

Nomad women – America’s houselessness hidden in plain sight

Jessica Bruder

Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century

New York: W.W. Norton, 2017

***Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao, 2020**

Only a few minutes into my first post-lockdown night in a movie theatre, the main character of *Nomadland*, a 60-year-old or so Fern, played by Frances McDormand, explains: “I’m not homeless, I’m houseless. That’s not the same thing, right?” As a researcher of homelessness, I suddenly felt perplexed. The film is an Academy Award-winning piece indeed, but I didn’t know much about its origin. I read the book straightaway and realised that the film is actually a quasi-documentary, where the events from the book are dramatised and condensed. Linda May, Charlene Swankie, Bob Wells, and others portray themselves in the film. Jessica Bruder followed them for three years, way after the initial report ‘The End of Retirement. When you can’t afford to stop working’ appeared in the Harper’s Magazine in 2014.

The book is about Americans, mostly boomers, who lost their life’s savings and homes in the Great Recession and live in ‘recreational vehicles’ (RVs). They take on seasonal, low-paying, and usually very physically demanding jobs across the country. They staff the peak season in the Amazon warehouses, harvest sugar beet, and work as hosts at campsites and amusement parks. Employers expect them to come with their own housing, which does not mean that the nomads don’t have to pay for a parking spot or commute to work. This mobile workcampers labour force consists mainly of older single people who otherwise can rely only on a Social Security payment of around \$500 a month, way too little to even pay the rent.

Throughout the book we learn a number of those life stories. What is not surprising to poverty and homelessness researchers, this precarious housing and employment situation is often not new to them. Many were struggling with poverty, temporary jobs, health problems, and family conflicts all their lives. They have exhausted the kindness of their kin to sleep on a couch and put the rest of their savings in fitting a van. Now

their lives revolve around basic necessities – finding a safe space to park for the night, a place to take a shower, surviving yet another day of low paying excruciating physical labour with no benefits, health insurance, or time-off.

The severity of these experiences and the unknown scale of the phenomenon is shocking. Even if the HUD-measured extent of homelessness has not changed much since 2008 (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020: 23), the van-dwellers seem not to be the only group of precariously ‘housed’ Americans that grew after the Great Recession. There is also, for instance, a ‘permanent credit underclass’, disproportionately Black, which was forced out of their homes due to intensified surveillance of poor people by the credit bureaus. They rely increasingly on ‘extended stay’ hotels, which offer around 500 000 rooms across the country (Frazier, 2021). Families live there in overcrowded conditions, without basic amenities, and overpay week by week. Work is no escape from the situation. Jobs in the gig economy mean not only a low pay, but also no fixed hours and work-on-demand, so people are sometimes forced to sleep in their cars in between shifts (Lapore, 2021).

All these situations escape the official HUD definition of homelessness and are not included in the 580 466 people reported (in uninhabitable places and in shelters) in a point in time count in 2020 (HUD, 2021). For people portrayed in the book, homelessness is almost always a stigmatising term, a concept from which they want to distance themselves. They are worried that the reporter will depict them as ‘a bunch of homeless vagabonds’. Homelessness is called ‘the H word’, though they themselves prefer the term ‘houseless’. After all, they have their pride, they are not ‘whiners’, and they are free. Many of them also utilise the all-American coping mechanism – positive thinking.

Some of the most interesting parts of the book for me were the descriptions of the mobile living: strategies of stealth parking, using electricity (boondocking), mounting solar panels, and methane detector, and using a plastic bucket for a toilet. Bruder uses the term ‘subculture’, and it seems right, as the RV dwellers have their own customs (naming their vehicles), own vocabulary, literature, daily routines and annual rituals, camps, get togethers, barter economy, special places, sense of community, and social media. There are fairs selling all the essentials (and especially non-essentials) for living in a van, catering especially for a population of older people (i.e., hearing-aids, Viagra, and dental work). There seems to be a strong sense of a nation-wide community, part of which exists on social media. Many of the people portrayed in the book write blogs or Facebook fan pages (earlier they used discussion groups). Bob Wells runs his YouTube channel and publishes books.

