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A CROSS-CULTURAL TREK OF NOMADISM  
THROUGH METAPHORIC CRITICISM

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Gabrielle Aurora Wilkosz  
May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

How has the worldwide phenomenon of nomadism — present day, recent past, and ancient past — been characterized through metaphor by writers, orators, and auteurs? Using metaphoric criticism, I show how the rhetoric of twenty-first-century “van-lifers” builds on a long global history of displacement that ranges from Central Asia to Malaysia to the Grand Canyon. This project’s three case studies span two decades each, comprising the Kitan people of Central Asia (1207–1227); Bukat people of Borneo in Malaysia (1930–1950), and contemporary “van-lifers” of the US (2001–21). This MA thesis parses a newfound connection between the language of nomadism and Burkean “truth”; the language of nomadism clearly contains metaphors of fluidity and renewal, and nonlinear, non-hierarchical structures, pointing to political friction.

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*A Cross-Cultural Trek of Nomadism Through Metaphoric Criticism*

By the time a Dayak<sup>1</sup> auntie poured homemade *tuac* into a styrofoam cup for me outside the rainforest festival grounds, I'd had more than my fill of the Fulbright-Malaysia program.<sup>2</sup> In month seven of deployment, a fight to expose misappropriated funds and in-house corruption had surreptitiously dead-ended. Due to the nature of our assignment, pointing out systemic disparities only made us seem ungrateful for our prestigious bilateral peace-making awards, or worse, unworthy. Many in the cohort experienced near-constant bullying. Leadership spewed radio-static ridicule so that quintessential Southeast Asian communal openness ("You are cold, wear a sweater," "He is married, don't talk to him," "You gained weight, skip dessert") became cross-contaminated with abuses of power. For the first time in my life, I needed a drink.

Like me, the Dayak auntie, her boyfriend, and her sister's son and his friend camped out at the humid two-day rainforest concert to let off steam. The auntie worked as a municipal clerk on another island in the archipelago. Her nephew was taking a break between semesters at a college. The boyfriend worked odd jobs. Why did they need to let off steam? After peeling away from my do-good group of American Boy and Girl Scouts for the syrupy Sarawakian rice wine, I

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<sup>1</sup> "Dayak is a generic term that has no precise ethnic or tribal significance. Especially in Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan), it is applied to any of the (non-Muslim) indigenous peoples of the interior of the island (as opposed to the largely Malay population of the coastal areas)." Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to a United States cultural exchange program funded by the US Department of State and its partners.

soon found out why. When the group asked what I was doing so far from home, I explained my “bilateral peace-making.” Auntie shrugged her boyfriend’s arm off her shoulder. Facing me head-on, she said that her community’s efforts to expose misappropriated funds and corruption of formerly nomadic tribal lands had, like mine with the Fulbright program, surreptitiously dead-ended.<sup>3</sup> Auntie’s and her boyfriend’s families descended from indigenous nomadic groups.

In the archipelago, Sarawak, Sabah, and peninsular Malaysia’s indigenous, once-nomadic people were accused by some in the Muslim-Malay majority for high rates of alcoholism, joblessness, and spiritual depravity.<sup>4</sup> One counterpoint to these commonly held beliefs lies in the origin story of the ancestral Proto-Malays who were introduced to Islam and sedentarianism as early as 674 CE. Colonizing forces persisted through the 12th century (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples). Over the past thousand years, Proto-Malays accepted sedentarism and displacement due to colonizing forces. Once free people in memory, the *orang asli* (forest people or indigenous) movement has been fragmented by a government that fails to represent ostracized members. For people like Auntie, to be an indigenous Southeast Asian is to be in a state of sociopolitical limbo.

I first heard and then understood and then felt (at least, felt that I felt) my new friends’ meanings. I listened and asked questions during our cross-cultural philosophizing. We poked holes through theories. I learned some slang. We shared *tuac* the way that strangers, ones poised to laugh or mourn with one another in an instant, do. Our time together lasted until nightfall

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from memory, not a direct quote.

<sup>4</sup> Not unlike some First Nations folks in North America.

when one of my Boy Scout cohort members recognized the shape of my braid in the dark and retrieved my entranced self.

When I returned to my own colonizing nation in December 2019, stories like Auntie's seemed to crane their sunflower heads my way. In another month, COVID-19 wrapped its arms around the planet and squoze. *Balik kampung Amerika* (by returning to my ancestral place, the United States), I also returned to a global pandemic that would not only wipe out close to one million<sup>5</sup> Americans but prompt thousands more to flock to national parks, state highways, and greasy roadside diners to become *nomads*.

These western revivals of non-sedentary living were attractive — the idea that anyone can outfit their vehicle, most famously “vans,” not only to hit the road but live on it. The BBC reported in 2021, “The nomadic way of life has increased in popularity due largely to the rise of the digital nomad movement, driven by remote workers who are unbound by traditional office jobs.” Social media consumption increased by 218% during the pandemic, coinciding with the unearthing of itinerant lifestyles, a form of contemporary nomadism (Nielsen 2021). Thus, a fantasy of movement and mobility sprang forth, countering the liberties denied during lockdown. Coupled with the advent of portable Wi-Fi hubs and showers and collapsible kitchen-living rooms (sourced from low-wage manufacturers in the global south), the do-it-yourself option to support oneself financially with remote work or passive ad revenue via social media platforms and merchandising provides consumers with the option to create content, monetizing getting out

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<sup>5</sup> 943,000 deaths at the time of this paper's inception. In March 2022, the millionth American is expected to die from Covid-19 (The New York Times and Our World in Data).

of town. And, if you yourself can't be a nomad, there exists for your consumption a plethora of media on the subject, including an Academy Award-winning film.<sup>6</sup>

