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On Westerns and Settler Migration

A Reading of *Meek's Cutoff* by Kelly Reichardt

Abstract

This essay examines Kelly Reichardt's Meek's Cutoff *(2010) as an example of 'slow' and feminist western film. In particular, it shows how, by applying an "austere" aesthetics (Gorfinkel 2015) and by giving prominence to the act of migrating rather than the act of settling, the movie rewrites pioneer history, offering an example of what Catherine Russel defines "migrant cinema" (2017). Because of the visual centrality given to the act of migration, with its feeling of geographical displacement and psychological apprehension, the movie situates itself alongside other contemporary films representing present-day migration, and questions the traditional western movement as a travel of self-confident expansion and colonization. In this sense,* Meek's Cutoff *can be rather read as a "decolonizing" (Trimble Young and Veracini 2017) rendition of white migration in the West, mostly achieved by including two destabilizing characters within the group of white settlers, Emily Tetherow and a Cayuse Indian, who trigger reflections on matters of knowledge and alliances.*

Keywords: *Kelly Reichardt, Meek's Cutoff, Oregon Trail, feminist revisionist western, migration*

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
(Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road")

Kelly Reichardt is an American independent filmmaker whose production is distinguished by a 'slow' aesthetics and a feminist approach. Her position outside Hollywood and her political agenda, however, did not prevent her from being strongly inspired by traditional American film genres and revisiting them in original ways. Her cinema "sits at the cusp of experimental and classical film traditions" (Gorfinkel 2015, 123) like the American road movie, whose conventions she confronts in works such as *River of Grass* (1994), *Old Joy* (2006), and

Wendy and Lucy (2008). In 2010, Reichardt moved from the contemporary set of her earlier productions to the historical events narrated in *Meek's Cutoff*, a movie that is much in line with the tradition of the western as it narrates 'pioneer' history and visually emphasizes natural landscapes, Conestoga wagons, and calico dresses. Whereas the historical frame situates *Meek's Cutoff* within the expectations of classic westerns, the film's existential anxiety has led some critics to describe it as an anti- (Dietrich 2011; Gorfinkel 2015, 124), a revisionist (Longworth 2011), or a meta- (Cairns et al. 2011) western: labels that suggest the subversion of some of the genre's ideological or aesthetic conventions. In an interview for *Cineaste* (Quart 2011), Reichardt herself has admitted that she worked on *Meek's Cutoff* with the intent of questioning the genre's legacy, because of a certain uneasiness she has with a cinematic tradition which she invokes and yet bends to a more intimate and feminist approach. As the director has stated, through this film she "wanted to give a different view of the west from the usual series of masculine encounters and battles of strength" that have long been emphasized in it (Gilbey 2011).

Meek's Cutoff tells a story of white migration across the Oregon Desert in 1845. The purpose of the migrants, a group made up of three families—the Tetherows, the Whites, and the Gatelys—and their guide, Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), is to reach Oregon, but they end up lost in the desert because of the very scant knowledge Meek has of the place. This fact, combined with their shortage of water supply, creates mounting tensions among the settlers, which explode once they meet a solitary Cayuse Native American whom they manage to capture. While stories of relocation and survival have often been at the center of westerns, I contend that Reichardt's 'austere' aesthetics (Gorfinkel 2015) and feminist perspective contribute to innovate the cinematic rendition of the pioneer movement, opening to a reflection on migration more in line with contemporary depictions of other narrations of displacement. The film's lingering on the migrating moment instead of the settling one questions the conventional image of successful white pioneers and allows the director to comment on those processes of knowledge which determine what and how we know about ourselves and the other as a community. *Meek's Cutoff* contributes in this way to a "decolonial vision" (Trimble Young and Veracini 2017) of both western history and the established genre with which the film dialogues. Distant from the epic qualities of the cinematic tradition it invokes, the movie can be interpreted as an example of what Catherine Russel calls "migrant cinema" (2017), a trend that has emerged in the last ten years as a consequence of the global remodulation of the discourses on migration.

