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CHAPTER 10

Ambivalence and Resistance in Contemporary Imaginations of US Capitalist Hinterlands

Tjalling Valdés Olmos

The first chapter of geographer Phil A. Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018) starts with a recounting of the author's experience as a day laborer for the US Bureau of Land Management in Winnemucca, a small mining town in northwestern Nevada. He is there in the wake of the global financial crisis, in 2011, the same year in which Chloé Zhao's film *Nomadland* (2020) takes off in Empire, a collapsed Nevadan mining town that lies a three-hour drive west of Winnemucca. Despite their shared envisioning of the rural US West as a space marked by capitalist ruin—and perhaps because of their specific media and genres—Zhao's *Nomadland* and Neel's *Hinterland* propose quite different answers to questions concerning how to respond to the continuous crisis capitalism produces in the rural hinterland, what this hinterland's futures might look like, and who is seen to have a (political) stake in it.

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In the first section of this chapter, I provide a close reading of Neel's analysis of what he terms the "far hinterland," investigating the futures envisioned for the rural US West through his anarcho-Marxist perspective. Paying attention to the manners in which the rural-urban binary continues to haunt Neel's political (and moral) distinction between the "near" and "far" hinterland, I probe the illegibility this binary produces in terms of thinking about resistance to capitalism in more ambivalent ways. I expand on this question in the second section of my chapter through a close reading of *Nomadland*, where I trace the manners in which the film presents resistance through a more intimate understanding of the interwoven structures of capitalism, heteronormativity, and settler colonialism. But I also point out how, through its esthetic and narrative embedding in the genres of the road movie and the western, *Nomadland* remains endemically invested in settler colonial registers, invoking (affective) patterns of movement and visuality that "cast nature as other and, through the gaze of *terra nullius*, [represent] indigenous peoples as non-existent" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 6). Finally—taking into account how my objects of analysis remain endemically invested in settler colonialism and render indigenous peoples invisible—I push the question of what it would mean to learn from and unlearn with Indigenous American epistemologies and imaginations as a move toward the unsettlement of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism.

VACATING THE FAR HINTERLAND OF POLITICAL POTENTIAL

Whereas the US West at the center of *Hinterland* and *Nomadland* has long been constructed through the grammars of settler colonialism as frontier—a wilderness turned into a "region of plunder, discovery, raw resources, taming, classification, and racist adventure" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 3)—the hinterland evokes a different, but also colonially informed, understanding of this area. From its inception in the German language (*hinter* "behind") and subsequent translation by George C. Chisholm in the 1888 *Handbook of Commercial Geography*, hinterland is defined as the backcountry of a commercial port or coastal settlement. More contemporary and common understandings of the hinterland define it as "a region lying beyond major metropolitan or cultural centers" (Merriam-Webster 2021) or as "an area lying beyond what is visible or known" (Oxford Dictionary 2021). Where the frontier evokes an unknown wilderness that lies *in front of* the settler's movement toward progress, the hinterland invokes a behind that serves to uphold an expanding urbanized center.

Neel's study expands on the historical notion of the hinterland as a backcountry connected to ports or centers of capital agglomeration. Tracing the manner in which non-urban and peri-urban areas in the US are shaped politically and economically through the contemporary crises that global capitalism produces, Neel posits that the hinterland often acts as an essential "subsidiary [zone] for global capital" and nearby cities, and as such he understands these areas as "fully subsumed into world capitalism" (2018, 17). Of specific interest to me is his distinction between the "far" and "near" hinterland. The "far hinterland," of which Neel makes Nevada and the far West prime examples, is predominantly characterized by its rurality and acts as a "disavowed" and "distributed" space for "factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas" (2018, 17). The "near hinterland" on the other hand "encompasses the foothills descending from the summit of the megacity" or "the exurb bordering newly impoverished, diverse inner-ring suburbs where immigrants settle in large numbers alongside those forced out of the urban core by skyrocketing rents" (Neel 2018, 17, 57). Neel's conceptualization of the hinterland is particularly generative in understanding how such areas—normatively seen as unimportant to the structure of capitalism—function as infrastructural sites of systemic extraction and dispossession that are part and parcel to the reproduction of global capitalism.[1]