What began as a broad survey of artifacts on nomadism and sedentarization from around the world has turned into an inquiry about how language shapes truth concerning movement: movement of people, housing, goods, cultures, and workplaces.<sup>7</sup> As a rhetorician, or someone who studies the seen and unseen arguments in language, I've since sought to understand how the worldwide phenomenon of nomadism — present day, recent past, and ancient past — has been characterized through metaphor by writers, orators, and auteurs. In my findings, the cross-cultural language often used to describe nomadism points to a worldview that includes spatial rather than linear thinking. Spatial thinking prioritizes the location and dimension of ideas, focusing on how different themes are related, rather than definitive, linear thinking that might impose definitive timelines and hierarchies. Language artifacts that describe nomadism use language that resists hierarchical and linear structures. The language suggests that nomadism exists in opposition to structural forms of government and business, which can threaten human agency and self-determination. Nomadism, alternatively, has been used to enact new structures of power. The following research shapes the truth that nomadism exists as more than a relic of the past or an in-vogue lifestyle. From the broad-ranging nomadism of the 13th century to the 21st, this project argues that contemporary revivals of nomadism are not only cultural attractions but also, as depicted through metaphoric analysis, “agents of cultural change” (Amitai-Preiss, Reuven, Biran). Using metaphoric criticism, I show how the rhetoric of twenty-first-century

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<sup>6</sup> The film *Nomadland* is a case study in the following project.

<sup>7</sup> Truth will be later defined as Burkian truth.

“van-lifers” builds on a long global history of displacement that ranges from Central Asia to Malaysia to the Grand Canyon.<sup>8</sup> One payoff of this project is the newfound connection between the language of nomadism and the Burkean “truth” that the language of nomadism contains metaphors of fluidity and renewal, and nonlinear, non-hierarchical structures.

To sift through artifacts (fiction and nonfiction books, screenplays, poems, media, etc.) on nomadism is to be inundated with figurative language, in particular metaphor. Metaphoric criticism results from contributions by I.A. Richards, who wrote about the structures of metaphors in the '30s, and Max Black who famously articulated vehicle and tenor theory. Using Black's theory, rhetoricians distinguish the thing being described (tenor) from the thing used to describe it (vehicle). For example, if one has an “arsenal” of court evidence as opposed to a “stocked pantry” the feeling of the information shapes two different arguments.<sup>9</sup> Pantry and

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<sup>8</sup> The term rhetoric is understood in accordance with *Garner's Modern English Usage: The Authority on Grammar, Usage, and Style* (2016). Garner explains “the slippage toward the pejorative sense [of Rhetoric] ‘the bombastic or disingenuous use of language to manipulate people’ (796) began early” (797). British North American writer William Penn first notes rhetoric's “iniquitous uses” in the 17th century. Penn's “Some Fruits of Solitude” (1693) states that “There is a Truth and Beauty in Rhetorick; but it oftener [*sic*] serves ill Turns than good ones.” Prior to a pejorative understanding of rhetoric as chiefly disingenuous, rhetoric was perhaps understood more neutrally as the art of using language persuasively; the rules that help one achieve eloquence. John Kirkby's definition from *A New English Grammar* (1746) calls rhetoric “the art of speaking suitably upon any Subject” (Kirkby 141).

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Amy R. Clements, St. Edward's University.

arsenal both indicate an arrangement of cavities, perhaps behind a secure door, holding materials necessary for completing a task. The tenor, evidence to win a case, is argued differently depending on the interpretation of an audience.<sup>10</sup> The tenor of an arsenal of court evidence argues for defensive, militant vehicle. In contrast, the tenor of a stocked pantry of court evidence argues for an offensive, nourishing vehicle. The reader's ability to feel and interpret their own emotional and cultural response to the rhetor's tenor and vehicle within the artifact plays an essential role in rhetorical study.

By charting the velocity of a particular metaphor or groupings of metaphors, we come closer to what Kenneth Burke calls "the discovery and description of 'the truth'" (Burke). Scholars instrumental to legitimizing the study of metaphor, including Stefan Larsson, Jeffery Feldman, George Lakeoff and Mark Johnson, and Burke, agree that not only is metaphor a nonliteral comparison in which a word or phrase from one category of experience is transplanted into another domain, but also that metaphors are everyday analogies, "which allow us to map one experience... in the terminology of another experience" (Larsson 355). Metaphors do not simply play a particular role in argumentation. Metaphors are arguments. Sonja K. Foss on whose method of metaphoric criticism this project<sup>11</sup> relies, argues that by deconstructing the analogistic language of an artifact, we locate the argument. "Metaphor does not simply provide support for an argument; instead, the structure of the metaphor itself argues" (Foss 288). What follows lies in the experience of the reader. "If the audience finds the associated characteristics acceptable and sees the appropriateness of linking the two systems of characteristics, the audience accepts

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<sup>10</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list of figurative language interpretations.

<sup>11</sup> A method of criticism section is located in Appendix A.

the argument the metaphor offers” (Perry 230). It is through the experience of the reader that an evaluation of the characteristics and *feeling* of metaphor in nomadic literature earns meaning.

Interestingly enough, my research has shown me that writers from a variety of genres require metaphor to disseminate their research on non-sedentary people. In his ideological criticism, sociopolitical writer Phil A. Neel’s nomads in *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018) are described as “a proponent of the conscious choice of new metaphors to invoke individual and social change” (Foss 289). Neel’s ideological critique of capitalism’s impact on (involuntary) transients worldwide suggests that in China and the US, displaced populations are impacted by an uneven distribution of wealth and growth in cities with no clear solution (Neel 4). His work on displacement, a form of involuntary nomadism, uses the metaphor groupings of constellations (8–10), crowds (11–13), separation (13–18) and connections (19–22). Cross-cultural rhetorics, or a study of the discourse concerning cultural interactivity, has always been linked with movement, and movement with economy. The existence of metaphor in socioeconomic scholarship like Neel’s shows two things: one, that metaphor can work as a figurative retention pond, retaining the unfathomable topics of movement and economy (push and pull factors.) Second, the existence of metaphor in socioeconomic scholarship like Neel’s foreshadows how metaphor is used across genres, including the socioeconomic (Neel), historical (Biran), anthropological (Sellato), and visual (Zhao.)

