Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 2, 2024, pp. 220–38
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i2.186

Genre, Space, and Social Critique in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which *Nomadland* is a convincing representation of poverty in the United States and to assess the film's political stance concerning race, gender, and age. By analyzing *Nomadland*'s narrative and filmic techniques, this article points out three major characteristics of the film that are relevant for its portrayal of characters defined chiefly by their poverty and age. Firstly, *Nomadland* employs genres subtly to undercut their inherent ideological effects. Secondly, in its portrayal of space, it represents the characters as placemakers, showcasing their agency in the face of structural problems. Thirdly, it adopts a particular neorealist production style that lays a powerful claim to authenticity.

While the film falls short of addressing the root causes of poverty and bypasses the question of race altogether, *Nomadland* serves as an exemplary model of socially conscious filmmaking in other regards. It transcends mere entertainment and counters a more mainstream strategy of personalizing structural problems through a nuanced portrayal of elderly working nomads while also displaying attention to gender and age.

KEYWORDS

Poverty, gender, age, space-place-nomadism, agency

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Production Details

Nomadland is a 2020 drama film written, directed, edited, and co-produced by Chloé Zhao. Based on the 2017 participant observational nonfiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* by Jessica Bruder, it stars Frances McDormand, who is also a co-producer, and, in a supporting role, David Strathairn. Shot for only five million US dollars (Brooks), the film has earned more than 39 million US dollars in theaters ("*Nomadland*") and has won 256 awards, amongst them Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actress ("*Nomadland* Awards"). The film also did overwhelmingly well among critics: According to the website *Rotten Tomatoes*, 93% of 436 reviews were positive, with an average rating of 8.8 out of 10.

Bruder's book represents a notable contribution to the ethnographic tradition of participant observation. She immersed herself in the modern-day nomadic community, spending extended periods interviewing, observing, and living with them. In a style reminiscent of John Steinbeck and Barbara Ehrenreich, the book blends ethnographic research, journalistic reportage, and group biography. The book's success prompted the film adaptation, with Frances McDormand acquiring the rights and enlisting Chloé Zhao as director. The film features professional actors as well as amateur actors, including Linda May, Charlene Swankie, and Bob Wells, who play fictionalized versions of themselves. Zhao, in collaboration with McDormand and the cinematographer Joshua James Richards, created the storyline during the filming process, following a loose script. This unusual production method, along with the use of amateur actors, aligns with the neorealist Italian film tradition known to prioritize social engagement and authenticity in representing disadvantaged individuals.

The film begins in 2011, portraying the life of Fern, a mature-aged woman who not only grapples with the loss of her husband but is also left jobless and homeless due to the closure of the US Gypsum mine in Empire, Nevada (a factual location). The early 2010s indeed gained tragic notoriety when mining employment declined significantly all over America as the US raw material market contracted in the wake of the 2008 recession. Expulsed from her home, Fern embarks on a journey in a small but fully fitted pre-owned van, not only in search of work but also to find solace on the road. The movie captures her new nomadic lifestyle, as she moves from one temporary job to another, connects with fellow itinerants, and attends nomad reunions such as the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzite, Arizona, an authentic gathering. Although the film plot is arranged in an episodic fashion, Fern undergoes a gradual transformation. By the end of the film, she relinquishes her possessions that were stored in a garage in Empire, along with the associated memories of her marital life and sets out in her van again – this time as an experienced nomad.

Depicting Poverty

Nomadland effectively addresses critical facets of poverty, as identified by social science research.[1] Primarily, the film highlights the challenge of housing security – the result of an absence of affordability and insufficient tenancy protections.[2] All principal characters in the film are houseless, residing in small vans or cars, or have no vehicle at all. These motorized vehicles, despite being homes for the nomads, offer only minimal protection against external factors: When parking for the night, stealth camper nomads are never safe from the dreaded "knock," which means getting up and looking for another spot for the rest of the night. Moreover, most of these vehicles are old and corroded. Once they break down, steep repair bills may push a person with very limited means over the edge. In *Nomadland*, we witness the despair Fern faces when her vehicle has a costly engine failure. The film also portrays food insecurity: Nomads and tramps have only limited access to sufficient nourishment. Similarly, in the film Fern prepares paltry meals in her van kitchenette and the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous features a communal kitchen where people in line are reassured that there will be enough food for everyone.