1. Drifting migrants

Reichardt's film is loosely based on the real events which took place on the historical Meek's cutoff, a minor route of the Oregon Trail (1841-1869) also known as the Terrible Trail, which led migrants from central US to the North-Pacific area of the country before the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad.[1] Starting in Missouri, the Oregon Trail partly coincided with other important migrant routes from which it diverged towards the North West and Oregon, the region explored by Lewis and Clark at the beginning of the 19th century (1803-1806). Meek's trek sadly went down in history for being the place where many migrants found their death. As the historian Hubert Bancroft (1886) wrote, in 1845 the explorer Stephen Meek (1807-1889), brother of the better-known Joseph Meek, persuaded "about two hundred families" (about one thousand migrants) to hire him as a guide and "to try a cut-off, with the assurance that they would save two hundred miles of travel" to the Willamette Valley, where they were headed. Besides shortening their route, this cutoff would spare them the animosities of the local Indians, who were opposing white settlers. In order to skirt around the Blue Mountains, home of the Walla Walla and the Cayuse, the group turned off the Oregon Trail to cross the desert.

The route they ventured on "was an abandoned trail of the fur-trappers," which led to an inhospitable territory, a country "so stony that wagons-tracks could scarcely be discerned on the disintegrated rock" (Bancroft 1886). Many migrants lost their lives as a consequence of what Bancroft calls "mountain fever," a mix of "extremes of temperature, improper and insufficient nourishment, [and] mental agitation" (1886). Meanwhile, "the children were attacked with dysentery from drinking the alkaline waters, resulting in several deaths" (Bancroft 1886). Many historical records like the pioneers' diaries testify to the fallacies and difficulties of the travel, as recalled in the following passage taken from William Goulder's *Reminiscences: Incidents in the Life of a Pioneer in Oregon and Idaho* (1909):

> From this point, we traveled up the Malheur [River] several days, and then, crossing over some very steep hills, entered a region of arid sage plains, marshes, and small lakes. The ground becoming soft and spongy, with no prospect of improvement, so far as we could see, in front, we were obliged to counter-march upon our trail in order to regain the higher ground we had left. This changed the direction in which we had been traveling, and entirely destroyed what little confidence we had left in the competence of our guide. It has been becoming more and more evident to us that Meek had no more knowledge of the country through which we were passing than we had ourselves, and that, like us, he was seeing it for the first time.

[1] For a history of the Oregon Trail and of Meek's cutoff, see Truman Dorris 1918; Clark and Tiller 1966; Gray 1870; Collins Menefee and Tiller 1977.

> We had entered upon this new and untrodden route at a time when our oxen were already worn down and foot-sore by the long trip, thus far, across the plains, and when we were all tired and several of the company sick from exposure, privation, and fatigue. The new route was a trackless waste, covered, for the most part, by immense fields of sage-brush that grew tall, strong, and dense. […] Added to this, was the scarcity of water in many parts of the route, which caused many sufferings, especially to women and children. This was follow [*sic*] by daily increasing cases of sickness. […] The people who have their homes in that region now […] wonder why we kept so far away from water, and why we chose a pathway so beset with difficulties of every kind. It was simply because we were bewildered and *lost*, and acted as people always do under similar circumstances. (1909, 125-127, my emphasis)[2]

Solomon Tetherow, one of the historical members of the train and also one of the protagonists in Reichardt's movie (Will Patton), wrote in his letters that salvation came thanks to a Cayuse guide (Clark and Tiller 1966, 84), played in the film by Rod Rondeaux. According to this historical source, the Native American showed the group the way to water in exchange for a blanket. However, *Meek's Cutoff* stops prior to this turn of events and frames the filmic narration between the appearance of the word 'lost' on a log and the image of a tree, which merely announces the close presence of water and a possible happy ending.

The initial title card indicates that the action takes place in 1845 Oregon. This is a significant detail, not only because *Meek's Cutoff* chronological setting distinguishes the film from most classic westerns—which are usually set after the Civil War and before the 'closing of the frontier' as defined by Frederick Jackson Turner—but also because the 1840s were the very years during which the ideology of Manifest Destiny emerged and started to circulate, later percolating in different expressions of national rhetoric. The copious archive of narrative and visual material usually ascribed to the western—from the paintings of the Hudson River School in the 19th century, such as Albert Bierstadt's *Oregon Trail* (1869), to Hollywood's recent westerns in the 20th century, like Ron Howard's *Far and Away* (1992)—finds in this ideology its founding moment. Yet, the 'arrowlike' direction associated with pioneers embodying a Manifest Destiny—a successful fate that is obvious, apparent, explicit—becomes meaningless for Reichardt's migrants: their travel seems a kind of lopsided circulation, with any advancement blocked by the menace of alkaline water and expanses of desert. By portraying the white settlers' travel as a narration of geographical and psychological displacement, *Meek's Cutoff* contravenes and hampers any possible reading of their movement as pioneering, thus questioning the faith in an

