

“AND THERE IS HOPE ON THE ROAD”: *NOMADLAND*’S AMERICAN WEST

Alice Carletto

FCSH – Universidade NOVA de Lisboa – CETAPS

ABSTRACT

Jessica Bruder’s *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century* (2017) and Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020) display a contemporary phenomenon which is growing in America, especially in the most western states: people who “choose” the road and mobility as a way of life, thus becoming nomads. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the topic of the American road within this book and movie, on its real and mythical sides, and on issues of mobility. This will inevitably lead to consider the contemporary American West, here too in its real and mythical features. Bearing in mind the strong connection between the American road and the American West, *Nomadland* contributes to a reimagination and a rethinking of American mobility.

KEY WORDS: American Road, American West, Mobility, Nomadism

“AND THERE IS HOPE ON THE ROAD”: EL OESTE AMERICANO DE *NOMADLAND*

RESUMEN

Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century (2017) de Jessica Bruder y *Nomadland* de Chloé Zhao (2020) muestran un fenómeno contemporáneo que está creciendo en América, especialmente en los estados más occidentales: personas que “eligen” el camino y la movilidad como forma de vida, convirtiéndose así en nómadas. El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar sobre el tema de la carretera americana dentro de este libro y película, sobre sus aspectos reales y míticos, y sobre cuestiones de movilidad. Esto llevará inevitablemente a considerar el Oeste americano contemporáneo, aquí también en sus características reales y míticas. Teniendo en cuenta la fuerte conexión entre la carretera americana y el oeste americano, *País Nómada* y *Nomadland* contribuyen a una reimaginación y un replanteamiento de la movilidad americana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Carretera americana, Oeste americano, Movilidad, Nomadismo

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Considered as a subgenre of travel writing, the American road narrative has sprung and evolved as a quintessentially American genre, in which the road trip, particularly journeys embarked on motorized vehicles, represents opportunity, reinvention, and escape. The end of the road trip suggests the encounter with a better reality or, if that is not the case, the road is still there to be travelled, thus, once more, perpetuating the idea of opportunity.

Furthermore, the American road trip gives Americans the chance to exert the so praised American spirit of restlessness, something that is considered distinctive of the American character, as already, in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, with his Frontier Thesis, was strongly advocating: “He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise” (Turner 1893). In the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009), the importance of travel and its connection to the American identity is emphasized:

Travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked. This connection undergirds commonplace descriptions of America as a nation of immigrants and a restless populace on the move ... American travel writing, like travel itself, is constitutive, a tool of self- and national fashioning that constructs its object even as it describes it. (Bendixen and Hamera 2009, 1)

Travel and its undeniable characteristic – movement – are at the basis of the American nation. Travel and movement have generated “a restless populace on the move”, as if they had created a specific breed. For Americans, every sort of opportunity could be attained through change, through movement. To move meant to hopefully get new opportunities, at least in idealistically terms. This is the core of the American journey, and, later on, of the American road trip: opportunity.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the American road – and its connection to the American West – and on contemporary nomads by focusing on Jessica Bruder’s nonfiction account *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* (2017) and, also, taking into account its film adaptation (2020), written, produced and directed by Chloé Zhao.

Nomadland displays a contemporary phenomenon which is growing in America, especially, but not uniquely, in the western states. This phenomenon manifested itself after the 2008 economic and financial collapse which made the lives of Americans hard to sustain, thus leading them to choose the road as a place to live. Jessica Bruder had been road tripping the American West with her van, driving 15.000 miles for three years. She had been meeting and interviewing van dwellers and nomads, trying, in this way, to understand better not only this phenomenon, but also the nomad lifestyle. As Bruder states in an interview for *The Amberst Student*:

I feel like when you immerse with a population, you’re there all the time and you get to become part of the furniture . . . I wanted to be around 24/7. I wanted to be there at night. I wanted to learn just everything I could. So for me, immersion



was definitely the way to go. It wasn't the idea that I could somehow merge with and become part of this population. The idea was if I really wanted to be a faithful chronicler, I would interview people but I would also observe them. And I would learn in both ways. (Picciotto 2021)

Bruder's immersive style has resulted in a realistic and poignant chronicle, in which myths and realities intermingle. Chloé Zhao's movie is based on Bruder's book. However, the film adaptation focuses more strongly on Fern, a fictional character interpreted by Frances McDormand. The movie also portrays real nomads, such as Linda May, Bob Wells and Swankie.

