



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree
in English and
American Studies

Joint Degree Program in University of Graz

Final Thesis

The Frontier
Reimagined: From
Expansion to
Precarity in
Contemporary
American Cinema

Supervisor

Elisa Bordin

Second reader

Rieser Klaus

Graduand

Arina Ermakova
899131

Academic Year

2025 / 2026

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1. Turner's Frontier Thesis and the Formation of American Identity	5
1.1 Myth, Violence, and Ideology: Reinterpretation of the Frontier	8
1.2 The Western as a Narrative Form: Myth, Violence, and Historical Representation.....	15
1.3 Gender, Power, and the Construction of the Frontier	22
Chapter 2. <i>Meek's Cutoff</i> as a Revisionist Western and Post-Western genre	30
2.1 Mobility and Precarity in <i>Meek's Cutoff</i>	35
2.2 Reichardt's Female Perspective in <i>Meek's Cutoff</i>	41
2.3 Masculine Authority and Its Collapse	43
2.4 Domestic Labor and Survival	47
2.5 The Failure of the Frontier Mastery, Landscape and Silence.....	50
2.6 Settlers, Indigenous Presence, and the Collapse of Frontier Hierarchies	54
2.7 Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and the Open Ending	58

Chapter 3. <i>Nomadland</i> and the Contemporary Post-Western.....	62
3.1 Mobility Without Destination: The New Frontier.	66
3.2 Community, Marginality, and the American Dream	72
3.3 Landscape, Space, and the Post-Western West	80
3.4 Fern as a Post-Western Hero.....	83
3.5 Ambiguity, Loss, and the Future of the Frontier	85
Conclusion.	87
Works Cited	90

Introduction

Throughout American history, the western genre has always been an important element in American culture. According to the classical Western stories, the frontier has always been depicted as a place where movement from East to West represented the idea of expansion, progress, and transformation. Westward movement represented the idea of achieving personal success. In this ideological context, the frontier was not simply a geographical space, but also an important symbol of the destiny of the nation.

However, contemporary film tradition has increasingly challenged this representational logic. Today's cinematic portrayals of the West involve a reflection on the concept of the frontier and raise questions about some basic assumptions that lie behind it, such as conquest, colonization, and social mobility. Instead of glorifying the West as the scene of triumphant conquest and colonization, such films tend to emphasize marginal viewpoints and precariousness. Thus, the frontier emerges as an ambiguous concept representing uncertainty and instability.

This thesis analyzes the shift from the classical Western tradition to post-Western. Particular emphasis will be placed on post-Western films' ability to reconfigure the concept of marginality, mobility, and the interconnection of people and the landscape. This thesis seeks to explore how post-Westerns subvert the classical narrative structure of the Western genre by abandoning linearity and closure.

In this chapter, the theoretical framework which constitutes the base for the analysis of *Meek's Cutoff* and *Nomadland* is introduced. As both films draw upon the mythology of the American West, they simultaneously criticize its conventions, it is important to analyze the background of the Western genre and the frontier idea. First, the development of the frontier myth in the works by Frederick Jackson Turner and

Richard Slotkin, who interprets the frontier ideology differently from Turner, is analyzed, followed by the history of the Western film and the shift from classic Western to revisionist and post-Western. The role of mobility, space, and marginality. By introducing this theoretical background, it becomes possible to investigate how post-Westerns of the present day reinterpret the traditional frontier stories and challenge the expansion, progress, and American Dream myths of the American West.

The two main case studies of this thesis are *Meek's Cutoff* by Kelly Reichardt and *Nomadland* by Chloé Zhao. Although these two films take place in different times in history, they both have elements of criticism when it comes to frontier mythology and the American Dream. By examining the two films, this thesis argues that rather than jettisoning the myth of the frontier, post-Western cinema actually reworks it in order to expose the internal contradictions of the myth and thus point to its instability. This demonstrates not only the continued relevance of myths about movement, settlement, and belonging for cultural ideas about identity in the US, but also their instability within the socio-economic context of the present day. Ultimately, this thesis sets out to prove that the post-Western cannot be understood through the lack of the frontier myth, but through its persistence in transformed and unstable forms. The frontier remains a powerful cultural structure, marked by ambiguity, loss, and the absence of narrative resolution.

Chapter 1. Turner's Frontier Thesis and the Formation of American Identity

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner put forward the “frontier thesis” in a seminal essay entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. At the core of Turner’s argument is the idea that, in the American context, the frontier is not merely a geographical border separating one country from another. It is the development and familiarization of new lands, a dynamic act of expansion and settlement, a formative force that shapes American identity and values. As Turner famously stated: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”¹ According to Turner, the frontier is a process, a movement that shaped national identity. The colonization of the Great West by the settlers required them to build communities and adapt to the new reality. As a result, the land was fully transformed. When confronted with the wilderness, social differences among the settlers were erased, as each had to cope with the same challenges posed by nature and a multicultural space. The equality was a result of the transformative influence of the frontier. The settlers adopted egalitarian and democratic principles as the foundation of the community they were creating, rejecting European models of social organization. This points out the line between restraint and unbridledness, shaping the American identity through the process of turning the unknown into habit.

In its original European context, the frontier signified a fixed boundary separating political territory, and was highly associated with stability and control. The

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 1.

American understanding of the frontier initially coincided with the European one, which mainly views the frontier as a fixed political boundary between states, and a border to defend, not expand into. But as the experience of settling the North American continent progressed, the understanding of the term shifted. With the emphasis on 'further settlements,' the concept of the frontier as a boundary with newly settled territories first emerged. "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization... It finds him a European... [and] strips off the garments of civilization"². This passage suggests that European settlers arrived with an identity, strongly tied to their place of origin, initially defined by established social and cultural structures. However, colonization as a process of establishing control over a foreign territory, reshapes the understanding of self in another cultural context. The frontier nurtured a character formation: an independent individual. Early history of The United States represented a journey through the difficulties caused by the despotic nature of colonial rule and, echoed in collective memory, instilled in Americans the idea of permissiveness and courage that liberated them from colonial dependence. As a result, the frontier thus functions as a transformative space in which a distinct American identity emerges through the interaction between settlers and the wilderness.

Turner argues that the settlement of the Great West played a central role in the formation of a distinctive American identity that was not simply a continuation of European traditions. As he states, "...the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people."³. He further describes the frontier as a "crucible" in which immigrants were "Americanized... and fused into a mixed

² Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 4.

³ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 14.

race.”⁴ Frontier functions as a melting pot of cultures, nationalities, and identities, where they are brought together and reshaped into a new collective identity. American nationality is thus shaped by the shared experience of expansion and adaptation rather than by origin. Another important aspect in the formation of American identity was played by nature. As Turner famously stated: “The wilderness masters the colonist.”⁵ The transformation, and consequently the creation of a new identity, occurred during the encounter with the wilderness, which compelled the settlers to abandon their customary ways of life and adapt to harsh and previously unknown existence conditions. The process of “Americanization”, where the frontier played a central role, created the society that we recognize today as distinctly American.

The frontier, according to Turner, is strongly associated with democratic values and their development. Turner argues that greater social mobility and political participation are reached by the removal of strict social hierarchies, which is one of the markers of frontier life. “The frontier is productive of individualism... it promotes democracy.”⁶ Rather than depending on a predetermined set of rules and laws, settlers arriving at the frontier had to rely on their own judgment, fostering a sense of individualism in order to adapt to unfamiliar, often unpredictable conditions. This also stripped away the complexity of social struggles that European society already had at the time: the frontier strips off the garments of civilization. Turner’s point is that the settlement of new territories required a certain sacrifice; in this case, he’s talking about letting go of certain commodities that life in the established country can provide. We

⁴ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 16.

⁵ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 4.

⁶ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 25.

already established that this allowed democracy and individualism to thrive, but we can't deny that it required a simplification in society's structure.

1.1 Myth, Violence, and Ideology: Reinterpretation of the Frontier

On the other hand, the notion of a frontier as a nationally-forming force is shattered by the disturbing reality associated with multicultural relations on the border between savagery and civilization. Challenged by the complex realities of multicultural relations at the boundary between so-called savagery and civilization. Historian and cultural critic Richard Slotkin contends that the American frontier is a myth deeply embedded in culture, film, and political rhetoric. Slotkin argues that, after the frontier was declared closed in 1890, it became "a term of ideological rather than geographical location"⁷. For Slotkin, the frontier is a product of popular culture and politics, with its myth often sanitized and stripped of violence. After all, it's well known that the so-called wilderness land belonged to the Indigenous population of the American continent for hundreds of years. As Richard Slotkin argues, "violence is central"⁸ in the development of the frontier, not only as a historical reality but also as a defining narrative principle. Violence does not appear random or unintentional; rather, it functions as the primary mechanism through which land is acquired, order is established, and identity is formed. In this sense, the frontier is structured around conflict, where acts of violence become necessary steps in transforming wilderness

⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 4.

⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

into civilized space. The land was forcibly taken from Indigenous peoples, who were denied basic human rights. In a society lacking a common religion, history, or nationality, the myth of the frontier served as a unifying and stabilizing force.

“Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation.”⁹ This is an illustration of the distinctive difference between historical reality and mythic narrative. The reality of colonization is marked by war and disposition; however, its mythical narrative serves as a tool to justify and give meaning to the actions that were used. The idealization of pioneer figures and the demonization of Native Americans interpreted the process of frontier development, for American interests, as a transition from Evil to Good through the forcible subjugation of “savages” and nature to the will of progressive characters. The central narrative of the frontier myth was “regeneration through violence”, which defined American identity and was ultimately reflected in legislation and dominant culture. In “Reflections on Violence,” Mary Young writes that “the American myth became increasingly Indianized.”¹⁰ When noting that, she doesn't mean a literal identification with Native peoples. Rather, she points to the selective incorporation of traits associated with Native life—such as resilience, survival skills, and a warrior spirit—into the formation of American identity. This process reflects the contradiction at the heart of the frontier myth: while Native peoples were marginalized and displaced, aspects of their supposed strength and adaptability were simultaneously appropriated and reimagined as defining traits of the American character. The American identity, as mentioned before, is composite. It consists partly of the European identity of the

⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

¹⁰ Mary Young, “Reflections on Violence,” *Reviews in American History* 3, no. 1 (1975): 9.

settlers' place of origin and the new characteristics acquired during the colonization and settlement of the new territories. The Indigenous populations of the continent left a significant imprint on this emerging identity. As a result of the violence employed during settlement¹¹, Americans developed a warrior ethos and survival skills that allowed them to conquer new territories and establish a nation on previously inhabited land.

However, the duality in the perception of certain traits is particularly significant in this discourse. Slotkin delineates a distinction between “people of the wilderness” and “savages,” suggesting that the actions of American settlers were essential to accomplish progress. This achievement of ‘progress’ was inevitably associated with territory expansion, which would not be possible without the displacement of the Indigenous population. Meanwhile, the natives’ struggle for land and survival is described as “savage” and “bloodthirsty.”¹² Slotkin observed that, as Turner argued, the capacity of certain races and ethnicities to assimilate into “American life” is limited.¹³ This illustrates how the contrast of the frontier, categorizing its inhabitants as “savage” or “acceptable,” was primarily founded on prejudiced and harsh perceptions of other racial groups, whereas white Anglo-Saxons - the “true Americans” - were considered superior. An illustration of this idea is the Memoirs of frontier hero and hunter David Crockett: *“Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee.”* In recounting the victims slain by himself and his companions, Crockett does not differentiate between the outcomes of successful game hunts and those involving Native peoples, as if there were no distinction between the two.

¹¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

¹² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 12.

¹³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 55.

Another notable aspect is the language and diction: in his memoir, when depicting a scene, Crockett notes how “many of the carcasses of the Indians were still to be seen.”¹⁴ The term “carcass” is typically reserved for deceased animals and, when applied to humans, carries a derogatory connotation. In other words, the killings of the Indigenous people of the American continent were not viewed as deeply wrong because of the strict racial distinction between white settlers and natives. This dehumanization brings us back to the mythic narrative of the frontier, where Crockett embodies the ‘mythic frontiersman’, a real historical event is viewed differently, and ideology becomes a lived practice.

