biku arranged an assisted living in the city for Agatecreek where he lived for a few months, before moving to a memory care further away from town. Soon after moving there, I received a text from Biku that Agatecreek had peacefully passed away in his sleep.

2) *Changing Relationship with Place*

Even though leaving the river for health reasons was mostly among the elders, some relocators were much younger and their movement off the river had an impact on their caregiver's plans for home. Such impact was mostly reflected in their changing transactional relationship with the place. Following his son's relocation, Bart also left the river. When we interviewed online, he was living in his RV home in the same long-term RV park where I had been living. Even though we were neighbors, we decided to interview online because it was still at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we didn't feel safe or comfortable to meet in either of our RV homes or any public spaces nearby. Bart shared his experience moving to the McKenzie and his plans for the next step.

My son needed medical attention. He and his wife didn't have any family or really even friends here in Oregon, so they needed support network. I moved to Oregon in June of 2019. I bought the house in July in the McKenzie River Valley and got a part time job to put down roots in the community, because I didn't know anybody in McKenzie River Valley.

Settling down on The McKenzie was not random. It was partly in debt to the writing by Barry Lopez, also a wildfire survivor, for his love of the river, resistance of artificial changes to nature, and his care for the river community. In his *Lessons from the River* (2018), which Bart had shared with me, Lopez talked about the significance of the day of September 17, when he would be listening to the river for the signs of chinook salmon that would spawn in front of his home. On his reactions to the arrival and absence of salmon on that day, Lopez wrote,

If the salmon don't arrive by the evening of the 17th. I walk down through the woods to stand in the dark and listen for them. I know more all the sounds this river makes, and there is no other sound like their caudal fins breaking the surfaces of the water as they mill. If I hear them, then I know things are good for this particular strain of salmon for at least another three years. If I don't hear them, I toss and turn through sleepless night and go down to look first thing in the morning. (Lopez 2018:2)

Lopez's connection with the river, as a source of emotional security, a sense of comfort deeply influenced Bart, who took the pride of living in the same town as the writer he dearly adored, "I love his writing," said Bart, "He's one of my favorite writers. He's a nature writer. He writes about Native Americans and animals and nature. And I knew he lived in the McKenzie River Valley."

Bart's plan of living on the river changed not only because of the fire, or the passing of Lopez shortly after the fire, but also because the fire voided the primary reason why he had moved to Oregon at the first place. He said,

Now my son's moved up to Portland—so he's kind of more independent, where he doesn't need my support so much. I can feel more comfortable moving back to California. But still that won't be able to take place until after we rebuild and have something to sell or rent out. Airbnb maybe. I will feel good when my wife is happy with where she's living. I mean, we enjoy the mountains, and we do enjoy the outdoors, going mushroom foraging, but she really does miss her friends. I miss my friends too. When she's back with her friends, I think it would be better for both of us. I am planning on rebuilding. Right now, if I didn't rebuild, I would end up having lost a lot because I had a lot of equity in the house—I wouldn't get the equity back out unless I rebuild. But it wasn't something I was planning on doing for the next couple years. I am retired, and I was planning on just you know, enjoying and having fun. But now I have to stick around and rebuild. It's going to be a long process.

During the rebuilding process, Bart began with the utilities—water, electricity and sewage—as he prepared to sell his property. It was clear at the time of our interview and throughout the following year when we were still neighbors, that Bart and his wife had no desire to return to the McKenzie. “It’s not the same,” said Bart, “because trees were all gone.” They would be moving to California after they either sold or rented out their rebuilt property. But about three years after the fire, I received a text from Bart that said they had moved back to their property on the river.

During my visit to their riverside property, Bart shared that living in their RV wasn’t ideal but it was cheaper to move back than renting the RV space in the park as he didn’t have to pay rent on his own property. By then, the utilities had already been rebuilt, which was all they needed for their RV home. Bart also secured a new job on the river while his wife, Ping who split her time between her parents’ home in Asia and the US, continued to work remotely from their RV home. When asked how she felt about returning and living in the RV, Ping said that as long as she had fast Internet and a kitchen where she could cook her traditional food, she’s home. Ping’s view on RV living was relatable in ways that like Ping, once I was also a beginner RVer as I started to go to graduate school. What I cared the most was the same—fast Internet so that I could do schoolwork at home, and a kitchen where I can cook Chinese food. As long as my work needs for school, or in the case of Ping, her needs for work were met, home could literally be anywhere we parked our RVs, including the Holiday Farm RV resort where I called home during my fieldwork.

3) Mobility of RV Living

While after fire most people chose to live in RV homes in a fixed location, some took advantages of the mobility of RVs as they figured out a more permanent location to anchor down. Feeling home in multiple places was the case for many veteran RVers like Nora. 33 years old, Nora has been moving on and off the river since the fire. I first met her when

building a tool shed for a wildfire survivor. I remember her vividly because she and I were the only women on the building crew, and she was an expert with tools. After getting to know her a little more from building a few more sheds together, I sat down with her for a formal interview at a riverfront cabin where she worked as a caretaker. Even though it was summer, we both had blankets, listening to the rain and the river as we chatted, while Nora smoked with her water bong.

Nora had trained as a mechanics when young and continued to do mechanical work in the military after high school. After leaving the army with severe depression, she had difficulties transiting to civil life. As she said, “I didn’t know how to transition back into the civilian world.” She began searching for roots, mostly through renting and caretaking for private property owners. “I’ve always wanted to live in an RV,” said Nora, “I wanted it right after the army. But it was expensive to buy an RV, so I just put it on the back burner for a long time.” Six months before the fire, she secured a new caretaking job for a second homeowner on the river. After learning her interest in living in a trailer, the property owner gifted her his small used trailer as her new home. On home, Nora shared the following:

I could make anywhere home. Home is not where my family is or where we’re congregating, but where I’m comfortable. But definitely the fire was a whole new normal for all of us. I didn’t feel like it [living in the valley] was gonna be temporary. But now it is. I still call it [the valley] home, but I call this place home too. I feel like where I put my trailer, I feel like I’m home in a comfy place. It may just be my trailer. That’s that factor for me. That’s my safe comfort. No matter where I go, I was able to make it my own, make it how I wanted with the painting and taking the furniture out and the window treatments. I did it how I wanted to, how I would make my own place.

After the fire, Nora returned to the river, living in her RV untouched by the fire, but eventually the smoke and nearby wildfires from the following fire season became unbearably triggering. Upon being notified that the property where she had parked her RV was going on the market, she looked for a new place and settled on a relative’s property off the river. Since then, with her RV, Nora got to experience home on the river during the off-fire season, and to

feel safe and home again by being away during the fire season. Home meant comfort and safety in her RV where, like Ping cooking her traditional food for maintaining cultural identity, Nora was able to gain a different sense of control by improving the interior of her RV.

Marginalized fire survivors like the newcomer renter RVers Nora experienced the most limited options of where to live after fire for the lack of funds and access to land. They enjoy the river as much as other newcomers and old timers, but the precarity they faced during recovery eventually shaped their re-orienting experience.

With the three groups of re-orienters discussed above, their change of mind shows that the post-disaster home decision is a process, in which the survivors continue to negotiate on the continuum of ontological security and insecurity at different times in different places, as they figured out a permanent place to call home.

Discussion

In this chapter, I have focused on wildfire survivors' decisions as to where to make their homes after their wooded community that was set along a river was largely destroyed by fire. I find that there are three groups of survivors that correspond with their decisions for where to live after the fire: returnees, relocators and re-orienters. Each group consists of people with deeper roots in the community, the old timers, and those who chose the McKenzie as home more recently, the newcomers, as well as both private property owners and renters. Their choices as to where they wanted to settle their post-disaster homes vary greatly depending on how they were connected to the place before and after the fire, reflected in both their economic conditions and sense of belonging.

Among the returnees, the old-timer community generally understood rebuilding as the only option to have a home again, despite having limited funds and resources to rebuild, whereas the newcomer community appeared to have more options about where they could

call home, and their decisions were largely based on insurance and economic factors. The old timers were much more rooted in the place, and as such felt called back to it, while the newcomers' commitment to the place was a vacation or retirement home, and the like. Their decisions as to where to settle after fire was primarily driven by insurance and economic factors.

Because many residents in the community were of retirement age, health concerns shaped the relocation of many elder survivors, particularly the old timers. For the relocated old timers, economic factors also matter, but they left or decided to leave mainly because of their deteriorating health that prevented them from safely living on the river. The newcomer relocators in general recouped as much finances as possible from their insurances and started life away from the river. Relocation was an intentional choice for them as they were no longer interested in being part of the place.

The re-orientors' trajectory following the fire is mostly connected to health, economic factors, and their mobility. Their change of mind shows that the post-disaster home decision is an ongoing process, in which the survivors continue to negotiate on the continuum of ontological security and insecurity, as they figured out a permanent place to call home.