Bruder starts her book with two epigraphs which deserve attention. The first one is part of Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" (1992): "There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in". The second epigraph is from an anonymous commenter in the journal *Arizona Daily Sun*: "The capitalists don't want anyone living off their economic grid". Those epigraphs are a synthesis of what the book will show; Bruder's voice interweaving with that of the nomads'. Cohen's words suggest hope, despite the suffering and difficulties; whereas, the second epigraph is a clear critique of the capitalist system. There is the road, there is hope, but there is also an economic, political and financial system which has failed and which has ignited a phenomenon like that of nomadism to spread.

In the Foreword, Bruder highlights:

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ITINERANTS, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the second millennium, a new kind of wandering tribe is emerging. People who never imagined being nomads are hitting the road. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate" – vans, secondhand RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible choices that face what used to be the middle class. (2017, xii)

Due to the Great Recession, many Americans found themselves in a difficult economic situation: "in a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America" (Bruder 2017, xiii). Having decided not to be designated as "homeless", but merely as "houseless", these new American nomads have chosen "a life on wheels" (2017, xiii), working at seasonal jobs for a living and experiencing the road as their home. Furthermore, Bruder underscores the nomads' longing for something more than mere survival. This yearning is perceptible in the following quote:

Being human means yearning for more than subsistence. As much as food or shelter, we require hope. And there is hope on the road. It's a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It's just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger. (2017, xiii)

This paragraph is a clear invocation of the myth of the open road. The road trope owes its creation to Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road" (1856),



part of the collection *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman attributes to the open road, and to travel itself, positive qualities. The American road came to be seen as a place of freedom, independence, equality, observation and discovery. Moreover, Whitman also considers the road as a place immersed in Nature or, at least, as a place in which Man can still find the possibility to connect with Nature (Whitman 1856, section 4). As Gordon E. Slethaug claims in “Mapping the Trope: A Historical and Cultural Journey” (2012), “He [Whitman] invests the road with a philosophical and religious aura that becomes a recognizable part of the image. ... the road is the subject of meditation, a repository of wisdom, a participant in communication and a social equalizer” (2012, 16). Whitman created a solid, strong, and idealized image of the American road. This transcendental aura around the American road will continue to hold a great power. To give an example, in William Least Heat-Moon’s nonfictional road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982), the open road is described as “a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself” (Heat-Moon 1982, 1). In a similar manner, this lure of the open road is reiterated in *Nomadland*. Contemporary vandwellers, wanderers, and nomads see the road as an opportunity to change their current situations and as a way to create a new sense of community. However, their longing for opportunities in the American road is not a complete deliberate choice. Hence, the paradox. The freedom that they proclaim, in their choice of undertaking a life on the road, is not a totally free choice, since it stems from the unbearable life conditions caused by the American system: “They are surviving America” (Bruder 2017, xiii). Living on the edges of American society represents their last opportunity and their way to find “common understanding, a kinship . . . a glimpse of utopia” (2017, xiii). This recalls the Puritans’ early hopes in the New World.