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his fundamental thesis, viewed the frontier as a historical process that took place during the continent colonization, whereas Richard Slotkin reinterprets it as a persistent myth that functions as an ideological force. This is the reason why Slotkin referred to it as “our oldest and most characteristic myth.”¹⁵ In this context, “myth” does not denote falsity. Myth is creating a narrative that shapes popular culture, rituals, and perceptions, and influences behavior. However, Patricia Nelson Limerick, one of the most influential historians of the American West, in “*The Legacy of Conquest*,” openly critiques frontier mythology. According to Limerick, the frontier and its significance are “not a simple story of progress but a complex and often violent history of conquest and cultural conflict”¹⁶. This brings us back to the topic of “Regeneration through violence”, where historical events are simplified and glorified through a mythic prism.

¹⁴ David Crockett, *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1834), 90.

¹⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 14.

¹⁶ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 27–28.

Patricia Nelson Limerick states: “Conquest was a literal territorial form of economic growth.”¹⁷ This serves as a reminder that the term “settlement,” in the context of the Great West, is not neutral; rather, it involves underlying forces, domination, and displacement. Economic growth is closely linked to the acquisition of new land, thereby providing opportunities for the expansion of agriculture, mining, and trade. Slotkin, in his interpretation of Turner’s concept of the frontier, describes it as divided into two realms: “Metropolis” and “the Wilderness”. The frontier is formed through the expansion of Metropolis outward. Each newly acquired territory absorbs and transforms the Wilderness. The driving motivation is the abundance of resources and untouched land that has not been affected by industrialization. This mechanism illustrates how the frontier was advanced. Beyond ideological imperial ambitions, hidden under a myth, there was a significantly more straightforward economic motive.

The expansion of the frontier was primarily motivated by territorial and economic interests; however, it was equally reliant on the systematic utilization of violence, functioning as a central mechanism of transformation. “Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation;”¹⁸ however, violence in this case is not incidental, even within a mythical context. Rather, violence functions as a component of frontier expansion, facilitating the transformation of land through the processes of conquest and dispossession. In this context, settlement cannot be separated from violence, as the acquisition of territory required transforming wilderness into a civilized space and removing Indigenous populations to establish new communities. However, perceptions of violence within

¹⁷ Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 27–28.

¹⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

the frontier are not universal; they are shaped by ideological distinctions that attribute varying meanings depending on the subject executing the actions. While the actions of American settlers are portrayed as inevitable and essential for the advancement of civilization and progress, the resistance of Indigenous peoples is simultaneously characterized as “savage and bloodthirsty.” This disparity demonstrated that violence is both a tangible reality on the frontier and a crafted narrative, where its moral significance is shaped by underlying systems of power representation.

Robert R. Dykstra, in “Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence,” emphasizes that a contemporary account by Colonel Richard Dodge suggests that frontier violence was often portrayed in exaggerated and almost obsessive terms, with “assassination” described as a form of “monomania.”¹⁹ Stating that, Dykstra implies that acts of violence were not only frequent but also perceived as a form of obsessive behavior, creating the identity of individuals within the frontier environment. Those incidents, instead of being understood as isolated ones, are transformed into depictions of violence and into a defining trait of frontier life. In this way, violence becomes more than a historical reality but also a narrative device, contributing to the mythologized image of the frontier as a space governed by conflict and personal reputation. This reinterpretation of violence is reinforced by its portrayal, in which acts of conflict are frequently exaggerated and dramatized. Such portrayals demonstrate that violence is not only a practical necessity of life on the frontier but also a subject of interest, viewed as a key characteristic of people operating in this environment. The emphasis on competition and reputation transforms violence into a

¹⁹ Dykstra, Robert R. “Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2009): 325.

form of spectacle, in which individual identity is constructed through acts of confrontation. Consequently, these narratives contribute to the formation of a mythical image of the frontier, in which violence is not only normalized but also elevated to the status of a central and essential feature of the frontier experience.

According to Slotkin's framework, the frontier is not a neutral space but one organized by distinctions that influence how its inhabitants are viewed and treated. Slotkin defines a division between "people of the wilderness" and "savages"²⁰. This distinction bears considerable ideological significance. While ones linked to wilderness areas might be seen as adaptable or capable of integration into American society, those labeled as "savages" are viewed as a burden, a barrier to progress. Such classifications are rooted in constructed perceptions that aim to emphasize a hierarchical relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples. This distinction can be understood through Edward Said's concept of the construction of the "Other." The "Other" is not a natural description of perception. It is the constructed, fabricated, and frequently inaccurate image of the Orient, created by Western scholarship, literature, and media.²¹ In the context of the frontier, "Otherness" functions to uphold the hierarchical structure, wherein the colonizer sustains a dominant position by perpetuating the alienation of the indigenous population even beyond the conclusion of colonial rule.

Furthermore, Slotkin raises a question regarding violence originating from the Native population. "Indians were certainly aggressors in particular cases"²². The underlying logic of the frontier is not only not questioned but also reinforced. It

²⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

²¹ 1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 32

²² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 12.

sustains the unequal framework through which the violence is evaluated. Indigenous aggression tends to be highlighted and compared to the aggression coming from the other side, reinforcing the “savage” stereotype. On the other hand, violence from the settlers is often depicted as reasonable, justified, and defensive. Consequently, these portrayals construct a narrative that justifies the displacement of the Indigenous population from their ancestral land and all the actions that were used to achieve that goal. Thereby, Slotkin shows how the myth justifies expansion. It takes us back to the dual nature of violence in frontier discourse. Frontier myth not only reflects the historical conflict, but it also actively organizes it into a narrative, privileging one group over another. The distinction between “savage” and “civilized” becomes a narrative device that reinforces the ideological foundations of the frontier. Violence, through this lens, becomes normalized and supports the narrative where conflict is an essential part of the frontier space.

1.2 The Western as a Narrative Form: Myth, Violence, and Historical Representation

Westerns, as a form of historical narrative, represent the frontier, and Slotkin found this genre particularly important in the representation and mythization of the concept of the frontier. The western genre relies on selective narratives, privileging moments of conflict and heroism, instead of presenting objective, historically accurate reality. In “*Gunfire Nation*,” Slotkin observes how writers are encouraged to seek out “thrilling anecdotes” and “glamorous” episodes from history,²³ emphasizing dramatic and particularly engaging elements. Historical experience is therefore transformed into

²³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 280.

a structured story in which violence, conflict, and confrontation are brought to the foreground. The western genre does not portray the frontier directly; instead, it actively reshapes it, crafting an alternative version of history that supports the ideological foundation of the frontier myth. “Jones recommended the history of the Frontier as one of the obvious places to seek such stories.”²⁴ This quote illustrates how the frontier became the space of creation, actively rewriting its narrative through the selection of particular events. This selective construction of the past aligns with Jane Thomkins’ idea about the hidden structure of Western narrative, where genre is “a story about the struggle to establish order”²⁵. Taking this into account, violence and conflict in Western are not incidental but are fundamental in shaping the narrative, where historical events are presented to support the intended argument. “The struggle to establish order”²⁶ characterizes the frontier as a space where order must be enforced; however, there is an ongoing challenge in achieving this goal. This discourse reinforces the ideological assumption that violence is necessary and historical complexity is transformed into a narrative centered around conflict and resolution.

According to Susan Kollin, the Western is “a genre structured by competing and contradictory impulses.”²⁷ Kollin’s observation points to the genre’s inherent instability, as it simultaneously reinforces and questions the ideological values it represents. The Western is not a single, stable narrative form, but a genre that brings together both traditional and critical elements. While classic Westerns from the early to mid-twentieth century tended to reinforce dominant ideologies, more recent

²⁴ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 281.

²⁵ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

²⁶ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 11.

²⁷ Kollin, Susan. “Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western.” *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 3 (2001): 560.

revisionist and contemporary Westerns have increasingly begun to question and challenge those conventions. On the contrary, anti-Western, as form of Western that questions or subverts the traditional values of the genre, is critical of the Western, showcasing its limitations, and questioning the violence, while still being influenced by its conventions and aesthetics. This tension illustrates how Western is not a static representation of the frontier, but a dynamic form that reflects broader cultural uncertainty caused by violence, identity, and national development.

As André Bazin suggested, it is challenging to find a definition of Western because, unlike comedy or melodrama, it can't be pinned down to a single function. Instead, a Western can incorporate elements of both comedy and melodrama and still be considered solely a Western.²⁸ The viewer recognizes they are dealing with a Western through various symbols and signs: geographical, historical, and others, that can be categorized under the idea of “setting.” These include the external features of the setting where the story unfolds and the appearance of the characters. In the world of the classic Western, every character, in one way or another, embodies one of two polarities: frontier or civilization. This depends on society's boundaries, whether the character engages with it, and if they follow its norms and rules. This is often created by the landscape or scenery. For many decades, Natives remained the central figures, clearly outside the bounds of Western society. They posed a clear threat to the nascent culture and statehood, which the Westerner had to contend with. The Native peoples had their own society, alien to the laws and norms of democracy and Christianity, and it was the white man's job to set them on the right path with the use of arms. All this

²⁸ André Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” in *What Is Cinema? Volume II*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 234.

creates a unique iconography by which the genre can be easily identified. By the mid-1910s, Wild West films began to develop a central theme: the conflict between civilized law and the law of the frontier. People gather to settle the new land, start families, and live comfortably within the bounds of law and the Christian religion. However, the surrounding wilderness is rife with bandits and Indians eager to disturb the settlers' peace. This is where the figure of the early Western protagonist emerges in the cowboy, who must restore order and eliminate the threat looming over the stability and progress of the new society.²⁹

The Western is also shaped by a recognizable visual language, with recurring elements such as wide-open landscapes, horseback travel, and the stable presence of guns. These features make the genre easy to identify, but they also help shape how the frontier is understood. The repeated image of vast, seemingly empty land suggests that the frontier is open and available, while overlooking the histories of conflict and displacement that made this space possible. In this way, the visual style of the Western helps construct the frontier myth, turning complex historical realities into simplified and familiar images. As André Bazin notes, the genre can be recognized through these recurring visual and narrative conventions, which together create a distinct cinematic language.³⁰

“*Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*” is a seminal work by Will Wright concerning the Western genre. According to Wright, “a myth provides a conceptual model of social action,”³¹ implying that Western narratives not only portray events but also present a framework through which social conduct is

²⁹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill,) 328.

³⁰ André Bazin, “The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence,” 234.

³¹ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 124.

comprehended and perpetuated. This function is supported by the idea that “the narrative action of the myth relates to the everyday social actions of individuals,” indicating a direct connection between narrative forms and social behaviors. The Western uses “conceptual oppositions and narrative functions”³² to categorize characters and events into clear ideological groups, such as order versus chaos or civilization versus savagery. Here, storytelling becomes more than just a way to tell a story; as Wright suggests, it acts as a means of explanation, influencing how people understand events and see them as part of a larger cultural framework. In other words, the Western genre is not solely an entertainment. Western stories depict the world's structure and functioning through an exaggerated perspective. In classical Westerns, it is typically clear who represents “good” and “evil,” and how conflicts should be resolved. These narratives rely on sharp moral distinctions and present violence as a legitimate means of restoring order. However, later revisionist and anti-Westerns complicate this structure by erasing such a clear distinction of moral boundaries and questioning the legitimacy of both the hero's actions and the values he represents. Oppositions are often very clear-cut: the antagonist creates chaos and causes the problems, while the protagonist works to restore order and peace. Problems are solved through violence. It brings us back to the argument about “civilized” and “savages.” Westerns are the stories that teach people how society works and how problems should be solved. Wright's quote, “the narrative action of the myth relates to the everyday actions of individuals,” demonstrates this point.

Just like the myth, the Western does not have a fixed structure. Both of them change over time. The narrative of Westerns evolves as society changes, and with

³² Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, 125.

those changes come different values. Wright suggests that the change in Western genre corresponds to broader shifts in mythic structure, showing that these narratives change alongside modifying social and cultural conditions. Wright also highlights a core conflict in these narratives, describing it as “a dilemma which confronts traditional values with the attitudes inherent in institutional actions.”³³ It highlights the conflict of moral ideas and how they are inseparable from the power structure of society. As a result, Westerns reinforce the ideology and expose its underlying contradictions, revealing the instability of the values they aim to uphold. This tension is one of the main functions of the Western. Scenarios in which different moral values are questioned are often central themes of the film. And instead of providing us with a stable and thorough portrayal of the society, Westerns reveal the system’s fragility. The Western becomes a space where power’s legitimacy is both questioned and reinforced, as acts of violence are displayed, which are simultaneously judged and seen as necessary. Resolving those conflicts does not erase those contradictions, but temporarily stabilizes them, reinforcing the idea that order is inseparable from the powers of unstable nature.

