

# Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow*: Two men in the wilderness face something more dangerous—big business

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*Directed by Kelly Reichardt; screenplay by Reichardt and Jonathan Raymond, based on Raymond's novel The Half-Life*

US filmmaker Kelly Reichardt's new film, *First Cow*, set in the 1820s in the Pacific Northwest, deals with the origins of North American business—and the value of and need for solidarity.

Co-written by Reichardt and Jonathan Raymond, based on Raymond's novel *The Half-Life* (2004), the film tells its story through the misadventures of a native-born cook and a Chinese immigrant, who attempt to make their economic and moral way in the primitive circumstances.

Reichardt is an increasingly well-known independent director. She first came to prominence with the deeply compassionate *Wendy and Lucy* in 2008 (co-written by Raymond, who also scripted Todd Haynes's worthwhile mini-series *Mildred Pierce*, 2011, and who has written or co-written the screenplays for a number of Reichardt's feature films). That movie concerned a young homeless woman (Michelle Williams) and her struggles.

About her 2016 movie *Certain Women*, the WSWs commented that the “rugged imagery and tense relationships combine to create a sense of hardship, in this case more directly psychic than economic. The film depicts a society that leaves its victims begging for a respite from their aloneness.”

In our view, there have been missteps and difficulties as well. Reichardt's 2013 *Night Moves* rather muddleheadedly treated eco-terrorism and political radicalism generally. Her 2010 period piece, *Meek's Cutoff*, set in the 1840s, with its minimalist approach, seemed excessively elliptical and elusive.

*First Cow* opens with a title, a line from William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*: “The bird, a nest, the spider, a web, man friendship.” This is followed by a prologue in the present day, in which a woman (Alia Shawkat) with a dog—shades of *Wendy and Lucy*—discovers a pair of human skeletons,

whose positioning indicates a certain closeness. (Raymond's novel divides its time between the 1980s and the 1820s. Here the present only receives a few minutes' attention.)

The story then shifts to the early 19th century. Cookie (John Magaro) is the cook for a band of gruff fur trappers in the Pacific Northwest. He is of gentle disposition, telegraphed by his careful gathering of wild mushrooms. One day he comes upon a naked Chinese man, on the run after killing a Russian, hiding in the woods.

A bond develops between Cookie and King-Lu (Orion Lee), who has come to this “land of riches” seeking his fortune (I “need capital and some kind of miracle ... or crime”). They begin to rely upon and trust one another. Eventually, they set up house outside the Royal West Pacific Trading Post, a melting pot of global immigrants and members of Native American tribes who are in a tug-of-war for survival and wealth. (Apparently based on the Hudson's Bay Company, headquartered in Fort Vancouver—modern-day Vancouver, Washington.)

The titular first cow has been brought into the territory by its quasi-governor, the Chief Factor (Toby Jones), a British fur trading overlord attuned to international markets and trends. He handles his subservient Native wife (Lily Gladstone) like one of his many acquisitions, including his prized bovine. While nearly everyone else's lifestyle is poverty-stricken and rudimentary, his, by comparison, is opulent.

King-Lu soon realizes Cookie has the skill to make an “oily cake” that can earn them money. The catch is that to enhance its taste they will need to steal milk from the Chief Factor's cow. As it turns out, scores of trappers and others line up daily to purchase a cake. The limited supply makes people grumble that “they're not dumb, they want to keep the prices up.” Even the Chief Factor eventually wants to impress his guests with Cookie's baking.

When Cookie expresses anxiety over the risks involved in their enterprise, King-Lu retorts: “Men like us, Cookie—we

have to make our own way. ... We have to take what we can when the taking is good.” But it is not long before the source of Cookie’s white gold is discovered and the close-knit pair are on the run, ending in a tragedy foreshadowed in the movie’s prologue.

*First Cow* is a realistic and intelligent account of a time when US capitalism was first extending itself across the continent, in competition with British, Russian and Spanish interests in particular—and the great human cost of that development.

Lee and Jones are stellar, while Magaro exudes quiet reserve and thoughtfulness. Movingly, the late veteran actor—and Robert Altman regular—René Auberjonois (who died in December 2019) has a cameo role. (His presence helps establish a further connection between *First Cow* and Altman’s 1971 *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, in which Auberjonois played a prominent role, also set in the Pacific Northwest and also about corporate mercilessness.)

Sad to say, under the present cultural conditions, what Reichardt’s film *is not* makes it stand out. *First Cow* is not an identity politics screed or a piece of ahistorical moralizing, as one tends to expect from contemporary filmmaking. It is an essentially objective, level-headed, nuanced work.

Also unusual is the fact that *First Cow* doesn’t cheaply or resignedly contend that brutal conditions *merely* produce brutal human beings. Brutal conditions can also generate *opposition* to brutality. The exquisite cinematography by Christopher Blauvelt and the tender score by William Tyler help convey this fundamental truth.

Bound up with this, Reichardt rightly focuses on class and has created genuine, well-defined social types. Alienation in her creations eats away at the soul. More than previously, her characters are memorable and stand out with specific traits.

In *First Cow*’s pivotal scene, an elaborate dinner party, the Chief Factor addresses a visiting sea captain who has recently had a mutinous sailor whipped, too leniently in the fur trading agent’s opinion. The Chief Factor observes that “twenty lashes for mutiny seems conservative ... Here’s the rub. You see, when one factors the loss of labor from the punished hand versus the gain of labor from those hands who witness the punishment, a stricter punishment can be the more advisable path. Even a properly rendered death can be useful in the ultimate accounting ... a motivating spectacle for the indolent among the mutinous.” He punctuates this discussion with the remark, “Any question that cannot be calculated is not worth the asking.”

At this instant, Reichardt’s film truly takes shape and rises above many of its contemporaries. This segment brings *First Cow*—and, more importantly, life at the time—into focus and

seizes the viewer’s full attention. Moreover, one knows that once the Chief Factor discovers the theft of “his” milk, there will be hell to pay. Likewise, the protagonists, due to their miserable and desperate circumstances, will be pressed to take reckless, ill-advised action, leading to a calamitous conclusion.

“I guess it’s really about who has the guns and the money, as always,” states Reichardt in an interview with vox.com, adding, “Somehow the levels of race and class exist from the get-go. There’s the complicated scene, with the First Nations people, and the Chief Factor ... who’s sort of like a CEO who would come and exploit the resources. He’s married to a Chinook woman. A Chinese man shows up. There’s a servant there. That was a really tricky scene to balance all that.”

The director goes on, “It’s also just a movie about capitalism versus nature. The beginnings of capitalism, and how quickly the beaver was depleted. If those two things [i.e., capitalism and nature] can co-exist”—the explicit subject of her *Night Moves*.

Raymond, too, points out, in an interview with *Seventh Row*, that his 2004 novel was “about this early capitalism in the northwest and this beginning of global trade networks around the fur-trapping economy.” The filmmakers were unable, for budgetary reasons, to represent all the sequences in the novel, including a voyage to China. Raymond explains his subsequent line of reasoning, “Could something come to them [Cookie and King-Lu] that could represent this burgeoning network of trade going on in the world? And for some reason the cow just kind of appeared to mind!”

One has the sense there are all sorts of conceptions related to ecological issues, identity politics and the like floating around in Reichardt’s film. But, taken as it is, *First Cow* is an incisive comment on harsh social relations and the drive for profits. Like the contemporary ruling elite, which reasons that economic privation and the threat of destitution will drive workers back to work under hazardous conditions, Jones’s character is adamant that intimidation and threats, administered at the right moment, can incentivize the work force. How timely.



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