Another crucial issue is financial stability, specifically employment opportunities. In *Nomadland*, the main characters hold low-paying temporary jobs at various locations throughout the United States – such as in a fast-food restaurant, a stone shop for tourists in the desert, a sugar beet plant, a national park campground (where we see Fern on her knees trying to clean utterly disgusting toilets). However, the representation of employment most often discussed in critiques of the film is Fern's winter job at Amazon. The book devotes an entire chapter to work at Amazon and highlights the extreme physical demands placed on workers: lifting, bending, kneeling, reaching, pushing, pulling, climbing, moving. Painkillers are distributed for free at the plant. While elderly workers testify that they are grateful for the work during the winter season (when money is tight outside of the harvest season), they do feel exploited and replaceable. They also mention that the sheer abundance of items that will likely be discarded soon after being delivered is depressing, serving as a reminder of their very own obsolescence (230). Linda May, for example, is quoted in Bruder's book describing Amazon as "probably the biggest slave owner in the world," adding, "I hate this fucking job" (240). None of these hardships at Amazon are represented in the

[1] See Cynthia Duncan's work on poverty in *Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America*. In addition, Stephen Pimpare discusses various aspects of poverty in *A People's History of Poverty in America* and traces their filmic representation in *Ghettos, Tramps, and Welfare Queens: Down and Out on the Silver Screen*. Eager et al. focus specifically on the nomads that are the subject of *Nomadland*.

[2] "[T]here are only a dozen counties and one metro area in America where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. You'd have to make at least $ 16.35 an hour – more than twice the federal minimum wage – to rent such an apartment without spending more than the recommended 30 percent of income on housing" (Bruder 7).

film. Consequently, Arun Gupta and Michelle Fawcett critique the film for misrepresenting actual nomads, arguing that "by making Fern's story one of personal responsibility and freedom, the movie erases the causes of the nomads' economic pain" (2). Aside from the Amazon warehouse, however, the film does represent various aspects of poverty. For example, it touches upon the relevance of kin and community in the context of poverty. While limited financial resources make socializing more challenging, support systems by kin or friends are essential in alleviating some of the burden that comes with poverty. The film duly portrays Fern as often lonesome, highlighting the isolation that comes with poverty. Furthermore, the friendships she develops with Linda Mae and Dave, as well as connections with the wider community of fellow itinerants, are presented favorably, with warm lighting and a relaxed pace.

Overall, the film does not investigate structural causes of poverty or even poverty itself to a greater extent. While it is evident that Fern lost her job and with that her home, and that desirable employment opportunities are scarce, the mental, physical, and emotional toll of these economic hardships does not take center stage. Instead, the film emphasizes Fern's personal agenda such as the mourning for her husband, her love of the outdoors, and her resilient personality. Thus, *Nomadland* can be analyzed within the context of an "ideology of resilience," which, according to Brad Evans and Julian Reid, is

> grounded in a new 'ethics of responsibility' that lays on the individual and their communities all the burden for overcoming, surviving and thriving through crises, even if these are due to systemic or structural forces that no individual can change on their own. (65, also qtd. in Fraile-Marcos 4)

This perspective perceives resilience as "a raw material that the wretched of the earth possess" making it susceptible to exploitation (Fraille-Marcos 4).

However, Fern is no poster-girl for neoliberalism but rather stands between resilience and despair. She is definitely not the first subject of resilience in Bracke's three-partite categorization, a relatively safe "First World subject . . . whose longing for security aligns . . . with securitarian politics" (58). Nor does she fit the mold of a "subaltern subject" from the global South (60). Fern most closely resembles Bracke's third category of resilient subjects, characterized as a "subject of *postfeminist resilience*" (65, original emphasis): "the female subject who continues to survive patriarchy, is increasingly exposed to the neoliberal labor conditions of flexicurity, and is considered individually responsible for her survival" (65). However, *Nomadland* subverts the underlying neoliberal and postfeminist narrative associated with this type. Rather than a "Look, I Overcame" narrative (James qtd. in Bracke 67), the film adopts a "Getting By" narrative. This shift is evident not only in *Nomadland*'s characterization of Fern or its extolling of communality but also in the circular structure of the

story. Fittingly, Susan Bye, while acknowledging some shortcomings of *Nomadland* wonders whether Zhao's observational style and Fern's detachment might be seen as an "eschewal of what Lauren Berlant describes as 'cruel optimism,' a way of living in the world based on an unachievable vision of future possibility" (92). The film thus can be seen to fulfill Desmond and Western's requirement for "any full-bodied account of life far below the poverty line," namely to "be open not only to pain and exhaustion but also resilience and creativity" (310).