Nevertheless, *Hinterland*'s distinction between the far and near hinterland remains informed by a more traditional bifurcation between the urban and rural. It presents what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls an "extractive view" (2017, 5) that renders the land solely visible as a space that provides resources and commodities for (urban) centers of global capital. Consider the following quote from Neel:

> [The far hinterland is a terrain] in which ruined mountain hamlets, desert trailer parks, [and] cookie-cutter cornfields … are united by an uncanny feeling of similarity—there are really only so many ways to kill a place. Aside from the informality and illegality of their employment profiles and the tendency to rely on productive or extractive industries, [the far hinterland is]

[1] In this sense, Neel's work resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of Marx's "urbanist teleology" (2018, 265).

> also united by a certain feeling of slowing time, days stretched long and empty by unemployment, hollowed mills and factories pieced apart by the concrete-wrenching roots of grass and shrubbery. … This sort of slowness gets to you, sinking in your body and wrapping itself like molasses around your bones. The longer you stay, the harder it becomes to reach the velocity to escape. (2018, 78)

This quote is indicative of how *Hinterland* valuates the rural—as a homogeneous space which has been by and large given up on as being able to foster some type of life worth saving. The rural is represented here as dying, ruined, and decrepit. Neel's description of the far hinterland affectively performs a feeling of exhaustion and resignation, and spatiotemporally constructs this space as a stagnant wasteland. In line with contemporary Anthropocentric approaches, capitalism in the far hinterland is represented as "totalizing in its destructive effects" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 4), which makes it a space with no future that one preferably leaves behind.

The vacating of the rural far hinterland as a space of life, of resistance, and of other-world-making anticipates Neel's preferential treatment of the "near hinterland," a peri-urban location, as the space from which more viable forms of resistance to capitalism are materialized. Neel contends that "the near hinterland will likely be the central theater in the coming class war, the most concise summation of which is simply the fact that large populations of people who have been made surplus to the economy live and work along its integral corridors" (2018, 145). So although Neel does make the rural far hinterland visible as a node in the infrastructure of global capitalism, his analysis seems to re-inscribe the (peri-)urban as the space where the violence of capitalism hits harder, making it more suitable for the formulation and practice of resistance. The rural-urban binary here is reshaped, but not rejected. Consider also the formal structure of *Hinterland*: the first two chapters, with their focus more steadfastly on the rural far hinterland of the US West, are geared toward providing an (infra) structural analysis of capitalism in these areas, but do not provide much insight into what forms and modes of resistance have and are emerging from the rural (with the exception of the far and militant right). Potentially worthwhile forms of political resistance on the left are the focus of the latter two chapters, which concentrate on the exurbs.

In addition, *Hinterland*'s anarcho-Marxist approach is only able to understand full-blown class conflict and violent proletarian uprising as legitimate and possibly successful answers to the current system of capitalist domination. When Neel raises the potential for some forms of resistance, including ones that do not look like riots or wars, emerging in the far hinterland he considers these from the same nihilistic and fatalistic perspective as his general assessment of life in such spaces:

> When some fragment of the communal does find some space to congeal in the world's wastelands and factory floors—maybe in the midst of a riot, in the heat of a war, in the cold lonely life led in high steppes and deep mountain valleys not yet fully subsumed by crisis and capital—this fragment is ultimately found, pieced apart, drained of its intensity until it also can be thrown into that same dead, world-rending dance. (2018, 47)

Rather than understanding these "fragments of the communal" as operating outside of capitalism, we might consider them as part of the system, as a "glitch," which Lauren Berlant defines as "an interruption within transition," and a "revelation of an infrastructural failure" (2016, 393). The failure or erasure of such a glitch does not mean that it loses its capacity to be read as a generative interruption; in fact, as Berlant poses, it is precisely by staying with the revelation or imaginaries such failures and "hiccups" (2016, 393) provide that opportunities arise to envision forms of sociality and being that are non-reproductive of capitalism. Such failures, *both ordinary failures and spectacular failures*, thus have the potential to inform "counternormative political struggles" (Berlant 2016, 393). And so, in the next section I want to linger on the resistive potential of "the cold lonely life led in high steppes and deep mountain valleys" through a reading of *Nomadland*. What happens if we read the far hinterland of the US West as a space where "heterogeneous forms of living" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 4) exist as forms of ambivalent resistance that generate alternative imaginations of and for the world?