My findings are consistent with prior research on the return of the disaster survivors that they were motivated to return because the place meant home despite the destruction by the disaster (Haney 2019; Kim and Oh 2014; Morrice 2013). Return was more of an emotionally driven choice. However, I argue that such emotionally driven return decisions tend to be more common among old timers, or the survivors who have spent a substantial amount of their life in the place with generational ties to the place. It appears to be more economically driven for the newcomers to return.

Contrary to prior findings in Sherman's (2021) study of the Paradise Valley that the old timers tend to be more isolated from each other and not to speak in terms of community,

the old-timer community on the McKenzie had a strong sense of belonging to their community as demonstrated repeatedly in the reports by the old-timer survivors. This could be explained by the concept of *trauma bonding* (Erikson 2006) that after experiencing the fire, the old timers feel more connected to each other and to build a stronger McKenzie identity in the recovery of the place, their home.

This chapter began with three empirical questions: 1) How did wildfire survivors decide where they wanted to settle after the fire? 2) What factors did they consider in their decisions for home? And 3) how does place shape wildfire survivors' experiences, actions, and outcomes as they attempt to rebuild their homes? I analyzed the experience of three groups of survivors: the returnees, the relocators and the re-orientors, using the framework of home as a source of ontological security. Their experiences of home differ greatly in ways they connect to the place. Their economic conditions can dictate the quality of their recovery but where they wanted to settle after the fire is closely connected to the qualities of the place, which means *who they are* to the old timers, and *what they have* to the newcomers.

This chapter is limited to a unique case study of a relatively small and affluent community in the McKenzie River Valley in the Pacific Northwest. It has limited generalizability to wildfire recovery. As prior research suggests, the meaning of home is context specific (Dupuis and Thorns 1998) and the analysis of home and place is "all depends" (Hollander 1991) upon "specification of locus and extent" and the broader historical and social context" (Mallett 2004:84). However, this case study illuminates the role of place in shaping the survivors' experiences in the US disaster recovery, especially those in the rural communities.

Home, as an intimate environmental boundary for human life, is not only a physical dwelling with sociological effects, but also a sociological reality that is formed with a physical structure, starting from small like a house, to the metaphorical structure—the planet

Earth—on which all lives dwell. As Borchard (2013) puts it, the emotional dimension of home is “decidedly less straightforward, even more open to interpretation, and difficult to measure empirically and objectively” (Borchard 2013:77). However, centering the experience of home on place, as demonstrated in this chapter, will create an opportunity to validate the emotions of the survivors, and to find solutions to their overall well-being.

Based on the findings in this chapter, I suggest the following policy interventions for future considerations: 1) provide long-term mental health care for survivors in ways that are culturally appropriate to different social groups, 2) expand the definition of survivors to include those who evacuated but are located outside the official disaster boundary, 3) investment should also be focused on social rebuilding and community resources (Kulig et al. 2013), and 4) add disaster tax to nature altering projects that have negative implications to the land and communities.

CHAPTER IV: AFTER FIRE: LIVING IN RECREATIONAL VEHICLES

Joan: I think it's [RV living] definitely still not the normal. We're completely going against the grain of what society usually is. I think a lot of people can consider it trashy.

Bill: That's the first thing that comes in mind.

Joan: Absolutely.

Bill: It's like when I tell people like especially starting a new job, where do you live? Oh I'm up on McKenzie, up in Blue River, and they're like, oh, did you lose your house? I was like, no, I lost my trailer. They're like, what do you mean? And I'm like, Oh, I lived in the trailer. And I still do. And they're like, what? I'm like, yeah like, that's how I choose to live. It's definitely like, different.

Joan: A lot of people think of a trashy like trailer. But a lot of people are surprised when they come in ours for the first time, because it's a lot more spacious than it looks, you know, and it's homey.

Bill: It's homey. It's nice. And not a typical trailer trash park. That's what people think of.

Joan: Exactly. It's beautiful. You're in the woods, you know, versus there are definitely trashy trailer parks that you have seen, you know, you've seen on TV or in person, but that's not us. You know, and I think people should stray away. I think people should just do what they want to do in life.

Bill and Joan: And people should mind their own business.

Bill: Let people live how they want to.

Joan: Exactly.

—Joan and Bill, both 20s, insured, veteran RVers

A few days after I moved to my study site at the Holiday Farm RV Resort, my RV lost power. It was December 2021. I was concerned of the possibility of “camping” overnight in the big tin box in the lower 20F weather because the electrical heaters quit working without power. On my way to the park office for help, I ran into my neighbor Joan who then called his husband Bill to help me. Within a few minutes, the power returned. Bill knew exactly where to look and how to fix the problem, and he did it for me for free. Joan and Bill had been living in an apartment in the city but decided to full time live in an RV after being inspired by what is known as “van life.” Simply put, van life means living in a van. But it means more than an alternative choice of living. It is a social movement where individuals reject the way of life as they were told, in favor of minimalism, simplicity, adventure and an

opportunity to reevaluate the meaning of life. Living a van life means to pursue happiness, gaining control over money and time, allowing the van dwellers to build their own paths (Merritt 2023). The van life community is mainly connected through online platforms like Youtube. After following van life Youtubers, Joan and Bill downsized and joined the “nomad” RVers before fire. During their time as van life followers, they had been helped by a variety of other people, and now they were happy to return the favor and help other RVers like me.

“I enjoy living out there,” said Bill during our interview. “We’re like, Wow! We actually own a piece of land now. And we own our trailer. And we were getting to the point that we’re getting out of that cycle of living with rents and not gonna be able to own something.” Then Joan added:

We had something to do. We could work on the lot. You know, I made a whole little like, rock garden entryway type thing. It was fun to have your own space that you could do stuff with, you know, like, we put gravel and it was fun. It was the first time we’ve ever owned something like that, that we could do our own thing, make it us so it was exciting.

They lost their RV in the fire, but like other fire survivors in the park, they quickly replaced their RV with a new one, and resumed their RV lifestyle. Because of the quick recovery of the RV park, I was able to move to my study site for data collection. There, I rented the RV site that had formerly belonged to an elderly couple who acted as “snow birds,” spending the winter in their other RV home in warm and sunny Arizona.

Outside the resort, for other RV dwellers, it was a different story. The excitement and pride of living the RV life shared by veteran RVers like Joan and Bill, as well as my landlords, was not shared by many other fire survivors—the beginner RVers who lost home in the fire but also lived in RVs afterwards. For example, Radar Mapleton, 60, was one such beginner RVer. I interviewed her in her travel trailer on the property where she had been living for nearly 30 years. When asked how it had been living in her travel trailer, she said:

I hate camping. I hate being outside. This is not an ideal situation for me. But I figured I can do it for six months. And I did it very well for six months. I did it really well for a year. Now I'm going crazy. I am not that interested in what it [my home] looks like. I just want it to be comfortable. And I haven't been comfortable in a long time. I couldn't afford to heat a 90-year-old house. So I was getting chilblains and I was freezing in that house. I'm having that same issue here. We've got 17-degree weather—my pipes freeze. I can't afford to heat this much. I normally keep it at 50 [Fahrenheit]. I turned it up because you're here.

The contrast in the experiences of home between the beginner RVers like Radar and more seasoned RVers like Joan and Bill puzzled me. They all lost home in the fire, but they felt completely different in their post-fire RV homes. What is the process for the fire survivors to remake their home in RVs? What affected the different experiences between the two groups of RVers? Further, how does RV living provide a sense of home for the RVers? If RVs are practical solutions to home after disaster, how may RV living survivors be better supported in the future?

This chapter centers on these puzzles about the experiences of RV living as a whole, as well as the differences in the experiences between the beginner and veteran RVers. I find that the RV living survivors were driven by both the pull and push factors of place, with both economic and non-economic considerations as they remade home in RVs after fire. Further, I show the types of stress that are unique to the recovery experience among particularly the beginner RVers. This chapter contributes to existing research in at least three important ways. First, it adds to literature on disaster recovery by showing how trailer living can provide or facilitate a sense of home for the disaster survivors. Second, it extends the RV living literature, which is currently largely focused on homelessness in urban public settings, by exploring the experiences of RVers in rural private spaces. Third, it sheds critical lights on rural inequalities through contrasting the two different groups of RVers and suggests ways to connect the two groups, with a goal to reduce the divide.

I next discuss literature on vehicle living as a personal solution to homelessness and trailer living in disaster recovery. I then describe the background of the trailers in the Holiday

Farm Fire disaster recovery, then I discuss the experiences of both the beginner and veteran RVers, and how their RV living experience meant home to the survivors. I end with discussion of core findings, relationship to prior research, and broader implications.