Balancing of Binaries

Nomadland evinces a high degree of ambivalence and a consistent undercutting of expectations. Surely, the problematic focus on individual resilience can be blamed for individualizing structural aspects of poverty. Also, the film aestheticizes poverty through stunning scenery and cinematography, especially with regard to nomad community gatherings or the sublime rendering of the great outdoors. These strategies of representation are, however, repeatedly subverted. Notably, the film tends to emphasize one term of a binary only to balance this out by giving extended attention also to the opposite. Many of these oppositions can be framed through that of structural problems and victimhood, on the one hand, versus personal issues and agency, on the other. As extensions of this binary, *Nomadland* weighs up necessity versus choice, homelessness versus nomadism, loneliness versus solitude, poverty versus personal loss/grief, and harsh working conditions versus personal endurance.

The emphasis on choice is a stock topic of the film's rhetoric. For example, Swankie, an elderly lady with late-stage cancer, prefers to remain in her van rather than be hospitalized. Choice is most obviously accentuated, however, in that Fern refuses offers to stay in a house at three (!) occasions (by a kind acquaintance, by her sister, and by her very special dear friend Dave, who frames his invitation in respectful and loving words). In a similar manner, the film honors Fern's voluntary solitude rather than her loneliness, presenting her as someone who thrives on being by herself in the wilderness. Overall, the film exhibits a fascination with nomadism that at times overshadows the harsh reality of houselessness: Various locations that signify impermanence (empty lots, desert spaces, lonely coastal regions, deserted tourist camps) are depicted agreeably, often in the early morning or late afternoon – the so-called golden hour. Fern's penchant for solitude and nomadism is, of course, also indicative of the film's emphasis on grief – rather than on poverty – as her primary motivation to embark on her road trip.

On a second look, however, *Nomadland* also presents loneliness, problems of housing insecurity, and poverty – that is, structural factors that limit the choices of the nomads. Generally characterized as alone by choice, Fern is also shown as lonely

such as when she sits by herself in a laundromat or when she spends a freezing night in her van – both scenes being rendered in cold blue colors. Houselessness rather than voluntary nomadism is also featured in the film, for example, in the above-mentioned dreaded "knock" when stealth parking and in a speech by real-life nomad Bob Wells, who is also a facilitator of the broader nomad community. In particular, *Nomadland* does not sideline the intersectionality of poverty and ageism. All nomads flock to Amazon in the pre-Christmas season because, although the work is hard, the pay is better than at many other places. Fern's dire financial situation is revealed when her van breaks down and, to have it repaired, she has to borrow money from her sister. And then there are two powerful monologues, first by fellow nomad Linda May, who recounts that she considered suicide when she ran out of money and could not find work:

> I was getting close to sixty-two at the time and I went online to look at my social security benefit. It said five hundred and fifty dollars. Fern, I worked my whole life. I worked since I was twelve years old. Raised two daughters. Now I've only got five hundred and fifty dollars a month to live with. (*Nomadland* 00:11:44–12:02)

Later, Bob Wells, who is an activist and founder of the website *CheapRVLiving* and the non-profit *Homes on Wheels Alliance*, gives a speech at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous that also points out lack of resources as a prime motivation for the van-living crowd:

> We not only accept the tyranny of the dollar. We embrace it. We gladly live by it our whole lives. I think of the analogy as like a work horse. The work horse that is willing to work itself to death and then be put out to pasture. That's what happened to so many of us in 2008. If society is throwing us away and putting us out to pasture, we work horses have to gather together and take care of each other, and that is what this is all about. (*Nomadland* 00:18:47–19:23)

What are we to make of this confrontational balance between agency and structural factors? Arguably, the film here sticks close to the self-representation of the nomads. As Bruder reveals in her book, the nomads prioritize their agency and resilience over dwelling on the inevitable (46–47). Indeed, the film presents them as having adjusted to their situation. As Bye puts it, "they find a form of freedom in no longer hoping for the best" (97).

There is a final pairing in *Nomadland* that is not delimited by the agency vs. victimhood paradigm – individualism and communality – which are both represented side-by-side. In fact, individualism as well as community and friendship are stressed in the film with a visual focus on the latter. While Fern is an individualist, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), organized by Bob Wells, serves as a central hub of many of the nomads' lives. The RTR offers a collective kitchen, van life workshops, and political discussions. Community building and community maintenance are

portrayed as vital for the nomads, and although Fern at certain points prefers solitude and nature, the film portrays the collective in luminous and cheery colors whereas Fern on her own, inside her van or outdoors, is often depicted in chilly, grey- or blue-tinted hues. While the film presents Fern's individual trajectory as befitting her character and situation, this choice of colors implies that without the support system of friends and companions her journey would be a rather bleak one.