21st century nomads work at seasonal jobs in order to economically maintain themselves. There are different kinds of jobs available for itinerants, though the conditions offered are anything but good. Around this spreading nomadic phenomenon, Amazon¹ has been able to create its own profit. In concomitance with the housing crash in 2008, Amazon launched a specific job program called CamperForce. The program has been only discontinued this year, but, since 2008 until 2022 it has been at work. Its objective was to recruit vandwellers, RVers and nomads for short seasonal jobs, and to employ them at their warehouses, called “fulfillment centers”. On Amazon official website, CamperForce job offers were advertised and the rhetoric used was quite captivating, perpetuating the idea of being on the road and of experiencing adventure. However, CamperForce is not an easy job:

¹ Amazon.com, Inc. is the largest online retailer, founded by Jeff Bezos, in 1994, in Bellevue, Washington, and, originally created as an online commerce of books. As Bruder explains in the book, CamperForce is a specific program created by Amazon: “. . . a labor unit made up of nomads who work as seasonal employees at several of its warehouses, which the company calls “fulfillment centers,” or FCs. Along with thousands of traditional temps, they’re hired to meet the heavy shipping demands of “peak season,” the consumer bonanza that spans the three to four months before Christmas” (Bruder 2017, 45).



The workers' shifts last ten hours or longer, during which some walk more than fifteen miles on concrete floors, stooping, squatting, reaching, and climbing stairs as they scan, sort, and box merchandise. When the holiday rush ends, Amazon no longer needs CamperForce and terminates the program's workers. They drive away in what managers cheerfully call a "taillight parade". (Bruder 2017, 45)

Being on the road has a cost. Amazon CamperForce provides jobs which are usually very tough. Considering also that the nomads' average age is not young, these seasonal jobs prove to be prejudicial for their health. This policy to hire older people is also common to other jobs, like the sugar beet harvest. One of the workcampers interviewed by Bruder – David Roderick – has explained why companies prefer older people, and, mainly, it is because managers feel that they can trust elderly people, knowing that, for almost all their lives, they have worked hard: "“They love retirees because we're dependable. We'll show up, work hard, and are basically slave labor”" (Bruder 2017, 60). It is, with no doubt, an attitude based on exploitation. They do not only know that they can work hard, but that they are dependable, that they need that job. Thus, they will do whatever is necessary to work properly and receive a retribution, even if small. Another workcamper, Phil DePeal, has even compared his job at Amazon CamperForce to the Army, thus stressing the toughness of the job (Bruder 2017, 62). This policy to hire retirees or older people has also been defined by Monique Morrissey, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute, as "the first-ever reversal in retirement security in modern U.S. history" (Bruder 2017, 62), foreseeing a worsening in the next generations regarding the retirement issue.

Linda May, one of the vandweller interviewed by Jessica Bruder, was contemplating to apply again for a seasonal job at CamperForce when she meets Bruder, but she then changed her mind, given the fact that the previous year she "ended up with a repetitive motion injury from using the handheld barcode scanner. It left behind a visible mark, a grape-sized lump on her right wrist. Even worse was what she could not see: a searing pain that radiated the length of her right arm, from thumb to wrist, through elbow and shoulder, ending in her neck" (Bruder 2017, 9). Those jobs, advertised and promoted in the most positive light, are causing chronic and serious injuries. Despite this, vandwellers continue hitting the road. On the one hand, they are drawn by the idea of the open road; on the other hand, out of necessity. This also reveals another paradox: contemporary nomads long for freedom, from being unchained from a failed society, though they are still bound to it, namely considering the fact that they are working for capitalistic companies, like Amazon.

At the time of Bruder's interview, Linda May is ready to get back on the road, working, for her third summer, as a campground host, at Hanna Flat, in San Bernardino County (California). Campground hosting is another widespread job among nomads. In a similar way to Amazon CamperForce's ads, campground hosting is promoted in an attractive way:

Ads for the job splashed with photos of glittering creeks and wildflowers-choked meadows . . . "Get paid to go camping!" cajoles a recruiting banner for American Land & Leisure, another company that hires camp hosts. Below the headline are



testimonials: ‘Our staff says: ‘Retirement has never been this fun!’ ‘We’ve developed lifelong friendship,’ ‘We’re healthier than we’ve been in years.’ (Bruder 2017, 6)

With promises of closer contacts with Nature, this picturesque description is overturned by the actual reality of the job which, for instance, does not provide any type of warranty: vandwellers can be fired at any time (Bruder 2017, 23). Another frustrating aspect of the job is that, in general, they work more than they expected, and they do not receive more money for that extra job. Bruder reports some of the employees’ complaints and the situation appears indeed anything but positive. Some of them even complain of not “being provided with water while working in the heat” (Bruder 2017, 24). California Land Management is one of the companies that hires seasonal workers under these poor conditions. In the book, Bruder discloses how she has written to the company, recounting the vandwellers’ tough experiences at the camping sites, and, in response, Eric Mart, the company’s president, has denied everything reported by Bruder (Bruder 2017, 25).