[2] The Oregon Pioneer Records (1847-1864), stored at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, is an archive of journals and diaries of the expedition. The collection contains, among others, the writings by Solomon Tetherow, one of the three male settlers in *Meek's Cutoff*.

unlimited, unproblematic expansion implicit in the ideology they represent. In dismantling the settlers' geographical assertiveness and their combination of determination and willingness often displayed in traditional westerns, the film recalls important literary works like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) or Hernan Diaz's Pulitzer-nominated *In the Distance* (2017), which have similarly defied the genre's ideological and geographical linearity.[3]

The film starts with the shooting of a log, on which the young settler Thomas Gately (Paul Dano) engraves the word 'lost.'[4] That first written word, in tune with the ever-present silence of the film, which mainly relies on scant dialog and context sound, "is a proclamation of a diegetic place, a location in narrative time, and perhaps an existential state" (Gorfinkel 2015, 128). The word 'lost' functions in fact at different levels: 'lost' denotes the group's general disoriented state of mind, caused by the physical consequence of their thirst; but 'lost' is also how they feel, because of their growing suspicion of having been misled by their guide, Mr. Meek. 'Lost' is thus an indication of both their existential and geographical position: they are in an unknown place without clear referential points. 'Lost' may also be read as a narrative indication: the film starts in fact in *medias res*, without providing any clue about the logics that have produced the migration. The reasons that led these migrants to leave their original place remain remote and unknown to the viewer. Rather than as a battle of strength that romanticizes and justifies the settling of new communities and, by extension, the coming into being of the whole nation (Grandin 2019; Trimble Young and Veracini 2017), as typical of settler narrations, *Meek's Cutoff* introduces the westward movement as framed by the absence of a real beginning and an ending. Instead of pioneers, Reichardt presents her characters as migrants unable to originate a new community, as a group whose faith in their own position and role in the westward expansion is collapsing. Any vision of the 'promised land' to be claimed is indeed absent in the film; their disorientation on the trail and their craving for water give the viewer the impression of watching a group of mislaid pilgrims, whose settling remains aspirational at best and questioned throughout the movie.

Because of the absence of clearly expressed motives or goals, that is, of a real plot (Gorfinkel 2015, 126), movement becomes supreme in the film, although ambiguous: while magnificent in terms of visual rendition, Reichardt's use of space deflates the pompous myths usually associated with the West. If the endless, open space in westerns usually means freedom and

[3] On a reading of *In the Distance*, see Campbell 2019. Many are the studies on *Blood Meridian*; see Lilley (2002), Wallach 2000, Hall and Wallach 1995.

[4] The log used in the film is an historical relic exposed today in the Deschutes County Museum, dedicated to the Oregon migration experience.

enables conquest, in *Meek's Cutoff* it represents an impediment and geographical displacement. In this sense, the film deconstructs the traditional association of advancing in space with the coming of progress and civilization, as embodied, for example, in John Gast's famous painting *American Progress* (1872) in which the migrants' movement is guided by divine will and follows an imaginary telegraph wire.[5] In Reichardt's movie, the sense of being lost combines with vagueness and a faltering sense of geography: instead of progressing, the families are represented as *drifting*, revealing the precariousness of a condition in which agency—the ability to do, decide, or act according to one's own will and desire—has been suspended.

