

8. EXHAUSTED DRIFT: AUSTERITY, DISPOSSESSION AND THE POLITICS OF SLOW IN KELLY REICHARDT'S *MEEK'S CUTOFF*

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Occupying a unique place in American independent film-making, Kelly Reichardt's cinema sits at the cusp of experimental and classical film traditions. Reichardt's autonomous creative practice and relatively low budgets have linked her style with international art cinema, both historical (neorealism) and contemporary (slow cinema). Reichardt often works with the tropes of a specifically American idiom – the road film – and her films *Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) and *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), and the recent *Night Moves* (2013) all notably employ the beckoning horizon of wide-open north-western landscapes and their tarnished promises of freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance. Deploying austerity as an aesthetic, Reichardt's films frequently perambulate and get lost with the wanderers, mountain men, drifters and the socially displaced and marginalised at their centre. Her films trace the trajectory of these precarious travellers circuitous or arrested journeys, as well as the affective slackness of their suspended agency, their 'stuckness,' non-productivity, and inability to progress within the harsh demands of an exhausting, social, material world. Landscape and physical detail work in her films to index or to unravel the already frayed bonds that draw people together and apart, in impoverishment and in rituals of the everyday, in relations of dependency and debt.

REICHARDT'S SLOWNESS

Reichardt's slow style across these works bears qualities of austerity, drift and a fascination with affects of exhaustion and processes of embodied labour.

Her films are frequently described with adjectives such as minimalist, austere, restrained, reticent, observational, spare, oblique, reserved, undecorated. This chapter examines the political and theoretical implications of the aesthetics of austerity in Reichardt's 'anti-Western' *Meek's Cutoff* (hereafter *Meek's*). *Meek's* is emblematic of the scope of Reichardt's contribution to the slow tendency emergent in contemporary world cinema, whose primary features include temporal dilation, liberal use of distant framings and the long take, and a focus on a phenomenological realism (Flanagan, 2008). Tiago de Luca emphasises slow cinema's preoccupation with physicality and corporeal realism, a 'fascinat[ion with] the physicality of animate and inanimate matter, bodies and landscapes . . . [the] deflat[ion of] narrative progression . . . through which the perceptual and material qualities of the image are enhanced' (de Luca, 2011: 42; de Luca, 2014). Song Hwee Lim, examining Tsai Ming-liang's cinema of slowness, further articulates slow cinema's formal elements, linked to both narrative subject matter, which privileges scenes of empty time and waiting, and a durational aesthetic embedded in the use of extended long takes (Lim, 2014: 11–42). Additionally, slow films evacuate eventfulness, in the pursuit of dedramatised scenarios in which incident replaces event, and sheer profilmic happening challenges structures of legible or discrete causality.

Reichardt's works focus on the observation of everyday and laborious processes; her use of muted and sparse dialogue and ambient sound, her preference for stripped, evacuated landscapes, solitary characters or situations of estrangement, and for reticent performance styles from actors position her within the above continuum of tendencies seen in global slow films. Yet Reichardt approaches these minor temporalities and quotidian textures from specifically American cinematic idioms and through a persistent utilisation of an American sense of place. Her artisanal, small-scale mode of production – *Meek's* was her first film made on 35 mm and her first with a seven-figure budget – materially inscribes the aesthetic possibilities of the films in terms of a discourse of austerity. Austerity, a loaded term, resonates with a twenty-first century economic order and the neoliberal imperatives and policies of the George W. Bush and post-Bush era that insist that citizens do less with less, policies of resource attrition that have led to the dispossession of the already marginalised. In that sense, Reichardt's austere slowness is an aesthetic responsive to the harsh economic and ideological realities of the United States's political contemporaneity. I thus use austerity here to signpost a formal drive within the film-maker's work but one that is conceptually inseparable from these socio-economic, materialist underpinnings.