Vehicle Living and Homelessness

Recreational vehicles (RVs), together with vans and campers, have been seen as part of the countercultural revolution against the sedentary lifestyle since the 1960s (Wakin 2014). In the 1980s, following the US federal policy change that counted mobile homes as new housing units, which increased the prices of mobile homes, RVs became the affordable form of permanent housing. RVs with better homelike designs filled the housing markets. Although RVs are sometimes associated with wealthy tourists—especially retirees—people in poverty use them as “downgraded” or substandard “permanent housing,” or home (Wakin 2005a, 2014). In many cases, RV living serves as a transition between being homeless and having a home. However, the length of this transition period varies from group to group, often longer for those who financially struggle. For example, “despite [housing] being a basic good for human survival, its price on the market exceeds many people’s wages. There is not one state in the United States in which someone working full-time at minimum wage can afford a “fair market rent” two-bedroom apartment” (Pattillo 2013). Financially, RV homes are affordable choices for the under-funded (Pruss 2019).

Studies of RV living are mostly focused on urban areas where RVs are parked in public spaces and where the occupants face various city regulations such as ticketing, impounds, and interactions with law enforcement (Pruss and Cheng 2020). Safe parking programs in cities that are designed for RVs in turn threaten vehicle living as a form of transitional housing solutions (Wakin 2005b). RV living on the street is visible, an easy target for authorities to exercise power and control, however, outside cities and in rural areas, RV

living had remained invisible to public scrutiny, despite of its increasing popularity, partly due to the van life movement.

Van lifestyle is often associated with the spirit of adventure and exploration on the open road, the American identity (Joncour 2022a). It is about downsizing and moving into a small living space on the wheels so that the occupants can travel and feel free from the sedentary lifestyle. They find work where they park and move from place to place as a lifestyle. The history of van-dwelling traces back to the twentieth century when motor homes became popular. Also emerging was the retired seniors trading their houses for RVs and adopting RV lifestyle for their retirement (Counts and Counts 2001). More recent literature on van life is more centered around the mobile life of those who financially struggle to afford more expensive sedentary lifestyle (Bruder 2017), including the homeless in urban areas (Pruss 2019; Wakin 2005a, 2014). With the van life, the van dwellers and the RVers in general share a sense of community where they share tips to make their mobile life safe and comfortable. They do this mainly via online platforms such as YouTube channels and books like Bob Wells' (2012) *How to Live in a Car, Van, or RV*. There are also organized in-person events that bring RVers together, such as the annual event The Rubber Tramp Rendez-Vous held in Quartzsite, Arizona. The van life movement has inspired more people to consider downsizing and tiny living (Joncour 2022b). Yet, little has been known about the home experiences of the RVers impacted by disasters, especially those living on private lands.

Trailer Living in Disaster Recovery

As a federal response to disaster, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began providing standard trailers to house the displaced disaster survivors in the 1970s. Since then, studies on disasters have criticized the consequences of the FEMA trailer program on the physical and mental health of the occupants, especially following the deadliest hurricane, Hurricane Katrina, in 2005. Such studies indicate that in its attempt to

assist the survivors with housing, the trailer program creates disaster risk for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups (Clark-Ginsberg et al. 2021), physically and mentally affecting the health of the survivors (Erikson 2006; Reid 2013; Verderber 2008b) .

Specifically, the FEMA trailers have been contested for being built with toxic materials that contain chemicals like formaldehyde that induces high cancer rates (Verderber 2008) and for their inappropriate design that creates stress and poor mental health (Browne 2015; Verderber 2008). A study on the Katrina survivors finds that living in FEMA trailers is strongly associated with symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (DeSalvo et al. 2007). One factor that negatively contributes to the survivors' mental health is the design of the trailers, which considered little of the cultural needs of their occupants, such as the access to a kitchen where the survivors can cook their traditional foods (Browne 2015). Challenges and stress are also felt by the families attempting to navigate the FEMA systems to secure a trailer for housing (Lucus, 2006; Sakauye et al., 2009).

FEMA developed innovative designs to make FEMA trailers more home-like, such as the "Katrina Cottage" initiated in 2007. These cottages are an alternative to the FEMA trailer, as a dignified option to help the survivors feel safe while the cottages are also affordable (Katrina Cottages n.d.), but it has been criticized as the catalyst of "Disaster Capitalism" (Klein 2007). This concept concerns the global economy based on the exploitation of catastrophe and the suffering of increasingly growing population of the displaced. As shown in Katrina literature, on both the economic and social levels, the FEMA trailer presents itself as an important but unsustainable solution to the needs of disaster survivors. While this chapter is not particularly about FEMA trailers, it has important implications for future disaster housing assistance by investigating a trailer living alternative. As this chapter reveals, the disaster survivors were motivated to adopt trailer living in their long-term

recovery. Although RVs mean home in different ways to different survivors, they generally served as a transition for the survivors to work towards their aspired home.

Case Study Background: FEMA Trailer Facts, Observations, and Reactions

As with disasters like Hurricane Katrina, officials set up FEMA trailers for Holiday Farm Fire survivors. In August 2021, a local newspaper wrote, “Nearly one year after the Holiday Farm Fire destroyed more than 400 homes along the McKenzie River, officials and leaders of the recovery effort celebrated the arrival of 17 FEMA trailers” (Cerullo 2021). In order to understand why survivors chose to live in RVs, I first explain why they chose not to live in these government-administered FEMA trailers. Three key reasons emerged in the data: space/location, timeline, and regulations.

First, the FEMA trailers were located about a mile east of the fire boundary, and 47 miles east of the end of the city. Tucked away on the property of a private athletic training facility, 17 identical, white trailers sat on concrete foundations, with nothing else around them except metal fences. The trailer camp looked solemn and depressing. The only color was a small section of fence painted with red salmon. Several trailers had cars parked next to them, but there was no evidence of any activity outside. Fire survivor Lucy commented that the site looked like a concentration camp, “Sad, sad, sad” she said. Despite the fact that many families displaced by the fire were still living in hotels in the Eugene/Springfield metro area, these trailers did not seem to be fully occupied. In addition to the depressing perception of the space, other survivors noted that space of the trailers themselves was not ideal because they were not big enough for families to live in, and because they were located too far from their pre-fire homes in the Blue River area. Fire survivor Dorothy, who lived in a tent before moving into an old RV trailer, refused to consider those trailers. Not only because she couldn’t bring her pets—several dogs and chickens—but also because she did not want to live away from her property as she rebuilt. Nora, who lived nearby the trailer camp, was

angry about the trailer program. “It was a complete waste of resources,” she said. “By the time they got the trailers upriver and ready to live in, most people had already found alternative housing. The survivors were not waiting.”

As noted in other reports on FEMA trailers (Cohen 2023), the timeline for occupancy is not ideal for many disaster survivors, due to bureaucratic process of entering the disaster site and setting up utilities. FEMA set up these trailers nearly a year after the fire, while many survivors had already settled into other temporary housing. Furthermore, survivors were dissuaded by the short timeline for occupancy, believing that FEMA trailers were only available for six to 18 months, and therefore were “not a permanent solution” (Radar, interview 2022). In addition, survivors noted that there were too many restrictions and “too many hoops to jump through” (Nora, interview 2022) to access FEMA trailers, reflecting the difficulty many rural survivors experience in navigating government bureaucracy. While other research finds that disaster survivors dislike the institutional feel of and inability to personalize FEMA trailers (Lee, Weil, and Shihadeh 2007; Verderber 2008a), rural residents were also deterred by the inability to bring their animals with them as many have more number and variety than urban residents (Dorothy, interview 2022). As the next section discusses, for many of these Holiday Farm Fire survivors, a different kind of “trailer” became a more desirable, accessible, and feasible form of housing during the recovery process: RVs.

In Figure 4.1 below, I show the three types of RVs occupied by the fire survivors (left), in contrast to the traditional FEMA trailer (right).



Figure 4.1. Three types of RVs. Sources: Drsryan, Reddit, 2020 (left) and Cerullo, KEZI News, 2021 (right).

As shown in Figure 4.1, the RVs can be either towed by a pick-up truck or be mobile on their own, as in motor homes. The FEMA trailers require larger trucks and sometimes railways for transportation. They are often installed on concrete slabs, which are not necessary for RVs.

As Kronenburg (1995) mentions in his book *Housing in Motion*, a portable building like RVs can appear instantly, providing a sense of familiarity as well as allowing the occupants to reestablish their relationship with the environment in ways that can regenerate fresh energy. As in the case of the Holiday Farm Fire, RVs offered a timely solution, both practical and to certain extent, sustainable for the homeless survivors to have a home after the fire. In the following, I discuss how RVs both economically and emotionally served as a function of home to the RVers, and then I discuss stress associated with RV living that greatly distinguishes the experiences of home between the veteran and beginner RVers.