In my reading, the scene in which one of the women runs after her bonnet across an alkaline lake is not only remarkable from an aesthetic viewpoint, but also expresses Reichardt's questioning of the westbound movement. The woman's act of retrieval is the opposite of a confident advancement: her 'progress' is made almost impossible by the wind, which deprives her of her cap and, by forcing her to go back to get her headgear, symbolically dispossesses the woman of her role as a pioneer. Rather than gaining ground, the settlers are forced to retrace their steps, because of the adverse weather, as in the scene mentioned above, or because of their mere ignorance of the geography of the place which forces them to continuously adjust their direction. While the characters' sense of being lost becomes more and more palpable and real, also by the signs of insanity shown by some members of the expedition, their geographical referential points dissolve in a vertigo of elusiveness which prevents viewers from identifying them in their traditional role.[6]

The director's deployment of an aesthetics of "austerity" (Gorfinkel 2015), achieved through the scant number of characters,[7] the 'slowness' of the group's movement, and the minimal use of soundtrack music, further deprives the film of the epic quality usually associated with more conventional renditions of white western migration.[8] For example, the iconic value of the

[5] For a historical interpretation of the frontier, see Grandin 2019.

[6] Shifting the focus from pioneering to migrating is consequential because, while migration is an implicit element of westerns, such subtext has remained cinematically marginal in favor of a depiction of the moment of settling or immediately following the formation of a new white community. Because of this focus, westerns have traditionally been read as narrations of the struggle between nature and civilization, or of lawlessness as opposed to legal order (Mitchell 2018). Even productions appreciated for being historically conscious and inclusive—think, for example, of the HBO series *Deadwood*, produced at the beginning of the 2000s—have kept at some distance from the issue of migration to focus on more established classic themes, such as East vs. West and legal vs. individual justice.

[7] The historical twenty-three families taking Meek's cut-off are reduced to just three in Reichardt's film.

[8] Think, for example, of John Ford's *Wagon Master* (1950) or *Westward the Women* (1951) by William Wellman.

Conestoga wagon, along with the poetry of horse-riding,[9] are invalidated as the migrants are forced to cross the plain on foot. There, in the desert, the power of the settlers' venture is lacking not just in numbers, with the group reduced to a few scared people in the vast inhospitable landscape, but also in speed and motion, because they have to walk rather than to ride in order to relieve their exhausted animals (fig. 1). Their slow-moving progress produces, in Reichardt's own words, a "trance of walking" (Gilbey 2011), a suspension of geo-spatial coordinates in which movement becomes stillness. The slowness of walking operates then at a formal as well as at a symbolical level (Gorfinkel 2015), as a visual rendition of the migrants' strandedness in opposition to the freedom evoked by the westward movement. Whereas the scenes of the wagon train crossing the landscape do establish a visual continuity with the tradition, the weary march across the desert reduces the pioneers to mere migrant bodies, exposed to thirst and wind and progressively weaker and weaker.

Fig. 1: Mrs. Tetherow, Mrs. White, and Mrs. Gately walk through the desert

[9] On the epic value of the horse in westerns, see Savage 1979.

If the settlers' fatigue is visible in the way they drag themselves and their animals, which refuse to proceed, the pioneers' physical exhaustion is also intensified by the temporal torpor of the movie's slow pace. From a cinematographic point of view, film critic Dan Kois (2011) highlights that the group's walking, in certain scenes such as the one in figure 2, is "seemingly portrayed in real time," creating for the spectator the paradox of watching movement as a visual equivalent of immobility, because as the women advance the landscape does not change. The unhurried pace of *Meek's Cutoff* does not simply stem from Reichardt's distinctive style, which has made critics compare her to other exponents of 'slow cinema' like Terrence Malik; but it is primarily a purposeful maneuver which makes the spectator vicariously experience, by means of an 'unbearable' uneventful screen, the "difficulty of survival and endurance" of the migrants in the desert (Gorfinkel 2015, 135).

Fig. 2: Mrs. Tetherow and Mrs. Gately crossing an alkaline flat

The settlers' physical effort appears then as a mere dissipation of energy, a "gruelling transit" (Gorfinkel 2015, 126), a burden on the bodies that makes any possible mythic 'pioneering' quality sink. More than progress, their walking measures their increasing terror and their ever-growing doubts about survival. The sounds of the film—the cracking of wheels, the noise of

animals, and the perpetual and exhausting blow of the wind—are used to further demolish the hope of a final moment of rejoicing. Lost and fatigued, the pioneers' travel becomes a journey for survival rather than a quest for the dreamt 'promised land,' a concept that, despite being invoked by Meek (a "regular second Eden," he says of the valley they are headed to), recedes in the tragedy of their present condition.