The role of the hero in Western is indeed ambiguous and deserves special attention. John G. Cawelti, in “Some Ruminations on American Fantasies of Heroism,” emphasizes the tension between institutional power and the actions of individuals. As Cawelti notes, “the Western hero acts out the myth that society and its organized processes of law... are incapable of bringing about true justice.”³⁴ The idea of formal structures of law not being sufficient is being reinforced, as is an individual’s

³³ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 130–131.

³⁴ John G. Cawelti, “The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick: Some Ruminations on American Fantasies of Heroism,” *American Studies* 16, no. 2 (1975): 50.

moral authority. In this context, the hero's actions, although often violent and immoral, are viewed as necessary. Those actions restore a deeper idea of justice. However, it only complicates the relationship between the hero and society, because the same qualities that make him an exceptional heroic character prevent him from full integration into society. In other words, according to Cawelti, in Westerns, law does not establish rules. Instead, the hero takes on this role. That is why the hero's nature is so complex: the violent actions performed are wrong at the core, but solely because they are done by the hero, they are justified. This emphasis on the individual's authority and justice reinforces the ideological framework of the frontier, in which authority is derived not from institutions but from personal action and strength.

Another important aspect of the Western we must consider is mobility. As Frederick Jackson Turner stated, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development"³⁵. Mobility in this case is expansion, movement further west. Mobility is also strongly associated with freedom; however, in the case of the frontier, the mobility is part of the reason for the absence of fixed identity. Constant movement across space makes it difficult to establish stable communities or fixed social structures, leaving individuals in a state of ongoing transition. As a result, identity is not tied to a specific place or role but remains fluid, shaped by changing circumstances rather than stable norms. The constant movement across space prevents the formation of strong communities, which puts individuals in a position of constant change and transition. In the case of Western, this is particularly evident in the hero. Mobility

³⁵ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), 1.

becomes more than a physical condition; it becomes an existential one. However, the mobility within the frontier is not experienced equally in the same manner. There's a polar difference between 2 groups: settlers and Natives. Mobility for settlers was an opportunity for expansion, freedom, and choice. Whereas the Native population of the Great West was forcibly displaced. These are both forms of mobility, although in this case, mobility reinforces the hierarchy. Freedom for one only becomes possible through the limitations of another.³⁶ So the mobility praised in the frontier myth is highly uneven, because it is based on displacement and exclusion of the Indigenous population.

1.3 Gender, Power, and the Construction of the Frontier

The frontier myth centers on themes of individualism, violence, and movement, yet it is also heavily influenced by gender; it favors masculinity while marginalizing or excluding female perspectives. Western narratives are fundamentally concerned with men's use of power.³⁷ In this context, the male perspective is a central element of the genre. Within the frontier, identity is defined by control and the ability to confront the violence, or use it in times of necessity. The Western hero image embodies qualities that reinforce a masculine model associated with dominance and independence. Consequently, the frontier transforms into a gendered space where masculinity plays a crucial role in gaining power, thereby shaping the overall narrative. This brings us back to Slotkin's argument about violence, where it is not merely incidental but

³⁶ Susan Kollin, "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western," *American Literature*, 560.

³⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50.

foundational to the development of the frontier.³⁸ The male subject in Western culture is positioned to protect and control the order.

R.W. Connell contends that masculinity is constructed and maintained through social institutions and practices, which precisely aligns with the concept of the frontier in our context. Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as “the form of masculinity which is culturally dominant”.³⁹ By undertaking this action, he reinforces the concept of masculinity as a normative standard against which other identities are measured and evaluated. This hegemonic form seeks not only to describe but also to prescribe behavior, form the expectations, and reinforce the power structures. As Connell further states, hegemonic masculinity “is an expression of the privilege men collectively have over women”, underlying its role in a bigger gender hierarchy. In the context of the Western hero, it can be viewed as the embodiment of this ideal, as it functions as a model of power, authority, and independence. However, this ideal is neither universal nor stable, as it coexists with other forms of masculinity, constantly changing and evolving depending on the context. This way, the Western hero is a very obvious and exaggerated example of hegemonic masculinity, as it presents a highly visible and idealized form of male identity.

Margaret Jacobs, in her work “Western History: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?”, contends that gender is “fundamental to the ordering of society and the creation of individual and collective identities,”⁴⁰ She highlights the pivotal role of gender in shaping both historical experiences and their representations. Women, in the meantime, were “sometimes pawns, sometimes agents”, occupying different roles

³⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 11.

³⁹ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 44.

⁴⁰ Margaret Jacobs, “Western History: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2011): 303.

within frontier society.⁴¹ According to Jacobs, gender is a core structure that can be applied to the context of the Western frontier. “Instead, just as “whites” were once considered to be without race, men are still too often considered to have no gender.”⁴² This quote contextualizes the concept of gender, particularly within the frontier setting where white settlers held a substantially privileged social position. Similar to this societal hierarchy, gender is often viewed as existing along a polarity. Masculinity is considered the default, the only gender capable of assuming a leading role, serving as a hero, and exerting considerable influence, rather than a constructed identity. The central role of hegemonic masculinity in Western is consistent, however, it does not imply stability. As Elisa Bordin notes in *“Masculinity and Westerns: Regeneration at the Turn of the Millennium,”* “masculinity seems under the pressure of an ongoing demasculinization,”⁴³ indicating a shift in how masculinity is perceived. This perspective questions the role of the Western hero, whose identity is strongly tied to the stereotypical masculine traits. Instead of depicting masculinity as a static ideal, it is portrayed as a dynamic and debated category, influenced by wider social and economic shifts. In this context, the Western no longer solely reinforces hegemonic masculinity but also examines its vulnerabilities, emphasizing the conflict between traditional ideals and evolving realities. Masculinity is revealed as a social construct instead of a norm, where its authority becomes progressively more questionable.

Although women and female perspectives are not entirely absent from the Westerns, their roles are often limited and strictly structured, and their visibility does not always equate to autonomy. Female characters are often positioned as companions,

⁴¹ Jacobs, “Western History: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?”, 303.

⁴² Jacobs, “Western History: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?”, 302.

⁴³ Elisa, Bordin. “Masculinity & Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the Millennium,” 2014, 33

moral compasses, or narrative supporters, rather than as independent actors shaping events. This imbalance reinforces the connection between masculinity and action, while simultaneously reducing femininity to a secondary or symbolic function within the genre. As David Blanke demonstrates, the representation of women in Westerns is not fixed, but shifts significantly over time.⁴⁴ In early Western films of the 1910s, female characters often played more active and complex roles, shaping the narrative and participating in its moral conflicts. However, as the genre developed within the classical Hollywood system, these roles became increasingly restricted, with women relegated to more marginal and supportive positions. This transition reflects a broader shift toward male-dominated narratives, in which female agency is diminished in favor of reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Blanke's analysis thus highlights the evolving nature of the Western and challenges the assumption that its gender dynamics have remained constant. As Cynthia J. Miller notes, "rowdy women of the silent West laid claim to the skills and iconic qualities generally attributed to their male counterparts,"⁴⁵ highlighting the presence of more active and capable female characters in the early Western. These figures challenged traditional gender roles by participating in the same physical and narrative spaces typically reserved for male protagonists. However, this relative openness did not remain stable over time. As the genre evolved, particularly within the classical Hollywood system, such representations became increasingly restricted, and female characters were increasingly confined to domestic or supporting roles. This shift highlights the

⁴⁴ David Blanke, "When East Goes West: The Loss of Dramatic Agency in DeMille's Western Women from the 1910s to the 1930s," in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 3.

⁴⁵ Cynthia J. Miller, "Silent But Rowdy: Stuntwomen of the Early Frontier," in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

evolutionary nature of the Western and reinforces the idea that gender roles in the genre are historically constructed rather than fixed.

Cynthia J. Miller, in her essay “Silent but Rowdy: Stuntwomen of the Early Frontier,” introduces the archetypes of women in the Western. These archetypes structure the roles of female characters within the genre and showcase the roles they play in the narration. Miller introduces four archetypes: the rancher’s daughter, the schoolmarm, the soiled dove, and the female gunslinger.⁴⁶ Each of them represents different qualities and personality traits. Rancher’s Daughter is meant to represent innocence and domestic order; meanwhile, the Schoolmarm usually portrays civilization and morality. The Female Gunslinger appear to challenge traditional gender boundaries, introducing exception and disruption and the Soiled Dove is meant to showcase sexuality and marginality. As a result, even when women are present, their roles are frequently constrained by the expectations of the genre, limiting their narrative agency.

In “*West of Everything*”, Jane Tompkins argues that the Western tends to exclude women in order to preserve a masculine space where male characters can pursue freedom, autonomy, and emotional detachment outside the constraints of domestic life.⁴⁷ This aligns with the hero concept mentioned before, since the contradistinction between a weaker character and the hero that obtains strong and dominating qualities adds dimension and reinforces the established order where the male protagonist is a heroic character. However, the post-war Westerns increasingly incorporate themes of family and domesticity, challenging the idea that the genre is

⁴⁶ Cynthia J. Miller, “Silent But Rowdy: Stuntwomen of the Early Frontier”, 1.

⁴⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 127.

exclusively centered on masculine isolation. Quoting Matthew Carter and Marek Paryz, Gaylyn Studlar notes that “the family is crucial for both the narrative strategies and ideological concerns of the Western genre.”⁴⁸ This shift suggests that women and domestic relationships are not simply marginal to the Western, but play an important role in shaping its ideological and emotional structure, especially for those born after World War II. This shift is strongly linked to the change in society. After the war, people strived for stability, traditional gender roles, and domestic order. At the same time, the figure of the isolated frontier hero starts to feel unstable or insufficient on its own. So by incorporating wives, families, children, and domestic conflict, the Westerns shifted the focus from conquest and mobility to belonging and social responsibility.

Christopher Minz suggests that Western notions of masculinity are performative and fluid.⁴⁹ While often viewed as a male-centric genre, Minz argues it “is not, and never has been, a distinctly male one.” This challenges the typical idea of the Western hero by implying that female characters can also embody masculine authority and agency. Christopher Minz differentiates between masculinity and biological maleness, arguing that the Western genre shouldn't be viewed only through male heroes. Instead, masculinity acts as a broader cultural and ideological construct that can also be represented by female characters. This challenges the traditional view of the Western as a strictly male-dominated genre and allows for alternative expressions of agency and authority in frontier stories.

⁴⁸ Gaylyn Studlar, “Freud, ‘The Family on the Land,’ and the Feminine Turn in Post-War Westerns,” in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

⁴⁹ Christopher Minz, “Never Seen a Woman Who Was More of a Man: Saloon Girls, Women Heroes, and Female Masculinity in the Western,” in *Women in the Western*, ed. Sue Matheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

“A masculine female presence has always had what Yvonne Tasker refers to as a ‘peculiar position of marginal centrality’ in the Western.” This quote underscores the paradoxical role women often play in the Westerns. While female characters are usually on the edges of the narrative and lack the visibility of male heroes, they still hold a crucial place in the genre’s ideological and emotional framework. Their “marginal centrality” indicates that women are both excluded and vital. From this viewpoint, female characters are seen not just as passive sidekicks or domestic roles, but as active participants who subtly shape authority, morality, and survival in frontier tales.

Frederick Jackson Turner considers the frontier a key driver of American democracy and individualism, whereas scholars like Richard Slotkin critique this perspective by emphasizing the violence and exclusion involved in westward expansion. As a result, the frontier is understood not as a fixed concept but as a complex, contested space characterized by conflict, displacement, and the creation of myths.

The Western genre is key in maintaining and reshaping frontier stories. As explored earlier, it not only depicts the frontier but also builds its mythology through common storytelling patterns, visual symbols, and ideological beliefs. Classic Westerns often emphasize themes like masculine independence, mobility, and the acceptance of violence, whereas revisionist and anti-Westerns challenge these norms, revealing the contradictions and vulnerabilities within the genre.