Nomadland: Resistance, Ambivalence, and Settler Colonial Desire

Nomadland, similar to Neel, invokes the rural US West as a ruinous space in which both communities and the environment are subjected to the unforgiving and volatile power of global capitalism and US neoliberalism. Zhao's award-sweeping film—based on Jessica Bruder's 2017 investigative nonfiction bestseller *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*—follows a sixty-year-old widow, Fern (Frances McDormand), choosing to rebuild an itinerant life in the rural US West in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. The film shows Fern as part of a community of migrant laborers (vandwellers) made up largely of older white Americans, as she travels through the various nodes of the far hinterland capitalist infrastructure. Fern sorts packages in an Amazon distribution center in Nevada, cleans toilets and services tourists on a camping ground in the Badlands, works at a beetroot harvesting site in Nebraska, takes up a job as a waitress at a truck stop diner in South Dakota, and helps out in a souvenir shop somewhere along a desert highway.

The plot, however, centers not merely on Fern's precarious life as an itinerant seasonal worker. *Nomadland* begins with the following words superimposed on a black background: "On January 31, 2011, due to a reduced demand for sheetrock, US Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years. By July, the Empire zipcode, 89405, was discontinued." As the text fades, the black screen becomes the inside of a storage unit door that is being rolled up by Fern. She takes out some of her possessions and loads them into a small white van. While going through the objects that used to make her house a home, Fern encounters a jacket that belonged to her late husband. She grabs it and then nostalgically hugs it, taking in its smell. Displaced from the private property of her former house, the items reinforce a sense of alienation from the promises of normativity that neoliberal capitalism upholds. While Fern continues to load stuff into her van, a wide shot situates her and the storage unit in front of a backdrop featuring the former gypsum mine. Viewers see this extractive fort in its ruinous state, standing on the horizon of a bleak, somber, wintery landscape. The opening scene thus weaves together different scenes and senses of loss: the disappearance of a capitalist extractive industrial site that offered stable labor and income, the loss of a husband and community that sustained heteronormative forms of kinship, and the loss of private property that provided rootedness and safety. Fern's departure from this scene of compounded loss forms the start of some sort of quest and her mode of transport embeds the film in the genre of the road movie.

Whereas many earlier US road movies can be recognized by a motif of aimless travel, where the journey seems to be "charged with rebellion against a choking industrialized stability" (Laderman 2002, 8), *Nomadland* starts with a scene showing the fantasy of American industrialized stability as having been shattered. As film scholar David Laderman notes, "the tone [of road movies] suggest[s] a movement *toward* something" (2002, 20), whether that is an unencumbered and individualistic life on the road where the grasps of capitalism and modernity seem weaker, or a movement toward the (re)attainment of some sort of status quo. Ignacio M. Sánchez-Prado further identifies the theme of restoration and/or redemption as an anticipated goal of the genre (2016, 58). *Nomadland*'s evocation of the road movie, then, induces an expectation of a quest that will restore some sort of normativity, and thus stability, to make up for the interwoven loss that Fern has experienced.