This project’s three case studies span two decades each, comprising the Kitan people of Central Asia (1207–1227); Bukat people of Borneo in Malaysia (1930–1950), and contemporary “van-lifers” of the US (2001–21). An understanding of “agents of cultural change” articulated in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors* parses

the Mongol empire's rise and decline, which I apply, along with Neel's work, to the following three case studies. As agents of cultural change, the Mongols facilitated the adoption of the best policies, inventions, source materials, and strategies of those whom they conquered. At their peak, the nomadic group controlled between 11 and 12 million contiguous square miles, an area about the size of Africa (Weatherford 2). The Mongols also enabled individuals caught in the cultural crossfire to transition to a Mongol ethnicity, which, I argue, resulted in a theme of cross-cultural rhetorics. Non-sedentary van-lifers, Auntie's ancestors, and Genghis (preferred *Chinggis*) Khan's Mongols and Kitan people provide this project with a wide range of nomad case studies offset by the narrow lens of metaphoric criticism.

Through the process of untangling figurative linguistic elements of the sample texts, readers will come to an expanded definition of nomadism and its global function as an agent of cultural change. The research of artifacts from Biran and Sellato reveal patterns of sedentarization and mobility as a response to economic injustice. Interestingly, the reverse, nomadization, rendered by Zhao has also become a response. The work in this project hopes to pave the way for future pieces of rhetorical criticism that analyze the language of nomadism.

This project also moves in respect to indigenous people and formerly nomadic communities adjacent and abroad. The United Nations reports that indigenous peoples today, including nomadic people, bear disproportionate costs from resource-intensive and resource-extractive industries (Braidotti). It is to these communities, like Auntie's, that the language of the figurative becomes corporeal.

### Remember the Kitans: Retracing a history of the Mongol and Biran nomads

This noble king was called Genghis Khan,  
 Who in his time was of so great renown  
 That there was nowhere in no region  
 So excellent a lord in all things.

(Chaucer, “The Squire’s Tale”)<sup>12</sup>

To get a stronger understanding of what nomadism is and how it operates throughout time, I first charting the velocity of groupings of metaphors in the first of three artifacts: the chapter “The Mongols and Nomadic Identity” (152–181) from *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors* (University of Hawai’i Press 2015). In it, Michael Biran argues that “Mongol imperial policies played a crucial role in determining the direction of identity change among their mixed subject population...” (152). Foregrounding a cross-cultural rhetorics, Biran arranges his scholarship using cause and effect. A cause is the nomadic group’s ethnographic conquest of both the Kitan land and people, with Kitan cultural identity changes as a result. The argument is organized to express the configuration of ethnicities within Eurasia; how parts of the long Mongol conquest fell into place; and what evidence remains of changed identities. The Kitan people are Biran’s core interest. The historian also details the lives of other affected Central Asian people groups including the Tanguts, Uighurs, and Qipchaqs. Another result is a complex spread of the Kitan people into disparate communities riddled with questions of steppe politics, adoption of Chinese identity, class structure, and imposing Mongol expansion. In particular, Biran sorts through evidence from two of the primary developments: 1) the loss of the Kitans’ political frameworks and 2) Kitan communities’

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Squire’s Tale,” *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1395)

geographic distribution. Also worthy of mention, the artifact affirms that under the heterogeneous rule of Chinggis Khan, what made a person a Mongol wasn't his or her lifestyle as sedentary or, in the Kitan people's case, nomadic: "According to the great khan, [it] is the bond between comrades-in-arms, excelling in warfare, and proven loyalty." Biran adds, "Since most of the documented Kitans were soldiers, this path was readily available to them" (165). As nomadic literature, this line could suggest that knowledge of structural operations of the Mongol takeover of the Biran people and their land relied on mobility across and between categories. It could be seen as a micro-example of spatial as opposed to linear conceptualization.

In one metaphor grouping from the artifact, figurative language alluding to bodies of water appears. Clans and tribal units are "left in the wake" (152, 169). Dynasties are "quelled" by Ji emperor Shizong (r. 1161–1189). Meanwhile, the emergence of a failed independent Kitan leader is described by Biran as having "also buoyed their Kitan identity" while integration is later "buoyed" by social norms (157, 169). "Swelled" describes the imperial army (168). Finally, states begin "dissolving" with troops "dispersing" (172) the latter perhaps also lending itself to aquatic metaphors.

Evidence supports a celestial metaphor as well. The Kitan people "fall within the orbit" of nomadic states (153). There are "power vacuums" (153), and the culture "revolves around" gold (153). In line with the celestial, the preimperial Kitans have "loose, rotational leaders" (153). Allyship "heavily influences the formation of the world empire," the emphasis there is on "formation" (158). There is also the "main thrust" of Kitan assimilation, which occurs due to incentives behind the trend of subsuming a postconquest Chinese identity, in particular how many syllables are in a Mongolian one versus Chinese. Moreover, the Yuan era promises to "shed light" (170).

From the stars above to the earth below, agricultural metaphors are also a rhetorical feature within Biran's long-form scholarly chapter. The artifact describes factors that "let to the uprooting" of people (152). The royal court has "seasonal movements" (153), which in context, could be taken metaphorically or literally. (If it is a metaphor, "seasonal movements" might also appear in the celestial metaphor section.) A southern and northern "branch" of administration are assigned to sectors of the Kitan population post-conquering (154). Buddhist, Nestorian, and Jewish communities, Biran explains, were "flourishing" (155, 164). And when leader Liuge in 1219 declines an offer, he does so "on the grounds" that there were contradictions. As a rhetorician, I anticipated an animal husbandry metaphor or some mention of animals generally. There is but one mention of domesticated animals: The warring lords "continue[d] to lock horns" (163). There is also a "Mongol yoke" (167); however, tools of animal husbandry might be a step too far removed from animals themselves. The yoke most likely exists in a category of its own. A "lion's share of documented administrative appointments" might also exist in an independent metaphor category (163). Finally, Biran includes a few metaphors of the body such as "handful" (154, 161) and "heavy-handed" (155). From the hands to the feet, discussion of "equal footing" (157) crops up a few pages from where the Kitan people's identity is described as having "one leg in the Chinese world and another in the steppe nomadic realm" (172). In a discussion of status, Biran mentions the "lofty standing of women," the operative word being "standing" (160).

