



WHAT WE TALK ABOUT
WHEN WE TALK ABOUT

Appalachia

BY BRIAN STOUT



“We see poor people constructed as people we should despise.”

–BELL HOOKS

Post-election, the political stage remains set for Us versus Them, and it appears to be the one thing both parties agree upon. Political leaders continue to fuel power struggles focused on allegiances to party and not to class. And media outlets, weary from four years of non-stop evaluation and assessment exacerbated by a pandemic, police brutality, and racial injustice, seem less interested in attempting to unify. Honest conversation that seeks to gather and process all perspectives is in short supply. Where do we go from here? How do we attempt to mend these differences? Can we hear the grievances of Working Class White America while continuing to bring increasing attention to other voices that have been marginalized for far too long?

In the absence of a productive dialogue in the public space, I have often looked to films to help us sort things out; not necessarily to find the answers, but to put a finer point on the right questions. Three films released in the last five years, the documentary *Hillbilly*, Chloe Zhao’s Oscar front-runner *Nomadland*, and Ron Howard and J. D. Vance’s mostly laughed out but still Oscar-nominated *Hillbilly Elegy*, take on working class White identity

In April 1964, President Lyndon Johnson visited Martin County, Kentucky, filmmaker Ashley York’s home state, to rally support for his War on Poverty. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives/LBJ Presidential Library.)

from different angles, but do not necessarily deliver diverse portrayals of Whites on the fringe of society in Appalachia and in motor homes. Unsurprisingly, the narrative films offer less nuance and minimal criticism of the structures that systems that have created and maintained these struggles.

"We see poor people constructed as people we should despise."

--Bell Hooks, interviewed in Hillbilly

In *Hillbilly*, currently streaming on Hulu, Appalachian-born filmmaker Ashley York examines southern stereotypes in popular culture and the disenfranchisement that many who live in the region experience due in part to media indifference to their challenges. She moved to California to follow her dream but remains close to them despite the ideological split. Her aim is to share the minds and hearts of hillbillies and to explore the ways that media has misrepresented them, and unsurprisingly, her work offers the most nuanced view of the region and the people.

Her family describes experiences outside of Appalachia and how stereotypes have impacted their lives. In one poignant scene, a family member who served in the military described the ridicule he faced over his accent while he was stationed in California and how he felt robbed of the bonding with other soldiers that he craved. York's film underlines the political split between her family, who all voted Trump after supporting Obama, and herself, who voted for Clinton in 2016. Even some of the more progressive voices

in the film from the region are reticent to be too critical of hillbillies and their support of politicians who put their needs and hopes last. One takeaway is that there is a difference between a politician listening and the people feeling heard, and the latter appears to hold significant sway.

In 2021, and even in 2016, really, it's easy to deride their reasons for voting Trump and their minimizing things he said in favor their expectations that they would be heard, but York's film also doesn't shy away from the ways that the Democratic party has sought to clothe itself in elitism that many working class Whites find alienating, showcasing well-known clips including the "Basket of Deplorables" comment. It's poignant to

see York's family revel in Trump's victory shortly after the election now, and one must wonder whether the Yorks are in better shape today than they were in 2016.

Writer-activist Silas House, an eighth-generation Appalachian, describes feeling like an immigrant outside of his hometown. He mentions that media images of hillbillies produce shame and self-hatred and is shown interviewing two Whites

who discuss code-switching in their work with academics. However, once the 2016 election results are in, he decides that he is done defending hillbillies and hillbilly culture.

York interviews Bell Hooks and several academics who call attention to the ways that poor Blacks in the region are even less publicized and Hooks in particular



highlights the fact that politics are adept at keeping poor Whites and Blacks from joining forces to influence change. One key to this is that people, Whites in particular, do not want to see themselves as poor, and that between that idea and the contempt shown for hillbillies in media, they often want to distance themselves from the hillbilly identity rather than embrace it.

"We see poor people constructed as people we should despise," Hooks said in the film, just after the film presents a montage of stereotypical images that spark outrage among Appalachians, but fear or belly laughs among many. The scene reminded me of a troubling montage of Black performers and Whites in Blackface from Spike Lee's incendiary *Bamboozled*. I was also reminded of one of the most powerful scenes in another current Oscar contender, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, where Fred Hampton addresses a group of disenfranchised Whites to outline his vision for a Rainbow Coalition to fight oppression across groups. Playing races against each other supports the status quo; oppressed people of all colors fighting back is something to be feared by the ruling class.