While Reichardt consistently relies on long takes and a durational, observational style, her intervention in a global slow cinema aesthetic comes less in the use of literal extended duration but, more prominently, in the linkage of quotidian activity and forms of arduous, painful labour with temporalities

of exhaustion and dispossession for subjects on the margins of American life. Slowness for Reichardt operates as a vitally allegorical, as much as a formal, material. In this sense her work is both *distinct from* and *coextensive with* her slow cinema contemporaries globally. *Distinct* in that it often evokes or conforms closely to certain elements of classical film form and shot structure, and bears a stronger attachment to character subjectivity. Geoff King, in his reading of *Meek's* as representative of the persistence of a low-budget mode of indie production thought to have waned in a post-Miramax era, calls this the filmmaker's 'relatively slow style' as measured against her more 'radical' contemporaries on the one hand and a Hollywood norm on the other (King, 2013: 22). Indeed, compared to the extremes of extended takes in the work of film-makers such as Béla Tarr or Tsai Ming-liang, Reichardt's shot durations (her long takes average ten to thirty seconds) fall short. Lim notes that film studies as a field has largely been unable to settle on a definitive length for what counts as a proper long take. The very subjective nature of temporal experience will always militate to make a 'metrics' of slow a futile task, one that would run counter to the *criticality* of the concept of slowness (Lim, 2014: 21–2).

Thus, if we detach slowness from a purist metric of duration, Reichardt's work is exceedingly *coextensive* with the aims and aesthetics of slow cinema in that her very shooting, editing and framing strategies propound slowness as a thematic, allegorical and political condition as much as a purely formal one, or one of sheer or mere duration. Recently, Lutz Koepnick has critiqued a definition of slowness as a style or strategy that should attend merely to temporal and literal duration, suggesting instead that

aesthetic slowness registers and reflects on the coexistence of multiple streams of time in our expanded present . . . the wager of aesthetic slowness is not simply to find inlands of respite, calm and stillness somewhere outside the cascades of contemporary speed culture. It is to investigate what it means to experience a world of speed, acceleration and cotemporality. (Koepnick, 2014: 10)

This dialectical nature of slowness can position Reichardt more forcefully within an expanded field of slow aesthetic practices.

That sensory impression of slowness in Reichardt's style doubtless played a role in *Meek's* prominence in a widely read critical dispute in the *New York Times*. Dan Kois's essay 'Eating Your Cultural Vegetables' (see the Introduction for further discussion) polemically confessed that the author had reached a point of 'cultural fatigue' from having to dutifully watch slow art films. *Meek's Cutoff* served as Kois's prime example, which he described as a 'quiet arduous chronicle of a long journey . . . seemingly portrayed in real time . . . by the [film's] end, I could sympathize with the settlers' exhaustion;

I felt as if I'd been through a similarly grueling experience' (Kois, 2011). It is hardly surprising that fatigue is the central affect, especially with regard to a film so concerned with weariness as a physical and existential condition of grueling transit. As I argue elsewhere, slow art cinema's legacy of archiving both profilmic weariness in performing bodies and in producing extrafilmic fatigue in the spectator is simultaneously vast and relatively unexamined (Gorfinkel, 2012/2013). Despite wide critical acclaim for *Meek's*, this unpleasurable response to the austere temporality of the film was also in other quarters positioned as part of Reichardt's rigorous, feminist, 'materialist' but 'unsensual' aesthetic (Denby, 2011).