Metaphoric criticism aims to provide a sense of direction to the detail-oriented reader who interprets nomadism as a whole. Biran's chapter gestures to how we as scholars and laypersons define and distinguish language related to premodern-to-modern nomadic peoples. The metaphor clusters can be grouped into figurative language regarding aquatic metaphors, celestial or planetary metaphors, agriculture, and the body. The author seeks to describe an

ethnic configuration of steppe peoples. Metaphor is the sleek rhetorical device that conduits historical research into a polished product. Sharing a similar tone to the genre of writings used in Advanced Placement World History exams, Biran uses metaphor to argue that the Mongols were agents of cultural change throughout the steppe, facilitating the movement of people, skills, and goods. Had Biran argued that the Mongols facilitated cultural change without use of metaphor, he would be less accurate in describing cultural changes in the Kitan community and factors leading to war.

*Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* by Jack Weatherford (2019) provides further context by which to understand how Biran writes of nomadic Khan and his people's contributions. In the space that Biran does not have, Weatherford explains how Khan organized the world's largest free trade zone, disassembled the feudal system of aristocratic privilege at birth, redrew the boundaries of the world, and at his peak controlled between 11 and 12 million contiguous square miles, an area about the size of Africa (2). When Biran exfoliates the nitty gritty of "The Mongols and Nomadic Identity," heterogeneity and tolerance surface as key concepts. After rhetorical analysis, I propose that Biran relies on metaphors of celestial bodies and water instead of metaphors about the body. By doing so, the artifact's author delivers arguments on "major shift[s] in ethnicity and identity" due to nomadism (152). Metaphor is an argument. A Burkean reading renders metaphor groupings where the tenor, nomadism, is described using the vehicle. Under this reading, nomadism depicts fluidity and recurrence.

The artifact's history of the nomadic Kitan people during Mongol expansion uses metaphor to evidence nomads as agents of cultural change. The Mongols and Kitans enact cultural change on one another. The metaphors, their patterns as tenor and vehicle, and their function in the artifact reveal that nomadism cannot coexist with stagnancy. Figurative language

that endorses change includes “aquatic” and “celestial” metaphors, “agricultural” metaphors, and a handful of metaphors “of the body.” The result? Biran delivers arguments on “major shift[s] in ethnicity and identity” due to nomadism (152). Thus, figurative language works to materialize an additional undercurrent of nonlinear, spatially organized themes. What this amounts to is two-fold: a 2015 scholarly history of a nomadic people who lived 2500 years ago, and second, shifts in ethnicity and identity described as buoying, flowing, rotating, and supplanting.

Metaphoric analysis suggests that a nomadic way of life will naturally or forcibly transition to a sedentary one. Following the ebb and flow, or rotation, or seasonal changes of Biran’s preeminent metaphors, a sedentary way of life will return to its original state of being. Biran concludes, “At any rate, the examples cited throughout this chapter demonstrate that the Mongols were indeed agents of cultural change in all that concerns Kitan identity” (172).

### **Like Herding Bukat(s): Anthropological depictions of Bukat economic injustice woes**

The migrant feminist thinks in generations; in this sense, death is necessarily a comma. The migrant feminist washes, feeds, builds, plucks, sets ablaze, digs, flays, rips, dries, paints, kneads, wipes, testifies, lies, brays, stabs, crawls, lubricates, trims, guts, slaps, mantles, damns, disturbs.<sup>13</sup>

(Dewi Oka, “Manifest”)

Translated from the French by Stephanie Morgan, this project’s second artifact is from the book *Nomads of the Borneo Rainforest: The Economics, Politics, and Ideology of Settling Down* (1994), which provides a western perspective on the cultures of the nomadic

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<sup>13</sup> Cynthia Dewi Oka, “Manifest” *Poetry* (May 2021). Oka is a contemporary Southeast Asian poet who writes about nomadism among other topics.

hunter-gatherers of Borneo in Southeast Asia. French anthropologist Bernard Sellato's "Chapter 5: Processes of Change," resembles a power chapter at 51 pages, meaning that "Processes of Change" provides a unique exigence to the heart of Sellato's proposed findings. Like Biran who studies the Kitan people of antiquity, Sellato is an outsider to the people groups of Borneo. Unlike Biran, Sellato's access to those of whom he writes remains unsevered by time. Sellato's project seems less hierarchical in its organizational structure, perhaps subsuming a constellatory formatting of information, for example:

The conversion of the Punan to rice cultivation, an unintended and paradoxical side-effect of these strategies, causes a reduction in the supply of forest products. But the Punan, choosing to avoid too great a dietary dependence upon rice, develop economic systems of mixed subsistence which, being both stable and flexible, permit them to remain the professional collectors that they have opted to become. (163)

In this sample, Sellato's prose buries the lead as journalists say, causing readers to loop through Sellato's anthropological inklings like "too great a dietary dependence" and "to remain the professional collectors" as readers attempt to glean factual information. In an exercise rewriting Sellato's paragraph, I was able to cut the word count by two-thirds and convey the same or similar information. The reason why two-thirds of the information was not cut stresses the importance of metaphor in conveying the complexities of nomadism as a phenomenon.