2. Women 'settlers'

The revisionism offered by the 'drifting' dimension of *Meek's Cutoff* is matched by a second point of innovation often emphasized by critics: Reichardt's feminist perspective and the central role women play in her work. The director herself has declared that, while the original idea for the film came from screenwriter Jon Raymond's research on the figure of Meek (Pejkovic 2011), her reading of background sources like diaries and journals has led her to pay attention to women's experience in Oregon and to how their dream of a promised land had collapsed into the monotony of their daily chores.

One of *Meek's Cutoff*'s most innovative aspects in this regard is how it brings into focus the 'domestic' character of the settlers' movement by giving unprecedented visual space to the repetition of everyday work such as cooking dinner or breakfast, washing dishes, doing laundry, or knitting (Henry 2018; Kollin 2020; Gorfinkel 2015). This emphasis on a supposedly female sphere *per se* disintegrates the exceptionality of the westward travel by cracking the expansion movement into a series of menial routines. Choosing the slowness of humble acts instead of the pace of adventure becomes a militant (and temporal) critique, "aligned with a general feminist revaluing of labour," as Claire Henry explains (2018, 494). While domesticity as a dimension of the westward movement—and not in contrast to it—has been addressed as a central feature of Reichardt's film's revisionism, I would like to focus here on another aspect of the movie, that is, on its female characters and, specifically, on Emily Tetherow as a figure that contributes to articulating Reichardt's discourse on processes of knowledge and on how women's marginalized position creates the basis for a different and possibly 'decolonial' community.

Reichardt's feminist emphasis is, first of all, visual. The chromatic detail of *Meek's* photography is aesthetically beautiful, reminiscent of a Vermeer-like color sharpness. The women's pastel pink, ocher, and green garments almost glow in the landscape they are crossing; their similarly colored bonnets provide a vivid image that contrasts the plain whiteness of the alkaline plateaus (figg. 1 and 2).[10] Although not immediately detectable as the flamboyant red of Meek's shirt, the

[10] Kollin (2020) reads Emily's pink dress as a visual reinforcement of whiteness.

palette used for the women's clothes allows to spot them easily and calls attention to their visual, and therefore narrative, centrality. The women's attire is engaging, functioning as an "uncanny" reverberation (Gorfinkel 2015, 129): although the shade of their clothing matches the surroundings, the bright and joyful colors of their dresses suggest that they do not belong. They are insinuating something new, artificial in that territory as well as new in the filmic tradition *Meek's Cutoff* evokes.

Fig. 3: The women in their bonnets

If, on the one hand, the bonnets can be regarded as a simple supplement to the women's colorfulness, on the other the camera frames them as a cage of sorts that reduces the women's ability to see what is around them in the open range (Gorfinkel 2015, 128; Longworth 2011). Compared to the 'limitless' vision available on top of a horse, where Meek rides, the bonnet functions as a restriction and an indication of the women's subaltern position in the migrant wagon train: 'enclosed' within their bonnets and their gendered role, women are deprived of visual—real and metaphorical—agency and thus excluded from any decision on the global view of the movement. If the square Academy Ratio frame (the 1.33:1 ratio of pre-1950s American cinema) Reichardt uses functions as a technical reproduction of a visual and geographical limit, the gender-specific bonnets function as a further accentuation of such a restriction. The women's limited access to vision, information, and decision-making is also rendered through their physical separation from the group of men, with the camera often framing them together, as if they were a subgroup within the white colonizers, as figure 3 shows. The film's use of sound

further enlarges the feeling of women's subalternity: dialogs are indeed almost overheard in *Meek's Cutoff*, so as to force the viewers to experience the same absence of knowledge imposed on the women characters (Dietrich 2011).

Although female subalternity within the group of white settlers is immediately presented in the film, power relations change as the narration advances and the migrants' physical existence becomes more and more endangered. Among the women, Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams) gains progressive visual and narrative weigh, shifting from merely being Solomon's wife to being the new leader of the group and principal antagonist to Meek. Emily's animosity against Meek, whose knowledge of the territory she doubts, transpires from the beginning of the film; however, her contrasting position becomes definitely evident when she meets the Cayuse face to face. The introduction of otherness within the white group explodes the precedent mounting tensions, because, for the settlers, the Native American represents both an alternative (and local) guide to the territory and a threat of destruction, as Meek repeatedly suggests. The rivalry between Emily Tetherow and Stephen Meek deepens then as they come to embody opposing reading paradigms: one endorsing the necessity to execute the Indian, and the other arguing in favor of more negotiating strategies.