(Trans)generic Aspects

This multifaceted portrayal of poverty, isolation, and individual strife is facilitated by the film's complex employment of genres. Chloé Zhao and her team employ a range of generic styles, including western, social drama, neorealism, and the road movie, to both engage with and challenge the audience's preconceptions of these genres' content and styles.

The western, characterized by vast open spaces, prairies, sierras, or deserts (Langford 64–65), is perhaps the most conspicuous contributor to *Nomadland*. The wide-open scenery comes with a range of meanings and tensions. On the one hand, it champions independence, freedom from social constraints, and individual survival while, on the other, this scenery is often barren, intimidating, inanimate. *Nomadland* seizes on these connotations and complexities, presenting a central character who, while sociable in certain situations (e.g., helping a couple sell handmade jewelry or sharing food with a lone traveler), is also a loner who avoids forming close relationships and even more settling down. A decisive twist in the genre is evident in the jobs Fern is shown at. Her outdoor jobs are almost industrial (beet farming with heavy machinery), in tourism (camp hosting in national parks), or commercial (selling stones in Quartzite), and the narratively most striking job is indoors, in the vast halls of an Amazon warehouse. While the classical westerns liked to show cattle drives but not the slaughterhouses where the animals ended up, *Nomadland* shows more than only the adventurous outdoor work.

Above all, *Nomadland* replaces the male figure, who is typically antisocial and potentially violent but triumphs over 'virgin' territory, with a female protagonist who traverses the West in a petro vehicle, the modern-day equivalent of a wagon. According to Brooks, *Nomadland* thereby forms "part of a vibrant contemporary subgenre of western films," including *American Honey*, *Leave No Trace*, and *Wendy and Lucy* that is "modern-dressed, female-centered, and defined by a mood of pensive restlessness – that is in turn connected to a classic Hollywood tradition." Furthermore, Kisner contends that *Nomadland* explores "probing the isolation and alienation of people on the American 'frontier' – and in critiquing the frontier illusion itself, the

fantasy that fleeing toward the next horizon offers riches as well as freedom from the waste and damage left behind" (89).

The feminization of the western in *Nomadland* is further complemented by the genre's counterpoise, social drama. While on the visual level *Nomadland* is markedly defined by western aesthetics, its narrative employs social drama elements such as inequality and resistance or opposition to social norms. The film also contains aspects of melodrama, with its focus on intense and ongoing emotions such as loss and grief (for her husband), strained family relationships (with her sister), and finally – and particularly powerful – unconsummated romance, all of which are embodied by the resilient protagonist. However, *Nomadland* sets itself apart from the melodrama formula by its scarce employment of non-diegetic music, by a nuanced view of the world, by a lack of excessive visual stylization often present in melodramas – and, maybe most importantly, by a "damsel in distress" who chooses not to be saved by anyone but herself.

Nomadland also has recourse to the historical genre of Italian neorealism, a post-World War II film movement in Italy, that regularly cast non-professional actors, focused on the hardships of the lower classes, and had a realist but emotionally powerful style (see also Neher). Similarly, Zhao has brought to this larger film a technique that she had previously used for her independent "rez films" (Native American reservation movies) *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2016) and *The Rider* (2018). In *Nomadland*, Zhao combines professional actors Frances McDormand as Fern and David Strathairn as Dave with real-life "nomads," who are playing fictionalized versions of themselves. Although the film is not a documentary, the nomads' characters are recognizable from the book, which Zhao refers to as not only an inspiration but also a "companion piece" (Feeney 45). Linda May from the book serves as a model for both the character Linda and aspects of Fern's character.

The neorealist style of *Nomadland* extends beyond casting non-professional actors in that Zhao and her team did not work from a finished screenplay. Instead, they had a guideline but finalized the film during shooting, allowing it to be molded by elements such as landscape, events, and people. This was made possible because the crew was kept small: "With a cast and crew of under 30 people, members of the production embedded themselves in the community and lived out of vans themselves for the months-long shoot" (Gutterman). This approach gives the film a poetics that is neither documentary, since it is too fictional and constructed for that, nor generic, in the sense of conforming to an established style, be that the western, the social drama, or, as will be discussed below, the road movie.

