IN 2021, CHLOÉ ZHAO’S FILM Nomadland won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, the Academy Award, Golden Globe, the British Academy Film Award (BAFTA), and many other awards for Best Picture, as well as numerous Best Directing awards for Zhao and Best Actress awards for Frances McDormand. Nomadland captures aspects of a hitherto ignored subculture of transient houseless older Americans who have taken to the road in RVs and vans, seeking itinerant jobs rather than experiencing the promised ease of retirement. The film filters our knowledge and experience of the nomads through McDormand’s fictional character Fern, a widow who loses her home when the US Gypsum plant that dominates her hometown of the ironically named Empire, Nevada, shuts down and the town is abandoned.

The film is based on the nonfiction book Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century, by Jessica Bruder, and the film incorporates many of Bruder’s characters, who play themselves and interact with Fern. Bruder details the economic realities that underpin the reasons why the people documented are forced to adopt nomadism: societal and economic failure that produces extreme income disparities, high medical expenses, crushing debt, inadequate Social Security payments, a reliance on itinerant workers, and lack of benefits and savings. Bruder notes that nomads often claim to be choosing their destiny, but she emphasizes how the sense of choice is kettled by economic realities. Bruder quotes one nomad who makes clear that they face, at best, a Hobson’s choice: “The economy is not getting better. You have a choice—you can be free or you can be homeless.”1 With regard to female nomads, in particular, Bruder calls attention to the economic reality of older women in America: among older women living alone, more than one in six live in poverty; older women are two times more likely than older men to be
poor; and, owing to the gender wage gap, wherein women earn eighty cents on the male dollar, and time out of employment because of maternity and other caregiving work, women earn significantly less than men over their lifetime and thus get fewer benefits from Social Security and accumulate less savings than men. Bruder underscores how difficult the nomad lifestyle can be. She describes how these older workers are hired by Amazon for seasonal work, which specifically recruits the elderly homeless under the moniker CamperForce. These workers walk more than twenty thousand steps a day doing hard physical labor and are often injured, yet they have no benefits.

Some reviews of *Nomadland* censure the film for softening Bruder’s critique. Richard Brody notes that the film shows both “the struggles of nomads of necessity, who lost their livelihoods, and those who describe their nomadism in terms of a spiritual quest, an intentional rejection of settled ways of life and what they consider more conventional and more commercial, consumerist values.” He argues, however, that the film tilts the balance to the latter by tying Fern’s motives to a desire for independence rather than economic concerns. Joshua Keating claims, similarly, that rather than emphasize “the economic conditions that make retirement impossible for middle-class Americans,” the film opts to present nomadism “as a means of personal liberation or escaping personal trauma.”

In many ways, the film explains Fern’s nomadism as the result of a character trait. For example, given a chance to move in with fellow nomad and semiboyfriend Dave (David Straithairn), who is leaving the road for the comforts of his son’s comfortable house and the ties of family, Fern opts for the road. She won’t even sleep in the guest bedroom, choosing her van over a comfortable bed. When Fern visits her sister to borrow cash for van repairs, her sister asks her to move back to her childhood home, but Fern says she can’t live there. Her sister identifies Fern’s refusal as a long-standing character trait: “It’s always what’s out there that’s more interesting. You left here as soon as you could.” Her sister expresses her disappointment that she didn’t have Fern with her when she was growing up but commends Fern for her unconventionality. Where others viewed her as “eccentric,” or “weird,” she says, she always saw Fern as “braver and more honest than everybody else.”

Not only does the film play up Fern’s choice, but it also downplays the difficulty of nomadism (the infamous scene of Fern pooping in a bucket, aside). Keating suggests that the film presents a “surprisingly benign portrayal of work at Amazon, leaving out the long hours, grueling physical demands and frequent injuries,” in order, he implies, to get permission to film
at an Amazon warehouse. Indeed, we see the CamperForce workers getting safety tips from an Amazon worker, taking a convivial lunch break, and working without any sense of strain or difficulty, all while the Amazon logo is prominently displayed on uniforms and boxes. Fern, especially, seems to be enjoying the work and smiles as she carries a bin through the Amazon warehouse wearing an Amazon hat. In addition to Amazon, Fern labors at a turnip farm, works the kitchen at Wall Drug, and serves as a cleaning lady at a campsite. None of these are made to seem terrible, and McDormand brings a degree of wonder and joy to her portrayal that makes her character seem to be enjoying even the grubbiest labor.