UNENDING DAYS, MONOTONOUS DRIFT

Meek's Cutoff's slowness derives in large part from its lack of explicit narrative exposition or contextualisation and its observational accumulation of passages and processes. The film script – written by Reichardt's frequent collaborator, novelist Jon Raymond – reconstructs the events of an actual, arduous expedition led by the hired mountain man, Stephen Meek, to take emigrants across the mountains and Oregon desert trail in 1845 in search of a place to settle in the state's Willamette Valley. Lost from the outset, their ostensible goal, arrival at their intended destination, is converted to basic survival, a pursuit of water and its liquid sustenance. Reducing the scale of the actual expedition of hundreds to a fictionalised group of three families, the film presents their parched, punishing quest as a Beckett-inflected scenario of absurdity, bound by waiting, opacity and non-knowledge. Character backstory, the details and reasons for travel are elided or only obliquely given. The group's trust in Meek (Bruce Greenwood), a raconteur guide prone to tall tales, braggadocio and irascibility, becomes a tenuous act of faith, desperation, or reckless abandon. The settlers quietly wonder after his intentions and the possibility of foul play. This precarious trust frays further with the arrival of a lone Cayuse Indian (Rod Rondeaux). The frightened settlers hold the Native American captive, unable to communicate with him. He becomes a source of suspicion, hostility, anxious wonder and uncertainty – a pure site of difference, an empty sign of unfathomable alterity. His language and words, presented unsubtitled, are as incomprehensible to the settlers as theirs are to him. In their unending monotonous transit through windy salt flats, rocky desert hills and wiry sagebrush, they suffer numerous setbacks and losses. After a stand-off between Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams), the film's anchoring character, and wife of Soloman (Will Patton), and Meek, their failing guide, the group entrust in the tribesman their hope that he will guide them to water. In multiple registers, of narrative, theme, and form, goal orientation and telos are confounded and derided, and the expedition's transit seems like a maddening loop, without a capacity to progress.

The ambiguous ending reinforces the film's emphasis on movement without advancement. A faint flicker of promise remains in their discovery of a lone tree that appears, as if an apparition, bearing some greenness – a harbinger of water? – below dead, gnarled top branches. Meek announces that he is at the Indian's and, by extension, Emily's command proclaiming that 'we're all just playing our parts now. This was written long before we got here.'

Meek's grounds its detached gaze in the perspective of the wives in the travelling party who, during moments of crisis and decision-making, are often framed together spatially, and apart from the men. Sound further exacerbates this distance as Reichardt makes dialogue low or inaudible, highlighting the women's straining to hear and, instead, deploying ambient elemental noises. The film emphasises the women's muted observation and suspended agency, constructing out of their partial views, limited knowledge, and enforced distance from the men's actions, the anchoring perceptual frame of the film. Invested in the women's marginality to the central action, and decentring and displacing a privileged sense of narrative action altogether, *Meek's* presents us instead with elliptical segments of the dread, monotonous time of their travel and brute encounter with the Oregon Trail, the desert an impediment and silent adversary.

The film's opening emblematises Reichardt's slow style as an instantiation of austerity and narratological and pictorial restraint. It also establishes the minor rhythms that will organise its sparse narrative. The first six or so minutes of the film consist of thirteen shots taken from a detached observational distance, and in long takes. The first image shows the migrants traversing the girth of a rushing river. Slowly, in long shot, first one, then a second, then a third woman, cautiously wades through the water, waist deep, moving from screen left to screen right. One carries a basket and one a birdcage on her head. The camera tracks slightly leftwards to readjust, as we spy them from river level. The low position of the camera limits the expansiveness of the shot, emphasising the verisimilitude of the experience of fording the water's depth.

A subsequent shot, in long take, shows male travellers standing at the opposite bank, attempting to manoeuvre their Conestoga wagons into the water, and the camera slowly pans left to follow their movement. We see two oxen, faces mutely waiting in the hill's horizon. Dialogue is absent, as the forceful sound of the river swells, and the murmurs of animal and elemental life flood over the images. These distant framings deliberately give way to closer, medium shots of more specific tasks of labouring: a pregnant woman drying out wet clothing amid yellow thistles (Shirley Henderson); the filling of a water bucket from the rocks by a male traveller (Patton); and of one of the caravan's wives (Williams) scrubbing a wooden bowl on the rocks, her bonnet concealing her face. A woman's face shrouded in her bonnet (Zoe Kazan) is seen in medium close-up as she gingerly pours some water into her yellow canary's

cage. A donkey is readied for travel, chewing impassively as a grizzled man (Greenwood), in ostentatious red shirt, loads the saddle on the animal, his back to the camera.

Overlaid with this image a subtle sound bridge grows progressively louder, a scraping which mirrors and reinscribes the rustling, abrasive auditory landscape that has given this very austere space its brooding, verisimilar texture. The scratching is revealed in the subsequent shot. A young emigrant (Paul Dano) carves the word 'LOST' into the dry carcass of a toppled tree, its smooth surface whittled by wind and time. The first words, spoken or read, that we encounter in this film, this communiqué is a proclamation of a diegetic place, a location in narrative time, and perhaps an existential state. An expressive act addressed ostensibly to no one, lostness, a common trope in Reichardt's cinema, here signals an asynchronous time. The SOS is a conversation, like a time capsule, with a future temporality that has yet to arrive, as well as a material inscription of a wearisome present. The voyagers appear to us in the film's beginning already estranged, in a nowhere place, the irony of which the rest of the film will elucidate.