Mountain people are dangerous and threatening in films such as *Deliverance* and *Pulp Fiction*. Actor Billie Redden from the famous "Dueling Banjos" scene is interviewed and lamented how his big moment came in a film that has shaped perceptions of a region for decades.

Hollywood also did not come calling for him, as he currently works at Wal-Mart, underlining the "exploit and discard" mentality that has plagued Hollywood's portrayals of hillbillies and countless other groups.



Conversely, two films highlighted as "getting" the Appalachian experience are *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Nine to Five*. These films feature strong, determined women from the region with feminist voices and no tolerance for misogyny and feature iconic performances from Sissy Spacek and Dolly Parton, respectively. Several people recount the value of seeing their experiences reflected on screen,

and it is hard not to allow one's mind to linger over this, to attempt to recall the last film with hillbilly characters who weren't criminals or criminally ignorant. In fact, other films such as *Winter's Bone* and *Frozen River* put the focus on women struggling to survive in similar situations with cunning, resilience, and far less polished, but far more compelling, filmmaking. These two films also garnered Oscar nominations and some financial success.

"I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless."

--Fern (Frances McDormand), *Nomadland*
Nomadland, also currently streaming on Hulu, is one of the top contenders for multiple Oscars. Chloe Zhao's newest, based on a popular book, is about a woman who lives in her RV, bouncing from job to job after losing her husband and home. The film opens with Fern wrapping up seasonal work at Amazon to get by before finding some community among others who have



FRANCES McDORMAND IN NOMADLAND.

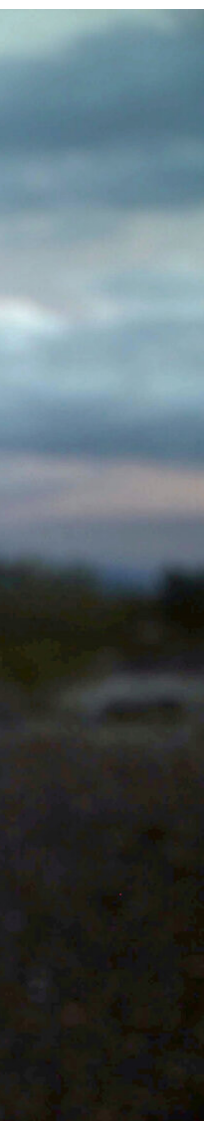
similarly adopted a nomadic lifestyle after hard times left few options. She joins a community overseen by Bob Wells, self-proclaimed “Rubber Tramp,” who is a real-life van dweller and YouTube personality. In a speech early in the film, he outlines his objective: “We not only accept the tyranny of the dollar. We embrace it....we live by it our whole lives...if society is discarding its old workhorses, then we workhorses have to gather together and take care of each other. The Titanic is sinking, and economic

times are changing, so my goal is to get the lifeboats out and get as many people into the lifeboats as I can.”

The film is mostly populated by non-professional actors (save for Frances McDormand and David Strathairn) and their stories are heartbreaking reminders that so many of us are only a few tough breaks from our lives being upended. Fern found herself in this position after losing her job, her husband, her home, and her community, but is resistant to opportunities to regain

“We not only accept the tyranny of the dollar. We embrace it....we live by it our whole lives.”

—BOB “RUBBER TRAMP” WELLS



some of the life she once knew. An undercurrent of distrust pulses through the stories, people who bought into corporate life and the American Dream only to find themselves discarded by it, like views expressed in *Hillbilly*. While other groups have known the game to be rigged from the jump, some of the Whites in these films have now learned through experience that outliving one's usefulness to The Company can be hazardous to lifestyle maintenance, too. One character, a Vietnam veteran, describes how living in an RV helps him manage his PTSD. Another character in the film describes her friend's illness and death before retirement. "He missed out on everything...I didn't want my sailboat to be in the driveway when I died." Another bought an RV after losing both parents to cancer in quick succession. This is what the film gets right. Zhao understands, like York, that individual stories have the most

power.