As the title suggests, *Nomadland* is readily identifiable as relating to the genre of the road movie. Indeed, the opening scenes depict Fern, having already left her home,

packing her van and leaving behind any excess belongings in a garage. Fern maintains her itinerant lifestyle throughout the film, eventually giving away her stored belongings and bidding a final farewell to her former home before embarking on another, unknown journey. Interestingly, scenes of Fern's actual physical movement are rare and usually depicted in montage sequences. Instead, the essence of the road movie is captured through the presentation of multiple, loosely identified locations, with only Quartzite and the Badlands (a staple location of director Zhao) being clearly identified. As will be discussed below, this focus on impermanent spaces forms a critical foundation for the film's exploration of space, place, and placemaking.

As a narrative style, the road movie format serves to unify the diverse locales, themes, and characters encountered by Fern on her journey. It facilitates an episodic structure, with each sequence functioning as a pearl on the string of her road trip. In its social signification, the road movie, like the western, is a quintessentially American genre, brimming with core US mythology. But the road movie is not just a vehicle for US ideology. As David Laderman argues in *Driving Visions*, "[t]he driving force propelling most road movies … is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique" (1). Consequently, *Nomadland*, through its presentation of a "literal venturing outside of society" (2), offers a critique of American culture. While the protagonist's nomadism is largely motivated by her grief, her refusal to settle down and her embrace of the open road at the end of the film signal a more general social critique. The precise target of this critique remains often ambiguous, although it gains focus through the larger issue of elderly Americans unable to afford housing, as highlighted in Bruder's book as well as in the speeches by Linda and Bob Wells quoted above.

Nomadland avoids the criticism of "sentimental pastoralism" (Marx 5) that often characterizes road stories. The film acknowledges the role of technology in the lives of its characters, such as Amazon jobs, laundromats, and, above all, petro-mobility. This creates an "imaginative and complex" pastoralism, rather than a "popular and sentimental" one (5; see also Laderman 18–19). Although the film exhibits pastoralist veneration of nature by depicting beautiful landscapes that have a healing effect, it does not suggest that a simple "back to nature" – or any "return" for that matter – is a viable option. In this sense, *Nomadland* utilizes but also enhances the road movie genre, in the sense of Neil Archer's outlook on the future of the genre. He argues that a new era requires new ideas about freedom and that

> road movies can also point to optimistic futures, and not just nostalgically reassuring pasts. They can gift us with fantasies of escape or the romance of mobile communities and friendships; they are a vehicle for images of natural beauty, but can also take us into the disturbingly unfamiliar. (104)

Nomadland embodies this updated vision of the road movie, with its complex portrayal of pastoralism and its exploration of the lives of nomads in contemporary America, where upward mobility is giving way to horizontal mobility.

Spatial Theories

In addition to deconstructing genre work, *Nomadland* builds its semiotic web, including social critique, through its sophisticated representation of space and place. Space, according to most theorists, can be characterized as abstract and Cartesian, a container that derives its identity only from the objects with which it is filled (Hansen Löve 29; see also Cresswell *Place*). That is, space is something that can be rendered through maps, by overview, but otherwise is the emptiness between things: "[S]pace as something 'dead', that is, inanimate, objectively measurable and totally passive" (Matschi 177). Place, on the contrary, is relational, historical, produced by social interaction and concerned with identity. Moreover, place is anything that signifies "the clarity and distinctness of the near and small" while space points to "the emptiness of the far and enormous" (Casey 295). Massey does not distinguish sharply between spaces and places, she emphasizes that both are "a product of interrelations," (10) "heterogeneous," and "always in progress" (11). She also stresses that places should not be conceived "as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events" (130).

Various theorists have designated specific sites with their own terms, such as Bakhtin's "chronotope," Bhabha and Soja's "thirdspace," Foucault's "heterotopia," and Augé's "non-place," the latter two resonating compellingly with *Nomadland*. Augé's non-place refers to what he calls "supermodern" sites of transit, including airports, shopping malls, and gas stations, that are designed for the processing of anonymous individuals. Although a non-place is a place, it is devoid of identity, creating a particular kind of equality because it is equally alienating for all. In contrast, Foucault's heterotopias are spaces that are different from the rest of the social sphere (ships, cemeteries, prisons, gardens) but have more relationships to other places than one might assume. Heterotopias can be real places that are either approximations or attempts at a utopia or parallel spaces, that are designed for undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible.

The concepts of space, place, non-place, and heterotopia are very helpful for understanding *Nomadland*'s representation of the American landscape and the experiences of its nomadic characters. By portraying the characters' movements across various spaces and their ability to make places, the film highlights the dehumanizing effects of non-place and emphasizes the importance of relationality and historical significance for the characters. Through its nuanced representation of these

concepts, *Nomadland* creates a powerful social critique while engaging its audience in a contemplative and introspective manner.