Linda May, and her friend Sylvianne Delmars, also a vandweller, have not complained about the situation and the conditions of their jobs as campground hosts (Bruder 2017, 23). On the contrary, they are enthusiastic since they feel that they can finally be free from their previous restrictive reality: “Linda was ready to feel her world opening up again after it had shrunk to the size of a sofa. For too long, she’d been without her accustomed freedom, that accelerated rush of newness and possibility that comes with the open road. It was time to go” (Bruder 2017, 10). The lure of the open road is felt by Linda May. She has always been a hard-working and self-reliant woman – working at different jobs and raising two kids on her own – and, even if working at seasonal jobs is not the best situation for a sixty-four-year-old woman, she sees it as a way to be independent, living in her own space, and to be free (Bruder 2017, 27). Bruder describes Linda May’s trailer, called “the Squeeze Inn”, as having “the same interior length as the covered wagon that carried Linda’s own great-great-great-grand mother across the country more than a century ago” (2017, 4). Moved by a sense of opportunity – a sense conveyed by the vastness of the country, linked to the promise of change – Linda’s predecessors headed West in search of a better life. Linda, with her Squeeze Inn, is a modern version of early migrants in the American West, almost as if she was perpetuating a tradition.

Likewise, Sylvianne Delmars, sixty years old, has embraced her new nomadic life. She has worked in several different fields: as a waitress, in a corporate healthcare, in retail, acupuncture, and catering (Bruder 2017, 16). Her choice to live on the road was prompted by a series of circumstances: “her car stolen, her wrist broken (no insurance), and a house in New Mexico that she couldn’t sell” (Bruder 2017, 15). She also explains how it felt the first time that she slept in a car, feeling that she was “a horrible failure or a homeless person” (Bruder 2017, 15). Then, she got used to that new life. She describes her nomadic life in the following terms:

On her blog, Sylvianne Wanders, she also characterized the transition like this: “A not-quite-retirement-age baby boomer gives up her sticks ’n bricks former miner’s cabin, her three part-time jobs, and her attachment to any illusion of security this tattered remnant of the American Dream might still bring to her tortured soul. The



goal: to hit the road for a life of nomadic adventure as the Tarot reader–Shamanic Astrologer–Cosmic Change Agent she was always meant to be”. (Bruder 2017, 16)

In this description, the American Dream is called into question, proving to be illusive, something that was supposed to bring stability, but that, in reality, has mainly tormented people. Between her illusive life and a nomadic one, Silvianna chose the latter. She even wrote a song to honor her new life, entitled “vandweller anthem” (Bruder 2017, 16-17), in which she calls herself “Queen of the Road”. Through the song, she mainly praises freedom and continuous movement, which allows her to reconnect with the Earth. In *Wanderers: Literature, Culture and the Open Road* (2022), David Brown Morris states that: “Wandering – aimless movement without a destination – is an antidote to confinement and takes the sinuous shape of the trail, winding and unwinding, with “nowhere to go” (2022, 3). This recalls Silvianna’s attitude, since she uses wandering as a way to cut off with a restrictive and consumerist society. In fact, that is what she vindicates in her song: “I’ve finally cut the cord / Unlike society’s consumer hordes” (Bruder 2017, 17).