But the film refuses the movement of discovery and restoration that the road movie generically promises. For one, Fern is reluctant to reinvest in the fantasy of the "good life" (Berlant 2011) that heteronormativity and property offer. With her van, she traverses various states in the West, making stopovers at sites of labor, all the while befriending fellow itinerant workers. One of these, Linda May, encourages Fern to make a visit to an annual gathering for vandwellers in Quartzsite, Arizona. There, Fern has a short encounter with Dave (David Strathairn), who makes clear he is romantically interested in her. Fern is depicted as somewhat reluctant to reciprocate Dave's feelings. At first, it seems this is because she is still coping with the loss of her husband. As the film progresses, Fern seems to give in to Dave's advances and eventually joins him at his son's idyllic property in Northern California for Thanksgiving. Fern apprehensively participates in a lavish dinner, engages in pleasantries with Dave's family and friends, feeds the horses and chickens, and takes care of Dave's newborn grandchild. However, when she observes Dave playing piano with his son, her facial expression is flat. Not invoking joy, nor an overabundant sense of sadness or nostalgia, the domestic scene of happy heteronormativity seems to leave Fern rather cold. Attempting to sleep in the king-size bed of the guestroom, she decides against it and goes to sleep in her van instead. At dawn, she re-enters the house and walks through it one last time, as if trying to find a feeling that would spur an attachment to this scene of normativity, but ends up leaving Dave, the idyllic domestic space, and California. The continuity and safety promised by heteronormative kinship and property no longer seem to give Fern a "sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant 2011, 24).

The film's generic anticipation of (re)discovering happiness through the restoration of some sort of normativity is thus truncated. Fern's departure from California is also significant in that the endpoint of the American road movie and western is so often located in this state either as an idyllic fertile space (as opposed to the deserts and plains of the far West) or as holding out the possibility of further progress and wealth in its cosmopolitan metropoles. Fern, instead, takes to the road again, where she first returns as a seasonal worker at the Amazon distribution center and subsequently makes her way back to the vandweller gathering in Quartzsite before finally arriving back in Empire, Nevada. In this movement, the film seems to invoke the cyclical temporality associated with traditional imaginations of the rural idyll (Bakhtin 1996, 225), but it crucially elides the notion of the rural as a pre-modern and isolated space in its incessant visualization of Fern's movement along the infrastructural nodes of global capitalism charted by Neel.

When Fern reappears in Empire, she first clears out her storage unit, telling the friend who is taking over her belongings, "No, I'm not going to miss any of it." She is then seen walking toward her former workplace, the gypsum mine, still lying amidst the bleak and snowy plains. She wanders its empty halls and wipes gathered dust off a meeting table. A shot follows of a dusty coffee mug with "Happy Birthday! From USG [United States Gypsum]" printed on it. In the background, Fern's trembling breath is audible. A close-up of her face reveals her crying, clearly pained by the memories and the fact that she is, in some sense, saying goodbye. By having Fern return to the initial scene of loss, the film presents an ambivalent relation vis-à-vis a capitalist space of extractive industry, conjuring it as an object of belonging from which the hinterland subject might fail to completely disinvest. The mine is then no longer just a symbol of the ruins of capitalism, nor does it merely signify an institution that offers a sense of stability and income. The mug and Fern's tears also make it legible as a space bearing the reminder of ordinary forms and events of failed sociality and community that give meaning to resistance despite their embedding within exploitative structures of capitalism. In this sense the fatalistic affect associated with the hinterland as a site of totalizing capitalist ruin is challenged.

Concurrently, the film also attempts to disrupt the "affective economies" (Ahmed 2004) of this region as settler frontier. A montage of single, still shots follow the previous scene, again depicting Empire as a snowed in, desolate town emptied of life. The viewer then trails Fern from behind as she walks up a residential street toward her former house. She enters and nostalgically wanders—as she did in the Californian property—through the former domestic spaces of the living room, the bedroom, and eventually the kitchen (Fig. 10.1). There, she looks through the rear window into the landscape of Nevada, observing its barren, wintery, and bleak plains. This contrasts with how Fern described her former house and its

