

Essay anthology seeks to redefine roommates and communal living

Eric Olson

The housing market is a through line in contemporary American dialogue. But for all its breathless coverage, relatively little considers shifting the foundational building blocks of *how* we live, namely, who we choose to live with.

The writer Samantha Paige Rosen was 29 years old when she decided to move back in with her parents. She'd been chasing the American dream — marriage, single-family home, everlasting privacy — for a decade. “At twenty-eight,” she writes, “the burnout hit.” Rosen’s new housemates turned her mental, financial and physical livelihood around. Her new anthology of essays, “Living, Together: Reimagining Community in the Age of Disconnection” (Beacon Press), gathers 21 writers and local organizers to explore the boundaries of our American housing system, arguing that roommates and communal living, long left out of our suburban-centric American dream, in fact forms a road map to a healthier United States.

The Seattle Times sat down with Rosen and anthology contributors Kristen Arnett (“Mostly Dead Things”) and Simone Gorrindo (“The Wives: A Memoir”) to discuss housing in modern America. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The collection is filled with this idea of the “American dream.” It’s something of a shifty notion, but the current iteration seems to disavow communal lifestyles. How do we change the aspirations of an entire country to promote or at least destigmatize communal living?

Rosen: When the American dream originally developed in the 1800s, living alone was not a part of it. It wasn’t until this push to the suburbs. It’s nice to be able to afford to live alone in a single-family house and a nuclear family if you feel that it offers you the logistical support and the privacy you want. There have been times in my life when I’ve really wanted to live alone. But I don’t think it should be seen as a bleak response to financial crisis to want to live with others. Some of this is a result of tech and overwork. A lot of things are fraying right now, other than financial aspects, that are making people hungry for other people.

Arnett: I think two things can be true at once. Financially, it’s a difficult time. And also, people crave companionship. There’s been a shift toward almost Luddite behaviors, people picking up

more arts and craft stuff. It's a response to robotization, this technology that just inundates us on a daily basis.

Some of these essays argue that “found family” can be easier to deal with than biological family. Many cultures, including ours, don’t see these things as equal. How do we make progress here?

Arnett: I grew up very evangelical, conservative Southern Baptist in central Florida. And that meant that there wasn't any wiggle room or compromise that could be had, and coming out meant that my life was just immediately, infinitely difficult because of my family. I wound up making a lot of friends who not only are queer, but also came from religious backgrounds. And part of those backgrounds is that your community is the church. So some of that was embedded in us, like we do meal trains if someone's ill. It's this idea that if the world is harming you, you can help sustain each other.

Gorrindo: My friend Rachel (a fellow military spouse who lived across the street when Gorrindo moved to deployment housing) actually invited me to her church group. When my husband was deployed and I was super pregnant, with brutal perinatal anxiety, I went with her. It was 6 p.m. and there was free dinner. And at no point was anyone like, “Why are you here? You don't go to our church.” No one ever asked me. They must have known I didn't go to church. But I was just a part of their group.

Rosen: I found that stuff in arts communities. And one thing I had in mind when I was editing this book, was how do you tell people that these relationships can be formed? How do you get to a level of friendship that's so close where you really feel known? The biggest answer I've come up with is seeing people with regularity, and that's what's so hard in this day and age.

Gorrindo: Building intimacy takes time. It's putting in the hours. And for some reason we forget that. People are always like, “I had such close friends in college,” or “in this crap job where I was a waitress for four years.” You get intimate spending so many hours together, even enduring unpleasant things. Trauma bonding is real. It's the same thing for military spouses, you're not having fun a lot of the time. We were stressed and worried, getting messages about people being injured or killed. I don't think there's a calculus or paint-by-numbers to intimacy, but you have to be vulnerable.

Who are your all-time best and worst roommates?

Gorrindo: My favorite's easy, it's Ruffalo (author of "Margo's Got Money Troubles"). We met at a summer arts camp and she got me to drop out of high school and move to New York, where we lived together for 10 years. And the worst was pretty bad, in an old tenement building in Chelsea that got condemned. We don't need to put it in here. I had so many roommates. I lived in eight apartments in four years in New York City.

Arnett: I haven't had a lot of roommates. I left my parents' house and went to college and immediately got pregnant. So I had a baby at 18 and that was my roommate. My worst roommates, if I'm saying it literally, were my parents. But they also had me when they were teenagers. I have more perspective now, having had a baby at 18, no one knows what they're doing. I have empathy. And I'm going to say that my best roommate is my wife.

Rosen: I think my parents were my best. It doesn't mean they're perfect, but they really cared about me. And it meant a lot. My worst, I moved out to California and got a Craigslist roommate. At first it was the best, we would cook together, she introduced me to people. But over time we just got busy. I don't know if it was actually the "worst," but it was just sad to see that devolve.

'Living Together'

Samantha Paige Rosen, Beacon Press, 208pp., \$27.95

Rosen and fellow contributors will be at Third Place Books Ravenna at 7 p.m. Aug. 28 for a discussion with local novelist Daniel Tam-Claiborne. 6504 20th Avenue N.E., Seattle; free; 206-525-2347, thirdplacebooks.com