As mentioned previously, the increased escalation of nomadism in America occurred as a consequence of the Great Recession. However, even earlier than 2008, nomads were already roaming in America. In 2003, author Richard Grant published *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads*, a book in which he describes the nomadism phenomenon, also reporting some specific nomads’ stories. Grant stresses how the phenomenon is becoming more and more common among retired and old people, those that he labels as “the Eisenhower generation” (Grant 2003, 287). Basically, Grant explains that this generation is, generally speaking, moved by a feeling of rebellion against how the American society views retirees, and, on the whole, regarding the way in which aging is considered:

as a time of slowing down and solidifying, of moving about less and less until you stop moving altogether. The Eisenhower generation has staged a mass rebellion against this model of retirement. Some thirty million retirees have left behind their homes, families and communities and struck out for new sociological frontiers . . . After a working life spent paying off mortgages, raising families and accumulating possessions, they were called by the other American dream – ‘burn down the house and saddle up the horse,’ as Mike Hatfield described it. Or more precisely, sell the house and buy an RV with the proceeds. (Grant 2003, 287-288)

The acknowledged image of the American picket fence² – representing stability and the fulfillment of the American Dream, in its materialistic side –

² “The American Dream has long been bound up with America’s politics and political ideology, and for the most part the relationship has been harmonious. When in the 1920s ownership of a single-family house became woven into the dream as one of its central components, it was for deliberately political purposes: the dream house would become the standard material artifact accepted as fulfillment of the dream-myth. The rapid expansion of single-family housing after mid-century, by accelerating the numbers of Americans realizing the dream, thus became a principal mechanism of American political stability and economic prosperity. And for the remainder of the century this



has become a nightmare for most Americans who, in counter-response, as Grant has underscored, have chosen the other American Dream, based on freedom and movement.

Going back to Bruder's books, the reader reaches another key moment when Bruder meets and introduces Bob Wells, a well-known nomad, living in a van since 1995. In 2005, Wells created the website CheapRVLiving.com, where he gathered information for people who wanted to lead a nomadic life like his (Bruder 2017, 69). Wells is also the organizer of the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, the largest gathering of nomads which takes place every year, in January, in the desert close to Quartzsite, Arizona (Bruder 2017, 140). In an interview with Bruder, Wells's point of view recalls Grant's words, specifically regarding the American Dream: "When I moved into the van, I realized that everything that society had told me was a lie – that I had to get married and live in a house with a white picket fence and go to work, and then be happy at the very end of my life, but be miserable until then," he told me in an interview. "I was happy for the first time ever living in my van" (Bruder 2017, 73). Thus, Wells highlights that there could be more opportunities to be happy, detaching from a system which has proved to be a failure: "By moving into vans and other vehicles, he suggested, people could become conscientious objectors to the system that had failed them. They could be reborn into lives of freedom and adventure" (Bruder 2017, 74). There is the possibility of a new life, different from the previous restrictive one, and there is an obvious awareness when choosing a mobile life. Bruder, then, stresses that this mobile attitude has some connection with the mid-1930 migration West, during the years of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, thus emphasizing that contemporary nomads are somewhat the descendants of an established practice in the American West: that of moving. As Bruder discloses, the 1930s witnessed the first major mass production of house trailers and many Americans, facing economic distress, "chose" a life on wheels:

At the time, millions of dispossessed Americans shared the sentiments Bob later echoed. They'd upheld their end of the social contract, yet the system had let them down. Some of those people had a revelation – that they could escape the stranglehold of rent by moving into house trailers. Becoming nomads. Getting free . . . We are rapidly becoming a nation on wheels," wrote one prominent sociologist in *The New York Times* in 1936. "Today hundreds of thousands of families have packed their possessions into traveling houses, said goodbye to their friends, and taken to the open roads . . . [soon] more families will take to the road, making an important proportion of our people into wandering gypsies". (Bruder 2017, 74-75)

Nevertheless, Bob Wells brings attention to the following aspect: the 1930s migrants – also known as the Okies – hit the road in search of new opportunities,

arrangement worked. Indeed, it embodied all the hallmarks of a highly successful myth: it was taken for granted, as a bedrock tenet of American citizenship and culture, that to have that single-family house was to fulfill the dream, and it was assumed that to fulfill the dream was to have "made it" in America" (Archer 2014, 8).



with a desire to escape a constraining reality and looking for something better, though hoping to return, one day, to a stable life (Bruder 2017, 78). Bob Wells, on the other hand, views the present situation through different lenses: “Rather he aspired to create a wandering tribe whose members could operate outside of – or even transcend – the fraying social order: a parallel world on wheels” (Bruder 2017, 79). Therefore, he is not considering nomadism as a temporary solution, but as another way of living.