Other reviews read the film through a more romantic lens. Brian Tallerico calls it “a gorgeous film that’s alternately dreamlike in the way it captures the beauty of this country and grounded in its story about the kind of person we don’t usually see in movies.” Tallerico notes that “there’s an interpretation of Nomadland that it’s the story of a woman running from grief, unmoored from society after everything she knew up and vanished,” but he emphasizes, on the one hand, the film’s striking landscapes and beautiful cinematography and, on the other, its attention to the beauty of small things and kind gestures. Viewing the film as a balm for the multiple anxieties of 2020, he avows, “Maybe we should all hit the road.” A. O. Scott notes that the film “smooths” the social criticism in Bruder’s book to focus on “resilience, solidarity, [and] thrift” in a narrative that toggles the “tension between stability and uprooting, between the illusory consolations of home and the risky lure of the open road.” Nonetheless, he ultimately celebrates the unsettling as indicative of a “fine Emersonian spirit.”
In some ways, these romantic readings of the film are inevitable. While some may have wanted the film to hew more closely to Bruder’s dark portrayal of elderly itineracy, Keating suggests it may be impossible to make an anti–road movie: “Put your protagonist on the open road through a classic American landscape and it will seem appealing, no matter what the circumstance.” Keating may be wrong about the anti–road movie: has he seen *Detour* (Ulmer 1945), *Duel* (Spielberg 1971), or *The Road* (Hillcoat 2009)? But he is right that we have been culturally conditioned to view shots of the landscape from a moving vehicle as appealing and that we often project onto the open road what Scott refers to as a “risky lure.”

When *Nomadland* screened at my university, many of these competing views of the film came into play during a panel discussion after the screening. The panel consisted of myself, a white male colleague working in labor history, and a Black British female postdoc in sociology. The labor historian and I both read the film through the lens of precarity. He came armed with statistics about the dismal financial prospects for elderly women and the horrendous working conditions at Amazon. I discussed the long arc of precarity in film, linking this film to others about tramps and the unhoused. The postdoc, however, had a different view. She saw in this film her mother’s migration to the United States from England: for her, it was a story of grit, resilience, and hope. I pushed back a bit, discussing the way in which the film’s aesthetics idealized Fern’s experience; and I asked the audience if they would really want to see their mothers or grandmothers living like this. A white male colleague in my department responded by saying that his mom was doing just that, traveling the country in an RV. He admitted, however, that his mom was not hauling turnips or working at Amazon, and his mom still had a nice suburban house available when she wanted to return.

**OTHER VANS**

As these varying responses indicate, *Nomadland* conjures a spectrum of connotations of itinerant mobility as variously related to freedom, grit, resilience, escape, and tourism, on one end, and poverty and lack of stability, on the other. Amplifying the spectrum, the elderly nomads can be placed in conversation with the contemporaneous movement labeled #vanlife, which stitches nomadism to privilege more than precarity. As Chris Moody describes it, #vanlife is aimed at “how to live a countercultural lifestyle but keep making
money doing it.”8 Where Nomadland shows characters working itinerant jobs to survive, the ethos of #vanlife monetizes itineracy itself to escape the drudgery of work. Moody declares it “a new version of the American dream. It is no longer one of stability and rootedness but one more fit for the current age that promises you can have it all: the so-called ‘dream job’ can be yours, all while enjoying an endless vacation.”

To be sure, elderly nomads share images and information about their van life on YouTube, Instagram, and other social media, “but vanlife, as a concept and as a self-defined community, is primarily a social-media phenomenon.”9 As Caity Weaver describes them, the TikTok and Instagram accounts of so-called vanlifers “are an infinite reservoir of gorgeous, unpeopled scenery previously encountered only in desktop backgrounds: sunrise canyons, sunset oceans, high-noon highways that stretch on, carless, forever.”10 Rachel Monroe shrugs that “the same vanlife pictures get taken over and over: the van’s back doors opening onto an ocean vista; a long-exposure nighttime shot of the van, cozy and lit from within, against a backdrop of stars; a woman on the van’s roof, in the middle of a sun salutation.”11 Open #vanlife on Instagram and you will see myriad images like this, populated especially by young white heterosexual couples, the woman frequently photographed alone and in a bikini.

More than simply documenting #vanlife, vanlifers are social media influencers who earn money as brand ambassadors and by garnering multiple sponsorships with product placements. Monroe describes one sponsored #vanlife post for the water-bottle company Hydro Flask. The Instagram image shows a gorgeous white woman “heating water in a teakettle, a light-blue thermos conspicuous in the background. ‘Our bodies, the most precious vehicle for our journey here, run on water,’ she wrote in the caption. ‘A big thank you to @hydroflask for creating durable water bottles that help shift the bottled/privatization of [the] water paradigm.’”12 A recent Instagram post under the moniker through.the.llyns shows a beautiful white woman lounging on top of her van. The posts respond to the seemingly annual declaration by through.the.llyns, “I’m not doing that for free,” with commenters referring to “the industry” (presumably that of influencers?), proclaiming “know your worth” and “don’t work for free” (work as lying on top of a van?), and describing themselves as wanting to work only with people who have an “abundance mindset” and “high values.”