The book is in a sense a page-turner, there are no deeper arguments or long narratives. It follows a number of characters, abandons them, then comes back; the story line is not linear, and it is not always clear when the meetings and conversations take place. In a way, this perhaps reflects the yearly cycle of temporary jobs and seasonal movements of nomads, but it does not make the book particularly easy to follow in detail. Bruder's own experiences of fitting her van and work camping are surprisingly bundled in two chapters (8 and 9) in the middle of the book. Especially here, but also in other places, the book resembles a news reportage more than an ethnography. With the publicity around this book, Bruder is perhaps following a generation of American female journalists-social scientists whose books made it to the syllabi on poverty in America, ethnographic methods, and journalism all around the world (Katherine Newman's *No Shame in My Game*, 2000; Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, 2001; or Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in their Own Land*, 2016). The authors all went native, were hanging out or hit the road to see 'how the other half lives', and to break through the 'empathy wall'. Still, Bruder is not a social scientist and the fragments on poverty or race seem a bit superficial and textbook-like. Obviously, there is lack of data on van-dwellers, but Bruder does not seem to extensively search for it either. For instance, she does not check how many 'extra' residents are registered in South Dakota, where obtaining an address is exceptionally easy. Throughout the book there is perhaps more scattered data on the mobile RV workforce than their housing situation.

Bruder notices that at an older age, more women than men live in poverty. Most people portrayed in the book are also women. Still, women are a minority of the homeless population in the US. Over the course of a year, more than a third of people experiencing homelessness in the US are women. With the exception of families, this population is aging and suffers from ill health and disabilities (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020). Unfortunately, the gender aspect is not explored in the book. Bruder observes however the 'unbearable whiteness' of van living. She attributes this to the white privilege of being on the move without really appearing threatening or suspicious. I would add that it is also a privilege of age and gender.

Reading *Nomadland* from a European perspective, I cannot help but wonder how different Europe is with much tighter institutional safety nets and relatively lesser impact of the economic crisis after 2008, not to mention contrasting political context with some of the European populists advocating and actually lowering the retirement age. Still, there are probably similar precarious housing situations that are hidden in plain sight from homelessness researchers in Europe. For instance, in Belgium, the issue of 'holiday parks' has been somewhat studied in the previous years. Some campsites are 'permanently inhabited'. People live there in a large part illegally, far away from any services, and in poor conditions because

of a lack of other options (Meert and Bourgeois, 2005). But in a recent count in the Flemish city of Leuven, despite many problems in the community, trailer park inhabitants were not included in the 'houseless population' but treated as a separate category since their addresses were recognised by the city (Demaerschalk and Hermans, 2020).

The book is not only about living on the road and working at Amazon. It is also about the aging society. An entire branch of economy seems to be directed towards this group. There are even care services for older people living in RVs. However, most van-dwellers from the book could not afford them. They talk about death on the road, including by suicide, as they have no prospects of really retiring anywhere. Eventually, Bruder quits her temporary jobs and drives her van back to the East Coast. Linda May is left dreaming of building her Earthship on a patch of desert she bought. The book ends there. There is much less of these bodily aches and physical hardship in the film. The main character, Fern, seems particularly fit. She actually has two options to stay in a comfortable house, but she turns both of them down. There seems to be something else that she is seeking. For me, the film ends with a very different message than the one in the book. The film adaptation seems to have added a paradoxical epilogue. Things have turned around for Charlene Swankie and Linda May. All of a sudden, they found themselves on the red carpet. The making of the film did make this American dream come true for them. For me the story unfolded as usual. After my recent searches, Amazon keeps sending me ads for books such as *Your First Year on the Road. Tips for You, Your Van, and Having the Adventure of Your Dreams*.

► Bibliography

Demaerschalk, E., and Hermans, K. (2020) *Dak- en Thuislozentelling Leuven* [The Homeless Count in Leuven] (Leuven: LUCAS KU Leuven).

Frazier, M. (2021, May 20) *When No Landlord Will Rent to You, Where Do You Go? How Extended-Stay Hotels and Motels Became the Last Housing Option for Thousands of Low-Income Americans* (NY: New York Times).

HUD (2021) *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress* (Washington DC: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

Lapore, J. (2021, January 11) *What's Wrong With the Way We Work Americans are Told to Give Their All—Time, Labor, and Passion—to Their Jobs. But Do Their Jobs Give Enough Back?* (NY: New York Times.)

Meert, H., and Bourgeois, M. (2005) *Between Rural and Urban Slums: A Geography of Pathways Through Homelessness*, *Housing Studies* 20(1) pp.107–125.

Shinn, M., and Khadduri, J. (2020) *In the Midst of Plenty: Homelessness and What To Do About It* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley/Blackwell).

Magdalena Mostowska

The text was supported by a project financed by The Kosciuszko Foundation.