All in all, even if there is a distinction between the contemporary nomadism and the 1930s migration, vandwellers see themselves as coming from a long tradition. Don Wheeler, another nomad interviewed by Bruder, has been living in a 1990 Airstream and working at an Amazon CamperForce, in Oregon. He claims the following:

workcampers are modern mobile travelers who take temporary jobs around the U.S. in exchange for a free campsite – usually including power, water and sewer connections – and perhaps a stipend. You may think that workamping is a modern phenomenon, but we come from a long, long tradition. We followed the Roman legions, sharpening swords and repairing armor. We roamed the new cities of America, fixing clocks and machines, repairing cookware, building stone walls for a penny a foot and all the hard cider we could drink. We followed the emigration west in our wagons with our tools and skills, sharpening knives, fixing anything that was broken, helping clear the land, roof the cabin, plow the fields and bring in the harvest for a meal and pocket money, then moving on to the next job. Our forebears are the tinkers. (Bruder 2017, 46-47)

Therefore, Wheeler highlights that their lifestyles have roots in the past, having taken inspiration by the emigration West. Their ancestors are the tinkers, people who have always been working in different places and have always been on the move. As reported in an article from *The Guardian*, contemporary vandwellers, workcampers, and hoboes regard themselves as pioneers, outlaws, and cowboys (Brooks 2021). To a certain extent, a correlation between the Old West’s pioneers and the contemporary nomads in the West can be identified. In that experience of contact with the frontier and the western territories, pioneers got away from civilization and completed a process of rebirth: “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner 1893). Turner considered that the frontier experience was the event that had marked American history, and Americans in general, given the fact that it also provided them with some specific characteristics, among which “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness”, “that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, . . . and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” (Turner 1893). Contemporary nomads quite fit in Turner’s description, mainly for the aspects referring to individualism and optimism, stemming from freedom. These new nomads can be read as the “new pioneers”, moving away from society, from an Old America which has failed them. They seek to experience rebirth through the open road. Bruder notices that the conversation with workcampers was most of the time marked by optimism, despite the sufferings: “Other stories were less chirpy, but still they emphasized the thrill



and camaraderie of the open road, sidestepping the challenges that had driven so many people to radically reimagine their lives” (Bruder 2017, 163). Besides, she also emphasizes how “positive thinking, after all, is an all-American coping mechanism, practically a national pastime” (Bruder 2017, 164). Not only nomads themselves depict their lives on wheels as a bright narrative, but also the media portray their lifestyles as something hilarious. In this way, the reasons that prompt them to choose the road are not only hidden and neglected, but it also happens that their struggles get related to that very same hilarious life on the road.