AUSTERE FRAMES, RESTRICTED MOVEMENTS

As evident in this opening and throughout the film, Reichardt's interest in omission, restriction, and limited, rigorously structured perspectives can be seen in the construction of these scenes in medium and long shots, and primarily stationary, contemplative camera set-ups. This element of restriction is also pronounced in her use of a 1.33:1 (4:3) aspect ratio, instead of the customary 1.85:1. To the extent that her aesthetic is organised by scarcity, difficulty, obstruction and impediment across her films, the boxier shape of the frame of 1.33:1 and the avoidance of widescreen delimits the visual field. Reichardt has commented that the square frame was also an instrument of manipulating narrative time, in that 'you wouldn't see tomorrow or yesterday in the shot' as you could in the wider expanse of the desert horizon (Longworth, 2011). Such framing also dispenses with a romantic orientation to landscape and the representation of westward expansion as a magisterial exercise in a mastery of, and a triumphalist claim to, space. While the genres of Western and road film are strongly associated with the monumentality of scale and beautified vision, Reichardt seeks 'de-romanticization' (Dietrich, 2011; Klinger, 1997). Reichardt has also linked the square frame and the restricted visual field of the space to the social and visual constraints signified by the women's bonnets. The headwear provides a figurative sight line and framing point of view (POV) which serve as blinkers that eliminate peripheral vision but also control an experience of space and time (Longworth, 2011; Dietrich, 2011). All these choices highlight what cannot be known, prognosticated or understood.

Sound and light are also key elements deployed by Reichardt in pursuit of a formal austerity. In addition to the general inaudibility of dialogue, when the men speak and the women look on, dialogue, albeit minimal and clipped, is often reserved for night-time or moments of halted transit. Silences, stalled conversations, and elliptical speech also prevail, as the film's ambient sound returns strikingly to recurrent tropes and motifs – the creaking wagon wheel – a rhythm that marks this monotonous time – the sound of the animals hooves, wind, the rustling of brush, footsteps and the jostling of objects in wagons. In addition, the transitions between the punishing sunlight of daytime and the pitch dark of night-time provide stark, unexpected contrasts. Night scenes strain and challenge the spectator's vision, as low lamplight and firelight barely illuminate actors' faces. These aesthetic strategies of extreme naturalism underscore the opacity and non-knowledge so central to the temporality of this uncertain journey.

Barbara Klinger suggests that the road film, like the Western, participates in an 'atavistic romanticism' of the nation through its figuration of landscape. Discussing *Easy Rider* (1969), she claims that the film's pictorial, cinematographic radiance – for example, in the use of lens flares and 360-degree pans in Monument Valley – reinscribes, despite a countercultural pedigree, a nationalist ideology through a beautified or majestic landscape aesthetic (Klinger, 1997: 189). In contrast, Reichardt's road saga, while examining the mythos of the west, shoots landscape as a sphere of danger and suspicion, threat and contingency (Dietrich, 2011). Wide picturesque vistas that emphasise ease or mastery of movement are avoided and, while long shots are prominent, Reichardt usually connects the impact of environment on bodies through the registration of affects of fatigue, weariness, in the residues of dirt and dust on hands, faces and garments, through arrested movements, and stalling gestures. The material environment is unforgiving. It exacts its toll on bodies, psyches and things, tracing an intractable time and a depletion of energy and resources.

The Oregon desert's very tactile textures – rockiness, brambles and shrubs, dust and wind, cracked earth, as well as a monochromatic tone of tan dryness – provide a haptic inhospitability and a sense of alien threat. Such images of barrenness gain an apocalyptic charge, summoning an ecological imaginary of blight and ruin, a time outside time. This aesthetic approach also produces some of its more hallucinatory, 'uncanny' aesthetic features: the yellow canary in this landscape (an indulgent piece of property that signals both naive idealism and sentiment); the women's floral pastel dresses in hues of yellow, green and pink against the dusty dry earth; or the scene of Glory White running back across the cracked salt flats to recover a lost scarf.