Spaces, Places, and Beyond

"The last free place in America is a parking spot" (Bruder 14).

As a film characterized by open spaces, *Nomadland* corresponds to Tzvetan Todorov's basic distinction, as elaborated by Leroi-Gourhan, between "radial space" and "itinerant space" (325–27). While the former is characterized by settled people, clear demarcations, and the archetypal element of the house, itinerant space designates "a nomadic world-view . . . and is most prominently characterized by a conspicuous absence of boundaries and the road as the most fundamental archetype" (Hansen Löve 40). This distinction is most prominently manifested when Fern stays with her sister, whose husband and friends are real-estate managers: They discuss property and financial gains while Fern talks about homelessness and social responsibility.

Nomads, thus, even when they are intersecting with settled people are in a different space altogether, a fact that characterizes the distance between Fern and her friend and suitor Dave. Interestingly, Dave's family home is presented as warm, welcoming, and open – amiable conversations, lovely company, great food, warm colors – but for Fern the scenery appears to be delimiting and distant, to the point of inaccessibility (*Nomadland* 01:23:16–29:47). She holds a baby in a very awkward manner, is scared of the horses, and at night, while observing Dave and his son playing four-handed piano, she sits on the stairs, separated from the scene by the bars of a railing. Restless, she moves to her van at night, and in the morning, the film presents her as separated from the house by a harsh, dark fence, a palisade, really (Figure 1). She meanders through the sleepy house as though it were a museum and then leaves without a farewell (*Nomadland* 01:30:28–31:42). The railing and the fence are reminiscent of Lotman's spatial narratology that conceptualizes a border as a central plot device for narratives. In *Nomadland*, they serve to establish two worlds that cannot be easily traversed, much less unified, reinforcing Fern's sentiment of alienation and Otherness.

Fern's van, along with other nomadic homes, is presented more emphatically but also wields a double-edged character – it is a personal place of retreat but not quite a safe haven. At one point, Fern is faced with the notorious "knock," followed by an anonymous voice instructing her to depart. Furthermore, when Fern's vehicle is rendered immobile (once due to a flat tire, another time due to an engine failure), it becomes apparent that, without an opportunity to escape, her "home" is unable to keep her safe. In her van, Fern may suffer from hypothermia due to a lack of insulation. Neither is it suitable for visitors, due to its limited size. Nevertheless, Fern takes

pride in its efficiency and values the space it provides. Linda's mobile home, "The Squeeze Inn," is one of the most positive depictions of any place in *Nomadland*, adorned with Christmas lights and trinkets, basking in a warm, yellow glow, presenting itself as a relational and lived space. But then this is the scene in which Linda tells of her considering suicide – a chilling reminder of why she is on the road (*Nomadland* 00:10:42–12:07).

Figure 1: A fence visually disconnects Fern from the family home and its inhabitants.

Figure 2: The Rubber Tramp Rendezvous

The film thus challenges the traditional concept of home – signified by the family house – as necessarily a safe, cozy, and convivial environment. Instead, the nomads find personal space and a feeling of belonging in vehicles originally designed for movement or leisure activities or even outdoors, for example, at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (Figure 2). Through this counter-hegemonic rendering of spaces and places, *Nomadland* offers a complex portrayal of both nomadism – neither pure liberty nor pure adversity – and the nomads – neither traditional western heroes nor mere victims of their circumstances. Instead, *Nomadland* highlights the ability of the nomads to create places, while avoiding the ideological baggage that often accompanies traditional notions of "home."

The placemaking ability of nomads even extends to non-places in Augé's sense. The Amazon warehouse and cafeteria, a mobile home park, a gas station, and tourist campsites are all characterized by economic efficiency, transience, and depersonalization. *Nomadland*'s representation of some of these non-places is at first often uncompromising, with dehumanizing and distancing camera shots emphasizing the spaces' inhumanity. However, the film then portrays how the people manage to transform these non-places into places, creating a sense of community and belonging, despite the bleakness of the surroundings. The film does so through a variety of strategies such as medium eye-level shots, soft lighting, warm colors, and dialogue that emphasizes interdependency.