We can thicken our understanding of the connotations of mobility expressed around van living by looking back historically. In many ways, not
least in their fondness for VW vans, contemporary #vanlifers hearken back to countercultural hippie van dwellers. Celebrated in books like Roll Your Own: The Complete Guide to Living in a Truck, Bus, Van or Camper, hippie van or “truckee” life dovetailed with the larger movement of youth travel in the 1960s and 1970s. Truckee Rob McGraw declared of two buses he shared with friends, “They were our houses, our homes, and we were on the move, looking for America and ourselves, too, I suppose.” The TV movie In Search of America (Bogart 1971), a pilot for a never-made TV series, echoes this view of truckee life, as a college dropout (Jeff Bridges) convinces his entire family, including his grandmother, to reexamine their life goals and leave it all for a cross-country trip on a renovated 1920s bus across America.

While #vanlifers borrow some of the language of the counterculture, they differ from hippie truckees in crucial ways. For one thing, #vanlife seems to be primarily populated by young, white heterosexual couples—as opposed to elderly nomads who seem to be mainly single—whereas truckee life carries the ethos of the commune and cooperative living. Most important, #vanlife differs from truckee life in the attitude toward work and money.
Certainly, truckees need to earn money, and *Roll Your Own* includes information about selling crafts or doing itinerant handyman work on the road; but the overall ethos of truckee culture is anticapitalist, aiming to escape the grind and tension of “the vicious earning-paying-for-the-right-to-live-and-eat cycle.”

If we consider van dwelling in the 1940s, a very different ethos motivates it, as it serves as a form of government housing. As Richard Foster details, trailers and trailer parks that had emerged in the 1930s “to satisfy the needs of vacationing motorists . . . lost their primary association with travel” in the 1940s and were, in effect, demobilized to serve as residences in areas suffering acute housing shortages during World War II. Some thirty-six thousand trailers were purchased by the federal government for residential use and placed near defense plants and other wartime employment. Here, rather than mobility—whether perceived as freedom or precarity—the trailers provided stability in an insecure housing market. This can be seen in the film *Apartment for Peggy* (Seaton 1948), in which a young couple lives in a trailer allocated for GI housing as the husband attends college.

I begin with these variations on van, bus, and RV living as examples of the way in which even the same form of mobility—here, living in a vehicle—can carry multiple and competing meanings. Some of these differences depend on historical context—the difference between 1970s hippie culture and World War II, for instance—and others relate to cultural connotations—the lure of the open road or the image of a sunset, for example—that have accumulated over time. They variously characterize mobility as freedom and authenticity or as poverty and necessity—privilege or precarity. Where some are escaping the trappings of home for the pleasures of the open road, but have the option of returning to a more traditional home, others are uprooted and houseless but for their vehicle. These depictions also reflect different relations to work, as elderly nomads extend their working years past the age of retirement to work in temporary and seasonal jobs that are necessary for their survival; #vanlife influencers monetize their lifestyle to be free from the constraints of nine-to-five work; hippies work only enough to enable their lifestyle on the road; and World War II veterans and defense workers live in an RV in order to be proximate to their jobs. Each of these modes of van living is mediated through films, television, social media, and books, and those mediations shape our understanding of the differences among modes at the same time that they become part of the larger discourse about mobility.
This book examines America’s ambivalent and shifting attitude toward placelessness through marginalized figures of mobility in film. It examines films that show characters as unhomed and placeless, mobile rather than fixed: failing, resisting, or opting out of the mandate for a home of one’s own. These narratives suggest the degree to which ideas of home and fixity in America depend on othering certain modes of mobility while promulgating others. They reveal a tension in the American imaginary between viewing homelessness as, on the one hand, deviance or threat and, on the other, as freedom and independence. This study points to changing ideals in America regarding the status of home, poverty, the ethics of care, class, and social mobility. It provides ways to think about what it means to be domiciled, who can choose to be unhomed, and how mobility is defined through privilege and precarity.

At the same time, the book provides a new way to view American film history. While these stories may seem to be insignificant trend-driven narratives of people on the fringe, they are in conversation with more conventional narratives of success, social mobility, and home: they are the flip side. Rather than marginal, these cycles of films about unhomed figures remind us that genres of precarity have been central to the American cinema (and American story) all along. These precarious narratives, in effect, unhome dominant narratives about American cinema as a cinema focused on ideologies of success and social mobility.

This project connects to my earlier work *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* in thinking about the apartment as offering a vision of home centered on values of community, visibility, contact, density, friendship, mobility, impermanence, and porosity that contrasts sharply with more traditional views of home as private, stable, and family-based. It also connects to my work in *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction*, about the mobility of the urban child and two different senses of neglect: on the one hand, the view that the child appears to be neglected and thus unmoored, unsupervised, and unprotected; and, on the other hand, a more benign sense of neglect that points to the positive thrill and possible risk of the child’s freedom, independence, and movement. *Unhomed* also considers alternatives to dominant narratives of home and competing views of mobility but hitches those concerns to notions of being unhomed, mobile, and placeless.