Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century

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Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century


Reviewed by Donald M. Scott, Independent Scholar.

For five years I wandered in a 1977 Toyota Chinook micro-RV, the “William Clark,” volunteering for public lands agencies—National Forests, National Parks, the Public Lands Institute of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Bureau of Land Management—one of thousands volunteering to help underfunded public lands stretch thin dollars. A campsite or basic lodging was provided and sometimes a stipend to pay for small daily expenses, but the work was done primarily as public service. Before that, I was a National Park Ranger, and, as a fourth-generation Westerner, also a camper and hiker at an early age. So when I was asked to read and review Nomadland, I enthusiastically agreed.

Jessica Bruder’s book describes a recent socioeconomic phenomenon: the huge number of “houseless” people living in vehicles as they wander seeking work or gathering together for support and encouragement. The group includes “vandwellers,” living rent-free on public lands or “stealth camping” in towns and cities, and “workampers,” who work seasonally while vandwelling. They are often the same people.

The book focuses on one wanderer, Linda May, an aging grandmother with wanderer’s roots (a distant ancestor came west in a covered wagon), who has been squeezed out of work. At one point suicidal—she is without money or electricity, living in a dark, dank trailer—she plans to kill herself. Her dogs would also die, though, so she makes a choice: She’ll survive “Hamiltonian” America. Following her ancestor’s example, she buys a tiny, used trailer, names it the “The Squeeze In,” and heads out on the road to seek renewal.

How does such dislocation happen? Bruder profiles Empire, Nevada, a company town and mill near the Black Rock Desert, closed by U.S. Gypsum in 2010. In one day, dozens of workers were put out of work and their families out of their homes. (This part of her book hit home: As a NASA educator, I taught in Empire for a day.) Bruder describes the kind of jobs the fired likely got: seasonal work for Amazon or similar low-paying, no-benefit jobs—a major step down from the middle class. It is interesting to note that Empire’s site is only a few miles from the Black Rock Desert—where, during the annual Burning Man Festival on Labor Day weekend, thousands of “economy-knowledge” workers disport themselves on expensive vacations, participating in transitory art—and the topic, ironically, of Bruder’s (2007) first volume, Burning Book.

Empire is not unique. This country has known its share of economically dispossessed wanderers seeking better lives—from Puritans like the first National Park Service Director Stephen T. Mather’s ancestor Richard Mather escaping “bad mortgages” in seventeenth-century England, to the Westward Movement, to “Okies” heading for California in the Depression. In his excellent book about the Oregon Trail, Buck (2015, 109) explained how the iconic Westward Movement began when farmers and small businessmen, forced into economic (and psychological) depression by bank failures in the Panic of 1837, sold out at a great loss, hitched up their farm wagons, and headed for Oregon. Then, as now, it was bank failure...
that inspired the movement; and then as now, the road to distant open lands promised hope. Even the name of the pioneers’ main jumping-off place, Independence, was encouraging.

As Least Heat Moon (1983, 3) puts it in Blue Highways, it is the essential American idea that if you cannot make a go of things, at least you can pack up and go.

Will Rogers (1931) famously said, “We’ll hold the distinction of being the only Nation in the history of the world that ever went to the poor house in an automobile.” Today he might add we will be the only nation who finds the poorhouse—or how to avoid it—on the Internet. Linda May took her first steps toward surviving when she discovered Bob Wells’s (2018) CheapRVLiving.com. Soon the Internet became a new kind of neighborhood for her. It helped her find her first RV, steered her toward seasonal work, and—most of all—brought her hope. She became a workamper, joining communities at campsites where she and others stayed during their seasonal jobs. Learning after her work season ended of a vandwellers’ gathering, Linda May headed for the two-week “Rubber Tramp Rendezvous” near Quartzsite, Arizona. There, organizer Bob Wells and others offered seminars about financial, technical, legal, and social strategies for the group. Afterward, attendees gathered around potlucks and the campfire to swap stories and ideas. No longer alone in her American survival adventure, Linda could look forward to thriving.

Bruder also shares the stories of other vandwellers. Working together in poorly paid, difficult, seasonal jobs, they live together in nearby (or not-so-nearby) RV parks. Sitting around the campfires after a hard day at work, they encourage each other, exemplifying de Saint Exupéry’s (1939) quote: “Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction” (288). Sometimes “the same direction” is simply helping each other through a miserable workday, sometimes it is sharing dreams—of hiking the long trail, kayaking the river, or finding a cheap place to build a sturdy home. Sometimes it is sharing a faith, in talks around the campfire, that “What makes the desert beautiful is that it hides, somewhere, a well” (de Saint Exupéry 1943, 52).