Readers would be right to resist the aforementioned observation, thinking, *of course Sellato's project might be interpreted as discursive; it is a translation from the original French.* Having surveyed the French myself, however, Morgan's translation of Sellato remains, since its 1994 inception, compelling. Morgan captures Sellato's academic voice, which is dreamier than Biran's, perhaps because he writes in the *passé antérieur*, the French literary compound past

tense. So although the texts differ, like Biran's, Sallato's is a match following Foss's best practices for selecting metaphoric criticism artifacts.

Metaphors of war permeate chapter 5, which is surprising as there are neither violent insurrections nor battles described. Rather, Sellato's academic text leans on figurative language of war when describing flexes of soft power by the Borneo farming people over the Penan peoples of the region<sup>14</sup>. For example, Sellato writes, "they [nomadic people] have little recourse other than their mobility" (171). War metaphors include "resort to a variety of strategies" (165), the figurative expression "by exchange of blood and marriage" (166), "conflict" (202), "deserted their hamlets" (170), "little recourse" (174, 184). The metaphor of stratification appears 14 times, referring to a classification of something into different groups (202, 203, 205, 212, 189, 192, 193, 194, 201). I would group a stratification metaphor with metaphors of war due to the context in which *Nomads of the Borneo Rainforest: The Economics, Politics, and Ideology of Settling Down* wields stratification. Specifically, social stratification is an "acquisition" (192, 194) and classic social stratification of aristocrats, freemen, and enslaved people (201) is to common people, Sellato explains, opposed "more or less vigorously, explicitly or through inertia" (201). If stratification is not a metaphor of war, then it may signal a group of metaphors of class or class hierarchy.

The metaphors of war grouping exist alongside a slew of metaphors on enslavement. Metaphors on enslavement refer to figurative language directly or indirectly describing the state of someone who is forbidden to quit their service for an enslaver, and who is treated by the

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<sup>14</sup> Sabah, Sarawak, and Borneo are adjacent land masses in the Austro-Indonesian archipelago, south of Malaysia and Thailand.

enslaver as their property (Waite and Lindberg). “Rice farmers are chained to their work in the fields” (186) indicates a state of servitude that the tenor is not permitted to quit or walk away from. Farmers were not literally chained to their work. Sellato uses the metaphoric vehicle of enslavement to highlight a perception of the nomadic peoples of the Borneo rainforest who experienced capitalist economic pressures with increasing globalization especially in the ‘90s. Enslavement as depicted here is a peculiar vehicle. Those figuratively enslaved are restricted in their freedom to move at will. Enslavement can, however, call upon themes of forced relocation or movement. Members of nomadic communities did everything short of selling their limbs to sedentary monopolies, i.e., the heads of rice farming operations, which demanded from the nomads forest goods in exchange for their independence. An enslavement metaphor describes the state of semi-nomadic people who live in the forest, who appease their farming neighbors by delivering high-value forest samples in exchange for contemporary goods (including cigarettes, tobacco) and in order to not become low-wage rice farmers. In this following excerpt, Sellato provides analysis of the economic injustice experienced by the Punan.

I believe that the farmers’ strategy is to settle the Punan, for reasons amply detailed above, but not to convert them to agriculture, which runs counter to their interests. However, once the Punan reach the stage of sedentarization and early horticulture, the farmers no longer have any control over the process. And they are fated, in some cases, to see “their” Punan escape from their economic domination. (175)

“Escape” is not literal, a metaphoric reading suggests. What stands out in this passage is Sellato’s invocation of “their’ Punan,” meaning the sedentary farmers’ specific contact within a community of nomad forest people. Some nomadic folks are seen as belonging to certain sedentary farmers. Sellato sublimates that these nomads are economically enslaved.

Having rhetorically analyzed the only English translation of Sellato's book written originally in *passé antérieur*, my findings locate war and enslavement as primary metaphoric groupings. A potential issue with enslavement as a metaphoric grouping is the serious distinction between tenor and vehicle. Though Sellato chooses to describe economic injustice and capitalist coercion using the metaphor of enslavement, a hard line must be drawn. Enslavement as a metaphoric device cannot be confused with historic enslavement, one of the worst human evils imaginable. What this project did not anticipate in this case study is the girth of binary language inherent to the artifact. Through use of metaphor, the artifact characterizes nomadism in a potentially patriarchal way, submitting to polarizing themes of war and enslavement, which necessitate life-or-death stakes for the reader.

### **Wheel-estate in No Man's Land: An Auteurist's cinematic storytelling in *Nomadland***

“Ride ’til the sun comes up and down around me  
 ’Bout two or three times  
 Smokin’ cigarettes in the last seat  
 Tryin’ to hide my sorrow from the people I meet  
 And get along with it all.”

(Foley, “Clay Pigeons”)<sup>15</sup>

“We help people build homes,” argues George, Fern’s realtor brother-in-law, during a scene in the 2021 Academy Award-winning film of the year *Nomadland*. A tumultuous few weeks led Fern to this incisive moment. On screen, the nomadic protagonist will soon spin into an

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<sup>15</sup> Blaze Foley, “Clay Pigeons” (2014)

emotional outburst at her sister Dolly's backyard party. And viewers seated in their home theaters during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic watch. The scene is a blip in Fern's life, a thematic crescendo that echoes the ache and yearning of a post-pandemic world. In other words, when the pandemic ends, where will our feet take us?

Director Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* screenplay and film are adapted from a 2017 book of the same name by Jessica Bruder. Analyzed below, Zhao's artifact is 80 pages of sparse text. The auteur regards her real-life subject matter (though some of the characters like Fern are fictitious) with anthropological, almost documentary-like study. Richard Brody for *The New Yorker* explains, "Though it runs just under two hours, it's two movies in one: a documentary and a fiction. These two motifs hardly coalesce to become a hybrid, though; the film is not a docudrama" (1). Zhao's portrayal of the story through "two movies in one" enables the sleek, cinematic storytelling of one of the Excited States' darker topics, how financialization drove working class folks like Fern's nostalgic industrial America off the rails. What we can glean from Brody's contribution is that Fern's material and economic well-being are contingent on the bureaucratic and work-for-pay systems that guide her.<sup>16</sup> Zooming out, auteur Zhao's relationship to nomadism is personal — the director at one point lived/lives off the grid with her partner and filmmaking teammate.