In analyzing how power relations within the settler group change, and the new position occupied by Emily Tetherow, the figure of the Indian is central, although Reichardt's rendition of the man as the absolute unfathomable Other has offered the cheek for accusations of a misplaced inclusiveness. Nevertheless, I contend that the Cayuse Indian and the triangulation of power he triggers manage to shatter a Eurocentric vision of this white settling-oriented migration. In my reading, *Meek's Cutoff* offers an example of what Alex Trimble Young and Lorenzo Veracini call a "decolonizing" approach to settler history, namely, "a critical outlook that is more than just inclusive in its politics, transnational in its scope, and poststructuralist in its methodology" and which they believe necessary to move towards real "postwestern futures" (2017, 7).

The animosities between Meek and Emily Tetherow become explicit when the unnamed Native American touches and takes possession of some objects the Tetherows have lost when their wagon overturned in the attempt to cross a ravine. Meek threatens to kill the Indian, who does not understand the command to let the objects down; in order to defend the Native American, Tetherow points her rifle at Meek, who eventually capitulates (fig. 4). While this scene is central for the narrative development of the film—and has accordingly made its appearance on the movie posters—critics have paid scant attention to it. On the contrary, I think it deserves more analytical effort, because the hostile confrontation, which Tetherow wins, constitutes a turning point in the filmic narration, on account of the fact that it establishes Meek's narrative 'cut off':

in other words, Emily's pointed rifle marks the end of the guide's imposition of his deceitful knowledge on the group and the beginning of Emily's partnership (although highly imperfect and uncertain) with the Cayuse Indian.

Fig. 4: Emily Tetherow pointing her rifle at Stephen Meek

At a first level of interpretation, the confrontation Emily wins means the achievement of full agency, patriarchally denied to her in the earlier part of the film. It can also be read as an instance of empowering feminist revision of pioneer history, as it puts into images women's (lamentably silenced) contribution to westward migration which scholarly efforts have tried to retrieve and emphasize in the last decades. At a second level, this same sequence can be said to engage a more subversive dialogue with the history it represents, as it calls into question the recognition of cultural and racial otherness as something to defend against Meek's biased position, which embodies traditional discourses on Indians and the West. Reichardt's representation of the triangular relationship between Meek, Emily, and the Indian as an entanglement and redefinition of power relations triggers, in other words, the possibility to imagine a different community, based on the acceptance of the alternative knowledge offered by the Cayuse and on a diverse way of managing leadership, distant from Meek's deadly proposal

of executing the Indian in the name of his white necropolitical superiority. Through her characters, Reichardt ruminates on how we decide to live as a community: while Meek and his mythicized colonialism and brutal individuality can be thought of as what Trimble Young and Veracini call the "settler colonial structures of violence" (2017, 7), this scene shows that siding otherwise is possible. Emily's standing up for the Cayuse provides a non-hostile alternative which finally prevails over Meek's narration of Indians as intrinsically deceitful. Even though the open ending allows for different interpretations, Emily's unorthodox backing of the Native American shatters hegemonic history and, above all, questions where real knowledge resides in an uncharted place, thus invalidating the white man's supposed mastery.

Tetherow's conciliatory relationship between the Indian has been addressed by some critics as an expression of Emily's capitalistic and racist ideology. Susan Kollin, for example, reads the scene when Tetherow sews up the Cayuse's moccasin as the expression of capitalistic racism, as voiced by the woman's utterances (2020, 6). "Oh God, the stench," she says in a patronizing way with regard to the man's footwear. Also the line "You can't even imagine what we've done. The cities we've built" would reveal her internalized support of imperialism. Similarly, when Emily explains to Millie White that she has sown his shoe just because she wanted him to "owe" her something, she would acknowledge a relationship based on "a capitalist logic of debt" (Gorfinkel 2015, 133).[11] In this reading, human kindness alone does not explain the woman's attempt to establish a relation with the Native American; rather, it is her egoistic attempt to survive that would enable her acceptance of the other. While this reading may provide some insight into the character of Emily Tetherow, I think we should make an effort to overcome the trap of establishing who is racist and who is not, who is a good character or a bad one, in order to critically reflect on questions of relationality and how these might allow for a rethinking of migration in the West.