Nomadland is an easy film to cosign; it is well-directed and beautifully shot. But despite the solid work from McDormand and Strathairn, the well-known stars are distracting, a reminder that we are watching a film. Seeing familiar faces in these roles makes it hard to fully immerse in this world, to forget that we are watching a movie. It could be argued that a real-life Fern and Dave would have served the film better, or that just telling the real-life stories of the Rubber Tramps in documentary form would have made a more compelling case for

Nick's

english hut

19 27

Catch the Game on over 30 screens

- * Subs and Strombolis
- * Nick's Burgers
- * Our Famous Pizza
- * Sink the Biz fries!
- * Beer, Wine and Spirits

Carryout - Curbside - Dine-In

423 E. Kirkwood
(812)332-4040



Open for

DINE IN and CARRYOUT
(812) 822-0694

- * Wood Fired Pizza
- * House Made Pasta & Ravioli
- * Italian Deli Sandwiches
- * Sauces by the pint & quart
- * Lasagna by the tray

Check out our
Pizza of the Month
osteriarago.com

419 E. Kirkwood

Hillbilly Elegy positions Vance as lower class everyman meant to inspire those in similar situations to pull themselves up by those fabled bootstraps.

questioning systems that leave so many with minimal options. It would have also likely reduced the audience reach significantly, and there is the rub—films like this get made when there is a recognizable name attached.

One of the criticisms lobbed at the film is that Beijing-born Zhao presents capitalism as being at fault for Fern's situation while prominently displaying the Amazon logo repeatedly. On the other hand, details about the day-to-day lives of the nomads are omitted in favor of showing a resiliency in the face of collapse, while there are only mild critiques of the systems and situations that created the need for the solutions Fern and the others implement. The term "houseless" is also noteworthy and could be seen as a form of denying "homeless," providing some credence to the idea that people don't want to see themselves as poor. Ultimately, the film is most likely to be remembered as a breakthrough for Zhao above all, whose next project is a big-budget Marvel movie due out later this year, even though it will likely win Best Picture.

"Do you actually want to be dead, or are you too lazy to try?"

--J.D. (Gabriel Basso), *Hillbilly Elegy*

At the other end of the awards derby is

the mostly-failed Oscar bait *Hillbilly Elegy*, Netflix and Ron Howard's big budget adaptation of J.D. Vance's popular memoir that was at the time of its release seen as a "Rosetta stone" for understanding poor and working class Whites. Featuring histrionic acting from usually reliable talent such as Amy Adams and the Oscar-nominated Glenn Close, the film was mostly derided by critics and rightfully so—it is a poorly constructed mess, bouncing between flashbacks and present day to show Vance's troubled family and upbringing and winds up being wildly inconsistent in its storytelling and

unclear in its point. Vance is the hero of his story and is invested in the audience seeing him as a triumph over adversity, which he is in some sense.

However, critics of the book have derided his apparent blaming of people for their own struggles.

Published in the wake of Trump's election, the book was overly valued as an important text describing an overlooked group,

further evidence of the indifference toward this group. In the film, hillbillies are background, barely present. Is Vance to be lauded for his success? Is the film meant to be a larger statement on the hillbilly culture explored to much more powerful effect in York's *Hillbilly*? A by-the-numbers addiction



story? It is unclear. Howard throws it all against the wall in the hope that it will resonate somehow.

It is perhaps unfair to criticize an individual's story, but the film features scene after scene of implausible situations, most notably a dinner interview scene where Vance calls his girlfriend in a panic about selecting forks and white wine at a meal. For someone so accomplished, it seems absurd that he wouldn't have prepared himself for this ahead of time, especially given his apparent hypersensitivity to his background. However, the dinner scene does have an interesting flip on a trope that has often placed a person of color in an uncomfortable situation dominated by White privilege, as the interviewers casually degrade Vance's background until he snaps at them. In other scenes, his credit card is declined at a gas station, while later he uses multiple cards to fund his mother's latest restart in rehab. The film is invested in positioning Vance as lower class everyman meant to inspire those in similar situations to pull themselves up by those fabled bootstraps. But even his situation depends heavily upon his success in the aforementioned dinner scene/pre-interview. He must fit in to continue his upward mobility. Caring for a loved one in the throes of addiction isn't something to be dismissed, but the film doesn't seek to give Bev enough of a background to inspire more than pity.