Economic Factors: “RV is some people’s only option”

Economically, living in an RV in general is cheaper than renting an apartment or a house. These forms of housing usually charge extra for pets and animals, which is common among the rural survivors, if the landlords allow them. The acquisitions of the RVs would be the largest expense; however, the survivors were able to acquire RVs through either insurance payouts or FEMA funds if they were uninsured, or donations from their private social network such as family, friends, and faith communities. River is an old timer, living full time in the McKenzie area ever since she moved there with her family when she was a young teen. When we spoke, she was living in her RV with her family and two dogs while rebuilding their house. When asked how she decided to live in a trailer, she recalled a conversation with her insurance agent:

We can't live in Eugene or Junction City or wherever else it is that you guys are going to try and put us while I'm trying to rebuild. That is 60 to 120 miles away from wherever it is that you're going to try and put us, not to mention the fact my [family member]'s job is here. There's no rentals up here. What the rental inventory that we did have, the most of it was burned. And so there's not a whole lot of options and the options that were available were \$3,000 a month. And I'm like you guys are crazy, if you expect me to pay \$3,000 a month to live in some of these houses. And so when our insurance said, "We will buy you a fifth wheel," I was like, "Oh, perfect. That's great."

To meet her needs to rebuild without travelling long distance, the fifth wheel RV provided River and her family with a temporary home parked on their own property. This way, she would not have to pay high rent for a place from the limited housing market on the post-disaster river, or a place off the river far away from her property. Once she moved into her rebuilt house, River would have an RV paid for by her insurance company, an asset to her property. The RV offered both economic and geographic advantages as a long-term home solution for survivors like River.

Uninsured survivors, if they were property owners, could secure some funds from FEMA, and some used their funds to purchase RVs. I visited Radar inside her travel trailer, where she lived with her dog and cats. She said:

Early on I went shopping for the trailer. I could go live with my father. Not a good idea. I mean, we get along great. But no, I don't want to live with my father. None of my siblings have room and I don't want to live with them. I have no other resources. You know, when you make less than \$1,000 a month, you can't make rent!

Like Radar, many RV living survivors on different household income levels, perceive renting as an unsustainable solution to home. Not only because the rental rates were high, but also because renting meant uncertainty, as the rates were subjected to changes by individual landlords. Also uninsured, Sam lost her rental cabin in the fire, after which her family member offered her a fifth wheel where has been her home ever since. She shared her thoughts on her choice of RV home:

Without like buying a home that you're gonna live in forever, I wouldn't want to move out of here. I'm not gonna go rent an apartment that the rents were already astronomical, and then they're gonna raise your rent by another \$500. And you can't

pay it or they're gonna sell it out from under you. And you have to move and then there's no place else to go. I just think it's a situation now that's what everybody's doing. What they're doing is you don't have a choice. There's not some place you can go. There are so many people that I see here all the time. And they're like, "They sold my place. I have to be out in three months." Is there any place to go? And there's nothing there. There's just what two bedrooms for \$2100 a month. It's not something that somebody can afford to do.

As illustrated in Sam's example, living in an RV provided the survivors with a sense of control over home that their home would not be taken away from them like how it could be if they were renting. In addition, the survivors reported that the expenses associated with RV living is low. Like Sam, Renee, 50, also lost her rental cabin on the river. After the fire, she had been living in her donated travel trailer, parked on a secured rental space through work. She described the economic advantages with her RV living:

Everything's with the rent, which is nice and includes the utility and wi-fi. So I can telework too, if I need to. One of the perks about living here is that I've been able to really save money and also help my mom out a little more, because my mom's on a fixed income. So you know, my rent at the time at the cabin was only seven [hundred] a month. So that was really nice. But I had to also purchase all of the year supply for the 700 a month was the base for the rent. But I had to pay all the utilities and I had to buy about a ton of pellets every year. And that was about a seven to a thousand for the pellet stove. The stove there ran on pellets and so the pellets on top of your pellet stove that runs on electric. So you know, it still was a little spendy. So I'm saving all that money that I'm not paying out every month for rent. I think all in all, I think the best thing about living in it is obviously economically. I've been able to put some money away and you don't buy a lot of things because you can't bring something in as you don't have space for it.

Saving money by living in RVs is commonly shared by both the beginner and veteran RVers. They were saving for rebuilding as well as the purchase of a new home. Joan and Bill were such veteran RVers that saw RV living as a steppingstone towards their aspired home.

Joan: Our big goal is to buy land and to build a house and to put a little house on there. We don't want a huge house. We want more land than we do a big house. And so this is just a stepping stone of independence to get there. Because the money that we're paying into it, instead of it going down the [rental] drain, it's going positively to...

Bill: An asset.

Joan: To an asset.

Before the fire, driven partly by the economic advantages of RV living, they moved to a long-term RV park on the river. Bill said:

She broke it down to me about the whole paying for \$1,200 a month. At the point when we moved out there, we were paying our loan on the trailer and we were gonna end up owning it at some point after that would be paid off. It'd be ours, rather than paying \$1,200 a month, something that is just keeping a roof over our head and potentially prices would change.

What Bill described was the economic precarity of renting and the certainty of owning an RV, or the sense of control also mentioned by Sam. Joan and Bill lost their trailer in the fire, after which they sold their RV lot in the park, moved back to the city, renting again. But a year later, they moved back to the RV park. But this time, RV living meant more than just an economic vehicle to reach their future goal for home. It meant to be back to their van life identity, back to their RV community. These non-economic factors facilitate a sense of belonging that helped the survivors feel ontologically secure in their RVs.

Non-Economic Factors: “It was more of a community happiness”

Besides feeling economically secure with their choice of RV lifestyle, living in RVs enabled the survivors to restore a sense of their pre-fire identities, as well as building new ones. For the old timers, they were able to return to the river where is home to which they felt called back. RVs allowed them to be back to the place with which they identify themselves and to restore their sense of belonging. For the newcomers, living in RVs meant an opportunity to experience “van life,” a new RVers’ identity, as well as a new sense of belonging in the RV community at large. For the veteran RVers who had been living in RVs before fire, RV living after fire strengthened their RVers’ identity, intersecting with their newcomer’s identity connected to the river. These identities and the values attached to RV living fulfilled the survivors’ emotional needs for home.

Lee, 69, had been living on the river since the late 80s. She and her family had been renting until three years before the fire. They had finally secured enough funds for the down

payment for a property on the river. Struggling with cancer herself and having her husband recovering from a logging related injury, Lee had been frugal while enjoying her own home where she never had to move again. She said,

This is my little piece of heaven. We get the beauty of the McKenzie River and the close-knit community of Vida. We're very tight. Everybody knows each other. I grew up old world—you make friends with your neighbors. So if anything happens and they need help, you can help. If anything happens, and you need help, they will help.

The loss of home was devastating. She said, "We have continued making our mortgage payment, which is \$1,500 a month without a house without anything. It was just ashes." After the fire, her husband wanted to move away. "He said everything my dad left me is gone. Everything your dad left you is gone. Everything your grandmother gave you is gone. All your family movies, your recipes, everything is gone. Why? Why should we stay?" But Lee insisted on rebuilding. She said, "Because this is our property. It's the first time we've ever owned anything. And I don't want to give up. It's my blessing. You know, this is the blessing I was promised and if I give up, I'm refusing a blessing from God." A friend offered to build her a house within her budget. With that offer and an RV offered by another friend, Lee was set on rebuilding while living in the RV on her property. She said:

This trailer is a blessing. It was given to us by some good friends that knew that we could not stay in Eugene. And so they gave us this and then another good friend gave us the pickup to pull the trailer in case there was another fire up here. And, [her friend's name] was helping us build the house. It's just been an amazing journey of growth and love.

Supported by friends who offered material support, Lee was able to rebuild and live on the river. She said, "It [The McKenzie] is my soul. I've been a part of this valley since the day I was born. I am going to be buried on this property." Living in the RV facilitated Lee's return and the restoration of her sense of belonging on the river, which was common among the old timers like River, Radar, and Renee who had been living in their RVs at various stages in their long-term recovery.

Besides facilitating the restoration of the old-timer identities, RVs also opened up a new opportunity for some of the survivors to follow up on their dreams for van life and experience a new “nomad” identity. In this study, a group of RV living survivors were inspired by the notion of van life. Although they were mostly using the RVs for sedentary purposes, they were experiencing the van life identity as they continued to recover from the fire.

Bart, who moved to the river the year before the fire was one such fan of van life.

When asked how he decided to live in his RV after fire, he said:

Part of our plans for when I retired was to live the van life. I don't know if you've heard of the van life. We had watched YouTube videos on it. And we were going to get a van and fix it up and whatnot. And I thought my parents have always owned an RV and I love camping. During that time in the hotel, I was looking for apartments to live in. And I was getting, you know, I sent an application, submit the money for the application, \$25 or \$45, whatever it was, and I was getting all these applications refunded. They wouldn't even look at my application for these apartments. And so I was getting a little anxious. And I knew [my wife] was going to join me, and I wanted something for her to be able to live in. Because it's just not fun living in a hotel, especially for that long. So I had talked to some friends from California about living in an apartment versus living in an RV. Some of them advise you need to stay live in an apartment, some said an RV would be fun. So I decided to look for to buy an RV, and I found one right away.