I avoid entering here in the issue of Emily and the Cayuse's relationship as a debt-defined relation to concentrate on what striking a social debt may mean within a representation of settler colonialism. The marginality in which the apparent deal (we do not know the Cayuse's perspective on facts) takes place is in fact telling, as it can be read as an attempt to validate (and vindicate) a different type of knowledge that opposes Meek's verbosity and, with him, a whole tradition of grandiose white acts and tales about the West. The establishing of a relation means in fact that there is some power on the part of the Indian which Emily Tetherow

[11] King is more cautious about this scene. As the film critic argues, "some ambiguity remains as to whether" a capitalistic interpretation is really the case or Emily's utterance is "partly an excuse presented to the less sympathetic Millie (Zoe Kazan)" (2013, 24).

recognizes, and without which no negotiation would be possible. The inability to see a potential power in the Indian is rather Meek's position: the Indian represents to him just a danger and an embodiment of savagism, and therefore he deserves to be shot. Opposite to that, Emily sees knowledge in the Cayuse, a kind of mastery of the place that is extremely meaningful for the migrants' survival. Emily Tetherow is thus implicitly establishing a hierarchy of knowledge and, therefore, in classic Foucauldian sense, a hierarchy of power, according to which Meek is inferior to the Indian. For this reason, she is ready to protect the Indian at the cost of shattering the white settlers' unity.

What we see in the confrontational scene described above functions then as a radical epistemological comment on the white mastery that explained expansion in the West: implicit in the face-off between Tetherow and Meek is not just her usurpation of his command, but the questioning of what he knows—and hence, of his authority and his knowledge—by backing up the possibility of a new epistemology from the margin, hers and the Indian's. Tetherow opposes Meek's reasons to kill the Indian because she glimpses in his intent not just a racial homicide (killing the savage Other) but, to use decolonial thinker Boaventura de Sousa Santos's definition, an "epistemicide" (2014, 237), that is, the unjust suppression of a different knowledge that could be salvific. By interposing between Meek and the Indian, she is turning upside down the given hierarchy between the white man's knowledge (perceived as blatant lies) and the Cayuse's.

The Native American's linguistic alienness—his words are never subtitled nor translated, and Reichardt has even refused to reveal their meaning in the interviews following the release of the film (Dietrich 2011)—makes Emily's choice even more radical, because it indicates the acceptance of an absolute, unfathomable otherness as a source of knowledge. The reason why incomprehensibleness becomes more assuring than Meek's known words becomes then an ethical, rather than a linguistic, issue, because it involves how one relates to otherness, whom one considers the Other, and what one deems valuable in the formation of communities. In her choice of the Cayuse over Meek, Tetherow shows then that the white migrants can never become 'truly' settlers unless they trust the Indigenous and *their* mastery of the land.[12]

In this sense, *Meek's Cutoff* qualifies as a 'decolonial' western because, in Veracini's use of the term (2019), it does not offer the mere inclusion of others or a postmodern pastiche of places, times, and quotations, but systematically reconsiders the discourse that has sustained the colonization of the West, that is, the supposed faith in the civilizing progress (already disclaimed

[12] On the paradoxical relation between settler society and indigenization, see Trimble Young and Veracini 2017, 11.

by the 'lost' movement) and the inferiority of the Indian. Despite its open ending, the film emphasizes the valuableness of the Emily's rudimentary affinity with the Indian as a prerequisite for the group's salvation, showing the film's ability "to reflect on the political implications of our empathy or lack thereof" (McKim 2018, 75) when it comes to the history of the representation of the westward movement.

3. Past and present migrations

By lingering on migrating rather than settling, Reichardt moves slightly but remarkably the perception of western history: the director deflates the mythic allure of a historically significant pioneering adventure, reconducting settlers within a much broader category which resonates with other discourses on migration salient in the 2010s. *Meek's Cutoff* visual depletion of the pioneer rhetoric in favor of a 'decolonizing' narration of the westward movement may then be the element that has led Catherine Russell (2017) to quote the film as one example of what she calls "migrant cinema." This is a broad category in which Russell includes not only Reichardt's 19th-century-focused film but also other works about contemporary migrants, like Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* (2017) or Chantal Akerman's *From the Other Side* (2002), as they all represent scenes of displacement that offer opportunities for "creative experiments with geography and empathetic humanism" (Russell 2017, 17).