Significant focus has been placed on exploring how mobility, gender, and identity interact in the Western tradition. While mobility is often linked to freedom and opportunity, it also leads to instability, displacement, and precariousness,

hindering the development of stable identities and social structures. Additionally, Western culture has traditionally favored masculine viewpoints, while marginalizing or limiting female agency through rigid archetypes and gender-specific narratives. Nonetheless, recent research shows that both masculinity and femininity are not fixed or universal but are continually evolving and being renegotiated over time.

These theoretical perspectives form the basis for analyzing modern frontier stories. Films such as *Meek's Cutoff* and *Nomadland* go beyond copying traditional frontier myths; they challenge and reinterpret them. They focus on themes like precarity, vulnerability, fragmented identity, and different perspectives, and expose the fragile nature of the frontier myth. They transform the Western genre into a setting defined more by instability, disorientation, and the struggle for survival rather than by conquest and domination.

Chapter 2. *Meek's Cutoff* as a Revisionist Western and Post-Western genre

Kelly Reichardt has established herself as a filmmaker particularly interested in themes of marginality, precarity, and the instability of American myths. In her works, Reichardt frequently focuses on individuals on the fringes of social and economic structures, emphasizing their vulnerability, uncertainty, and the fragility of human relationships. Rather than relying on spectacle or dramatic action, Reichardt employs a minimalist aesthetic, slow pacing, and restrained dialogue, directing attention to everyday gestures, silence, and the material conditions of survival. These stylistic and thematic elements become especially significant in *Meek's Cutoff*, where the director revisits the Western genre to scrutinize its traditional notions of masculinity, mobility, and the exploration of the Wild West and frontier expansion. Reichardt's minimalist approach and focus on marginalized individuals distinguish her from many American filmmakers. Instead of presenting stories of triumph, progress, or heroic achievement, her films frequently emphasize uncertainty, vulnerability, and the limits of human control. As a result, Reichardt's oeuvre is often associated with a revisionist approach to American genre cinema, as her films challenge the dominant narratives of individualism, conquest, and national progress that have historically shaped genres such as the Western.

Set in 1845 amid the westward migration along the Oregon Trail, the film chronicles the journey of a small group of settlers led by the frontiersman Stephen Meek, who asserts knowledge of a shortcut through the Cascade Mountains. As the group progressively faces dwindling water supplies, disorientation, and waning confidence in their guide, the narrative increasingly shifts towards themes of

uncertainty, exhaustion, and vulnerability. Rather than depicting the frontier as a domain of opportunity, expansion, and heroic conquest, *Meek's Cutoff* deconstructs numerous conventions traditionally associated with the classical Western genre.

According to Neil Campbell, the post-Western preserved the visual and thematic language of the traditional Western while avoiding full adherence to its conventions. He describes post-Westerns as “genre-impure” works that critique Western genre norms internally rather than rejecting them.⁵⁰ Building on the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, Campbell views the post-Western as occupying a liminal space: it maintains a connection to the Western genre while undermining its ideological assumptions. Unlike classic Westerns, which often depict heroic confidence, stark moral divides, and triumphant narratives, the post-Western disrupts these elements through fragmentation, ambiguity, and experimental formal techniques.

Meek's Cutoff exemplifies this process precisely because it still contains many recognizable elements of the traditional Western. The narrative centers on westward migration, wagon trains, survival in the frontier landscape, and the figure of the pioneer guide. However, Reichardt transforms these familiar conventions into sources of uncertainty and disorientation. The frontier ceases to function as a space of conquest and opportunity, becoming hostile, monotonous, and unknowable. Similarly, Steven Meek initially appears to embody the archetypal Western hero, but his authority steadily erodes as the settlers lose trust in his leadership. In this sense, the film does not reject the Western genre entirely, but rather “opens up,” to use Campbell’s terminology, revealing the contradictions hidden within the frontier mythology itself.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 24.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 24.

The film's minimalist pacing and prolonged scenes of suspense, silence, and physical exhaustion also align with Campbell's discussion of "minor" cinematic forms that interrupt the dominant structures of the classic Western. Traditional Westerns often emphasize action, movement, and male dominance over space, while Meek's Pass highlights stillness, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Reichardt thus transforms the Western into a reflective and self-aware phenomenon, revealing the instability lurking behind the myth of the Wild West's exploration.

The film primarily belongs to the revisionist Western tradition—a subgenre that emerged in response to the conventions of the classic Western and aimed to challenge its ideological assumptions. The revisionist Western emerged in the post-war period as filmmakers began to challenge the conventions of the classical Western. According to Shane Joseph Willis Frankiewicz, "the dominion, dependability, wisdom, and righteousness of the classic white, heterosexual male protagonist,"⁵² thereby questioning traditional assumptions about authority, patriarchy, and heroism. Rather than portraying the frontier as a place of inevitable progress and conquest, they emphasize ambiguity, violence, failure, and the perspectives of previously marginalized groups. *Meek's Cutoff* participates in this revisionist tradition through its depiction of an unreliable guide, the absence of heroic action, and its focus on the vulnerability of settlers rather than their conquest of the landscape.

At the same time, the film can also be seen as a post-Western. As discussed in the previous chapter, the post-Western not only revises the conventions of the genre but also questions the assumptions on which the genre itself was built. According to

⁵² Shane Joseph Willis Frankiewicz, *Revisionism and the Subversive Cowboy in the Classic Western: Challenging the Definitions and Boundaries of the American Western Literary Genre of the 19th and Early 20th Century* (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 2017), 57.

Neil Campbell, the post-Western engages with the formal and thematic traditions of the Western, simultaneously challenging and destabilizing them. Rather than existing entirely outside the genre, they remain connected to it, simultaneously revealing its omissions, contradictions, and ideological limitations.⁵³ In this sense, *Meek's Cutoff* goes beyond revisionism, questioning the very myths of mobility, power, and the exploration of boundaries that have historically defined Western narratives. Unlike traditional Westerns, which frequently depend on clear moral dichotomies, heroic masculinity, and narratives of progress, revisionist Westerns reveal the instability and contradictions inherent within the genre itself. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the Western has never been a wholly unified or fixed form; rather, it has continually evolved in response to shifting cultural and historical circumstances. Reichardt's film contributes to this ongoing process by rejecting many of the visual and narrative certainties associated with conventional frontier mythology.

Meek's Cutoff redefines the Western genre mainly through its perspective approach. Unlike traditional Westerns, which usually center around a male hero whose strength depends on violence, movement, and spatial mastery, Reichardt's film disrupts this norm. Steven Meek is portrayed not as competent or in control, but as uncertain and prone to failure. Meanwhile, the narrative gradually emphasizes the women on the wagon trains, especially Emily Tetherow, whose viewpoint increasingly influences how the audience perceives the story. This perspective shift challenges the genre's masculine roots and creates room for alternative portrayals of frontier life that are often marginalized in classic Westerns. By separating this movement from these historical

⁵³ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 3.

ideologies, the film reimagines territorial expansion not as an unstoppable engine of conquest, but as an intimate quest for personal autonomy.

The film fundamentally reshapes the connection between mobility and freedom. Traditionally, Wild West stories link westward travel to opportunity, self-reliance, and national growth. Yet, in *Meek's Cutoff*, mobility signifies instability rather than liberation. The settlers' ongoing movement across the land does not bring progress or mastery but results in fatigue, confusion, and danger. The frontier is no longer depicted as a welcoming, conquering space; instead, it appears hostile, mysterious, and resistant to human control. Reichardt thus challenges Turner's ideas of expansion, revealing the fragile foundations beneath the myth of frontier progress.

Meek's Cutoff operates as a modern reinterpretation of the Western genre, challenging traditional mythologies of the American frontier through its portrayal of space, mobility, gender, and power dynamics. By destabilizing the archetype of the Western hero, emphasizing female experiences, and transforming movement into a symbol of instability, the film reveals the limitations and contradictions embedded within conventional frontier narratives. Consequently, Reichardt not only redefines the Western genre but also reevaluates the ideological underpinnings that have historically supported frontier mythology.

Instead of confirming mythic certainty, post-Westerns highlight instability, fragmentation, and historical contradictions, offering a more critical and self-aware view of the genre. However, the genre strictly limits space, creating a clear divide between the dominant and the marginalized. The classic Western emphasizes the gap between the two, reinforcing the lack of social mobility in the frontier space. post-Western is the genre that challenged the original narrative. "Post Westerns investigate

these “gaps” and “secrets” for an inheritance buried deep in the American national psyche and played out on its movie screens through what Kathleen Brogan calls “cultural haunting.”⁵⁴ Classical Westerns often portray the frontier as unified and heroic, but post-Westerns analyze the genre to expose omissions, contradictions, and hidden histories within these stories. In this way, the past remains influential and continues to “haunt” contemporary images of the West.

2.1 Mobility and Precarity in *Meek’s Cutoff*

Mobility plays a key role in both frontier mythology and the Western genre. As noted earlier, westward expansion is linked to themes of growth, freedom, opportunity, and the shaping of American identity. In traditional Western stories, mobility often symbolizes progress and masculine independence, emphasizing the frontier as an open land for conquest and settlement. However, in *Meek’s Cutoff*, this link between movement and freedom is challenged. Instead of portraying mobility as freeing, the film depicts westward travel as tiring, uncertain, and unstable. The term “mobility” in its literal context signifies movement and change of location. Progress constitutes an inherent aspect, nearly inevitable when considering mobility, as movement is the opposite of stagnation. However, mobility in *Meek’s Cutoff* is presented as a category of its own, and arguably serves as a tool to demonstrate the precarity of the frontier and the mobility within it.

The film opens with a scenic shot of all the characters we will meet later, gathering around a body of water. Water, whether in nature—like a river, lake, or puddle—or in a drinking vessel, serves as a potent metaphor for life, health, and

⁵⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

charity. It also symbolizes the transient nature of those souls whose existence hinges on it. We see the characters drinking it, laundering their clothing, filling containers to transport this water during their travels, washing the dishes, and watering the animals, even the smallest ones like birds; no lack is present, since there are enough vital resources for every living being. The opening scene is filled with abundance and hope. We also observe the richness of characters' belongings. The settlers transport furniture, tools, clothing, and domestic objects across the river, demonstrating that they are bringing their lives with them and highlighting the mobility and the possibility of relocating their lives within the frontier. Movement is initially associated with opportunity and the possibility of carrying one's life into a new space. Nevertheless, this initial portrayal of abundance gradually deteriorates as the journey progresses, and mobility becomes progressively associated with fatigue, scarcity, and insecurity. This initial image of abundance is quickly interrupted by a shot of a man, later introduced as Thomas Gateley, carving the word "Lost" into a piece of wood. We are not provided with an explanation for why this is happening; however, this image symbolizes the instability that will characterize the settlers' journey. The word indicates not only geographical disorientation, which will later be introduced as a central issue of the film, but also the gradual breakdown of the frontier ideology linked to movement and expansion. Unlike traditional Westerns, where westward travel is depicted with confidence and clear direction, *Meek's Cutoff* presents uncertainty from the outset, challenging the idea of steady progress.

The film continues through a repetitive alternation between day and night, emphasizing the slow and exhausting rhythm of the settlers' journey. On the initial night scene, we immediately observe stillness; however, it is not the kind that

forebodes peace and quiet. Instead, we see the clouds moving minimally above the desert-like landscape. The scene is interrupted by a sudden change of setting, where we see the family gathered silently around an empty table, presumably in prayer, since the son is reading a verse from the Bible. The verse recited in the scene is Genesis 3:19, a passage describing humanity's struggle for survival after expulsion from Eden: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."⁵⁵ The use of this particular verse in the scene is deeply symbolic and acts as a biblical foreshadowing of labor and survival, since Genesis 3:19 refers to the labor, or the shift in its intensity, specifically.⁵⁶ The verse implies that working in the fields would be characterized by pain and frustration. The land itself would be cursed, hindering the growth of crops necessary for survival. In the film, this scene serves as a transition between hope and hopelessness, as it is preceded by the water scene and followed by the scene in which the group continues their journey through a dry desert, anticipating the hardships they will face.