Bart's decision to live in an RV was partly shaped by not being able to secure a rental unit, which he saw as an opportunity to pursue his dream van life. He bought a used fifth wheel and has lived in it since then. Also influenced by the van life YouTube videos, veteran RVers Joan and Bill shared their motivations to live in their RV. Joan said:

They just talk about how there's so much stuff that we have as humans that we don't really actually need. And I was really obsessed with that idea. I just felt like we had way too much stuff. Even now, I feel like we have too much stuff. You know, and we're in a 35 feet trailer. So I was just, I was really obsessed with that. And I still am, I think as humans, we do tend to have a lot of things that we don't need. So that was really the big sparking indicator. So we decided to pull the trigger. And we got a travel trailer and decided to move up to the park and we had no idea how the park was set up. We thought we were only going to be there for a little bit, maybe travel, and then that didn't happen because he has a full-time job. But we come to find out it was a super cool place, kinda like HOA ... And we really loved it. And that's kind of how we got up there. It was we were just really looking to downsize, and I was really into tiny living and we just decided to pull the trigger.

Joan and Bill were among the first who returned and resumed their pre-fire quality of life in their RV. While moving into their trailer before fire was a van life dream come true, returning to the same RV park after fire was more about the connection with the RV community in the park, which only strengthened their sense of belonging in the RV community at large. They shared their return experience below:

Bill: After the fire, we sold the RV lot back to [a member] of the HOA. We just moved back to town, renting an apartment for about a year. And then we went to that Fourth of July get together in a park. And they're like you guys need to come back out here. And I looked at her and I was like, come back? I don't know. We'll think about it. And then I talked with her about it on the way home and she's like 'Alright, well let's see then.' That next week we bought our trailer. In that moment, too, the [member] of the HOA sold our lot back to us. So they kept the lot for us. I guess, while we were gone, they were always like, no matter what, this is your guys's lot, because he's like, this is your lot. And he wouldn't sell it to anybody. He's like, if you don't even come back up here, he's like, you're gonna get it in my will. He's like, it's your lot. So if he kept saying that to me every time and like, yeah, being the delivery guy up there, I would stop like a couple times while he was there because he'd be working on the park like clearing the trees and whatnot. And the first time seeing him after that, it was like, I don't know, six, eight months, I'd seen him like, he ran over to me and hugged me. And I was like, Oh, this is so... But yeah, he ended up selling us back a lot. So now it's under us again.

Joan: I think it just goes down to the community aspect. It's just the ability to have people you could rely on. There is drama from time to time, but it is what it is. It's no matter what they have your back. And I would rather raise my kid in that type of environment rather than having him in a place where you don't know what's going to happen, you can't have anybody rely on him or anybody in all sorts of stuff. So I think it was just more of a community happiness.

The pursuit of van life among newcomer survivors like Bart, Joan and Bill give them an opportunity to experience living in RV communities where RVers were known to help each other and care if one another feels comfortable in their RVs. In my own experience living in my RV, my interactions with fellow RVers were also partly around what worked and what did not about our RVs. When I was neighbor to Bart, I had helped him restore the electricity in his RV and referred him to my propane repairperson when he shared that there had been be a gas leak. When the power in my RV went out on a snowy day, I reached out to my neighbors Joan and Bill who quickly fixed the power for me. RV living provided them, myself included, with a sense of belonging and identity that is largely connected to the RV

communities to which they belonged. Such sense of belonging emotionally supported the newcomer RV living survivors to feel at home as they transitioned after the fire. Together with facilitating mostly the old timers to return and rebuild, RVs largely meant home for the survivors that they can both save up for purchases associated with their aspired homes in the future, as well as maintaining their identities attached to the place and identities connected to van life.

Stress Associated with RV Living

While the choice of RV homes provides economic security for the survivors and facilitates the restoration of their sense of belonging, RV living is also associated with challenges that induce stress, which in turn diminishes the homeness felt by the survivors. This is especially true for the RVers who used RVs primarily for the purpose to have a place to live without identities attached to van life. For different reasons, their transitions to RV life were stressful. It took longer for them to feel at home in their RVs, and for some they never did. In the following, I will discuss the stressors of RV living, as well as how some of the survivors changed the narratives of stress and actively making home in their RVs.

Luna, 30, became a homeowner on the river two years before fire but lost it in the fire. She lived in a used travel trailer with her husband and their dogs and cats on their property, both working full time as they rebuilt. The trailer was a mid-70s model with a leaky roof that they had purchased for \$2000 from a family member. Since then, they had replaced the awning and fixed the leak in the back of their bedroom. About living in the trailer, Luna said:

You think that you would be really clean all the time because it's a really small space. That is the exact opposite. It is no matter how much I clean, no matter how much he cleans, no matter what, it's still so messy because it's so tiny. I want to buy things for my house but I can't, because where... I mean we have a shed. I actually did just buy some new pots and pans yesterday that were on sale, like really nice ones because I know that eventually I'll need them. But you know, I don't want big dogs and one of our cats, he's only inside, he's not allowed outside. He's on a diet. He's 12 years old. He did spend a lot of his life outdoors, being an inside outside cat doing as he pleased,

but now that he's an old man, I just want to keep them safe. So living in such a small space with so many animals is hard. The animals having their own space is hard because the old man cat, if the one of the dogs gets too close to him, sometimes he gets like you're in my space and we'll swat at her you know like it's difficult having six animals and two adults in a trailer.

Negotiating space with animals in a trailer was common among the rural fire survivors. While some survivors who lived alone with one pet, either a dog or a cat, may have an easier time fairing their small trailer space, most of the rural RV occupants had more than two animals. For example, River, 49, and her husband had two large dogs in their fifth wheel. Lee also had two dogs. Radar, 60, had her dog and three cats. And Dorothy, 70s, lived with nine dogs and a flock of chicken. Although animals did provide some degree of emotional support as the survivors recover and the survivors did try to accommodate them, they had not planned to downsize so quickly and to live in a small space shared with others.

Navigating small living space in an RV was a common challenge experienced by the new RV occupants, including those without pets. Bart had a hard time adjusting his experimental van life in his used fifth wheel. He said,

By living in an RV, it's not a solid floor. I'm a large guy, am six foot tall, over 300 pounds, but the space to go to the bedroom is a narrow hallway. The bathroom's small. The shower's small. We take daily showers in the bathroom here, but you know, [when] I'm turning around, I'm bumping into the walls of the shower, which, you know, I can't bend over in the shower either if I drop the soap. Even the sink you know, I had a big sink in my house, deep nice stainless-steel sink. And I could eat, I could wash the dishes. It took me several weeks before I figured out how to efficiently wash dishes in the RV sink. For a while I decided I'm just going to go walk down to the barbecue area where they had the sinks there. I'm just going to wash the dishes in there because I can't do it in this little tiny sink. Talking about van life. The life in a van would be even smaller than this. So this is a reality awakening.

Willow, 56, also had a hard time adjusting small space in the RV. When we interviewed, she showed me the bruise under her arm. It was from holding on to things as she was about to fall from her shower. She also shared that she had just been to the emergency room, having stitches on her because she fell from the steps between the bedroom and the kitchen. She said:

As a home at first it was hard because of the size difference. My kitchen at home upriver was huge. And I had a huge island in the middle. Boy, I've really got a size down. My equilibrium is messed up. I get vertigo. I get dizzy looking down at something. One day and I have to have my hand on a wall somewhere. You know if I close my eyes like say I'm washing my face, closing my eyes, I have to hold on to something otherwise I get real unstable. [Showing her rib cage] I got three stitches inside, and seven outside.

Besides stressors from getting used to living in small space, utility-related issues were also key to induce worry among the survivors. The utilities include appliances such as fridges, toilets, A/C units, heaters, propane tanks, water hoses, etc. This is unlike living in a house where, for example if the power goes out, the occupants can wait for a certain amount of time. In an RV, once the power is out, it can become emergency. The temperature in the RV can change quickly as the weather changes, and the RV can become quickly uninhabitable, depending on how cold or hot the outside temperature is.

When Renee first lived in her RV, she discovered many things were not working. She said:

The toilet... We didn't know who had owned it, or whatever. And we had major issues going on with the toilet. And it was like going to backup. And I got on the phone with my son. And I was done like complete hysteria and like crying. "I don't know what to do. I don't understand why the bathroom won't work. I don't understand why this. I don't understand it. I just I gotta get out of here. I gotta go. I don't know what to do." I was all over the place.