Back at Dolly's, George and Fern continue to argue. The realtor pushes his rehearsed upper-middle-class propaganda, explaining why the 2008 financial housing crisis made sense "so they can start a family, have children, take care of their parents" (65). George defends the realty

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<sup>16</sup> Some Canadians refer to the US as "The Excited States," according to my friend Basil Edwin Hall, a former woodshop professor at Clemson University.

business, which Fern criticized earlier for encouraging people to “use their life savings, to get in debt, just to buy houses they can’t afford.” George looks at Fern before he quips: “I mean, we can’t all just chuck everything and hit the road” (Zhao 65). To audiences, it’s a scene of impenetrable tension. To Fern, who has lost her husband to illness and her town to job casualization, the moment could be interpreted by post-COVID pandemic audiences as a catalyst for rage.

Before the midway point of *Nomadland* when George and Fern clash, the grieving-yet-self-assured protagonist takes in stride several blunt questions about her new nomadic lifestyle. As illustrated during a grocery store run-in, the protagonist sees Mackenzie, a teenager whom she had previously tutored, and the young woman’s sister and mother. The newly self-ordained nomad “is caught off guard, but quickly recovers” when Mackenzie asks about the older woman’s housing status. Surrounded by unlimited amounts of goods for sale, Fern — her proverbial pockets turned out like surrendered flags — espouses the film’s most recognizable quote from the film’s trailer, saying, “No... I’m not homeless. I’m just... houseless. Not the same thing, right?”<sup>17</sup> Mackenzie responds to the head-tilting question with an unremarkable “No” (Zhao 10).

It’s possible that Mackenzie’s “no” is what George ought to have said instead of defending practices that fueled the housing speculation bubble and consequent 2008 economic crisis. Aware of global economic pressures, Zhao’s work understands that the causes of contemporary US nomadism are many. Some itinerants cannot afford an apartment, utilities, and

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<sup>17</sup> Paraphrased from 2009 song “The Party” by Annie St. Clark performing as alter ego St. Vincent.

food on government benefits. Some experience financial losses so great, for example, years of medical bills, that working two or more jobs will never be enough. Others escape the snares of spousal economic dependence by fleeing to highways and byways, while folks, like Fern, stick to seasonal work, traveling one lay-off after the next. Many nomads, especially seniors, are an arm's length from poverty, and with that, impending homelessness and houselessness. And so, while *Nomadland* recognizes that nomadism springs from many structural, institutional, and governmental weaknesses, audiences are also confronted with the magnitude of this depiction of economic injustice. And on the sidelines, those who benefit from the systems at play, like George and Dolly, offer handouts to those they love and deny their role in the rest.

A deadpan film review from *The New Yorker* summarizes Fern's state when Zhao takes up her story: "As we're told at the outset of the film, 2011 marked the end of Empire; the plant was shut, and the town effectively died. Fern was married to a guy named Bo, but he, too, passed away" (Brody 5). Single, poor, searching for work and independence, rough-and-tumble Fern becomes a nomad with a penchant for dwelling on the past. Like Brody, a reader for this project placed Fern's emotions as "palpably attached to a bygone America — the America best emblemized by her blue-collar husband and the industrial town of Empire in which they both worked and lived."<sup>18</sup> Fern finds difficulty with the current economic model, its injustices and unforgivingness.

German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck traces the root of western economic peril to star-crossed lovers democracy and capitalism, whom he argues were never meant to be. In one of his texts, "The Crises of Capitalism" the sociologist denounces the relationship between

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<sup>18</sup> Bose, Maria. Email correspondence. 9 December 2021. Clemson University gmail.

capitalism and democracy, a relationship that some equate to a failed marriage resulting in, as Slavoj Žižek argues, an inevitable divorce.<sup>19</sup>

For a time, home ownership offered the middle class and even some of the poor an attractive opportunity to participate in the speculative craze that was making the rich so much richer in the 1990s and early 2000s — treacherous as that opportunity would later turn out to have been. (18)

*Nomadland* includes incisive moments of tension, and in particular, rage, even if audiences struggle to decipher a clear meaning from them. The public-facing IMDB description of the film provides potential answers and reads: “A woman in her sixties, after losing everything in the Great Recession, embarks on a journey through the American West, living as a van-dwelling modern-day nomad.” Under this description, Fern’s conversation with George will be the closest Fern gets to a candidate for the film’s conceptual antagonist: greedy, unfettered, low-wage American capitalism.

Of the metaphor groupings located, the most evident were the motif of weight or heft, metaphors of illumination, and the metaphorical phrase “I’ll see you down the road,” a communal catchphrase that functions as a Chekov’s gun. The phrase is initially literal. Fern’s friend says, “Take care, Fern! See you down the road!” (34). The screenplay later grafts the phrase onto a eulogy for deceased road warriors.

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek argues that our current brand of global capitalism is quickly outgrowing democracy and that a divorce between the two is inevitable.

EXT. RTR - CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

A group of NOMADS gathered around a campfire to remember Swankie.

One by one they toss a stone into the fire.

Bob Wells walks to the fire and looks down into the flames.

BOB WELLS

So long, Swankie. See you down the road.

Nomadland, 82-83

To grieve the dead, metaphor works as an argumentative tool that shapes afterlife travels. In one eulogizing moment, an anti-capitalist community leader named Bob Wells says, “One of the things I love most about this life is that there’s no final goodbye. I’ve met hundreds of people out here and we don’t ever say a final goodbye. We just say ‘I’ll see you down the road’” (84). The profundity of the literal and figurative phrase may find its source during Zhao’s depiction of Fern’s friend Swankie’s death, Swankie, having been an audience favorite played by a real nomadic American.