How mobility becomes even more central is evident in the scene, following the prayer one. The journey across the Oregon High Desert, in search of a new settlement, begins, and the group, consisting of three families, is guided by Stephen Meek. Initially, it becomes apparent that the guide lacks any information regarding the precise whereabouts of the group or the exact direction they should follow to reach their

⁵⁵ *CSB Pew Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 3.

⁵⁶ Richard T. Ritenbaugh, "Genesis 3:17–19," *The Berean: Daily Verse and Commentary*, Church of the Great God, accessed April 30, 2026, 2.

destination, or at a minimum, to access essential survival resources such as potable water and provisions. This is where the mobility in *Meek's Cutoff* is challenged for the first time. In his thesis on the frontier, Turner states: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development," emphasizing the idea that movement is what advanced America.⁵⁷ The motif of movement is present throughout *Meek's Cutoff*; however, rather than supporting Turner's argument, it takes an unforeseen direction, whereby mobility not only fails to function as a catalyst for progress but also becomes an impediment to moving forward. This goes against the traditional Western narrative of settlers conquering the land and acting as superior agents in the process of settlement. Wagons steadily roll through similar scenery as settlers focus on reaching their destination, relying entirely on Stephen Meek for guidance westward. At first, Meek seems to personify the traditional Western frontiersman: confident, experienced, and seemingly capable of mastering the landscape. But as the journey continues and uncertainty grows, his authority begins to weaken. The group's ongoing movement no longer inspires confidence or progress; instead, it reveals the fragile social hierarchy founded on Meek's supposed expertise. In this way, mobility destabilizes not only the settlers' physical state but also the authority structures vital for their survival.

This shift in the power structure introduces another dimension of mobility in *Meek's Cutoff*, highlighting its role in illustrating the instability of social authority, status, and the fragile nature of hierarchical power within the group. As discussed in Chapter 1, the frontier was often imagined as a space where social identities and collective structures could be reshaped through the shared experience of expansion and

⁵⁷ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), 1.

settlement. In Reichardt's film, the settlers create a hierarchy based on traditional social and gender norms, similar to those in classic Westerns. Leadership and power are typically associated with white men, while women are expected to rely on and be subordinate to their husbands. At first, Stephen Meek holds the role of the authoritative frontiersman, using his knowledge of the landscape to justify his authority. Yet, as the journey continues and the settlers become more lost and confused, this hierarchy begins to weaken. Increased mobility no longer reinforces authority but instead reveals its fragility, reliance on uncertain knowledge, and delicate social structures. By the conclusion of the film, the shift in hierarchy becomes markedly substantial, leading to Meek himself voluntarily relinquishing leadership and transferring authority to marginalized groups within the frontier context: women and the indigenous population of the land. This illustrates that the hierarchy within the frontier is often determined by occasion, as authority can be granted or revoked from the dominant figure in cases of incompetence or loss of authority.

Among the themes constituting the concept of mobility in *Meek's Cutoff*, loss and limitation are also presented as central. It is understood that the settlers had to deal with the loss of normality in order to create a home elsewhere. This entailed abandoning their lives, families, and possessions. The settlers' mobility transforms domestic space into something temporary and deeply conditioned. At the beginning of the film, we see the wagons filled with their belongings: furniture, clothing, kitchen utensils, and personal items, suggesting the possibility of transporting their lives across the frontier. The settlers do not travel as isolated individuals, but as families attempting to relocate their homes and establish stability within a new environment. However, as the journey progresses, travelers are forced to reduce the cargo to essentials due to the

limitation in vital resources such as water. When presented with a real threat of never reaching the final destination, settlers make the decision to sacrifice normality in order to survive. The material traces of domestic comfort gradually lose their function and significance.

An illustration of this is a nocturnal scene in which Glory White, a pregnant woman journeying with her husband and teenage son, reflects on her father's pigs. Glory describes how, when she thinks of them, she feels almost envious, because these pigs are warm, fed, and secure. The scene is particularly significant because it opposes mobility to comfort and stability. Although the pigs are ultimately destined to be slaughtered, Glory still envies their temporary security, revealing the extreme physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by the settlers. Within the context of the journey, even limited and temporary safety becomes more desirable than the uncertainty and instability of continuous movement across the frontier. Mobility no longer symbolizes opportunity or growth, but instead signifies the gradual decline of stability and permanence. The frontier simplifies domestic life to merely surviving, where comfort and personal ties become less important than endurance. Therefore, the film depicts mobility not as a form of freedom, but as a force that undermines both physical and social frameworks, revealing the fragile nature of the settlers' efforts to rebuild a sense of home in an unwelcoming and hostile environment. Near the conclusion of the film, the settlers are infused with hope upon discovering a potential direction, thereby suggesting the possibility of escaping the desert. However, this moment of optimism is immediately undermined when one of the wagons carrying their remaining belongings falls down a hillside, causing the loss of much of their remaining water supply. This scene is deeply symbolic as it reinforces the theme of

loss and limitation in mobility within the frontier. Water, an essential resource for survival, initially appeared abundant in the opening scene of *Meek's Cutoff*, symbolizing hope and possibility. Over the course of the film, it gradually became scarcer until it was nearly entirely lost by the conclusion. Similarly, the wagon and settlers' personal belongings that symbolize the mobility, domesticity, and westward expansion become associated with collapse and material loss rather than progress or opportunity.

2.2 Reichardt's Female Perspective in *Meek's Cutoff*

As previously discussed, *Meek's Cutoff* questions the conventional Western story, a genre traditionally centered on masculine conquest, shifting to a narrative emphasizing vulnerability, domestic labor, uncertainty, and female perspective. The traditional Western narrative is challenged by positioning the female perspective as the central focus in the film. It begins with the scene where women wash clothes, collect water and organize supplies. This immediately centers on everyday challenges rather than masculine adventure. According to Douglas Pye, Western films have traditionally marginalized women and Native Americans, positioning them within "a symbolic world centering on White male characters."⁵⁸ Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* challenges this convention by redirecting focus away from masculine heroism and towards female perception, domestic labor, and intercultural uncertainty.

Reichardt focuses on ordinary pioneer women, emphasizing their impact on the traditional Western narrative, their repetitive work, and vulnerability. Rather than presenting women through exceptional or romanticized roles commonly associated

⁵⁸ Pye, Douglas. "The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Western." *The Book of Westerns*, edited by Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, Continuum, 1996, p. 24.

with the genre, *Meek's Cutoff* foregrounds the experiences of women whose lives are shaped by domestic work, exhaustion, and survival. In this respect, the film challenges the traditional Western narrative, which has historically centered on masculine heroism and adventure. As Jenni Calder observes, “the ordinary pioneer woman is elusive on the screen”, yet Reichardt places precisely this figure at the center of the narrative.”⁵⁹

The classic Western story also appears in *Meek's Cutoff*, as it continues to depict traditional lifestyles and storytelling, particularly in the film's first half, which remains focused on the male perspective. It is particularly evident in the harvesting scene, where Emily and Glory share a brief exchange while all the husbands are gathered in the distance, discussing Stephen Meek's destiny. The dialogue between Emily and Glory deserves particular attention, since it exposes the existing group dynamic, where the fate of the whole group is decided by men, and women do not usually have a vote in the decision-making process.

Glory: “What are they talking about? Were you told?”

Emily: “Your husband didn't say?”

Glory: “Not this time.”

Emily: “They're talking about whether to hang Stephen Meek.”⁶⁰

In this scene, for the first time, we are introduced to the fact that Meek's authority is no longer present, since the group has been wandering through the desert much longer than was promised by Meek himself, the guide and a classic frontiersman in the first place. Nevertheless, it is evident that women are entirely excluded from the

⁵⁹ Calder, Jenni. *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The Myth of the Frontier*. Hamish Hamilton, 1977, 158.

⁶⁰ *Meek's Cutoff*, directed by Kelly Reichardt (2010; New York: Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2011), DVD, 00:12:18-00:12:31.

decision-making process, despite their active participation in this collective journey. A noteworthy detail in this scene is that women are engaged in labor, collecting branches and dry grass to ignite the fire later, while men stand at a distance conversing. We observe a contrast between authority figures and those expected to obey; however, it is the latter who are actually performing the work that will noticeably improve the settlers' comfort. This brings us back to Pye's argument, where women and Native Americans in classic Westerns are positioned to highlight white men's authority.

Another notable example is the scene where Meek and Solomon captured the Indian and took him hostage. In this scene, the group faces a difficult decision: whether to keep alive the only person who appears familiar with the desert and may lead them to water, or to let fear and distrust determine their actions. The settlers organize a vote regarding his fate; however, the women are excluded from the decision-making process. This moment reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy within the group, where authority formally belongs to men even as their leadership becomes increasingly unstable. At the same time, the scene exposes the contradiction at the center of the journey: although the men attempt to maintain control through collective authority, their survival ultimately depends on someone they neither understand nor trust.

2.3 Masculine Authority and Its Collapse

Although women's authority in *Meek's Cutoff* remains challenged, the harvesting scene already illustrates an important change, possibly in line with the revisionist trend within the genre. Women remain excluded from formal decision-making, however, they are increasingly aware of the uncertainty surrounding Meek's leadership, and

Emily is gaining interpretive authority and is not portrayed as a gunslinger, but as a strong and opinionated character who is aware of everything happening in the group, even though she is not made part of the decision-making process. Her personality is especially evident in the scene where she interacts with Stephen Meek, revealing her skepticism towards him and his authority. Meek is confronted with a direct question about whether the group is lost. As a stereotypical Western male hero, we can assume Meek does not feel the need to engage in a serious discourse with a woman, as he does not regard Emily as an equal. This perspective results in him dismissing her concerns and adopting a somewhat patronizing and derogatory tone. Instead of taking a traditional approach and agreeing with the answer she was provided with, Emily stands up for herself and confronts Meek by saying.

“Oh you don’t need to patronize me, Mr. Meek.”⁶¹

Meek proceeds then to dismiss Emily’s dissatisfaction and articulates his perspective regarding men and women.

“Women are created on the principle of chaos... The chaos of creation, disorder, bringin’ new things into the world. Men are created on the principle of destruction. It’s like cleansing, ordering destruction.”⁶²

Meek’s statement reflects a deeply patriarchal understanding of gender, where women are viewed as emotional and irrational forces while associating men with order, control, and authority. However, the film simultaneously undermines Meek’s worldview. Although he tries to justify masculine violence and domination as essential for "ordering," it is ultimately the women who show emotional restraint, practical

⁶¹ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 00:41:15–00:41:17.

⁶² *Meek’s Cutoff*, 00:41:44–00:42:02.

judgment, and adaptability during the journey. Meek's struggle to live up to the responsibility and authority he was given reveals the fragility of the traditional gender hierarchy. "Cleansing" and "ordering" resemble the frontier ideology itself: violence is justified as a means necessary for the westward expansion, and conquest is framed as a necessary order. By adding this scene into the film, Reichardt critiques this logic.

Classical Western masculinity depends on certainty, direction, and control over space. Stephen Meek possesses none of these. His appearance and mannerisms visually resemble the classical Western cowboy, but Reichardt subverts them. The created hierarchy begins to collapse internally from the very beginning. The first scene that hints at the lack of direction and authority is the "Lost sign". This being one of the earliest scenes, it prepares us for a later discovery, the film directly tells us: the leader is lost. This undermines frontier mythology immediately. When we discover later that his authority has always been in question, highlighted by the scene where husbands decide whether to spare his life, it serves as the final proof: masculinity in Meek's Cutoff does not equate to authority or leadership.

The film's climax highlights the total breakdown of male authority, as Meek relinquishes his role as the absolute leader. Despite his earlier, constant efforts of expertise, he ultimately defers to Emily and the Indigenous man, marking a symbolic reversal of traditional Western movie hierarchies. The white male guide, once the embodiment of frontier certainty, loses all credibility, shifting power toward marginalized figures—a woman and an Indigenous man. Meek's ultimate resignation signifies more than personal failure; it embodies a revisionist critique of the Western genre, rejecting the notion that masculine dominance and frontier knowledge guarantee survival or leadership.