Another rather unexplored layer is that the women in Vance's life—his grandmother, mother, and sister were unable to transcend their situations while Vance made it to an Ivy League education and a noteworthy career. They all put their effort into Vance or deny themselves to some degree to propel him forward. Writer and former Appalachian Alana Anton takes *Elegy* to task for the way the women are portrayed in the film, noting the relative absence of the abusive men who are offhandedly mentioned in dialogue but conspicuously offscreen most of the time.



C3

WE ARE
OPEN

—
*for dine-in
and curbside
carryout*

1505 S. PIAZZA DRIVE | 812-287-8027
C3BLOOMINGTON.COM

🐦 📺 📷 @c3bloomington



She also notes the questionable sources Vance cites in his book and his social media presence, which she characterizes as a "...vapid cultural understanding of the 'hillbilly mindset.'"

Telling the story from Vance's point of view lends it an outsider perspective that is apparently from the same cloth as his book, evident in the montage where he begins to clean up his act as a teenager. Perhaps this was Howard's attempt at capturing the sociological elements in Vance's book, but in the film, it only underlines a lack of understanding of hillbillies and hillbilly culture. The clichés continue to pile up, from washing plasticware to fried bologna sandwiches to the casual shots of closed factories without ever going deeper into the

structural issues the documentary attempts to address. And while *Nomadland* is clearly a better film than *Hillbilly Elogy*, audiences have embraced it, as it currently has an 84% audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes*, while *Nomadland* has an 81% with fewer than one fourth of the reviews *Elogy* has accrued.

The relative popularity of both narrative films raises some interesting talking points. Audiences seem to be responding to Vance's bootstrap narrative—are we to take away that we still want to believe in this trope? Fern and the other Rubber Tramps reject the "American Dream" after being victimized by it. Are audiences connecting to Fern's and the other Rubber Tramps' stories, or are they keeping them at arm's length to convince themselves it couldn't happen to



them? The people interviewed in *Hillbilly* unsurprisingly have the most nuanced take on the situation and the awareness of how business and systems have seduced and abandoned the region, and the inclusion of people of color adds a dimension that is mostly lacking from both *Elegy* and *Nomadland*.

None of this is surprising from Howard, whose career has been built on pulling punches, including sanding the edges from the real-life story that inspired his Oscar-winner *A Beautiful Mind* and turning *Elegy* into a classic bootstraps narrative, which aligns with the predominant public response to White poverty: “Why do you stay there? Why don’t you just do something different?” One wonders what this film could have been in the hands of a director with a stronger grasp

of the working class White world such as Debra Granik or Jeff Nichols, but perhaps it is precisely what Vance wanted it to be. The interview subjects of *Hillbilly* deliver the most complexity, and the film shines a light on the people of color who reside there and are largely left out of the discussion otherwise. *Nomadland* straddles the line, with a beautifully photographed verité look and the inclusion of many real people sharing their stories, but also has a movie star in the lead role. The three films also have competing agendas—*Elegy*’s “poverty porn” with a feel-good ending, *Nomadland*’s distrust of systems and near celebration of the rejection of societal mores without much pointed criticism of them, and *Hillbilly*’s

defense of the region and uplift of the real people who populate it.

So, what do these three films ultimately say about the White Working Class™? All three films put people on screen that we don’t see often, and while the portrayals aren’t ideal, as other groups have experienced, representation in some form is a start. In the narrative films, there is little exploration of the structural factors that have left many with few options and even less about the reasons for their distrust of politicians like Clinton but put their enthusiasm behind someone like Trump. One thing that is clear—the struggles faced have far more to do with class and victimization by industry than the divisions that get the most traction in media.

One of the biggest misses in this conversation is that the focus has been on how these people helped elect Trump. They did not do that on their own; too many years of unkept promises from politicians and big business produced distrust of career politicians. Their response was different than many progressive Whites would have preferred, in part their vote was a response to what was happening around them—political indifference and diminishing returns, exploitative businesses and unkept promises—and that should have been a wake-up call for the alleged party of the working class. Instead, we are left to laud Ashley York for attempting to provide a portrait of a people, deride Ron Howard’s shameless aim for Oscar gold and for providing Vance with another platform to share his dubious perspective, and lament the missed opportunities in *Nomadland*. Maybe we need York, Granik, or Nichols to team up with Bell Hooks, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton to deliver a narrative on the hillbilly experience. 