

The Size of 'Home'

Art is determined and created by the artist's perception of the world, and how they move through it. Artists, authors, and filmmakers alike are often inspired by their homes and upbringing. The space and landscape in which one resides, is central to their concept of 'home'. In the 2020 film *Nomadland*, director Chloé Zhao makes deliberate artistic use of landscape to convey that the idea of 'home' can be recognized in a variety of geographic sizes. From breathtaking wide shots of the American West, to close ups in the small confines of a van, Zhao shows that thousands of acres can be just as intimate as a typical suburban home. As humans, we make emotional connections with our homes. It is where we feel safe and grounded. In the film, the nomads show that those same connections can be made with the land and greater region itself.

A loose and simple definition of a nomad, is “an individual who roams about” (Merriam-Webster). A nomad is a member of a group that has no fixed residence. They move from place to place, usually within a defined territory. These movements may be seasonal, or defined by other natural incidences. Nomadic tribes and groups have existed throughout the ages and the world, and even continue in the modern day. There is a common misconception that nomads have no home, or are homeless. *Nomadland* refutes that claim. The film's protagonist Fern responds to an inquiry about her homelessness when she says, “No, I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless. Not the same thing right?” And throughout the ages nomads of all cultures have proved that it is indeed, not the same thing. Nomads made the land their home. Their home includes the expanse of hundreds of miles, and lands that fade into the horizon.

Most nomadic cultures and lifestyles have ceased due to globalization, colonialism, and imperialism, like North American Indigenous tribes. Other groups had to adapt with the change

of political and religious regimes, particularly the nomadic Arabian Tribes. Small and secluded groups in less populated parts of the world are able to continue their ancestral lifestyles to a certain extent. This includes groups in places like the Middle East, Africa, Russia, Mongolia, and India. The Romani people of Eastern and Central Europe, often referred to as gypsies, continue to live nomadic lives in an urban setting. Nomads in modern-day America experience similar complexities, and *Nomadland* explores the struggles, realities, and beauty of their lifestyle.

A new, and possibly frustrating, phenomenon in the past 50 years has been this resurgence of modern-day nomads. These people are usually white, and have made the choice to leave sedentary suburban living behind and hit the road. In the last 10 years, van living, or tiny house living has become trendy, ‘bohemian’, and enchanting. Recently on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, ‘tiny homes’ and van living has become quite popular. People praise these individuals who spend hundreds to thousands of dollars pimping out their vans to abandon the stress of the world and live a ‘simple and natural’ life. Audiences see this as quirky and beautiful. But this approach is often privileged and insensitive. People in the lower class who live small, simple, and natural lives because of their financial reality, do not receive that same fascination and respect.

In *Nomadland*, Fern’s choice to become a nomad is a choice she makes when there are few options left. She doesn’t do it to experience the world or ‘find herself’. As a poor person who has lost a husband, house, career, her known way of life, and as a very independent person, nomadicy was the most inviting course of action. People outside of the nomad circle question her choices and her way of living. She is questioned about being homeless. She is pitied. If Fern was wealthy, attitudes towards her lifestyle would not be quite so negative. These ideas overlap with sedentary living. Small stylish homes are celebrated, while mobile home parks are dismissed.

This is a socio-economic double standard. It is a privilege to choose to leave behind a home and a life to become a nomad in modern-day America. It is not a choice for the poor. They live it because they have to.

Nomadland combats these negative views of nomadic life. While it recognizes the setbacks, realities, and hardships of modern nomadic life, it uses the land and geography to shed light and reveal the beauty of the community. In addition to economic factors, people become nomads because they love the land. As they further that connection with the world, the more it becomes home. Much of the film consists of long shots of nature, and Fern exploring it. A beautiful sequence in the film depicts Fern's growing connection with her home. She verbally communicates with the land by shouting her name to echo through the mountains, forest, and rocks. She swims naked in the rivers and simply and silently observes wildlife. There is little dialogue in these sequences throughout the film. It's just Fern and the land. There are many wide shots of the scenery of Nevada, Wyoming, and Arizona, as Fern drives along the road in her van. These wide shots are never stationary. The camera is always moving and Fern is always moving. If the camera is, in fact, stationary, it is still moving in the car with Fern, as the outside world flies past. This reflects the movement of nomads. The land itself doesn't move, but the nomads move along it. These repeated similar images show the audience that the van and the countryside is her home. We become accustomed to the idea that 'home' is as big as the sweeping vistas, and as small as the car that moves Fern through and around them.