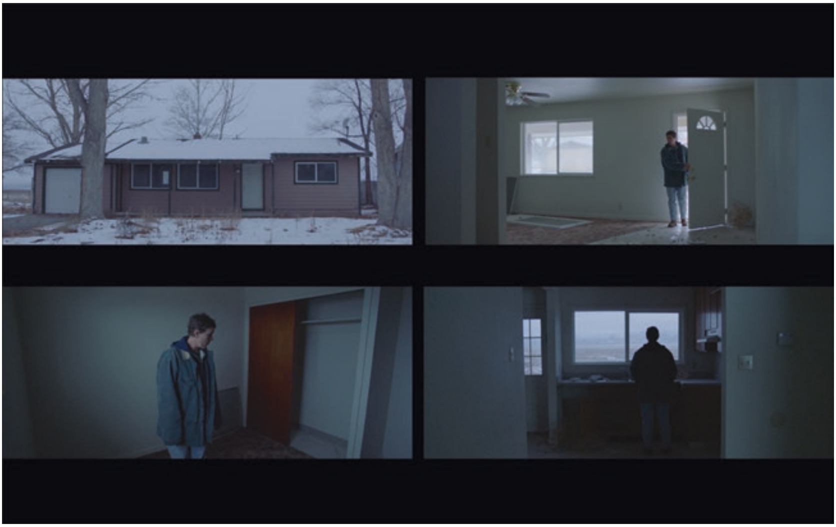

Fig. 10.1 Fern in her former home. Screenshots from *Nomadland*

surroundings in the earlier Thanksgiving scene in California. Asked by Dave's daughter-in-law what her house in Empire was like, Fern answered: "Nothing special. Just a company tract house… Actually, it was special. We were right on the edge of town. And our backyard looks out at this huge open space. It was just desert, desert, desert, all the way to the mountains. There was nothing in our way." This fond and hopeful recollection of her backyard view stands in stark contrast to the present scene of decay she observes from the backdoor upon her return to Empire. In this instance, the film stages a dialogue with the cultural canon of the western that has previously popularized and mythologized the landscape observed from Fern's backdoor as frontier.

Zhao and cinematographer Joshua James Richards speak with these earlier imaginations of the region through directly referencing the seminal John Ford western classic *The Searchers* (1956). At the start of *The Searchers*, Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan) looks out from her porch into the sunlit expanse of the desert (Fig. 10.2). A hopeful expectancy can be read in her expression as she sees Ethan Edwards—played by the iconic embodiment of Hollywood western masculinity, John Wayne—appear and approach the house. The arrival of the cowboy in the western generally

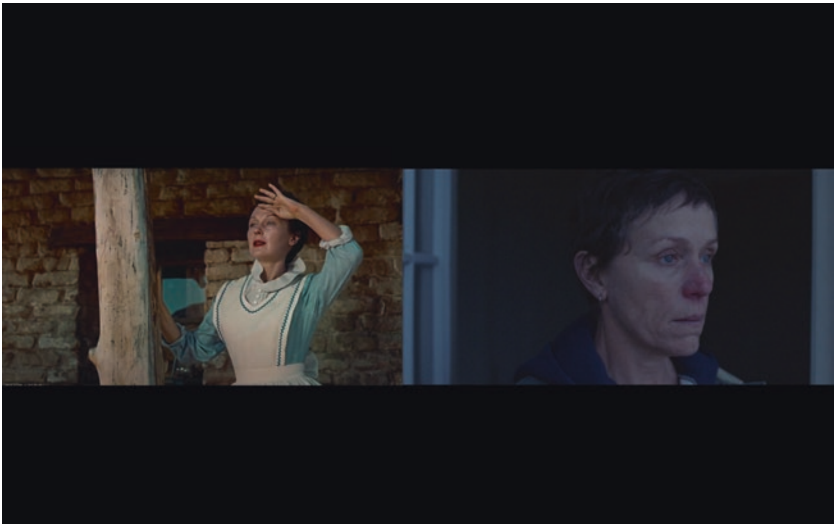

Fig. 10.2 Martha Edwards and Fern looking into the landscape of the US West. Screenshots from *The Searchers* and *Nomadland*

indicates the start of a spectacular quest in which protecting and/or restoring domestic property on the frontier from the danger of Indigenous Americans and an encroaching wilderness is the central theme. That frontier property, represented as the ranch or farmstead and almost always exclusively inhabited by the white heteropatriarchal family unit, symbolizes on a micropolitical level an idealized vision for the nation (Eagle 2017). In *Nomadland*, a close-up similarly frames Fern's face looking into the distance from the back porch, her trembling breath once again audible. Fern's expression crucially does not map a hopeful expectation onto the landscape. She does not anticipate the arrival of a rugged masculine individual to restore the property and a semblance of white domestic heteronormativity. Fern's tract house was never hers to begin with; her settlement of this space was always already precarious, precisely because the possibility of this settlement is tied up with global capitalism's foundational logic of extraction, dispossession, and dislocation. The scene whispers what Kathleen Stewart, in her discussion of everyday cultural poetics in derelict Appalachian towns and coal camps, calls "an audible lamentation," that "trembles in expectation" (1996, 93). Standing on that spectral threshold between property and wilderness, Fern's face hardens momentarily before showing a small smile, turning that trembling expectation into a timid realization that she no longer perceives a desert of opportunity—a frontier with nothing in the way—but a space that reverberates with disintegrating promises.