After Renee finally secured help to fix the toilet, she went on a learning curve about the sewer system of her RV:

One of the things about living full time in a trailer is you have your sewer lined up. It's lined up to a sewer drain. But you have to close your sewer down. You have to allow your tank to get at least a certain amount full then that the pressure of that will [flush the tank clean]. Actually see, you don't ever leave it open because otherwise you just have stuff at the bottom of the tank. So that was one thing that I learned. Number one is that when you [release your tank] once a month, or once every three weeks for me... So I've gotten on a schedule for when I need to release the tank. When you release the tank and you have to come back in and you have to run the water in the toilet for 15 minutes. You have to stay in there and keep the water running because you always have to [do this]. You need to have a little bit in there when you're starting fresh again. Well, the trailer smells a little bit like sewer for about a half an hour to an hour. So that's not fun. But I've kind of just gotten it down

to a system so those are the not too great things about it, is the sewer issue. You need to make sure that you only use RV toilet papers, too.

Depending on the years and the qualities of the RV, certainly not all RVers had to experience the same process as Renee went through, but her experience shows a common adjustment in a new RVer's transition that can be a stressor for many. In the case of the RV toilet, they need to make sure the sewer flows one way, regularly and completely flushes into the drain, while also making sure the smell does not impact other activities in the RV.

Besides maintaining the sewer, the new RVers needed to budget schedules for other RV living necessities, such as propane refill and laundry. Most RVs were not equipped with washer and dryer, so the RVers had to find sources outside their RVs to do their laundry. After moving back to the river, Bart and his wife Ping had been using laundromats in the city on the weekends. When they did, they had to budget their time waiting for the laundry, as well as using the opportunity to have other necessary things done for home, such as doing grocery shopping. Budgeting time for laundry became another stressor for the RV living survivors, especially those who had tight work schedules. Luna worked two jobs. She said:

Not being able to do my own laundry at home is really hard. [Her neighbor's name] is a sweetheart. She lets me do it up there when I need to. Most the time I go to the laundromat. I'll go out to my mom's house and spend the day with her and do laundry at her house. That is really the hardest part. When we first moved up here, we still didn't have running water, so they hooked us up to their well. We put like 200 yards of hose down and we were connected to their water for the first couple months we lived up here.

Besides figuring out how to ensure life basics like the water supply and sewer discharge work, feeling comfortable inside the RV poses as another challenge for many beginner RVers. It was common to feel cold in an RV in the winter, as the temperature in the river valley can stay below freezing for a number of days. The situation became especially tough when power went out, which was common in rural areas. Sam said, "It's too cold to be living in a trailer and in the snow and all of this. It is really rough on me. We had no power for two weeks. With a generator and a little propane fire thing that we had to use, and we just

had a little fireplace like that. So it was always pretty cold in here. It's colder in an RV. I don't remember being freezing ever in the cabin."

"They're actually my biggest complaint," said Luna, referring to the heating sources in her RV. "I sit next to the windows right here, so it was extra cold, but his grandma got me a heating pad, so I just keep that plugged in next to the wall. The floors are really cold in the wintertime." Ways to stay warm can include keeping multiple heaters going at the same time; however, an RV is limited by its electricity capacity. In other words, the power system could be easily overloaded, causing power failure or safety hazards, which was the last thing anyone wanted on a cold day or any day. Once, I made a mistake by using the microwave while both my portable heater and the RV electrical heater were running. I had known this use of electricity exceeded the capacity of my RV, but that day I forgot. Everything shut down. The consequence of my forgetfulness of using so many appliances at the same time was the potential of displacement because it can be dangerous sleeping in a heatless RV in below-freezing temperature. But luckily, I sought help from my neighbors Joan and Bill, who quickly restored the power.

Simple mistakes like the forgetfulness of mine could mean trouble for the RV occupants. But these are not ordinary RVers. They had just survived a major fire that burned their homes and communities. At the same time, they had to deal with rebuilding their life back, including for some, working multiple jobs and facing other life stressors at the same time. Trauma and stress affect one's decision-making process, as well as lowering one's immune system (Belleville, Ouellet, and Morin 2019; DeSalvo et al. 2007; Herman 1997). While this applies to trauma survivors of all ages, senior adults and those who suffer from pre-existing illnesses are particularly vulnerable to declined health and slow post-disaster recovery.

Radar, who had shared she did not like camping and living in her trailer for a year had driven her crazy, died of a chronic disease at the age of 62, three years after the fire. She had wanted to build a tiny house, but until her death, there had been no signs of any rebuilding activities. It often made me wonder if she could have lived longer if she had not experienced the fire, lived in the RV for so long while having to deal with the rebuild. Even though Radar's example presents as a rare scenario in recovery, it shows the extent of the stress associated with RV living after the fire displacement.

While material stressors associated with the RV living can diminish the homeness felt by the survivors, the RVers were also facing the socially constructed notion of RV living, often associated with poverty and homelessness. As Renee puts it:

Sometimes people think living in a fifth wheel are people that are older retired, and so they travel around a lot. And they have their travel trailer, and they go on adventures. Some people look at living in the travel trailer—a lot of young people are going tiny and so there's a different I guess, perception. Some people look at living in a fifth wheel that you have somehow been reduced to camping.

In countering the stigma of RV living, the RV living survivors often focus on the comfort of their home, and of course, the economic advantages of RV living which was discussed earlier in the chapter. Joan and Bill shared their thoughts on RV living:

Joan: I think it's definitely still not the normal. We're completely going against the grain of what society usually is. I think a lot of people can consider it trashy.

Bill: That's the first thing that comes in mind.

Joan: Absolutely.

Bill: It's like when I tell people especially starting a new job, "Where do you live?" "Oh I'm up on McKenzie, up in Blue River." And they're like, "Oh, did you lose your house?" I was like, "No, I lost my trailer." They're like, "What do you mean?" And I'm like, "Oh, I lived in the trailer. And I still do." And they're like, "What?" I'm like, "Yeah, that's how I choose to live." It's definitely different.

Joan: A lot of people think of it as a trashy trailer. But a lot of people are surprised when they come in ours for the first time, because it's a lot more spacious than it looks, and it's homey.

Bill: It's homey. It's nice, and not a typical trailer trash park. That's what people think of.

Joan: Exactly. It's beautiful. You're in the woods, versus there are definitely trashy trailer parks that you have seen on TV or in person, but that's not us. I think people should stray away. I think people should just do what they want to do in life.

Bill and Joan: And people should mind their own business.

Bill: Let people live how they want to.

Joan: Exactly.

Like many veteran RV living survivors who have gradually felt more home as they lived longer in their RVs, Joan and Bill emphasize the homeyness of their RV and the freedom of choice against the questioning responses they heard about their chosen RV lifestyle. In my conversations with them, they often carried a sense of pride about their RVers' identity, and like many veteran RVers, they criticize sedentary lifestyle as being wasteful, boring, compliant to rules of the larger system.

On the contrary, the beginner RVers experienced somewhat differently about their process of feeling home in their RVs. They did not get to plan to downsize like the veteran RVers did. It took them time to feel comfortable about their choice. Renee shared her process of overcoming her trauma response to RV living as someone who had experienced homelessness when young:

I was a child who lived in a tent. And so that was a sign that to me, my perception was that I'm going backwards, not forwards. I don't want to have to live in a trailer. I don't. For me, it was I had not made a decision to downsize. I had not been the one to make that decision to make that call and say, "Okay, I'm gonna downsize. I'm gonna save money. I'm gonna go tiny." That was not my decision. It was that your place of sanctuary is now gone, and you're going to live in a 1997 trailer that you know nothing about. I never had lived in a fifth wheel in my life. I think I spent two or three nights in a trailer at one time in my entire life. I was a wilderness backpacker. Camping to me was not glamping. Camping to me was going out in the woods, and actually going to the wilderness hiking or something. So I don't know how to even operate a fifth wheel trailer, like, you know, all these different light systems. You got a propane. You have a generator. What runs what? I didn't know anything. It's just a totally new experience that I did not ask for. So I was not happy. I was not happy about it at all. I mean, I got, a lot of anxiety coming up in me, just a lot different emotions. When I first walked into it, it had the booth built in and it had the old couch and had all those like, curtains, the little things and like, I mean, it was ready to go out camping or whatever, and had all like old carpet and smelled like a dog. And I just start crying. Like I just blasted down into tears. And I was like, "God, why do I feel like I'm going backwards," so I felt like I was just getting literally thrown back down the hill. All those years you worked so hard and then back down the hill. What did I

do? You know, just even you start like asking yourself like what did I do to deserve this?