One of the scenes illustrating the failure of masculine authority is found in the first part of the movie, when the group of settlers finds a body of water, thinking they have finally found a chance to survive and last until the way out of the desert is found. However, the water later appears to be alkaline and they can't water there. The moment the settlers find water that is undrinkable clearly reveals Meek's failure as a leader. On a surface level, it's a setback in survival; structurally, it represents a breakdown of authority. Meek early on presents himself as someone who "knows" the land, relying on confidence, storytelling, and bravado that seem to replace real knowledge. However, the scene with the undrinkable water quietly undermines this facade. The group's hope is sparked by the water, symbolizing survival, guidance, and reinforcing Meek's authority. When the water proves unusable, that hope shifts into doubt—raising questions about whether Meek has ever truly known what he's doing.

From a leadership standpoint, the issue isn't merely that Meek is incorrect; it's that his authority hinges entirely on the belief that he is right. He lacks institutional knowledge, a clear framework, or a system of verification. Each failure thus becomes an existential threat. The water doesn't just fail to support them physically—it undermines the basis of his leadership. The group struggles to differentiate between "Meek is guiding us through a tough situation" and "Meek is leading us nowhere." When later in the film the Indigenous character is introduced, he reinforces such idea even more, because Meek is unable to incorporate the Indigenous man's more precise understanding of the land into his worldview. Rather than seeing him as a valuable source of knowledge, Meek seeks to maintain his authority by dismissing or manipulating that knowledge. Consequently, when the water is found to be

undrinkable, it emphasizes a larger issue: the group faces not just poor conditions, but also a flawed hierarchy.

The decline of masculine authority is also shown visually in one of the final scenes, where William White collapses from exhaustion and dehydration.⁶³ Although the film leaves his fate uncertain, the scene functions symbolically as a literal representation of the instability and physical collapse of masculine authority within the frontier environment.

Throughout the film, men are portrayed as expected to embody control, leadership, and physical strength, aligning with traditional Western notions of masculinity. However, Reichardt continually challenges these stereotypes, illustrating that male power is fragile and gradually losing effectiveness. William's fall visually underscores this concept: the male body appears vulnerable to the landscape, unable to completely control or dominate its environment. Instead of portraying masculine strength as a victory, the film highlights exhaustion, physical limits, and the ever-present risk of failure.

2.4 Domestic Labor and Survival

Domestic labor in *Meek's Cutoff*, emerges as a key element of survival. Activities such as cooking, washing clothes, fetching water, caring for the child, repairing belongings, preparing meals, and organizing supplies take center stage, illustrating that survival relies not only on traveling through space but also on managing daily life. In the frontier space, where survival is not guaranteed, domestic labor provides a chance for survival. Domesticity also provided a sense of normality for the travelers. The settlers'

⁶³ *Meek's Cutoff*, 01:31:02.

wagons carry not only essential supplies; they also transport objects associated with domesticity and permanence, including furniture, utensils, and personal belongings. These objects symbolize the settlers' attempt to bring a sense of home and civilization to the unfamiliar frontier landscape. Rather than presenting the westward journey as pure freedom or adventure, the film shows how deeply the settlers remain attached to domestic structures and daily routines, even while constantly on the move.

An early prayer scene emphasizes the themes of domesticity and the “home far from home,” depicting a family gathered around a table, that was presumably brought from their old home. This imagery symbolizes stability, ritual, and social order, highlighting their effort to preserve familiar domestic routines despite the uncertain journey ahead. The act of prayer underscores a longing for moral and spiritual stability in an environment increasingly beyond human control, offering comfort through habitual actions and rituals reminiscent of home. Yet, the prayer scene's quietness starkly contrasts with the harsh, barren landscape outside, foreshadowing the eventual breakdown of this delicate order as the journey progresses.

Another significant image is the caged bird carried by settlers on their journey. It symbolizes vulnerability and confinement, mirroring the settlers' own situation. Although they are physically mobile and moving westward in pursuit of opportunities, they are still constrained by the harsh environment, societal expectations, and ongoing survival challenges. This image highlights the paradox at the core of the Wild West myth: while westward expansion is often linked to freedom and growth, the settlers in *Meek's Cutoff* appear increasingly trapped by exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty.

A scene that clearly demonstrates the themes of domestic labor and survival in *Meek's Cutoff* is when the settlers attempt to cross the hill, requiring them to lift the

wagon carrying their belongings and their last remaining drinking water.⁶⁴ By adding this scene to the film, Reichardt quietly destabilizes traditional gender roles associated with the Western genre. Although women are generally excluded from formal authority and decision-making, Reichardt consistently depicts their direct involvement in the essential physical labor for survival. In the wagon scene, women positioned at the forefront and assisting with lifting the wagon highlight that frontier survival relies on collective effort rather than solely masculine strength or heroism.

This scene is important because wagons represent more than transportation; they serve as mobile home spaces, carrying essentials like food, clothing, tools, personal items, and family memories. Repairing or lifting a wagon can be seen as symbolically supporting the fragile structure of the household. Women's active involvement in this task challenges the traditional Western split between men's social roles and women's passivity within the home.

After losing one of the wagons, settlers had to decide whether to continue trying to lift another loaded wagon or to leave behind most possessions and carry only the essentials themselves. The latter option was chosen, and despite its difficulty, it was the necessary decision to survive in the desert and ultimately find a way out. In the scene, young woman Millie is crying because she has to leave all her belongings, while her husband Thomas attempts to explain why this move is necessary:

“Millie, calm down. We’ll make the crossing, and on the other side we’ll start fresh. All you need is your strong back.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 01:14:37.

⁶⁵ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 01:19:15-01:19:42.

Thomas's words capture one of the central contradictions in *Meek's Cutoff*: the frontier promises renewal through mobility, but this renewal requires abandoning the myth of stability, memory, and material identity. The exhortation to "start anew" echoes the traditional Western belief that the West offers endless opportunities for reinvention. However, Reichardt presents this process not as liberating, but as emotionally and physically destructive. Millie's reaction highlights the human cost of moving West, particularly for women, whose household objects often symbolized continuity, comfort, and personal history in the precarious conditions of frontier life.

The scene also demonstrates how mobility gradually strips settlers of the material foundations of domesticity. Earlier in the film, wagons are filled with furniture, household goods, dishes, and personal belongings, symbolizing the opportunity to bring "home" to the frontier. As the journey progresses, these objects become burdens rather than signs of prosperity, and holding onto them would mean lower chances of survival. Thus, Reichardt transforms mobility from a symbol of freedom into a process of loss and reduction. The settlers are forced to abandon not only their possessions but also the illusion that the frontier guarantees progress and security.

2.5 The Failure of the Frontier Mastery, Landscape and Silence.

In the classical Western narrative, the hero knows the space and dominates it. The frontier is the land to be conquered, mapped, and controlled by the male hero, where the marginalized characters are forced to respect and obey. However, *Meek's Cutoff* transforms this narrative, and the landscape resists interpretation and control. The

desert becomes disorienting rather than liberating, and silence intensifies the settlers' vulnerability.

The landscape in *Meek's Cutoff* is portrayed as hostile and unreadable. We quickly understand that the settlers are lost through the continuing scenes of similarly looking landscapes. The hostility of the environment is reinforced by Meek's lack of authority in the group. He claims certainty and awareness, yet he does not find a way to prove it and constantly fails. The settlers move in circles, creating an atmosphere of emotional despair through repeated landscapes. Movement no longer leads to progress, revealing the fragility of Western myth very clearly, which is portrayed through identical hills, dry plains, slowly moving wagons, and settlers' exhaustion growing bigger with every day, mobility becomes circular and draining. Men no longer master space; instead, the desert dictates men's fate. This spatial disorientation can be further understood through the revisionist critique of the frontier myth. As Richard Slotkin argues, the Western genre is built upon the ideological logic of "regeneration through violence," where the conquest of space legitimizes masculine authority and national expansion⁶⁶

This depiction aligns *Meek's Cutoff* with the post-Western tradition discussed by Neil Campbell, where the genre no longer promotes the mythology of expansion and national progress but reveals its contradictions and shortcomings. Instead of symbolizing opportunity, the frontier now represents a zone of anxiety, vulnerability, and existential doubt.⁶⁷ The settlers' failure to "read" the landscape indicates the breakdown of the traditional Western belief that white male pioneers inherently have

⁶⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 14.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 24.

authority over the land. Reichardt thus redefines the frontier from a site of heroic conquest to one that actively resists dominance.

Kelly Reichardt in *Meek's Cutoff* uses the 4:3 aspect ratio, which visually restricts the spectator's field of vision. In her interview for Neal Conan, Reichardt revealed: "I felt like the square [aspect ratio] gave you an idea of the closed view that the women have because of their bonnets... cutting out the peripheral, it does leave you with the idea that something could be there that you don't know about."⁶⁸ The whole vision of the splendor of the landscape in widescreen is not available to us – instead, we see almost a square box containing the visuals. Unlike traditional Westerns that often feature wide, sweeping shots to emphasize the vastness and freedom of the frontier, Reichardt opts for a more confined perspective. The narrow, nearly square 4:3 frame limits what both the characters and viewers can see, creating a sense of confinement. So, instead of seeing the frontier as huge and ready to be conquered, the movie makes it feel closed-in, confusing, and hard to make sense of.

This feeling gets even stronger because the camera often follows the women from behind or off to the side, with their bonnets blocking part of what we see. Because of this, we get to see the landscape only through the women's narrow view. Graham E. Fuller in "*The Oregon Trail*" states: "There are several reasons why Reichardt chose the aspect ratio framing: one reason is that she wanted to give the restricted point of view of the female characters, whose bonnets deny them a peripheral view."⁶⁹ So, these bonnets aren't just old-fashioned clothes; they're also a key visual trick that changes how we take in the story. We, the viewers, never really get a full handle on

⁶⁸ Kelly Reichardt, interview by Neal Conan, "*Going West: The Making of Meek's Cutoff*," *WBUR/NPR*, April 8, 2011, <https://www.wbur.org/npr/135206694/going-west-the-making-of-meeks-cutoff>.

⁶⁹ ⁶⁹ Graham Fuller, "The Oregon Trail", *Sight & Sound*, 21. (May, 2011): p. 42.

the landscape visually, much like the settlers themselves couldn't fully grasp or control the desert around them.

This differs significantly from typical Western films. In classic Westerns, heroes often appear confident, riding across expansive landscapes and giving the impression that they control everything. However, in *Meek's Cutoff*, the tight framing removes that sense of dominance. Repeated shots of hills, arid plains, and empty horizons create a sense of confusion rather than adventure. As viewers, we start to feel just as lost and uncertain as the characters in the story.

The bonnets also tie into how the film focuses on what women went through. Reichardt zeroes in on the women's everyday, repeated jobs, like washing clothes, cooking, sewing, and looking after their gear. Instead of showing an abundance of action, violence, or conquering new lands, the film highlights the longing for survival and doing daily chores. That narrow frame makes us feel closer to the characters, bringing out the small gestures, the quiet moments, and exhaustion, instead of grand, heroic trips across the frontier.

The bonnets act as symbols of all the social limits women faced in the frontier world. Even though women were vital to the group's survival, they were usually kept out of leadership roles and major decision-making. Their limited view mirrors their limited place in society. But Reichardt takes this exact viewpoint and puts it right at the heart of the story. By making us, the audience, go through the journey from the women's point of view, the movie goes against the usual male-focused way of telling stories in Westerns. Reichardt uses the film's visual style to challenge traditional narratives of Westerns. The frontier is no longer depicted as a land of freedom, growth,

and conquest; instead, it appears as a space filled with uncertainty, where characters frequently struggle to maintain their stability.

The Indigenous man in *Meek's Cutoff* represents a facet of the frontier that's often overlooked or simplified in classic Westerns. His presence highlights the settlers' vulnerability and their ignorance of the land they seek to traverse. Unlike traditional Western stories, where Native Americans are frequently portrayed as obstacles, threats, or silent figures in the background, Reichardt depicts the Indigenous man as someone whose understanding of the environment greatly surpasses that of the settlers. His role questions the idea of white dominance over the frontier and shows how much the group relies on knowledge they don't fully possess or understand.