In the following shot, *Nomadland* explicitly references the closing images of *The Searchers* (Fig. 10.3). After eradicating the threat of indigenous presence and restoring the white heterofamilial space of domestic property, Ethan Edwards turns away from the ranch and walks into the endless and transcendental sprawl of the western landscape. The door of the ranch closes behind him. In this way, *The Searchers* ensures the safeguarding of the white family and nation, while Ethan/John Wayne is immortalized as the rugged free individual and righteous colonial subject who continues his journey toward endless American expansion and progress. In *Nomadland*, Fern also walks away from her former property. The landscape, however, is encumbered by a heavy layer of clouds that foreclose visions of transcendence associated with settler colonial teleology. The backdoor stays open, and as the shot widens, the viewer sees Fern exit

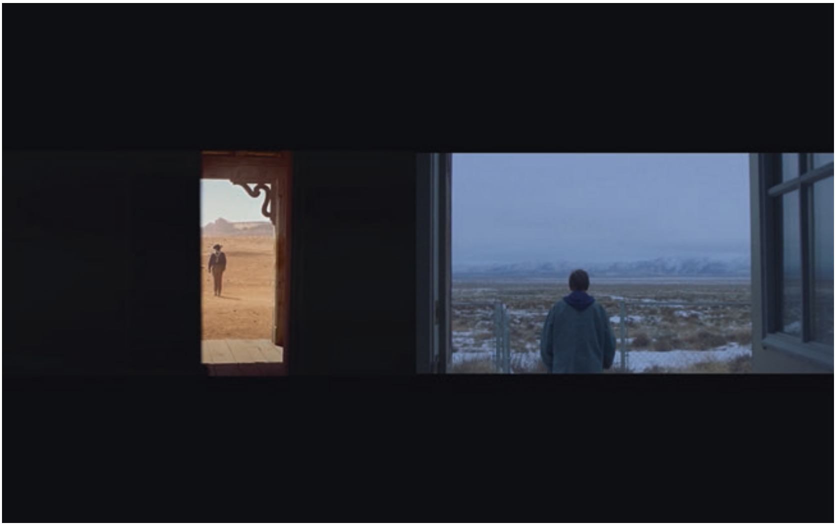

Fig. 10.3 Ethan Edwards and Fern walking away from, respectively, the secured ranch and the lost home. Screenshots from *The Searchers* and *Nomadland*

the frame from the left. Fern leaves behind the mining town, the domestic property, and the landscape as a scene of desire she has become disenchanted with. Nevertheless, *Nomadland* does not—as opposed to Neel's *Hinterland*—enshrine the rural far hinterland as a space resigned to death. Disenchantment is clearly not resignation; rather, it is a moment of shifting desire. In the next shot, we see Fern's van driving, once again, down a highway through the bleak and overcast landscape of the West, implying that she is riding toward her next gig in the infrastructure of this capitalist wasteland. Refusing to move along the straight lines of salvific or fatalistic catharsis, *Nomadland* offers its viewers a slightly more "queer face": an "episode of relearning" (Berlant 2016, 399, 412) that opens up new affective pathways to imagine life in the far hinterland of capitalist ruin.