The transformation of the western from an epic tale of settling into a story of survival marks in fact a visual subversion that aligns past pioneers to a different type of migrants, closer in time to us. While the representation of walking matches the 'slow' aesthetics Reichardt adopts, the image of the settlers on foot becomes meaningful for the political value it assumes as a visual connection between past and present displacements. The fatigue of walking, the difficulties of the desert, the weakness of bodies that collapse, like that of the extremely thin William White who refuses to drink in order to spare water, or the perturbing pregnancy of Mrs. White, exposed to the daunting desert yet proceeding, are images that recall the centrality of the body in migrating situations and remind of contemporary experiences of relocation. Walking and the absence of water, in particular, call to mind the present-day border crossings as depicted, for example, in Alexandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006, fig. 5), Michael Berry's *Frontera* (2014), or in the novel *The River Flows North* by Graciela Limón (2009).

The slowness of Reichardt's direction registers the "affects of fatigue, weariness, in the residues of dirt and dust on hands, faces and garments, through arrested movements, and stalling gestures" (Gorfinkel 2015, 129) which are reminiscent, for example, of the character of Amelia in *Babel*: left alone with two kids in an unknown location between Mexico and the United States,

the woman's face is sunburnt, her mouth 'adorned' with blisters, and her red dress, which she wore at the Mexican wedding before crossing back to the United States, progressively goes to pieces. The redness of the fabric, as the only colorful spot in the desert, recalls the visibility of Reichardt's women's clothes. As them, Amelia is at the mercy of patriarchal decision-making and lost, unable to find her way out of the desert.

Fig. 5: A shoot of Amelia, crossing the desert near San Diego, in *Babel*

Even the clock and the rocking chair, which the Tetherows throw out of their wagon, remind one of the discarded things scattered in the desert that Jason De León describes in his influential *The Land of Open Graves* (2015), an anthropological study on contemporary US border migration. While I agree with Kollin (2020) and Gorfinkel (2015, 134) that the littered objects symbolize the settlers' renunciation of middle-class comfort during their migration, the same items also call to mind similar scenes of environmental degradation photographed in De León's study or represented in *Frontera* or *Babel*, in which the directors reflect on how migration is often a phenomenon of radical dispossession.

This is not to compare and put two historically and geographically distant migrations on the same plane; the white internal migration in the US was sustained by a legal, technological, and economic structure, and its outcome was the imposition of a new social order, with regard to issues of sovereignty and epistemology. This is profoundly different from the border crossing of today. Nevertheless, the uncanny representation of white westward migration in *Meek's Cutoff* creates some fissures in the visual and rhetorical rendition of national history, which solicit

comparison with other migrations we learn about daily. By depicting the turbulent moments preceding the founding of a settlement and the subsequent colonization of the land, Reichardt's western cracks the genre's nation-making glaze and offers some interstitial space for decolonial thinking: decoupling the settlers from their pioneering qualities casts a different light on the historical process and how we have narrated it, and creates other visual and unexceptional linearities.

To conclude, Reichardt's recourse to a 'slow' aesthetic, together with her feminist agenda, mark *Meek's Cutoff* as a western able to engage as well as rearrange the genre's legacy by questioning its very epistemological substrate and adumbrating white settlers' sense of cultural legitimacy. The narration of their entrapment in the desert interferes with the image of the moving pioneer, shattering the epistemological confidence in the idea of a 'manifest' destiny. In this sense, the disquieted migration of the settlers' families alienates the genre from itself and from the land it has claimed: by showing Meek's incompetence and placing new hope in the Native American Other, *Meek's Cutoff* politicizes its rendition of 1845 migration to Oregon by casting doubts and ambiguities and by multiplying the possible narrations of that migration. Reichardt's film does, in this sense, not only show the pain, the fragility, the anxiety of migration, as other contemporary films about displacement are doing, but it establishes a political distance from the western as an apparatus traditionally celebrating, visually as well as rhetorically, the emancipatory force of white movement.

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