

America: Not So Great

Mike Wold

2021

a review of

Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century by Jessica Bruder. Norton, 2017

Nomadland—Film 2021; Director: Chloe Zhao

In case you weren't paying attention, the Academy Awards for best picture, best director, and best actress this year all went to *Nomadland*, a drama centered around Fern (Frances McDormand), a woman near retirement age, after losing her husband and her home, starts living in a van.

She works various seasonal jobs, many of them physically demanding, like harvesting beets, and discovers an organized subculture of RV and van campers that is mutually supportive and encourages her to see her new lifestyle as an adventure.

The movie, a compelling study of grief and aging, features beautiful cinematography and acting. Most of the supporting actors in the movie are drawn from the nomad subculture, more or less playing themselves. It is also noteworthy that the director, Chloe Zhao, is the first woman of color to win the Best Director award.

Nomadland is a well-made film, but in the process of converting Jessica Bruder's non-fiction book of the same name into an Oscar-winning drama, most of the political content was left out. Furthermore, both perpetuate the mainstream American ideology of individual responsibility and fortitude even in the face of oppressive social conditions.

Without reading the book, you might suspect some of what isn't in the film. For example, this subculture of house-less people is almost exclusively white. There are other gaps. The collapse of the company town where Fern lived is not shown as resulting from economic conditions, as it is in the book.

Fern's decision to stay on the road is portrayed as a choice, or at least a psychological problem, rather than stemming from a lack of money. And, in a beautifully filmed sequence about another nomad who dies of cancer, Zhao implies that part of the rewards for the lifestyle is becoming a perpetual tourist in nature.

If you read the book, you will see how Zhao, who wrote the movie script, took a fairly solid, if mainstream, journalistic account of this new subculture in American life and eliminated most of the political context of its existence.

In her book, Bruder follows her friend Linda May (who plays a fictionalized version of herself in the movie) through various jobs and locations, exploring a subculture of older people who have given up their homes, usually for financial reasons, and have become seasonal workers on farms, at Amazon during the Christmas season, as campground hosts at Forest Service campgrounds. A portrait emerges of unhoused people who help each other, show each other how to stealth camp in cities so as to escape notice from neighborhood vigilantes, share information about where to find 24-hour stores and restaurants to park overnight without challenge, and about what states don't ask too many questions when issuing a vehicle or driver's license. This is a tech-savvy subculture. Many of the RVs and vans are equipped with solar panels to run stoves and electronics.

The book's most gripping narrative is the exploitation at work. The majority of people in the subculture are upwards of 50 or 60 in age, and might have had hopes of retiring. Most of them lost their retirement funds in the crash

of 2008 and work to supplement social security and save for the future. But the places they work, especially Amazon, are low wage, with minimal health insurance, and involve severe physical stress with a high level of workplace injuries.

Just as in the movie, part of the ethos of the subculture, which on one level stresses helping out fellow campers, on another, rejects the label of homeless, emphasizes the adventure of being on the road and portrays not having a house as rejecting manipulation by the system. They encourage each other to believe they're gaming the system by not spending money on being housed. It's like a "permanent vacation." Homeless people, in contrast, are seen as depressed and lost.

Bruder tries to strike a balance between her outrage at the exploitation of this group and honoring their own narrative about themselves. The two migrant occupations she describes in detail—campground hosting in the summer and working at Amazon fulfillment centers for the Christmas rush that push the physical abilities of aging people. She portrays the nomads as seeing no future except to work at low-wage jobs until they die.

There's a reason there aren't many black people in this subculture. They would be more threatened in the rural, all-white areas where these people congregate in the winter. Bruder, unlike Zhao's film, points this out but not as an explicit critique. It's also notable that many of the people she describes were low-level managers and professionals who were pushed out of the cut-throat job market, partly because of ageism. The subculture helps them preserve a sense of their former status by keeping them distinct from the homeless. It's a devil's bargain. They have created a system of mutual aid that would be a good example for any anti-authoritarian group, but in return make a virtue of their noiselessness.

The nomad narrative of adventure, courage and self-sufficiency seem to lead directly away from resistance to the economic problems that cost them their retirements. They are portrayed as having a stiff upper lip consciousness. No matter what's thrown at them, they can take care of it on their own, or with help from fellow nomads. In fact, they can't, and, with major health or mechanical problems, they eventually won't. Even Linda May eventually finds some cheap land in the desert where she can fulfill her dream of building an off-grid house, and she's lucky to find it before disaster sinks her prospects forever.

As a description of one particular houseless subculture, and for the exploitation it shows, the book *Nomadland* is worth reading. For people who are or identify with the displaced and exploited—including those who might be considered apolitical—it reminds us that one way to start acting together toward common goals is to help each other when in trouble, to share skills, and to have fun.

What's missing in *Nomadland*, both book and movie, though, are the essential next steps of identifying the source of pain and developing strategies for fighting back together.

Mike Wold is currently housed, and has only experienced very short periods of being unhoused. He worked with unhoused and poor people for a decade after his retirement.

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