Reichardt studiously avoids presenting her landscapes as fulsome or sublime. For example, a later scene uses the cinematographic bounty of the 'magic hour' between dusk and nightfall to shoot the setting sun and the tawny

orange hues of the sky against the darkening silhouettes of the moving caravan of vehicles, animals and human bodies. The time of day, in the darkness of the figures, produces an effect of foreboding. Lens flares bestow on the image a peculiar cruelty. The last shot in this scene reveals the canary's cage swinging from the frame of the Gatelys' wagon, mordantly empty, a small death elided. The encroaching fall of night is thus made sinister and mournful as their movement grinds futilely on.

'A TRANCE OF WALKING'

I wanted to give a different view of the west from the usual series of masculine encounters and battles of strength, and to present this idea of going west as just a trance of walking. (Reichardt, in Gilbey, 2011)

The shooting of the film mirrored and recreated, in minor key, the restricted resources, duress and arduousness of the actual historical journey. Cast and a bare-bones crew spent a difficult time in the Oregon desert, setting up camp in the Horseshoe Motel in Burns, Oregon, a town with a population of three thousand, a two-hour drive from the desert locations. Operating without the frills of a bigger-budgeted shoot, Reichardt recalled the challenging production environment, calling the desert 'the great equalizer' (Longworth, 2011). The film-maker also remarked that 'Paul [Dano] and Zoe [Kazan] were saying that the strangest thing for them was after walking across that desert for a month, to get in a plane and fly across that area in a minute' (Adams, 2011). The arduousness of the emigrants' travel, on foot and via caravan, and the obstinacy of space as a medium of tracing time are no doubt here rendered in the calling forth of images of transit that challenge the ethos of freedom, velocity and speed, as well as the luxury of meandering drift or time luxuriated usually associated with modernist *flânerie* and its senses of drift. In the road film's quest structure and in the spatial conquest narratives that underwrite the Western, travel and transit are bestowed with the quality of autonomy and individuation. *Yet Meek's* associates physical movement with struggle, difficulty, blockage, impediment and endurance rather than with freedom.

The romance of drift, as contingent process and route to sovereignty, is converted thus into a space of considerable risk. Matthew Flanagan has described how slow cinema, at least from one of its originary sites in Michelangelo Antonioni's modernism, is often situated as a 'cinema of walking' (Flanagan, 2008). Wandering is a primary feature of the modern art cinema more broadly, linked with urban modernity and the preponderance of the *flâneur* and '*flâneuse*' in post-war cinema (Betz, 2009). Walking has a central place in contemporary global instantiations of slow style, especially in the form of the extended following shot that moves with the characters perambulations.

Walking in *Meek's* is stripped of this capacity for virtuosity in the mirroring of camera movement or individuation with the walkers. Camera movement is thus always subtle, and never ostentatiously materialised in the baroque tracking shot, in contrast, for example, with the cinema of Tarr or Carlos Reygadas. In *Meek's* the protagonist's walks often highlight the temporality of blocked advancement, the futility of progress, and the sheer endurance of its process. A series of shots articulates the temporal weariness of the walk through the desert, the exhaustion of drift. Emily and Millie are seen in long shot hobbling slowly with stiffening gaits against the wind but remaining in the same place within the composition for the duration of the take, their faces worn, their features slackened (See Figure 8.1).