Bruder decides that to fully understand the nomads, she must join them. She buys a van, names it Halen, and heads west. Along the way she confronts challenges like those vandwellers must deal with: a looming tornado with no basement offering shelter, mechanical problems, a car clout, and difficulty filling a prescription without a legal physical address. It helps her gain some understanding of the lives of the people she is studying. Bruder signs up for two of the largest businesses that hire seasonals: Amazon and Crystal Sugar’s beet harvest warehouses. She leaves Crystal after a few days and Amazon after a week. She has gained an idea of workampers’ jobs and poor work conditions. Yet she cannot feel the desperate workampers’ need to stick with it, pain or danger be damned, because they must do so. The houseless are everywhere. For example, one recent survey estimated downtown Los Angeles’s tent dwellers to be in the thousands—and notes the number has exploded. Bruder brings them out of the shadows and humanizes them. It is an important contribution to the understanding of issues of our time and highly recommended, but the book does have a few shortcomings.

There is not much discussion of the literature of road life. “One guy at a Rubber Tramp Rendezvous campfire was horrified to learn I hadn’t yet read Travels with Charley; the next day he arrived at the van to lend me a paperback. Other entries in the literary canon of this subculture include Blue Highways by William Least Heat Moon, Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey” (p. 161). Least Heat Moon’s tale of his 11,000-mile U.S. journey in a van after he loses job and wife and Abbey’s (1968) beautiful book describing his seasonal ranger summer at Arches National Monument are microcosms of the lives of the vandwellers. To dismiss them in a footnote weakens her book.

Although ecological novelist and historian George R. Stewart believed “the land is a character in the work” (Scott 2012, 186), the land enters Bruder’s book only in passing, when she describes sometimes-unpleasant weather, vast distances, or free places to stay. She seems to view those who protect public lands with disdain: “A forest ranger appeared in camp the next day . . . and asked the length of their stay. Bob told a white lie: They’d only been there four days. (In truth it had been just over two weeks.)” (p. 159). Even protection of public lands doesn’t seem to be an issue: When Linda May loses a propane tank—“combustible tumbleweed,” Bruder calls it (p. 13)—and decides it’s not safe to retrieve, she and Bruder leave the tank in one of the most flammable ecosystems on Earth. If vandwellers depend on public lands, public lands and their keepers—and those who volunteer to help rangers preserve those lands—deserve more respect than that act of roadside abandonment reveals.

Bruder ignores a large group who help public lands by volunteering for parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and other public land agencies: volunteers-in-public-lands (VIPs). Some VIPs might be motivated partly by loss of middle-class jobs (I was), but the principal motivation is public
service. VIPs are also vandwellers and workampers and Bruder’s book would have profited from reporting on them. At times Bruder shifts her focus away from the hard lives of her subjects to inject other issues: “I wondered if the lack of racial diversity [among vandwellers and workampers] had something to do with the fact that camping attracts a disproportionately white audience. . . . Or perhaps the problem was racism?” (p. 179). It is confusing: Is the book about a major socioeconomic dislocation, or about “diversity” and possible racism? Although I am firmly on the liberal side of mugwumpery, I believe this would be a stronger book if Bruder had stayed focused on the Hamiltonian diaspora and its effects on all Americans.

Finally, there is the Hamiltonian factor. John Adams colorfully warned his friend Dr. Benjamin Rush—and consequently all of us—that “Alexander Hamilton’s projects of raising an army of fifty thousand Men, ten thousand of them to be Cavalry and his projects of sedition Laws and Alien Laws and of new taxes to support his army, all arose from a superabundance of secretions which he could not find Whores enough to draw off” (Adams 1806, 1). Yet today both parties and most “leaders” are Hamiltonian, worshipping the standing army, militarizing police, hardening borders, and privatizing public assets like schools and campgrounds. Their refusal to control—“govern”—banks and corporations is the underlying reason for the vandwellers and workampers Bruder is studying. The book would have benefited from an exploration of this deeper cause of today’s problems.

Bruder does point out that the Hamiltonian passion for security is going to make things worse for the nomads. The new “REAL” license, soon to be required by the federal government and the Transportation Security Administration, will require physical addresses for wanderers. “The government wants you to live in a house,” Web site gurn Bob Wells warned them. “They’re tightening the grip all the time” (p. 213).

Bruder ends with hope, as Linda May finds affordable land where she can build a passive solar Earthship using recycled and natural materials. Bruder inspects the land for Linda May, finally describing desert flora and the desert’s wild beauty. No longer squeezed out nor squeezed in, Linda May has found her hidden desert well. A passionate invitation goes out over the Internet to her new friends and fellow nomads: “Come to Arizona and help build an Earthship!” Her friends are excited. It is an encourage-

ment—and a plan—for all those suffering from Hamiltonian dislocation.

Even with some weaknesses, this is a valuable book—especially for those who do not fully realize the massive disruption Hamiltonianism and its difficult child, 2008, brought on middle-class families. As Bruder explains, “The top 1 percent now makes eighty-one times what those in the bottom half do, when you compare average earnings. For American adults on the lower half of the income ladder—some 117 million of them—earnings haven’t changed since the 1970s” (p. 247). Bringing to life the discouragement of such disruption, and the hope people find on the road to encouragement, Bruder is taking one of the first steps—education—to solving the problem.

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References