In accordance with Pratt's concept of contact zones, personal engagements and human relations have the ability to transform non-places into places. This transformation is evident in various scenes in the film, where the Amazon warehouse (Figure 3), for instance, takes on a more personal dimension as safety regulations are

discussed and negotiated in a group setting. Similarly, the aloofness of a cafeteria is humanized through conversations among diners seated at a communal table (Figure 4). Furthermore, an otherwise bleak gas station parking lot where Fern parks for the night is imbued with a sense of humanity when a female attendant warns her of the frigid conditions and directs her to a nearby shelter (Figure 5). In a humorous display of ingenuity, Fern and Linda create a makeshift beauty parlor at their camp site by donning cucumber face masks while reclining in their camping chairs (Figure 6). In these ways, human interaction and caring moments serve to transform otherwise impersonal spaces into meaningful places of human connection.

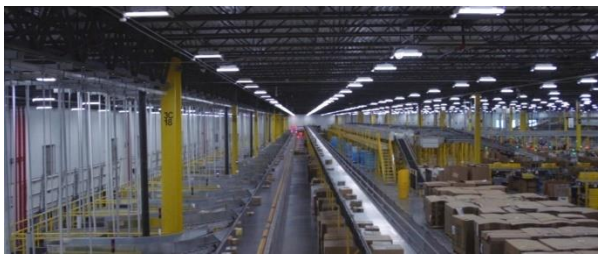

Figure 3: The Amazon warehouse – Space

Figure 4: The table at the cafeteria – Place

Figure 5: Non-Place humanized

Figure 6: Open space transformed

These visual and narrative devices correspond to the theories of Massey discussed above: Meeting up with others occasions intersecting biographies. This is revealed not only in the dialogues Fern has with Linda, Bob, and a young man who travels on foot, but also in micro-interactions such as with the mother of a former pupil or when she embraces the man to whom she leaves her belongings. It is also helpful to recall here the distinction between radial and itinerant space mentioned above. While Leroi-Gourhan, following Todorov, posits a binary between house and road (325–27), in *Nomadland* houses (Dave's, or Fern's sister's) can be places, indeed homes – just not for Fern. Arguably, the concentric or radial space formation is too binding; it posits a center and thus a periphery, and, above all, fixates the historicity of its inhabitants, something that contradicts Fern's quest. Interestingly, the film also bends the concept of the road. As already mentioned, we rarely see Fern on the road – van trips are mostly compressed into short montage sequences. Instead, the predominant scenes are at locations where the nomads come together: campgrounds, a warehouse, a café-

teria, a laundromat. In these spaces that are temporarily transformed into places, history is constantly remade, offering a chance to Fern to leave her past (the lost home, the lost town, the lost husband) behind her.

The ongoing social work required to transform empty spaces or non-places into places while they also retain their erstwhile character (empty landscape, workplace, parking lot) is further reflected in Fern's struggle to balance her wish for independence and solitude with her growing awareness of the importance of communality. This dichotomy, explored in the classic film *The Searchers* (1956), which *Nomadland* references in its beginning and ending (Figure 7), is updated by director Chloé Zhao as she centers it on a female character. In John Ford's work, as pointed out by Claire Johnston, the woman represents the home and serves as a symbol for culture and civilization, while the male protagonist embodies mobility, freedom, and independence. In contrast, Zhao's protagonist, Fern, is drawn *both* to solitude and to communality, thus transcending the nature/culture binary. Consequently, the house that she walks away from at the end is not, as in *The Searchers*, a multi-generational family home but her own former home, now deserted (Figure 8). Having lost husband, house, and community, she is also liberated and establishes herself through her engagement both with nature (empty spaces) and with culture (places and their temporary inhabitants). As Massey argues, place does change us "not through some visceral belonging (some barely changing rootedness, as so many would have it) but through the practicing of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us" (154). This is of course intensified when the place is temporary, an intersection of various histories. It is in this arena of negotiation that the character of Fern is formed, and her personal growth is insinuated.

Figure 7: The ending of *The Searchers*

Figure 8: The ending of *Nomadland*

A particularly compelling example of the transformation of space into place is the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous in Quartzite, Arizona (an actual event). During most of the year, this site is an empty space, but for a few weeks each year, it becomes a gathering place for nomads. Foucault's concept of heterotopia, particularly his notion of "crisis heterotopia," is relevant to this site both in reality and as depicted in *Nomadland*. Insofar as they are social outcasts, the Quartzite camp would seem to be a

"heterotopia of deviation," a place for individuals who do not conform to everyday societal norms, such as a prison, a psychiatric hospital or a care home (Foucault 25). But then Fern and her fellow nomads go to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous voluntarily, and thus it conforms to Foucault's crisis heterotopia, a place that is "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (4), a place without geographical markers (5). Indeed, here, far from regular and regulating society, they are in a state of transition experiencing a crisis that Quartzite allows them to confront *collectively*. Both in Bruder's account of the real-life gathering and in Zhao's film, the site comes across as a utopian experiment where people share food, attend workshops, exchange possessions, grieve, forge friendships, and support each other in an egalitarian manner (*Nomadland* 00:18:20–30:11).