This sense of time, as both embedded in minutiae *and* trance-like in its temporal shifts, is tied to accounts of the historical reality Reichardt aimed to reconstruct. In interviews, Reichardt has remarked on the journal entries she studied of actual emigrants, particularly the women, on the Meek expedition in 1845. She noted the settlers' attenuated sense of time, and how radically alien their temporal and spatial experience of travel might seem to a twenty-first-century sensibility (Quart, 2011: 41). The final shots which comprise the opening sequence emblemise the unexpectedly conjoined elements of movement,



Figure 8.1 The punishing walk on the salt flats, *Meek's Cutoff* (2010).

slowness and hypnagogic trance. A forty-second take presents the three wagons and the entire travelling party traversing the frame from background to foreground. They walk leading their wagons, curving towards the camera and then out of frame, as we see and hear the din of the river's water flowing behind them. All the emigrants pass out of frame, leaving the 'empty' image of the riverbank. An image superimposition slowly appears. One distant hillscape transforms into another and we see a moving caravan of wagons silhouetted, from a further, iconic distance, traversing the hilly edge of an even further horizon. The river appears slowly to dry out in the process of the image's transition from shot to shot, the water replaced by a more arid, tawny vista.

This slowly rendered lap dissolve, over the course of two takes and close to two minutes, creates an eerie spatio-temporal effect of time passing, in the condensation and ellipsis of narrative events, as well as the droning circularity and state of waiting such travel has induced. The monotony of a day edges indistinctly into the next, temporal difference eviscerated. The image of the settlers, who have just left the image on screen left, materialises their return as specks on the horizon on screen right. It articulates a sense of time marked by exhaustion that incorporates the hallucinatory and evocative as much as the realist. Both a clarion of the iconicity of the Western, and an instance of 'hyperreal' minimalism, this sequence speaks to the contradictory and distinct nature of Reichardt's formal manipulation of time and her use of slowness as an allegorical material, as much as, or in excess of, sheer durational material. The superimposed shot extends the fundamental strangeness of the settlers' presence in and to this landscape, their basic alienness converted into an arresting temporal abstraction within the image.

LABOURING BODIES

Labour and the effort of endurance are central to *Meek's Cutoff's* production of slow time. Noting the transformation in the original settlers' diary entries, Reichardt indicates how exhaustion winnowed the real emigrants' capacity for descriptive detail, 'the diaries . . . begin with big ideas and grand dreams when they start out, but as they go on, the trip turns into a stripped-down, bare-bones list of chores (e.g., pitching a tent). I thought of *Nanook of the North* while making it' (Quart 2011: 41). Robert Flaherty's landmark ethnographic film (1922) is, indeed, a crucial point of contrast for *Meek's*, as Reichardt clearly borrows the temporality of the observation of discrete labour processes (in *Nanook*, for example, the seal hunt, the building of the igloo). *Meek's* likewise takes pains to show us extensively the fixing of wagon wheels, the setting up of camp, collecting kindling, starting fires, knitting, mending clothes, laundry, looking after the cattle, the grinding of wheat, the cooking. But we rarely see an action proceed from ostensible beginning to end, as in *Nanook*, except for

key dramatic episodes such as the lowering of the wagons into the steep ravine or the widely discussed scene of Emily loading and firing the shotgun when she first spies the Cayuse (Lattimer, 2013: 40). The film's more quotidian actions are mere facts that must be attended to for the grinding time of survival.

While based in historical reality, the gendered division of labour is striking in the ways it produces spaces of solitariness amid presumed collectivity. It also highlights the spatial organisation of knowledge, as the men deliberate, making decisions, while the women are responsible for social reproduction and the care of the expedition. After they have come upon an inhospitable alkaline lake, an extended sequence shot from the women's waiting perspective frames an image of the men, standing in a line with their backs to women and camera, inaudibly discussing what to do. As they speak, the body of water seems to taunt the group as if a cruel mirage. The film's form apprises us that knowledge and access to information are like water, among many scarce resources.

Gender, exhaustion and labour systematically adjoin questions of race, a relationship complexly negotiated within the film. Starting the breakfast fire in the darkness of morning, Emily Tetherow (Williams) states begrudgingly, barely visible in lamplight, 'working like niggers once again'. The shot reveals two more lanterns and fires slowly starting in the background as the two other wives, Glory White (Henderson) and Millie Gately (Kazan) perform their morning chores. This contradictory association of their labour with a racial horizon of a pre-civil war slavery economy, and the women's positioning with other forms of chattel, resonates strikingly with the racial and gender politics that thread throughout the rest of the film.