Metaphoric language on weight or heft appeared when Fern was alone, observing her surroundings: “Fern walks around the cliff in the heavy wind and rain” (81). Another example from Zhao: “Fern drives. Eyes heavy, exhausted” (48). Zhao provides the sentence fragment “The sound of heavy wind” as the first line after *Nomadland*’s title sequence (1). A member of the metaphor grouping that includes weight or heft, one scene describes “Fern... passed out on a weightlifting bench. Her foot slips. She almost falls and wakes up” (7). An argument toward the

argumentative importance of the bench could be a link between the “weight” of managing an off-the-grid lifestyle while meeting one’s basic needs.<sup>20</sup>

Another metaphor cluster apparent in Zhao’s sparse screenplay is the interplay between metaphors of light, but not just light. This cluster includes metaphors of illumination, brightness, and smoldering (as in a dying fire). Zhao converts Bruder’s scene of childish delight when Fern and her friends tour an upscale RV, describing: “Wide eyed, they enter a brightly-lit fancy RV” (23). In a moment depicting Fern’s solitude like the scenes of metaphoric heaviness, the screenplay describes Fern in her van, Vanguard, “A red Santa light glows beside her” (3). Again in Vanguard ten pages later, “The blue flame of a Mr. Buddy heater glows in the corner. The sound of fireworks in the distance” (13). It is the fourth of July, a national holiday spent in a van with Mr. Buddy. In a last example, Fern approaches her friend Linda May’s house to see that the older woman “has neatly decorated her ‘front yard’ with Christmas lights and plastic pink flamingos that glow in the dark” (10). Additional examples of metaphor play on illumination, brightness, and campfires. Fern observes young hippies gathering around a “smoldering fire” with their dogs (25), headlights “illuminate” the dark road ahead (16), the first “light of dawn illuminates” a new landscape (17), and inside Vanguard, Fern observes “A faint light illuminat[ing] past memories — Images of Fern as a little girl. Her parents and her sister. Family life, summer trips, holidays meals...” (74). More examples appear on 11 and 14.

Apart from metaphors mentioned above, a condenser for additional metaphors are “extraneous” metaphors signaled by usage of “crap” “stuff” and “things.” During a scene that makes Swankie dear to audiences, she asks, “When did I buy all this crap?” (29) pointing out the

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<sup>20</sup> *Quasi* off the grid.

many possessions that she'll have to find homes for in preparation for either dying from cancer or humanely taking her own life. "Stuff" appears in 6 instances: 6, 25, 29, 47, 55, 73, and "things" appears 10 times: 13, 27, 30, 32, 36, 64, 65, 84, sometimes multiple times on a page.

Fern is no digital nomad. What physical property she has, she carries with her. This is significant because the film's mobile protagonist is the product of workforce casualisation. Fern is a worker whose employment options have shifted from full-time and permanent positions with security and benefits (health care plans, stock) to casual and contract positions without either. With metaphors throughout, Zhao deploys "nomadism" as a rhetorical foil for casualization.<sup>21</sup> The mainstream cinematic rendering of modern "van-lifers" does more than describe the ways in which westerners enter into social contracts with monopolistic companies who through unfettered capitalism underpay workers to the point of involuntary and voluntary nomadism. To an extent, Zhao juxtaposes the progressive worsening of labor conditions for the working class with the nomadism and all it entails as a solution: autonomy, individualism, etc.

Though Fern's abandoned homestead in Empire is evaporated of life and love, nomadism materializes as Fern's tool for survival. Zhao glamorizes nomadism, papering over the worsening conditions of the working class. Whether it is the friendships that Fern makes on the road or scenes of cinematic individualism (in one scene a solo, nude Fern floats serenely on the water), the worsening conditions of life of the working class take a backseat. Casualization acts as constellations described in Neel's *Hinterland*: "The world itself was reduced to a series of points" (Neel 9). As discussed prior, Neel's concept of constellation refers to the hyper-accumulation of capital and resources into city centers. The hinterlands, suburbia, etc. are

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<sup>21</sup> Bose, Maria. Email correspondence. 9 March 2022. Clemson University gmail.

spaces that are brought into the global capital expanse through their subservience to the city. The imagery of the constellation is invoked as much of the map is dark (sometimes literally as captured by photos from space) while the cities create a kind of mass or light. Though Neel's work cares about an increasingly segregated population, which he says is the result of a post-industrial economy, the impact of a constellation metaphor appears connected between the two works. For *Hinterland* and *Nomadland*, there's an uneven distribution of wealth and growth in cities with no clear solution.

Zhao's screenplay through metaphor defines an angry, nostalgic itinerant's way of coping with the ways in which financialization upends and continues to upend her world. Motifs of weight or heft appear in places of Fern's financial struggle, that is, a struggle to meet her own basic needs. They also appear in the natural world around her, as in the wind, an outside force that, like her financial situation, is too powerful to operate as an individual alone. Metaphors of illumination work rhetorically to signal Fern's innermost emotional state — she is alone in a vast hinterland. In line with memory, the film's tagline "I'll see you down the road" encapsulates nomadism as a thing that is tangible (a physical, liminal space) and intangible (a path toward the spiritual beyond, or afterlife.) What's left is that even if people like Fern's brother-in-law George remain unsympathetic in the face of widespread economic suffering or nationwide peril, the work-and-live financially disenfranchised continue to survive even as they fall through the cracks. Based on Zhao's contemporary film, the previous studies on nomad groups the Mongols, the Biran, and the Kitan people.

