

First Cow

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Kelly Reichardt's new film First Cow tells the story of a friendship between two men in 1830s Oregon—Kung-Lu, a Chinese immigrant on the run for crimes committed, and Cookie, a skilled cook traveling west with a group of fur trappers. When the two meet, they become partners, united in their hope for an untarnished future in the Oregon wilderness.

As Kung-Lu confides in Cookie: "I see something in this land I haven't seen before. Pretty much everything has been touched by man. But this is still new. More nameless things around here than you can shake an eel at." As we and Cookie wonder why one would shake an eel at anything, Kung-Lu continues: "History isn't here yet. It's coming, but we got here early this time. Maybe this time we can be read for it. We can take it on our own terms."

What Kung-Lu's un-history'd vision here enables us (or, technically, Reichardt) to do amounts to something like imagining a "state of nature" before the rise of governments. This place where Cookie and Kung-Lu have landed, seeking like the other prospectors and fur-trappers make their fortunes, is not-yet-Oregon. Reichardt's vision is all about possibility, indeed about multiple possibilities, all the potential Oregons that might be carved from this wilderness.

We see this first in the film's overt multiculturalism: this barely-settled space is occupied by Americans, by Englishmen down from Canada, by Russians whose early claims have not quite yet been overturned, by Black men freed from slavery, by Chinese people like Kung-Lu, and still by Northwest Coast Native Americans, in their woven cedar clothes (outerwear so perfect for the rainy native clime that some white settlers adopt it, too). Kung-Lu has big visions for his future. He envisions harvesting the "precious oil in the beaver" that could be sold "for a fortune" in Canton. Cookie's dreams are smaller scale: when that first cow comes (because, one fur trader jokes, "the Chief Factor wants milk for his tea, like a proper English gentleman,"), Cookie can see using milk to create "oily cakes." With a little filched milk, Kung-Li suggests, they could test the market for such goods.

That story line—a sort of fable of capitalism—provides the other main theme of Reichardt's film: sustainability. A bit of stolen milk won't likely be missed, but if Cookie's goods sell like, well, hotcakes, he'll need more milk, and more, and more... That plot arc tells us where Cookie and Kung-Li's project is headed, but it echoes themes reiterated throughout the film: already, in this phase of early settlement, the beaver have largely been hunted out, the elk have mostly vanished, the salmon-rich streams we know will follow soon. The rich and varied wilderness of not-yet-Oregon will eventually become, after all, the far more barren mudscapes of today's river shore; and as we know from the film's 21st century opening scene in which a woman and her dog unearth a pair of shallow-buried skeletons that, as the film unfolds, we realize belong to our two protagonists, even Kung-Lu and Cookie's friendship will come to an end.

But, it is one of Reichardt's best tricks in this film to make us forget that we know how it ends, to imbue her tale with a rich hopefulness despite its trajectory. And as a Kansas audience, we may be left asking ourselves: what lessons does Reichardt's film have for us? What is our first cow, our precious and, from some perspectives, pilfered resource that, without careful stewardship, may one day dry up? And is there a chance that, in contradiction to all our historic tendencies, we might recognize its value in time to save it?

Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow* is currently available for rental on Amazon Prime.

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