In brief, *Nomadland* through its use of space and place, as well as the introduction of non-places and heterotopias employs a complex and nuanced portrayal of the nomadic lifestyle. The film challenges traditional notions of home and road (as well as their concurring concepts of gender) and emphasizes the nomad's ability to create places while providing a sense of belonging in even the most desolate of spaces.

Conclusion

It can be asserted that the film successfully translates Jessica Bruder's participant observation book into a charming but still edgy fictionalized representation. Loosely weaving place-events around the narrative thread constituted by the protagonist's year-long journey, the film's focus on genre and space/place serves to portray the (structural) hardship of the nomads as well as their pride and agency. The film ultimately tackles a range of themes and topics, both personal and social in nature, including deprivation, grief, solitude, friendship, and the healing power of nature. *Nomadland* is particularly characterized by a nuanced and balanced portrayal. Vergari notes that in the film, "global and local, or universal and particular, interact constantly, dissolving into nuances – like those of the many sunsets that could be dawns – that break down barriers and judgements" (204).

As has been shown, the film achieves this subtlety in part by incorporating multiple genre conventions and manipulating them to serve its narrative and critical purpose. The film employs the road movie genre's critical impetus to great effect. It subverts western genre conventions through creative interventions such as a female protagonist and snow-covered desert settings. The film's neorealist cinematography adds authenticity and reinforces its interventionist approach. Narratively and visually, the film achieves this also by presenting the nomads as placemakers: They create a sense of place by maintaining their vehicles, displaying their stamina, and engaging

in a range of social interactions, which transform empty spaces and non-places into places.

While it has been criticized for downplaying the nomads' economic hardships (Brody; Gupta and Fawcett; Jurewicz), the film, a multiple Oscar winner with a mainstream audience in mind, aligns itself with the self-perception of actual nomads. The film's central message is that the nomads cannot alter their structural circumstances; instead, they make do with what they have. The film also aestheticizes and to some extent romanticizes nomadism but thereby manages to create empathy for the characters. Therefore, *Nomadland*, which was never intended as a radical text, can be regarded as highly successful in mainstreaming the indie film topic of rural poverty, which Zhao so aptly portrayed in *The Rider*.

The film's most marginalized social field is race, given that all central characters and most background characters are white. There seems to be no awareness of the racialized nature of "the road" as it has been revealed in Gretchen Sorin's 2020 book *Driving While Black* – and the entire idea of "empty space" or "open territory" is fraught with ignorance of white colonialism of Native territory. Class and capitalism are also relegated to the margins. While various indications of relative poverty are evident, such as bartering, food handouts, and insufficient funds for Fern to repair her van, these are not presented in the context of a class system or as byproducts of capitalism. However, the film boldly exhibits arduous labor conditions that are typically neglected in mainstream movies.

The film is also progressive in its addressing of gender with the protagonist being a female loner hero on a road trip and a predominantly female cast. As Vergari notes, "[t]he portrait of these, often single, women who decide to live alone also combines the rejection of a system that is not just economic but also patriarchal" (205). Even more radical, these are mature-aged women, a demographic commonly neglected in cinema. The film represents their alienation and subordination in a melancholy tone but at the same time portrays them as resourceful and resilient. The most joyful moments, both in terms of the narrative and the visuals, ensue with community building, which is presented as radiating hope and strength.

Overall, the film's tone and spirit encapsulate the socio-economic situation of its characters, challenge societal norms, and celebrate the resilience of a marginalized community. Significantly, the film's depiction of these marginalized characters is based on real people playing themselves, adding an authentic and poignant element to the production.

About the Author

Klaus Rieser is Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz, Austria, where he teaches (visual) cultural studies. He chaired the Department of American Studies from 2007 to 2013 and from 2016 to 2017. His major areas of research comprise US film, representations of family, gender and ethnicity, and visual cultural studies. His monographs have dealt with immigration in film, experimental films, and masculinity in film. He has also published a number of articles and co-edited five volumes, amongst other topics on Iconic Figures, on Contact Spaces, and on Ethnicity and Kinship. He is co-founder and editorial board member of the open-access journal *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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