These vast and magnificent images of the natural world, and Fern's exploration of it, ignites a longing within the viewers. We want that same feeling of peace and belonging. Exploring and existing in the natural world is like a return to the original state of man, to our original home. According to writer Wallace Stegner, we need the expanse of nature to ease our

minds and for good spiritual health, even if we don't venture out into it (44). *Nomadland* reminds us that such places exist. Even if we can't experience them personally, like Fern, we are reminded that there is space outside of our rigid perception of home. Such depictions are like a breath of fresh air. Those depictions of space reaffirm the notion that the world is wide, and people live out in it. The audience gets to see the ancestral and current homes of indigenous people and modern nomads alike.

Fern's van shows that nomadic life is still intimate and meaningful despite the wide expanse of their regional home. Fern is reliant on her van, as much as sedentary people are reliant on their apartments or houses. Fern's small moving home, in the form of a vehicle, relates to the American Plains Indians, who were once nomadic. The Sioux, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow and Arapaho, among dozens of other tribes, lived nomadic lives in the plains of what is now the midwest United States, and up into present-day Canada. Like Fern, they also lived in mobile homes, which the Sioux call 'tipis', though these homes are made from wood and canvas, and historically lacked wheels. Fern and the Plains tribes found use and power in items that aid them in their mobile living. For the Native Americans, this included things like buffalo, horses, and their tipis. The buffalo dictated when and where the tribes would move to. Besides water, these noble animals were their source of life. For Fern, that thing would be her source of income. As superficial as it seems, money had the power to move her from place to place, and wherever she can find work. Her van is similar to the Plains tribes' use of horses and tipis. They used horses for travel and tipis for dwelling, while Fern got a two in one deal with her Ford Econoline, named Vanguard.

This van is central to her life as a nomad. Without it, she cannot truly exist in her home. In her article "The Force of Things", Jane Bennett writes, "A thing has power by virtue of its

operating in conjunction with other things” (354). By itself, Vanguard is just a car. A tool to bring her from one place to another. But in conjunction with the land, and the things inside the van, it becomes more than just a vehicle. It becomes a home. Zhao exemplifies this idea of “thing power” with Fern’s interactions with her van, and the things inside of it. Fern worked hard to renovate the inside of her van, and make it the home she wanted. She felt pride with the cupboards she made, and her organization. She had a special connection and love for the plates, which she inherited from her father. Those plates connected her with her departed father, and they made her van more of a home. When many of the plates were shattered, she was saddened, but soon got over it. She had made connections with other things and other people that allowed her to maintain her home. Zhao shows that it is little things that make a home, and reinforces the idea that it is not size that defines home, but rather what makes up the space.

Vanguard has the most “thing” power in the film. Like Bennett says, it is a non-human thing that exercises force upon a human. Without the van’s literal power, Fern would be stagnant. When Vanguard breaks down, Fern is at a loss. Her home loses its power, and she loses the expansive home of a nomad. As humans, we are lost without a home. Although Fern had been wandering as a nomad, she wasn’t lost until she lost her home. The van. This shows that homes can be found in small places.

In *Nomadland*, the land itself has power, too. It causes the characters to reflect and consider their lives, and helps them determine their futures. Fern’s fellow nomad, Swankie, has a connection to rocks. Her wish is that when she dies, her friends and loved ones would remember her by throwing rocks into a fire as a memorial. This further conveys the idea that nomads are connected to the earth, and through the earth, they are connected to each other. Although Swankie lived alone, she shared part of her home with all the other nomads, and their connection

was proved when they fulfilled her fire rock desires after her death. The nomadic community is just as complex and sophisticated as any neighborhood or society. The land is home to all nomads. It is similar to an apartment complex. Each nomad has their individual dwelling space, but they all share the land as a common home, just as all apartment tenants share a building. The land has the power to connect and establish relationships. An example is how Fern and David are reconnected at Badlands National Park in South Dakota. Although they originally met in Arizona, the land that acts as their shared home brings them back together. It is their financial pursuits that allow them to meet again as well, connecting to the economic circumstances of a nomadic life. Both Fern and David have found temporary jobs on the Badlands landscape. The land is providing for them, and they rely on the work there to continue living with it as their home. The land and their monetary needs are the forces behind their movements and current residence.