Like many beginner RVers in this study, living in the RV was among the few options Renee had in order to maintain her life on the river. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Renee saw the RV as both an economic opportunity to save up for her future investment in a permanent home, as well as a way for her to maintain her sense of belonging as an old timer in the valley. She shared how she changed the narrative in her mind about trailer living:

I knew that if I was going to live in the fifth wheel, that was going to be the option for me that I needed to remodel it. I needed to make it something that felt like I had a choice in it, that I had me in it. Because it was really hard to be here. It was really hard. It was kind of dark. It had the old wallpaper, just really, aesthetically, not me at all. I want something that for me. I have to have a place of sanctuary. I have to have a place where my mind can rest. And I can feel like when I see something, it feels homey. That brings me peace. It brings me joy no matter where I am. My mom was that way when we were living in a campground when I was eight years old. My mom made that campground feel like home. We had a big huge wall tent that my grandmother had given us, and she would air it out on the weekends and she would clean it and she would put the beds together with our pillows and everything was clean. Everything was fresh. But like even our kitchen area in our camping space, she swept the ground and had these little shelves all looked really cute.

Renee did a series of improvements to make living in her RV a choice. This included changing the carpet, replacing the booth with a comfortable couch. She also color coordinated her couch, the floor mat and the curtains to light green. She redid the bedroom area, creating more storage room for her clothes, as well as an exercise area where stood a yoga mat. About cooking, Renee said:

Everything in the house is going to basically absorb the smell of the food to permeate everything. So I try to make sure that when I'm cooking my meals, I make sure that I've got my clothes in my dresser there. Those are things that you don't think they have to think about right? Like you don't go home and go cook and be like, "Oh wait, do you have all your clothing put away?"

It was these little things, one by one, that gradually made some RV living survivors like Renee feel at home. They started decorating walls with pictures, coloring their space that made the RVs theirs. In this sense, they were gaining a sense of control of their space, and in

turn perhaps a sense of control in general, through building their identities in and outside the RVs.

Building identities also included cooking traditional foods. For some survivors, the feel of homeness came with being able to cook familiar foods in their RVs. Bart's wife Ping is vegetarian and prefers to cook fresh food from scratch. She and Bart had experienced many barriers a new RVer would experience, including also dealing with rodents that took shelter in their RV. Once, a squirrel hid a nut under her pillow. But she said the RV was home. As long as she was able to cook and there was fast internet for her to work remotely, she was a happy camper. As long as Ping was happy, Bart was happy, too.

As demonstrated above, the struggles experienced by the RV living survivors were mostly around the material challenges as well as social stigma about RV living. And the struggles were mostly reported by beginner RVers, less or none among the veteran RVers. RVs meant home differently among the RV living survivors. In general, RVs provided a sense of economic security for its lower cost of living, as well as it being an asset for long-term investment. RVs also enabled some survivors to restore their sense of belonging upon returning to the river after fire, and for some, to experience a new van life identity. As much as the RVers worked to feel at home in their RVs, RV living also meant stress, which diminished the feel of homeness. Some survivors like River, saw RVs solely as a transition to permanent home without emotional attachment to it. Some were struggling to complete the process of transition, either because the recovery took longer than expected, like Luna, or because their health declined, affecting their abilities to transit to a permanent home, like Radar.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the following research questions: What is the process for the fire survivors to remake their home in RVs? What affected the different experiences between

the two groups of RVers? Further, how does RV living provide a sense of home for the RVers? If RVs are practical solutions to home after disaster, how may RV living survivors be better supported in the future? As the experiences of the survivors show, RV living after fire is both an economic choice and a choice associated with the identities of the RV occupants. Such identities include old-timer identities with which the survivors feel at home for being back to their communities on the river, and RVers' identities associated with the experience of living the van life as they continued to recovery from the fire.

Although both the beginner and veteran RVers seize the economic opportunity RV living brings, they differ in their experiences of home in ways that the veteran RVers had more time and experience with RV living. They knew how to make their RVs comfortable and had more practice with the common problems living in an RV, such as utility issues. In general, they did not report the same stressors experienced by the beginner RVers. Such variations of the lived experience of the RVers suggests that one way to help disaster survivors who choose to live in RVs have a better home experience is to provide resources on RV living, such as connecting the veteran and beginner RVers through group sharing. Another way to help is to provide resources for RV repairs and maintenance so that the RVers would not have to rely on their individual efforts to seek out help while they recover from a major disaster event.

FEMA has recently distributed travel trailers—RVs—to assist housing in coastal disaster area (Kelley 2023). As an alternative to their standard trailers, travel trailers can get to places where the standard trailers cannot. But, as suggested in this chapter, stressors associated with trailer living diminished the survivors' ability to feel at home and to make progress in their recovery, especially for survivors who had not lived in a trailer before. As such, resources that assist the survivors to restore their identities are critical in shaping the

well-being of the survivors, who may have a better chance to transition to their permanent home sooner.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

As I conclude this dissertation, I feel extremely humbled by the personal disaster stories shared by the 84 research participants in this study. They participated in this research as they were dealing with trauma, grief and loss of their home and community, amongst many other life challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of them did not know if or how they would have a home again. Often, I felt frustrated as I saw uneven resource distribution as the survivors struggled to recover. As Radar Mapleton said, “I did nothing to cause the fire, and now I’m suffering because of it.” How may we, as a society, reduce or even prevent the suffering like that experienced by the survivors? What could we do to have a home support system in place that reflects the fast pace of climate change and the cultural needs of the people so that no one who loses home would have to worry about not having a home? I know I cannot answer these big questions through this dissertation, but they did guide me as I approached this project. As a sociologist, the least I could do for the survivors is to document their experiences, using my training in social sciences to understand the inequalities in disaster recovery, and to connect those who share opposing views. My sadness deepened as I learned the death news of several research participants within the first three years after the fire, for which I felt even more privileged and responsible to share their stories, and to protect them from potential harm by participating in this research. Their strong will to recover and move forward from such a traumatic fire event—a hard life transition, and the determination of the recovery associates to help channel resources to the survivors, gave me hope. I intend to share this hope through this dissertation.

In the preceding chapters, I explored wildfire survivors’ lived experiences of evacuation and long-term recovery. I sought to answer the following research questions: What happened on the day of the fire? Why did the survivors by and large stay home despite the fire risk was extremely high? How might we explain the variations of behaviors among

residents regarding preparation and evacuation? How did the wildfire survivors decide where they wanted to settle after the fire? What factors did they consider in their decisions for home? How does place shape their experiences, actions, and outcomes as they attempted to rebuild their homes? What motivated the survivors to live in RVs, and how does RV living provide a sense of home after fire? What affected the different experiences between the beginner and veteran RVers? How may RV living survivors be better supported in the future? This dissertation examines the survivors' experience as culturally and structurally shaped and place specific. Its primary contribution is to foreground the meaning of home during climate crisis, and to connect social inequalities in disaster recovery with the characteristics of place. The findings contribute to environmental sociology, rural sociology and sociology of place, demonstrating how place shapes experiences of recovery and rebuild, how gendered care, residence time and the informality of housing in the rural space influence the experiences of evacuation and recovery. Above all, this dissertation emphasizes the importance of place as an axis that structures experiences and social relations.

Contributions

Environmental Justice for Rural Communities

The primary contribution of this dissertation is the sociological documentation of an understudied population in the field of environmental justice: the white communities in rural “natural” spaces in the US. It connects the history of the place with the current time rural inequalities and the suffering of the white community victimized by the catastrophic wildfire event. Although class backgrounds greatly influenced the survivors' choices on home, they are not the only factors motivating the survivors' responses and behaviors. This study sheds lights on the possible reasons for their choices to increase the understanding of the struggles of the rural population.

Foregrounding Place in Social Inequalities

A central goal of this dissertation is to emphasize the importance of place as an axis that structures experiences and social relations in the context of disaster recovery. The rural place characters meant a different kind of social norm under which the survivors operated largely shaped by how they were connected to place. Such varied connections to place in turn affect their perceptions of home, as in when home is safe or unsafe, when one should hold on to their home and when to give up, where to reestablish home after disaster, and ways to come up with creative solutions to home such as informal housing (RV homes). In addition to the traditional sociological variables such gender, race, class, age and health, such place-based factors are powerful explanations of the survivors' behaviors; therefore, it is important to foreground place in the sociological understanding of people's experiences.

Rethinking Disaster Recovery

This dissertation illuminates how home remains a central struggle for the traumatized wildfire survivors as they figured out housing that fit their financial and cultural expectations. Home is an experience with both material and emotional dimensions. Together, they make us human (Borchard 2013: 89). For example, in Chapter Four, the survivors pursued RV homes after the fire; however, RVs as informal housing are largely excluded from the official disaster recovery framework. To rethink disaster recovery is to shift the current housing approach to the restoration of home, with considerations of the characteristics of the place. Such paradigm shift of disaster recovery will create opportunities for a more inclusive and trauma informed society as we move forward with potentially more disasters as climate change continues to accelerate.