What is interesting about Zhao's film is that it proposes a register and grammar by which one might start to envision the US West as a hinterland determinately haunted by the afterlives of the frontier. When linked to Zhao's earlier films, *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2015) and *The Rider* (2018), which deal centrally with Indigenous American subjects and spaces, *Nomadland* is able to question somewhat the gendered and sexualized dynamics of settler colonialism that co-constitute capitalist reproduction and the desire for property and progress (Rifkin 2014). However, while I note a partial "waning of genre" (Berlant 2011, 6) of the US West as settler frontier or ruined hinterland, *Nomadland* also remains invested in the road movie's and the western's generic valuation of mobility and movement as boundless freedom and rugged individualism. The centralization of Fern's tenacity vis-à-vis the obstacles (i.e. labor and living conditions) she encounters on her journey construct her as akin to the forementioned strenuous figures at the center of the popular literary and filmic canon of the western frontier: the pioneer and the cowboy. *Nomadland* more explicitly draws on these tropes when Fern's sister Dolly (Melissa Smith) observes: "what the nomads are doing is not that different from what pioneers did. I think Fern is part of an American tradition."

The film differs sharply from both Neel's Marxist approach, as well as Bruder's investigative book, in the sense that it actively avoids a critical visualization of the exploitative labor conditions that companies like Amazon enforce in order to prevent workers from unionizing and tackling the systemic failures that affect them on a daily basis (Crispin 2021; Myles 2021). While the film might thus facilitate an imagination of more ambivalent ways of living and resisting amidst capitalist ruin, reiterating Fern within this idealized image of white strenuous subjectivity individualizes and romanticizes the structural dynamics of capitalist crisis. Moreover, the film obfuscates how capitalism affects differently racialized rural subjects across the hinterland and fails to recognize that certain forms of (ambivalent) resistance might be more available to some than to others.[2]

In envisioning the non-urban US West, race and indigeneity remain secondary not only to *Nomadland* but also to *Hinterland*. Given the historical co-constitution of capitalism with settler colonialism, I find it particularly harmful to ignore the fact that indigeneity constitutes the "differentiated material foundation from which modernity itself emerged and is sustained" (Shvartzberg Carrió 2020). Imagine then that around and between Empire and Winnemucca spreads a different infrastructure, one that remains marginal, spectral, and erased in the imaginations of both texts, but that can be and has been mapped. Imagine an infrastructure that was violently established as both frontier and hinterland in the name of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism, the nodes of which nevertheless contain past and present realities of Indigenous self-reliant communal survival and world-making, what Gerald Vizenor defines as "survivance" (1999). Across Nevada, the Western Shoshone, the Northern and Southern Paiute, and the Washoe continue to shape Indigenous nationhood, subjectivity, sociality, and culture in ways that, as Kahn-awake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson poses, "may be antagonistic to the encompassing frame of the state, [and] may be simply unintelligible to the western and/or imperial ear" (quoted in Byrd 2011, xx). Contemporary Native artists from the Great Basin, like Western Shoshone artist Jack Malotte, historically and presently critique the ongoing violence of settler colonialism-cum-capitalism and imagine other worlds possible, worlds in which it is clear that indigenous subjects are visible, are present, and have an actual stake in challenging and changing the hinterland as space where the historical nexus of colonialism and capitalism continues to violently reproduce.

Nomadland's and *Hinterland*'s erasure and displacement of Indigenous American presence remains, meaning that they evade a crucial remapping of infrastructures of resistance and living through and with Indigenous epistemologies. As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd posits, in their reflection on how key thinkers in critical theory circumvent sustained interrogations of indigeneity, "not being prepared to disrupt the logics of settler colonialism necessary for the *terra nullius* through which to wander, the entire system either freezes or reboots" (2011, 17). Both texts at the center of my chapter do not perform the work of an active learning and unlearning with knowledges, imaginations, and forms of sociality that Indigenous Americans have employed since before being confronted with settler colonialism. An epistemological repositioning that considers Native people as theorists and producers of knowledge is essential in the ongoing project of unsettling and reorienting the seductive and extractive settler colonial view of the non-urban US West as hinterland or frontier—as *terra nullius* ready for extraction and parceling into property.

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[2] The film, for example, neglects to incorporate Bruder's recognition that the reason the vandwelling community is able to move around relatively unencumbered is that it is predominantly composed of white people, who are not subjected to structural practices of anti-black surveillance and violence on the road (2017, 180).

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