## Conclusion

From the Himalayas to the Grand Canyon, where there are nomads, there are agents of cultural change. Following a Burkean answer to the “so what?” question of rhetorical analysis, the metaphors unearthed in this project point to the phenomenon of nomadism as a worldview-shaping argumentative act. This project’s case studies encompass metaphoric vehicles<sup>22</sup> that embody celestial fluidity — light, lightness (as opposed to heaviness), bodies in rotation, fluidity or aquatic language, and seasonal movement. Though some depictions of nomadism might outwardly resist nomadism’s 21st century return, a metaphoric analysis points to the Burkean “truth” that nomadism exists in defiance to economic injustice. As settling was once inevitable, nomadism is inevitable again.

Depicted fluidly in the metaphoric argumentative undercurrent, nomadism is a viable antidote to current sociopolitical structures that do not serve those it claims to support. The vehicles used throughout these case studies understand nomadism as an alternative to formalized government, economy, and society. While nomadism can be a critique of colonization, it can also emerge as violence in new forms. Like modern indigenous movements that seek to reeducate the public, shedding light on the colonizing ways of the oppressor, the resurgence of nomadism as human movement poses a threat to big business and government simply by circumventing reliance on them, at least, in theory.

This project is not at all interested in converting its readership to a life on the road; rather, as a takeaway, readers ought to consider the process of learning and unlearning about nomadism, or ways of structuring society, through metaphor. We do not learn in perfect, cumulative fashion nor do we settle down, and structure our governments and economies in one stagnant way ad

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<sup>22</sup> Not the thing being described but the thing used to describe it.

infinitem.<sup>23</sup> An expanded understanding of nomadism as expansive and nonlinear gestures toward contemporary issues like housing insecurity and the casualization of labor, the latter of which Zhao depicts as a workforce trend whereby workers with permanent positions and benefits are relegated to casual and contract positions often without sick leave or annual leave. As the Mongols, Central Asian Kitan people, Southeast Asian Punan, and van-lifers teach us, an economic model whereby the means of production are controlled by the few is not a static inevitability. Nomadism as a metaphoric act affords thinkers with the option — in fiction and nonfiction renderings, historical and contemporary — to imagine a constellatory, spatially organized future, rather than the seemingly linear one assumed.

Prior to the 17th century, rhetoric was understood not as a marker of disingenuous, grossly unfair discourse but as the rules that help one achieve eloquence. Since then, a growing body of rhetorical scholarship affords rhetoricians the space to make ambitious claims rooted in attention to language and detail. This project was born of a memorable conversation that I had with a small group of people while visiting Sabah in Southeast Asia. My findings through metaphoric analysis point to the truth that culture is not a monolith. So it would be irresponsible, and perhaps disrespectful to the indigenous nomadic and semi-nomadic folks, as well as their descendants, to tie this research into a neat bow. What can be derived from the work of this project is that pandemic itinerancy trends do, according to case studies now in conversation, mirror the kinds of metaphor inherent to writings of nomadic activity in antiquity and the recent past.

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<sup>23</sup> *Bad Ideas about Writing*, “Learning Composition are not Cumulative.”

There's no way to know what nomadic futures hold. Invoking multiverse theory (a hypothetical collection of potentially diverse observable universes) one potential of a spatially organized future might resemble *Nomadland*, which like the dystopian film *Mad Max: Fury Road*<sup>24</sup> (dir. George Miller) depicts mobile communities existing outside formal government structures. Nomadic futures, with nomads being agents of cultural change, could look like digital nomads advocating against casualization by companies like Amazon similar to the Kellogg's labor strike, which lasted from October to December 2021. It could look like citizens opting out of government services, public education, amenities including electric, gas, and waste, and the increasingly privatized medical-industrial complex altogether. It could look like fewer ballots cast, continued deregulation of the labor market, abandoning watchdog efforts to enforce safe local and state policing, and more empty malls. Imagining many possible universe timelines, these discursive "dark timeline" nomadic futures lend themselves to stories of an upper-class elite continuing to exploit the mobile middle-class masses who, engulfed by casualization, have become too unempowered, fatigued to effectively unionize.

In another future, nomads as agents of cultural change minimize the dystopian. Nomadism in a "light timeline" organically disturbs public institutions and capital hierarchies, prompting checks and balances through the kind of grassroots organizing that would make Senator Bernie Sanders and his ragtag group of followers proud. In tension with government and big business, nomadism works to enable some part- and full-time workers on the road to unionize digital boycotts, flipping casualization on its head. Either way, nomadism does not occur in isolation, nor is it a relic of the past. Inasmuch as nomadism exists as a harbinger of

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<sup>24</sup> Dramaticized science fiction in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) depicts a grotesque future.

cultural change to surrounding communities, conversations like these happen, and we move on to what's next — or as nomads put it, so long and see you down the road.

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## Appendix A

1. The critic reads or views the entire artifact with specific attention to its context.
2. The critic isolates the metaphor(s) within the text, both obvious and more subtle substitutions of meaning. Here Foss invokes Max Black's interaction theory of "tenor" (the principal subject or focus) and "vehicle" (secondary subject or frame for the metaphor), a method to analyze ways in which the related dissimilar objects actually share similar characteristics.
3. The critic sorts the metaphors and looks for patterns of use within the text. The more comprehensive the text, the longer this step will take.
4. The critic analyzes the metaphor(s) or groups of metaphors in the artifact to reveal how their structure may affect the intended audience.

## Appendix B

1. How do we as scholars and laypersons define and distinguish metaphors related to premodern-to-modern itinerant, transient, and nomadic peoples?
2. What rhetorical strategies emerge from the use of metaphor by those who research explanations of human migratory or nomadic lifestyles?
3. Thinking of the nomad case studies artifacts as a three-way Venn Diagram, what metaphors do the artifacts have in common or not in common with one another or with the group as a whole?
4. How might the artifact-assembler's depiction of their case study reflect, advertise, or sensationalize a nomadic lifestyle according to the persuasive tools of language that they choose?
5. Why might a depiction of nomadism across cultures matter? For the author of the artifact about nomadism, how might the metaphors used persuade audiences advertently or inadvertently?