He is initially contrasted visually with the settlers. While the group is weighed down by wagons, furniture, household items, and heavy clothing, the Indigenous man appears naturally connected to the landscape and moves through it with ease. The settlers often struggle against the desert, but he seems to intuitively understand its rhythms and conditions. This visual contrast emphasizes that Western mobility and expansion are less heroic and self-reliant than traditional frontier mythology portrays.

2.6 Settlers, Indigenous Presence, and the Collapse of Frontier Hierarchies

The depiction of indigenous characters in classic Westerns tends to be quite narrow. Native Americans are often portrayed primarily to serve symbolic purposes in the story of white expansion, typically as obstacles that emphasize the conflict between wilderness and civilization. Douglas Pye argues that “the whole history of the Western is therefore, at one level, inescapably bound up with reducing Native Americans and

women to functions in a symbolic world centring on White male characters.”⁷⁰ (Pye 1996, 13) In *Meek’s Cutoff*, Reichardt challenges this convention by depicting the Indigenous man not merely as an antagonist but as a figure who reveals the settlers’ reliance, fear, and absence of power.

The first interaction with the Native American in the film occurs when Emily spots him sitting atop a horse, positioned on a hill overlooking the settlers.⁷¹ This scene is important because it instantly sets up a visual and symbolic contrast between the Indigenous man and the arriving settlers. The settlers look tired, confused, and weighed down by their wagons and belongings, while the Native American appears calm, composed, and seemingly in harmony with the surrounding landscape. His distant placement adds a sense of ambiguity and tension, as the settlers view him not as a person but as a mysterious figure that disrupts their fragile sense of safety. While we lack a direct insight into Emily’s feelings from this minor interaction, it appears she does not feel immediately threatened, as she does not share her discovery with the group. Instead, she likely perceives the encounter as an opportunity to connect with someone knowledgeable about the land.

Later in the film, when Emily is questioned about her encounter, Meek tells her what he knows about native tribes inhabiting the land. The information she receives frightens her and allegedly causes her to doubt her judgment during the encounter.

Meek: “Ms. Tetherow saw this redskin and lived to tell the tale. I mean, you rarely see hide nor hair of a hostile... till he jumps you and cuts your throat. They can

⁷⁰ Pye, “The Western and Women,” 13.

⁷¹ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 00:26:24.

disappear in their own shadow. They can hide under a wolf skin so quiet, you step on ‘em before you know it.”⁷²

Meek, as previously mentioned, lacks authority within the group due to his failure to accomplish his primary task of guiding the group across the desert in a timely manner. In this context, Meek seized an opportunity to showcase his knowledge about Natives, aiming to boost his perceived usefulness. This scene is particularly important because, at that moment, no other group member had seen the Native. Emily relinquishes her authority out of fear, recognizing that their main goal is to find a way out together as a group.

When “The Indian” is captured, everyone feels threatened by him because of the fear of the unknown. Nonetheless, the group decides to spare his life, hoping to use his guidance. Over time, the Indigenous man becomes a new authority within the group. As Meek’s credibility diminishes and he repeatedly fails to guide the settlers, trusting the Indigenous man becomes increasingly important. This change challenges the traditional Western hierarchy, where white masculine leadership rules the frontier, and highlights the failure of hierarchy in frontier life.

Frontier hierarchies are also challenged by Emily’s portrayal. She gradually becomes one of the film’s most morally nuanced and perceptive characters. Hervé Mayer wrote: “There is a clear gendered hierarchy at work on the wagon trail, which is later contested by Emily Tetherow’s superior clarity as to the predicament of the party and true nature of their guide.”⁷³ Unlike Meek and many male settlers, Emily does not try to assert authority through violence, storytelling, or domination. Instead,

⁷² *Meek’s Cutoff*, 00:34:40-00:34:52.

⁷³ Hervé Mayer, “Neo Frontier Cinema: Rewriting the Frontier Narrative from the Margins in *Meek’s Cutoff* (Kelly Reichardt, 2010), *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (Chloé Zhao, 2015) and *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao, 2017),” *Miranda* 18 (2019), 10.

her strength lies in observation, restraint, and empathy. Reichardt highlights the contrast between Emily's behavior and the men's growing aggression and fear, especially in how they treat the Indigenous man.

One of the most significant moments that illustrates the difference occurs when Emily secretly brings water to the Native American, who was captured by the group and tied up.⁷⁴ Water in *Meek's Cutoff*, from the beginning of the film, symbolizes survival and hope, access to life itself. Emily's act, therefore, was strategic; she acknowledges his humanity when others view him as either a threat or a means of survival. Her gesture presents an alternative ethical stance that challenges the prevalent mindset of domination and fear influencing many settlers' actions. Emily then adjusts the Native man's boot, drawing Millie's attention and causing confusion.

Millie: "What are you doing Emily?"

Emily: "I'm going to fix his boot."

Millie: "You shouldn't."

Emily: "Well, I don't like it any more than you do. But I want him to owe me something."⁷⁵

This conversation is particularly significant as it underscores Emily's practical and strategic understanding of power dynamics within the group. While many settlers see the Indigenous man with fear, hostility, or suspicion, Emily recognizes that their survival may depend on him. Her decision to fix his boot is not just a kind gesture but a calculated effort to foster mutual obligation and trust.

⁷⁴ *Meek's Cutoff*, 01:02:00.

⁷⁵ *Meek's Cutoff*, 01:02:30-01:02:41.

Importantly, Emily's authority grows subtly. She speaks only when necessary, yet her insights are often more dependable than Meek's confident claims. Reichardt in *Meek's Cutoff* offers a different type of leadership, based on patience, sound judgment, and emotional intelligence, rather than dominance or traditional masculine traits. This sharply contrasts with the typical Western hero, whose authority usually relies on confidence, physical control, and violence. As earlier mentioned, according to Miller female characters in westerns are usually limited to four archetypes: the rancher's daughter, the schoolmarm, the soiled dove, and the female gunslinger.⁷⁶ Emily does not correspond to any of these categories, as she is portrayed independently, as a pioneer woman, fighting for survival among the men. Reichardt's portrayal of Emily Tetherow challenges traditional Western hierarchy, and brings quiet power in the space where power is usually obtained by violence.

2.7 Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and the Open Ending

The ending of *Meek's Cutoff* can hardly be called conventional, due to how differently it is from a traditional Western narrative. Classic Westerns usually conclude with a clear ending, such as victory, restored order, conquered frontier, clear moral resolution, leaving hardly any room for interpretation. However, *Meek's Cutoff* ends abruptly, leaving the spectators with an open question, ready for any interpretation. This is again what characterizes *Meek's Cutoff* as a revisionist Western, and challenges the traditional Western narrative.

At the very end of the film, the settlers find a tree standing in the middle of the desert. This discovery gives them hope because a tree can rarely survive without water,

⁷⁶ Cynthia J. Miller, "Silent But Rowdy: Stuntwomen of the Early Frontier", 1.

which means that a source of water can be found and must be located close by. Now that the hope for survival is presented, the group starts to wonder what route they should take, since earlier the main goal was to find a sign that finding a way out from the desert is possible.

Millie: “Thomas, we can still go back, we can try for the Columbia.”

Emily: “Millie, we’re close.”

Thomas: “That’s just it. We’re close, but we don’t know what to.”

Soloman: “We’ve been through this. We don’t know either way.”⁷⁷

The group for the first time does not agree on one destination, and this scene is particularly significant because it reveals the complete collapse of certainty within the group. Earlier in the film, the settlers remain united by a shared belief in westward movement and by their trust in Meek’s authority. However, in this scene, the group no longer agrees even on the direction they should take. Millie’s suggestion of returning to the Columbia introduces the possibility of retreat, directly opposing the traditional Western narrative in which movement westward is always associated with progress and destiny. Tomas’s response — “We’re close, but we don’t know what to” — is especially important because it captures the central ambiguity of the film. Settlers for the whole duration of the film continue moving, even though their movement has lost meaning, direction and a specific destination. Mobility no longer presents opportunity or success; instead, it becomes associated with uncertainty and fear.

⁷⁷ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 01:35:07-01:35:20.

When Stephen Meek, for the last time, is asked for his opinion on the matter, since the group has divided in two regarding the destination, he gives an unexpected response, which at last signifies failure of masculine authority, collapse of settler confidence and dependence replacing mastery.

“I’m taking my orders from you now, Mr. Tetherow, Mrs. Tetherow. And we’re all taking orders from him, I’d say. We’re all just playing our parts now. This was all written long before we got here. I’m at your command.”⁷⁸

The film is concluded with a shot of Emily looking through a large hole in the tree, and making eye contact with the Native American man. This interaction, however silent, carries significant symbolic meaning. Unlike earlier moments in the film characterized by fear, mistrust, and failed communication, this final exchange suggests a subtle shift in understanding between the two characters. Hervé Mayer writes: “Although such an alliance of Native and female clout eventually reverses the white man’s domination, when Meek yields command of the party to Mrs. Tetherow and the Indian in the ending sequence, the film never idealizes such alliance but instead emphasizes the women’s, and particularly Emily’s, participation in the colonizing scheme.”⁷⁹ Emphasizing the importance of the representation where marginalized experience is put forward. The absence of dialogue is bringing in the visual communication and observation, particularly in relation to Emily’s role as the most perceptive member of the group. The Native American man turns around and looks at Emily, before he turns again and continues his journey across the desert, in an unknown direction. We can assume his glance was an invitation to join his route, or it

⁷⁸ *Meek’s Cutoff*, 01:35:52-01:36:11.

⁷⁹ Mayer, “Neo Frontier Cinema.”, 10.

might be a silent farewell. Yet Reichardt deliberately avoids confirming this possibility, preserving the ambiguity that defines the film's ending. Emily's gaze through the opening in the tree visually frames the Native American man, reinforcing his central role in determining the settlers' uncertain future.

Chapter 3. *Nomadland* and the Contemporary Post-Western

Chloé Zhao (born March 31, 1982) is a Chinese film director, screenwriter, and producer. In many of her works, including *Nomadland*, Zhao reimagines the Western genre by discarding classic tropes of rugged independence and unstoppable conquest. Instead, her films, such as *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, *The Rider*, and *Nomadland*, examine the gritty, modern-day reality of the American frontier, highlighting overlooked, marginalized groups, the struggles of everyday workers, and the quiet, rugged majesty of middle America. Released in 2020, *Nomadland* follows the story of Fern, a former teacher in her early 60s, who lost her home and husband during the economic collapse of the US Gypsum plant in Empire, Nevada. As the town's primary employer, the plant sustained the local economy, and its closure transformed Empire into a ghost town, forcing many of its residents, including Fern, to leave the town, seeking life elsewhere. Fern begins living in a van, named Vanguard, that she furnishes with a sleeping alcove, a cooking area, and a shelf for storing mementos of her past life. Traveling across the American West, while taking seasonal jobs, moving across the campgrounds, she becomes a part of a contemporary nomadic community existing on the margins of American society. Film covers the themes of instability and fragility of the position of a human in the Western world.

Nomadland is an adaptation of Jessica Broder's book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, published in 2017. Broder's book is a non-fiction journalistic work, based on her experience living among labor nomads. The narrative is based on the real stories: "We followed a woman named Linda May. She went and did a lot of work. She lived in a 12-foot camper called the Squeeze-In. I followed her

all over the country. I went undercover at Amazon's CamperForce program and also the sugar beet harvest in North Dakota. Basically, I wove together all of these experiences into this book called *Nomadland*.”⁸⁰ One of the book's central themes is the critique of big corporations, particularly Amazon's CamperForce program. It exposes the difficult labor conditions and low wages that people providing the service for the companies face. “A lot of it was branded as ‘hey, these are Amazon's elves, like Santa's elves for the holidays – it's so much fun,’ when in truth this was really hard labor, and much of the population doing it didn't have another choice.”⁸¹

Bruder's book places greater emphasis on investigative journalism and the economic structures that force people into nomadic labor; however, Zhao's adaptation partially shifts the focus to personal experiences of displacement, grief, and survival. The film approaches these issues through the daily life of its protagonist, Fern, instead of a direct critique of corporate practices. Fern's journey illustrates broader social and economic issues through personal experience.