Nomadland's film adaptation is more focused on Fern's life, a fictional character. Fern comes from Empire, Nevada, and she has lost everything (Zhao 2020). The story of small-town Empire is recounted by Bruder in the book. Empire was a small factory village of three hundred people, “wholly owned by United States Gypsum, the company that makes Sheetrock. The place was a throwback to the much-romanticized heyday of American manufacturing” (Bruder 2017, 39). Almost all the Empire's inhabitants were working there, included Fern's husband (Zhao 2020). On December 2, 2010, due to the recession, United States Gypsum closed, and, with it, also the small town. Even Empire's ZIP code was erased. Empire's residents were basically forced to leave and the village was fenced with chain-link. To make things even worse, Fern's husband died (Zhao 2020). Thus, within a few years, Fern lost her husband, her job as a teacher, and her homeplace. However, as actress Frances McDormand states in an interview: “Once she (Fern) hits the road, the possibilities become open, and her sense of self sufficiency is tested” (TIFF 2020). The road does not only provide Fern with a new purpose, but it becomes a way to test her mettle. The road becomes her homeplace. It represents her freedom and self-discovery. During the film, Fern's grief and suffering are perceived, as well as some of the difficulties she has to endure on her nomadic life. The movie opens with Fern leaving Empire, and crying while embracing one of her husband's belongings, this suggesting grief and hopelessness (Zhao 2020). Fern leaves with her van, in the direction of Desert Rose RV Park, in Fernley, Nevada, to work at an Amazon CamperForce. The landscape is barren, and full of snow, almost corresponding to Fern's feelings. In Desert Rose, Fern meets for the first time Linda May, and, with her, she encounters other nomads, thus approaching and embracing her new life. Linda May invites Fern to participate at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, in Quartzsite, Arizona (Zhao 2020). Fern accepts the invitation and travels toward Arizona. The landscape gets here a different color and shape. The camera's focus shoots the road and the landscape in a meaningful way: it promises hope and a path towards healing.

At the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, Fern recounts her story of loss and grief to Bob Wells (Zhao 2020). In his opinion, hitting the road and becoming a wanderer represents the best option to overcome all the suffering. Living on the road serves as a good opportunity to (re)connect with Nature, something that, in Bob Wells' opinion, will make all the difference to Fern. On the whole, the movie portrays Nature as immense, thus providing a sense of infinity, opportunity, and hope, and the American road is the means that allows this reconnection.

In *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film* (2015), author Ann Brigham argues that mobility, and, consequently, American



road narratives, have been dealt with in a traditional and more fixed way, almost always understood as rebellion. She provides new insights when approaching road narratives, not only focusing on rebellion and escape: “mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite – a mode of engagement” (Brigham 2015, 4). To a certain extent, *Nomadland* holds the promise of the road as an escape; though, in my perspective, the experience here is more about (self)-reinvention: “Road narratives show how mobility is continually invoked and reimagined as a process for transforming subjectivity and space in the wake of larger conflicts” (Brigham 2015, 8). Both the film and the book disclose a complex social phenomenon in which the tough and hard sides of this specific kind of mobility are shown. Zhao and Bruder display the harshness of the contemporary nomadic life: the struggle to work at seasonal jobs at Amazon CamperForce or at the beet harvesting in North Dakota, the poverty of nomads and their loneliness, as well as the problems related to personal hygiene, and, specifically in the book, the perils associated to the life on the road, like, for instance, getting intimidated by passersby:

Living in a white van comes with its own set of challenges, though—what one guy at the RTR called the “creepy factor,” the cultural stereotype that connects them with child molesters and other noxious predators . . . It’s also common for vandwellers – regardless of vehicle color – to get harassed by passersby who assume they’re up to no good. As I write this, one guy in an online forum just recounted waking up after midnight to harassment from strangers who had no reason to bother him. They were shaking his van and yelling “Come on out, you fucking pervert!” and “We’re gonna kick the shit outta you!”. (Bruder 2017, 178)

Notwithstanding this, *Nomadland* invokes and reimagines mobility, since, in their own way, vandwellers engage with their social conflicts through mobility, through the American road. Likewise, space, and in this case mainly the open spaces of the American West, are summoned mostly in a rhetoric instilled with freedom and opportunity. As Chloé Zhao states in “Chloé Zhao on *Nomadland* and the road to self-rediscovery” (2021): “I feel like the American road, that part of the country [the West], and the spirit that’s in that landscape is in the people whose ancestors arrived there. They were always chasing the horizon and wondering what’s beyond it. It’s still there . . .” (Fuller 2021). Thus, even though reality has proved to be harsh, contemporary nomads still see and believe in the promise of the American road, in the promise of the American West as a regenerating and hopeful space, and in the possibility of creating new communities.

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