Emily Tetherow seems the most progressive force in the film, in contrast to Meek's fear-mongering and racism; she is the character who shows the most (proto-liberal) empathy for the Cayuse captive. Her politics are ambivalent, however, reinscribing her racial and economic privilege and patrimony, her sense of white Eurocentric pride. The scene of her mending the Indian's moccasins expresses the stakes of dependency, as Emily rationalises to Millie her offer of seeming care in sewing his shoe, 'I want him to owe me something'. Establishing a capitalist logic of debt as the essential social bond or condition of their relationality, Emily further speaks to the native as he looks on and she sews, explaining that the needle is a 'pin for sewing . . .' and launches into a 'civilising' lesson: 'you can't even imagine what we've done, the cities we've built'. The rawness and tension of the act are highlighted by one of the scarcer close-ups of the film, on the Indian's bare, soiled foot, resting on the sienna earth. Another ironic inscription of capitalist exchange value is also resident in Gately's naive offering of blankets to the Cayuse in exchange for his knowledge about where water might be – which invokes the history of the spread of smallpox among Native American tribes through contaminated blankets given to them by British settlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Despite these moments of coloniser hubris towards the Cayuse, the larger narrative arc destabilises the notion of property which underwrites the logics of self-possession that motivates Manifest Destiny, conceived as central to the American 'character'. In the most 'climactic' scene in which the Tetherows lose their wagon and their remaining water during their arduous descent into a deep valley, property, material wealth and capital are jettisoned, questioned, made cruelly irrelevant. Even earlier, the Tetherows are forced to lighten the load of their wagon to ease the weight pulled by their animals. Solomon Tetherow's mother's clock is the first, highly symbolic, object to be shuttled, along with a rocking chair, another palliative bourgeois object to soothe the passing rhythms of time. Later, during a delay due to the fixing of a wagon-wheel axle, Jimmy White's discovery of gold presents another absurd confrontation with their exhausting journey's revaluation of value, as Tetherow remarks that 'you can't drink gold' and that they must keep moving in order to make good time before sunset. They leave a marker of the gold's location, like Gately's lost sign, again for a future time that has yet to materialise.

DISPOSSESSION, INDETERMINATE ENDS

The hauntingly ambiguous conclusion of the film – itself a reflexive outcome of resource restriction, as Reichardt's budget ran out before they could shoot the last scripted scene – offers the discovery of the tree and Meek's abdication of his power, in effect to the woman and the Native American. Whether a renunciation of leadership, the emergence of an alternative episteme, or a recalibration of collective will, the equivocal ending presents another mode of dispossession, a 'giving in' and 'giving up' – seen in very different form elsewhere in Reichardt's cinema (Gorfinkel, 2012/2013: 342). The Cayuse may still lead them to water or into the hands of fellow tribesmen or to death. The film ends, emblematically, on a long shot of the Cayuse walking alone across the desert plain. As such, dispossession operates throughout *Meek's* as an inevitable, determined effect of movement itself, one dynamised by the 'alchemy' of ideology, racial rights, land rights and the drive of colonisation and settlement itself. To be able to imagine the claim on land as property, on persons as property and on the self as property in one breath, in the developing ethos of American possessive individualism in this represented historical moment, is also to be caught in the winds of its unfathomable violence and its drive to the abstraction of the human subject (Athanasίου and Butler, 2013).

Reichardt's cinema asks us to confront the couplet of austerity and dispossession through the experience of a grinding time of movement without seeming end, one that stresses and wears, and one that the travellers can only endure. Reichardt's slowness thus configures time not as a vehicle of progress or heroic

telos but as a sphere of blockage, delay, arrest and duress. In the refrain of the settlers' plaintive question of 'how much longer/farther?', we can indeed ask how much more can be endured, and *for how long*, before something is found? Reichardt's constitutive aesthetic mode is an exercise in slowness as a politics of the difficulty of survival and endurance, from the perspective of a 'late liberal' geopolitical moment (Povinelli, 2011) and the subjects at its utmost margins. In the solitary, exhausted drift of the film's final image, Reichardt's austere aesthetic seems to ask, what can one truly *have* without possession *but* attachment to the materiality of time?

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