In one particular scene Fern goes off on her own during a tour and explores the rocky landscape of the Badlands. Once again, the camera captures the beauty and artistry of the rock and sandstone formations, with Fern among it. She scampers around, swiftly looking this way and that, trying to maneuver her body through this new terrain. It reflects the way she is trying to navigate her life, and possibly a new relationship. This scene shows the poetry of the film, and how the story and the art is determined by the natural land. The same is said for the art of the pre-Islamic Arabian tribes. Before the rise of Muhammad and Islam, the people of the Arabian peninsula lived in nomadic tribes. Almost everything in their lives was based off of the land in which they dwelled. Their livelihoods depended on the earth, the plants, the water, and the animals, especially camels. But what set them apart artistically from other cultures, was their poetry. It was an oral tradition, and a tribe's poet was highly honored and respected, for they kept

the tribe's history, and in turn, the poets defended their tribe's honor. The hierarchy of the tribes was based on the excellence of their poetry, lineage, and legends, rather than their land or goods. Ibn Sallam al-Jumahi, a ninth-century writer and critic said, "Pre-Islamic poetry was to the Arabs the register of all they knew, and the utmost compass of their wisdom" (Kadir 330). Their poetry was known for its elegance and musicality, and it was thoroughly inspired by their home - the desert landscapes of the Arabian peninsula. The land defined their art, and their art defined their societal standings. The same goes for *Nomadland* and the community of American nomads. The land defined the art for this film. Chloé Zhao had to look, take the land as it was, and make art around it. The land defines the livelihood of the modern nomads. They base their movements on the weather, the seasons, and where they are going to get the means to provide for themselves, just like the Arabian nomads, and the Plain Indians.

Since the spaces in *Nomadland* could not be manipulated like other cinematic spaces such as a studio, Chloé Zhao used the power of the land to her advantage. Much of the production design was in the hands of God and Mother Nature. The Arabs understood this concept, and based their art and life off of what the earth had given naturally. Zhao did the same thing. She took the things she could control, and made art. This reflects the homemaking of nomads. They cannot control the earth or the seasons, but they can control how they navigate it, and how they live in this home of theirs. In a typical sedentary home, one has almost complete control over what their house contains. For a nomadic home, they can only control what is contained in their small mobile dwellings. Nevertheless, both styles are still a home.

Zhao also makes the point that home is defined by people. Fern has associated her husband with the landscapes she lives in as a nomad. She admits that she does not want to leave that lifestyle, because it would be like leaving her husband and his memory. Without her

husband, her house in Empire, Nevada is just that. A house, empty of the things that make it a home, namely her husband. As a nomad, the land became her home, because she shifted her husband's association from the house, to the land. This was beautifully shown in the scene near the end of the film, when Fern visits her old home once more. The house is mostly empty. Devoid of things with the power to make it a home. It is a shell of the life she used to have. In this scene, camera movement is again important to reflecting the status of Fern's home. The camera moves with her as she enters the house, and slowly moves with her again as she exits out the back, and into the expanse of nature that she now claims as home. The camera moving with Fern shows that she is moving on from her old life, and continuing to move as nomads do.

Through her artistic navigation of space, Chloé Zhao was able to show the unknown beauty of nomadic life. The wide shots take advantage of the vastness of American geography, and show the connection of people to the earth. The film exhibits the intricacies of nomadic society, revealing its culture and community. The way the film captures the exquisite majesty of the world sparks a longing for home, and a deeper connectedness with the world on which we reside. *Nomadland* expresses the truth that homes may consist of any space, at any size. Nomads live valid lives, and have valid homes, in the small confines of their vehicle, and their claim to the land as their home.

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