

The Forgotten and Marginalized Social Norm: Mourning through ‘Stubbornness’

The movie “Nomadland” is based on a book written by Jessica Bauder and directed by Chloé Zhao. Shot in the U.S. and released in 2020, “Nomadland” follows the story of a widow (Fern) trying to make ends meet after the death of her husband. Unwilling to part with her past, Fern remained in Empire, Nevada, the place where she and her husband lived until her husband passed away. Only in her case, Fern carried on with her life living in a van and getting by through seasonal work here and there. The movie starts with Fern leaving Empire for work, and after a series of minor mishaps, finding new relationships, and reuniting with her sibling, Fern eventually goes back to Empire, marking the end of the movie. Though its plot plain and prosaic, “Nomadland” exudes unique emotional valences with its use of melancholy background music and sporadic, random mise-en-scene and raises several themes salient to North American culture.

The beginning is grim and cold-colored. Retrieving things from a storage unit, Fern embarked on her journey of makeshift drifting through the vast, desolate terrain of California. While there was nothing out of the ordinary initially, the movie quickly made progress to propel the audiences to think. The first theme was raised in the supermarket where the daughter of Fern’s friend, who was also Fern’s student, asked Fern if she was homeless, to which she responded with the claim that houselessness does not equate to homelessness. It can surely challenge the socially normalized notion of a home that many of us hold.

While the movie does not provide a direct answer on what constitutes a home, it shows many disadvantages of Fern's lifestyle. Not only does Fern have to defecate outdoors or inside her van, making bacteria a friend of hers more so than it is to people who defecate in a separate bathroom, but Fern also has to do laundry in laundry shops. The seemingly cool, rebellious lifestyle pioneered by hippies in the post-Vietnam era can come with many inconveniences. At this point, it seems like the only thing that separates camper life from being homeless is the physical enclosure of the van. Fern gets so used to this type of lifestyle that she even feels uncomfortable having to sleep indoors, as can be observed from later clips when she chooses to leave Dave, even though Dave sincerely invited her to stay. A question emerges: is this lifestyle really a voluntary choice?

The later clips provide an indirect answer to the question, which is a no, at least for the most part. Fern is constantly forced out of the workforce because of its low demand and the lack of professional specialties. Fern's friend Linda also expressed that her social security benefit was extremely low following the Great Recession, which led to her choosing the camper lifestyle as a way out because she would no longer need to work and pay for expenses associated with conventional living. The answer also becomes quite obvious when Fern shivered in her van under the cold weather at around the 17-minute mark.

After Fern arrives at a new RV parking lot, the hue of the scenes becomes quite bright, accentuating the hope that she finds at a new place. It is the first time that the movie shows sunshine. Accompanying the brightness are the narratives from four

campers, a speech person at the gathering, a Vietnam veteran with PTSD, an African woman, and a widow, all of whom told their misfortunes to their fellow campers.

These people all experienced some kind of trauma, be it mental disorder resulting from fighting in war or the loss of family members, which, compounded by the economic downfall of the Great Recession, made them become campers. Nonetheless, not all of them view it as a compromise. Some of these people also value the peace, freedom, and sense of community that come along with the camper lifestyle.

One notable visual element of the film is the sporadic shift of mise-en-scene. It follows no particular order and sometimes changes rapidly, especially starting at around the one-hour mark. When Dave invites Fern to come with him but is rejected and leaves a souvenir outside Fern's van, the rapid change of mise-en-scene begins; the background music, melancholy piano riffs, also starts, further adding a wistful feeling to the scene. The constant shifting of scenes kind of symbolizes the aimless and drifting nature of the camper lifestyle. Friendships are constantly changing. Fern is in and out of work constantly as well. There is no normalcy in this lifestyle except that Fern always goes back to Empire. It might be stubbornness according to Fern's sister, but it also can be viewed as loyalty to her husband and her past. We as humans are always seeking, seeking novelty, seeking progress and sometimes we can get caught in the maze, forgetting about or devaluing things once important to us. Fern's adherence to staying loyal to and embracing her past, or rather, her way of mourning the deceased is something to be valued, but it also brings her challenges such as being unable to pay for the repairment of her van.

Unable to pay for the repair, Fern is forced to borrow money from her sister Dolly. She went to Dolly's house and joined a gathering. During the gathering, Dolly's husband-George said something along the lines of not everyone is able to chuck everything and hit the road like Fern did when Fern expressed that having to go into debt to buy real estate that people cannot afford does seem like a good idea. Right after Fern snapping at George and George apologizing, Dolly chimed in, saying that what Fern does is part of American tradition. Through the conversation, the movie not only depicts differing views toward nomad lifestyle and the social narratives that living in a van equates instability and homelessness, but also reminds us of American history, particularly the post World War II era where the government encouraged the purchase of real estate and the post-Vietnam War era wherein camper lifestyle was prevalent. More importantly, it addresses the issue of social norms and individual choice of life. Living in a house and having a nine-to-five job are things societal values embrace. The slightest deviation from this norm can result in being discriminated against or looked at differently. It also seems as though Fern has internalized the fact that her living in a van is always to be looked down upon, so to speak because she hesitated to disclose to the car shop staff that she lives in a van when it broke.

Upon Fern's visit to Dave's, Dave and his family welcome Fern with hospitality. Fern had dinner with the family and saw Dave jamming with his son on the piano. Though invited by Dave to stay, Fern did not feel comfortable. One night during her stay, Fern got up, went out, and slept in her van. It almost felt like Fern could not

adapt to domestic, household living arrangements anymore. Before Fern left, she wandered around the house, pressing a single key on the piano alone, which stands in stark contrast to previous scenes where Dave played the piano with his son.

Marchetti (2021) argues that Zhao refrains from touching the sociopolitical background of the plot^[1], which is in contrast to the Chinese counterpart of “Nomadland”-24 city. It is rather easy to see the motives behind the argument given China’s unreasonable censorship and some of the audiences’ preference to always see big corporations and government as the culprits of poverty, inequality, inaccessibility to the healthcare system, and so on. The movie could have leaned more towards a conflict theorist view by making connections between the predicament facing campers and the broader political context, but it would probably strike nerves, which is something Zhao would probably avoid. Nonetheless, it remains unknown whether or not Zhao consciously avoided depicting political context because, at the end of the day, she is the one who decides what to shoot, though its divergence from the book does provide us with some hints.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the movie does not strive to portray Fern and campers as victims. Heavily influenced by the observational style of narrative from other Chinese filmmakers, Zhao simply tells the story and encourages the audience to make of it at their will. Whether the absence of political reference within the movie compromises the quality and depth is totally subjective.

¹ **Marchetti**, Chloé Zhao and China: The *Nomadland* Moment

Bibliography

Marchetti, Gina Marchetti. 2021. "Chloé Zhao and China: The Nomadland

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<https://filmquarterly.org/2021/04/28/chloe-zhao-and-china-the-nomadland-moment/>.