Methodological Contribution

This dissertation contributes methodologically to qualitative research by demonstrating community engaged methods of data collection, with which I managed to

change my total outsider's status. I began this research as a complete outsider to the community under study. With carefully crafted research strategies such as becoming neighbors to my research participants, living in recreational vehicles, volunteering at local events such as park restoration, track meets, and library open houses, and working in a local store as a cashier, I gradually felt accepted by different sub-groups of the McKenzie community. Such transition of positionality enabled me to collect rich ethnographic data and built long-term relationships with community members. These data are critical in understanding a diverse range of home experiences among the survivors.

Together with the data collection, the writing of this dissertation, which took three years to complete, was life-changing for me as an immigrant researcher who has willingly and unwillingly changed home multiple times domestically and internationally in my 41 years of life. This dissertation captured the changes of my research participants' life three years after the fire, as I was changing and changed by their stories. This dissertation is a product of embracing these changes.

Limitations and Future Research

A fundamental limitation lies in the limitation of data from one unique rural area where is predominately white. Limitations also include missing data from survivors that could potentially enrich the overall experiences of the survivors, such as those who lived in the Lazy Days Mobile Home and RV Park, which was destroyed by the fire, as well as those who owned second homes. Without many variations of geographic locations, ethnicity groups, and other important types of survivors, the sample in this study is not large enough to allow for generalizability. Certainly, it does not represent the disaster recovery picture of the rural America.

The limitations of this research provide exciting opportunities for future inquiry on home in disaster recovery. Future research should examine the experiences of wildfire

survivors from different rural communities, such as comparing the disaster recoveries from different fires that occurred on the 2020 Labor Day in Oregon. Future research should also expand the ethnicity groups to non-white communities and compare their experiences with the experiences of the white communities. This could be a comparative study of the experiences of the Hispanic survivors from the Alameda Fire and those of the white survivors from the Holiday Farm Fire. Both fires are 2020 Labor Day fires in Oregon. Future comparative research should also include international disaster recovery studies on the meaning of home for the disaster survivors from different political, economic, and cultural systems. More research is needed to understand the experiences of the increasing RV living populations and how they interact with the changing environmental. This should include an investigation of the health consequences of full time living in RV homes, a field currently unstudied.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on my research findings include 1) clarifying the definition of disaster survivors, 2) implementing disaster recovery governance, 3) regulating property investment after disaster, and as a macro level approach, 4) degrowing extractive industries.

Clarify the Definition of Disaster Survivors

Disaster recovery authorities should clearly define *disaster survivors* and consistently use the same definition throughout the recovery. In this study, I followed FEMA's definition of a disaster survivor—they are people who have experienced the physical, emotional, or financial impacts of a disaster. Based on this definition, individuals who did not lose physical properties are also survivors. However, my findings indicate the survivors included in the official recovery assistance tend to be those who experienced material loss. The survivors who did not lose any properties but have since been traumatized by the fire did not feel legit in pursuing recovery assistance. Such confusion of who a survivor is and who is not,

reproduces social inequalities in disaster recovery, widening the existing rural divide.

Authorities should clarify who a disaster survivor is, and consistently use it throughout the recovery process.

Implement Disaster Recovery Governance

Disaster recovery should include community stakeholders of diverse backgrounds. This includes old timers and newcomers, property owners and renters, and residents living in informal housing such as manufactured homes, mobile homes, and RVs. As my findings suggest, survivors in each of these categories experience recovery differently. Therefore, when only some of the stakeholders participate in the distribution of recovery resources, the voices of the rest of the stakeholders will be silenced, risking their erasure in the disaster recovery.

Regulate Property Investment After Disaster

The US government should limit exploitative property investment after disaster. This will give old-timer residents who identify themselves strongly with the place an opportunity to retain private properties for the community members who would otherwise not be able to afford a home. As part of the disaster capitalism (Adams 2020), investment companies tend to exploit disaster survivors who want to sell their home and move away, leading to higher prices in the housing market. By regulating the post-disaster housing market, the old-timer community will remain a sense of home, without being chased out of the place due to property investment.

Degrow Extractive Industries

Both federal and state government agencies should carry out measures for degrowth. Extractive industries gave birth to communities in rural spaces, leaving them impoverished over time, many struggling to bounce back after experiencing acute climate changes, which are unfortunately going to happen more often. Degrowing these industries will prevent

alterations of the environment, reducing the size of community living in “nature” rural spaces. One way to do this is through imposing higher taxes—*disaster tax*—on extractive industries.

Final Thoughts

This dissertation began as a pilot study in my Ethnographic Methods graduate seminar with Dr. Lynn Stephen, Professor of Anthropology in the winter term of 2021. At the time, though intuitively I knew this research would have important contributions to environmental sociology, I was looking for convincing evidence that I was in fact able to carry out this research in a rural US community known to be closed to outsiders. At the time, I was 39 years old, a queer woman of color, Chinese immigrant, having lived in the US for only five years. I hesitated to put myself out there in the public, as white supremacy in the country was at its unusual height under the leadership of the former US president Donald Trump. However, with the support of Prof. Stephen, my dissertation committee, and especially the community members on the McKenzie I spoke with in my pilot study, I chose to move forward.

The overwhelmingly positive responses I received in my fieldwork validated my choice. As I spent more time in the valley, more wildfire survivors opened their home to me. During long hours of fieldwork, I knew I would have places to go if I needed to rest. Upon hearing I was working nearby but would not have a clean toilet, Bryce offered his impeccable bathroom and told me where he put his house key so that I could use it anytime I wanted. Biku and Agatecreek offered the study of their house where I napped and conducted online interviews. Concerned that I would oversleep and miss the interview, Agatecreek checked on me to make sure I was awake before my appointment. “I could be a father figure for you,” he said to me during my last visit, soon after which he passed away.

Generous offers like these made me feel at home. I felt safe and supported by a wide range of survivors regardless of their political and religious beliefs, residence time on the river, property ownership statuses, or gender. I observed their common care for their communities and the place—the McKenzie. It is my final hope that this dissertation connects the people of differing views so that we can better understand each other's experiences, and perhaps, it could be possible that everyone will have a place to call home.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Life history

1. Please tell me where you came from, what it was like when you were a child (home environment, family and friends, neighborhood. Probe for specifics if interviewee mentions a particular event.)
2. Where have you lived? What kind of houses have you lived in? What brought you to Oregon (if from out of state), XX (the city name) (if from within the state) [Ask about work as housing location may be connected to work]
3. Tell me about your relationship or family, marriage or a particularly meaningful relationship? [Probe for details] How do you feel about life now either being single or in a relationship (depending on the interviewee's status)?
4. When did you move to the McKenzie River and what is life like living on the McKenzie River?

Next, I'd like to ask about your experience with the wildfires.

5. Before the wildfires occurred last summer, did you expect that there would be wildfire in there area where you were living?
6. Was wildfire a consideration when you decided to live there?
7. What was it like when you knew you were going to be evacuated? Where did you evacuate to? Did you have family members who provided shelter or other forms of support? What about friends or neighbors?
8. What sort of physical, emotional, or monetary support did you receive? Did the support provided to you meet your needs?
9. Do you take any medication and were you able to secure your medicine before you were evacuated to take it with you?
10. What was your temporary housing like? Who provided it? What about food? Were you able to keep your distance from others in regard to COVID-19?
11. [To interviewees who have children] How did you children do during the relocation process? How did you take care of them during the evacuation process? [To interviewees who have animals] How did you children do during the relocation process? How did you take care of them during the evacuation process?
12. Did you get to support others during displacement and how?
13. Return or relocate - What was it like when you knew you could return to your home? What was the plan to rebuild your house [if the interviewee's house was burned down without knowing when to return yet], or what was the plan to where to live next? Would your housing insurance cover your cost of rebuilding? What was it like for you to decide to relocate elsewhere?
14. [If the interviewee is a full time resident in a recreational vehicle (RV)] How did the wildfires experience make you think of your decision to full time living in a RV? Would you consider moving to conventional housing? When? [If the interviewee lived in conventional housing] How did your wildfires experience change your plan for the future? Would you consider permanently moving to a RV? [If the interviewee lived in a mobile home] How did your wildfires experience change your mind about investing in a mobile home? Would you consider moving to a conventional house or maybe a RV?

15. Are you aware of the Holiday Farm Fire lawsuit by the 70 landowners against two public utility companies? How do you feel about this lawsuit? Do you ever consider joining others to pursue justice through legal means?

Last, I'd like to ask about how you take care of yourself.

16. How did the fire and smoke affect you? Were you injured or sick during and after the fire?
17. What did you do to cope with health conditions? What help did you seek or receive?
18. What is your goal in terms of feeling good? When will you know you are feeling well and healthy?

Final question.

19. What would you say to the world as someone who's gone through the Oregon wildfires?

Thank you for your time speaking with me. Do you know anyone who was also displaced and may be interested in sharing their story with me?

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