Zhao retains many of the real people featured in Bruder's book, including Linda May, Swanky, and Bob Wells, who appear in the film playing themselves. The inclusion of nonprofessional actors contributes to the film's documentary realism and blurs the line between fiction and reality. “Real life nomads in Bruder's book, Linda May, Swankie, Bob Wells among others all appear as themselves, enhancing authenticity. To develop a narrative vein, Zhao creates two fictional characters, Fern

⁸⁰ “Faculty Spotlight: Prof. Jessica Bruder's Book *Nomadland* Becomes an Oscar-Winning Film.” *Columbia Journalism School*. Accessed May 20, 2026.

<https://apply.jrn.columbia.edu/register/facultytextbrudernomadland>

⁸¹ Columbia Journalism School, “Faculty Spotlight: Prof. Jessica Bruder's Book *Nomadland* Becomes an Oscar-Winning Film.”

(Frances McDormand) and Dave (David Strathairn), to weave among them.”⁸² As a result, *Nomadland* occupies a unique position between fiction and documentary, combining a fictional protagonist with authentic stories from a contemporary nomadic community.

At the same time, the film goes beyond the book’s journalistic approach, exploring themes that resonate deeply with Western and post-Western traditions. Questions of mobility, belonging, survival, and the relationship between people and the American landscape become central to the narrative. The roads, deserts, and vast open spaces of the American West remain visually prominent, but they no longer symbolize conquest, expansion, or national progress. Instead, they serve as spaces of uncertainty, loss, and adaptation. In this sense, *Nomadland* transforms the frontier from a site of Western expansion into a contemporary space inhabited by people displaced by economic and social change, since Zhao’s adaptation not only documents the lives of contemporary nomads but also reimagines ingrained American myths of freedom and mobility. By creating a picture where marginalized people at the center of the narrative and by questioning the traditional promises associated with migration to the West, the film can be seen as a significant example of the modern post-Western.

The definition and understanding of post-Western as a genre were already established in preceding chapters, and *Nomadland* does not immediately resemble a traditional Western film due to the absence of many characteristic genre conventions, such as frontier violence, cowboy figures, territorial conquest, or clear conflicts between civilization and wilderness. Nevertheless, the film continues many thematic

⁸² Chow, K. C. “*Nomadland*: From Book to Screen.” *Ripple Effects*. June 26, 2021. <https://rippleeffects.reviews/2021/06/26/nomadland-from-book-to-screen/>

concerns historically associated with the Western genre, particularly mobility, survival, individual isolation, and the relationship between people and the landscape of the American West. *Nomadland*, rather than reproducing the classical Western formula, transforms and relocates these themes into a contemporary social and economic context, reflecting the evolution of the Western into the post-Western form.

Traditional Westerns often marginalize Native American characters, frequently reducing their representation to antagonistic figures or to symbols of defeat within the frontier narrative. Contemporary post-Westerns, by contrast, tend to reconfigure this representational logic by redistributing marginality onto different social groups and by questioning the ideological foundations of the frontier itself.⁸³ In *Meek's Cutoff*, the Native American character is not framed as a villain, but rather portrayed as a strong individual in possession of knowledge, and opposed to the settlers who appear clueless. *Nomadland*, although not including Native characters in the film, similarly engages with the frontier as a space of precarity by focusing on a different marginalized group: modern nomads. These individuals exist outside dominant social and economic structures and are often misunderstood by the majority of people living a conventional lifestyle. Many of the modern nomads are not portrayed as choosing this mobility freely, but as being pushed into it by economic instability and the collapse of traditional forms of security. Ian Christy writes: "Faced with the cost of maintaining a conventional lifestyle, these van-dwellers have opted to become mobile, taking advantage of a ready market in vehicles that may be intended for camping trips, but can also be, quite literally, mobile homes."⁸⁴ The analysis on the film provided by

⁸³ Mayer, "Neo Frontier Cinema.", 10.

⁸⁴ Christie, Ian. "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of *Nomadland*." In *Spaces: Exploring Spatial Experiences of Representation and Reception in Screen Media*, edited by Ian Christie, p. 124. Amsterdam University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11895527.12>.

Christy shows a unique perspective for the reimagining of the Western myth because he redefines mobility as a necessity, rather than one of expansion or conquest. Through the lens, the mobility of the nomads becomes an act of survival rather than anything else. *Nomadland* illustrates the collapse of the triumphant settler myth by portraying the experience of displaced white Americans who themselves exist on the margins of society. This creates a major shift in the Western framework. The descendants of the settlers who were once portrayed exclusively as winners and heroes, and associated with expansion and settlement, in *Nomadland* are portrayed as economically unstable, transient, and socially invisible. This narrative does not erase colonial history, but it exposes the flawed system that no longer protects even those who were once considered superior.

3.1 Mobility Without Destination: The New Frontier.

In *Nomadland*, the theme of mobility is also present and challenged. Mobility no longer represents freedom, progress, or frontier expansion. Instead, it becomes a strategy of survival adopted by individuals displaced by economic and personal loss. Unlike *Meek's Cutoff*, where movement is characterized by uncertainty and the settlers' inability to find their destination, the characters in *Nomadland* are not geographically lost. Rather, their mobility is challenged by economic circumstances that leave them with few alternatives to a nomadic lifestyle. Stagnation is no longer possible, as seasonal work and financial instability require continuous movement from one location to another. In traditional Western narratives, movement across the frontier is closely associated with opportunity, progress, and self-determination. Westward travel often symbolizes both personal freedom and national expansion, reinforcing the

belief that mobility enables individuals to reinvent themselves and secure a better future. The frontier functions as a space where movement leads to advancement, discovery, and the fulfillment of the American Dream. *Nomadland* retains mobility as one of its defining themes, but radically transforms its meaning.

The film opens with a black screen with a real-life event that occurred in the United States in 2011: “On January 31 2011, due to a reduced demand for a sheetrock, Us Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years.⁸⁵ By July, the Empire zip code, 89405, was discontinued.” The next scene immediately demonstrates the outcome of that event. Fern abruptly opens a garage converted into a storage area for unwanted items: a cheerful blue-striped chaise lounge, a lamp with a lampshade, and a box of bags. From this pile, she snatches a paper plate wrapped in a naive design. She examines it and puts back an unnecessary household item in a houseless existence. Then, from a box of men’s clothes, she takes out a heavily worn denim jacket. She is agitated, battling back sobs, and brings the jacket to her lips—it is farewell.⁸⁶ This scene is followed by another, where the heroine says goodbye not only to things but also to people, repaying a debt—literally. The metaphor is perfectly clear: here, in this town where she spent her entire life, she no longer owes anyone anything. Now Fern’s entire life is placed inside her small white van, Vanguard. From the very beginning, the mobile van is sharply contrasted with her abandoned home, already emptied of its belongings. Now the Fern’s home is wherever her van is.

Chloé Zhao builds her plot on the opposition between *home* and *house*. In *Nomadland*, House is merely a thing, a trap laid for humans by consumer society.

⁸⁵ *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao (United States: Searchlight Pictures, 2020), 0:00:51–0:01:11.

⁸⁶ Zhao *Nomadland*, 00:02:00–00:02:18.

Material belongings in Chloé Zhao's film exist outside of human life. Or rather, they are measured rows of impersonal objects—situated in warehouses, moving in boxes along endless conveyor belts. They can be sorted and packaged, which is precisely what Fern does, taking occasional jobs at an Amazon warehouse for extra income. But they cannot be lived.

This opening sequence establishes the conditions that shape mobility throughout the film. From the very beginning, *Nomadland* rejects the traditional Western narrative where movement is strongly associated with opportunity and growth. Fern's journey does not begin with a promise of a new life or the pursuit of an opportunity; instead, it begins with a loss that deprives her of a sense of security and belonging, forcing Fern to take on this journey. As a result, mobility emerges not as a freely chosen expression of independence but as a response to displacement. Fern travels because the life that once tied her to a particular place no longer exists.

Nomadland, as a film centered around the concept of physical movement and living a nomadic life, creating a home anywhere, also illustrates social mobility and the precarity of life in the United States. At the beginning of the film, Linda May, Fern's first friend among the nomads, and one of the original protagonists of Bruder's book, shares her real background story in a conversation with Fern.

"Before I moved into a Squeeze Inn, I was looking for work and putting in applications... 2008 and it was just tough. And I got to a really, really low point. And I thought about suicide... So, I was getting close to 62, and I went online to look at my Social Security benefit. It said 550 dollars. Fern, I had worked my whole life."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ *Nomadland*, Zhao, 00:10:48–00:11:52.

Linda May's testimony reframes mobility as a forced adaptation to the economic collapse and inadequate welfare systems. Her moving into van is shown as a last resort following the job loss. Linda May's story exposes the limitations of the American promise of upward social mobility. Despite a lifetime of labor, Linda May, at 62, found herself in a position where stable housing became economically unattainable.

Fern's background working experience, shared at the interview at the job center, is another illustration of social mobility within the capitalistic society. Humans' fate is often dictated by big corporations, and people like Fern, who do not lack work experience, are in a position where they cannot afford essentials due to the economic collapse of the country.

Fern: "I worked in Human Resources there for a few years. I did a lot of part-time jobs. I cashiered at the Empire Store. I was a substitute teacher at the school for five years.

Interviewer: "So, when do you need to go back to work?"

Fern: "Now?"

Interviewer: "It is a tough time right now. You may want to consider registering for an early retirement."⁸⁸

Large American corporations characterize the laws of modern America, capitalism, and the first steps toward achieving the American dream. Amazon represents total closure, a small model of the world that seems to characterize all of America. The corporation is symmetrical and lawful, and everything within it operates

⁸⁸ *Nomadland*, Zhao, 00:15:08–00:15:35.

according to strict rules. This puts ordinary people such as depicted in *Nomadland* in a vulnerable position.

In Bruder's book Linda May shares the realization she had reached: "Right now I am working in a big warehouse, for a major online supplier. The stuff is crap all made somewhere else in the world where they don't have child labor laws, where the workers labor fourteen-to sixteen-hour days without meals or bathroom breaks. There is one million square feet in this warehouse packed with stuff that won't last a month. It is all going to a landfill. [...] Our economy is built on the backs of slaves we keep in other countries, like China, India, Mexico, any third-world country with a cheap labor force where we don't have to see them but where we can enjoy the fruits of their labor. This American Corp. is probably the biggest slave owner in the world."⁸⁹ Linda May's reflection illustrates the economic insecurity from the position outside of her own experience as a nomad, relying on seasonal labor. Instead, she draws attention to the bigger issue of contemporary capitalism. Her reflection showcases the problem at the core of the American Dream: the upward mobility depends upon economic structure, which simultaneously produces economic insecurity for a large segment of population.

"What used to be enduring and solid structures and traditions are increasingly being replaced by their ephemeral, liquid alternatives. While they can be liberating for some, they are also challenging to manage, giving individuals no choice but to be on the move to cope with the fluid logics of contemporary life."⁹⁰ This quote by

⁸⁹ Bruder, Jessica. *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, 240.

⁹⁰ Atanasova, Aleksandrina, and Giana Eckhardt. "Nomadland: The New Frontiers of the American Dream at the Periphery of the Market." *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 6, no. 1 (2021): p. 7. <https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2021-06-01-02>.

Atanasova and Eckhardt illustrates the instability. Within this context, mobility becomes a symptom of precarity, rather than its opposite. The film exposes social and class instability and connects it with physical displacement. Heroes are constantly moving within the space, while remaining trapped within the same economic vulnerability.

The transformation of mobility is especially evident in the relationships between Fern and her van, Vanguard. Since a clear destination in *Nomadland* is not present, the journey becomes the endpoint. The van contains her most essential possessions and items that carry sentimental value, and simultaneously represents the isolation and comfort. For Fern, this place is a fulcrum. Traveling and living in it, she comes closest to a sense of fulfillment, imbuing it not only with functions but also with meaning. At the same time, the van itself is designed for movement, a guide to life on the road. The van, with its cramped space, monotonous colors, and poor lighting, forces one to peer closely at where the wall ends and the blanket on the bed begins, or where the line between Fern's hair and the background delineates. This way, Vanguard functions as a domestic space that accompanies her wherever she goes. As a result, mobility and home cease to exist as separate concepts. Home is no longer associated with a fixed location, it becomes something portable, carried across the American West.

This condition is shared by many of the nomads portrayed in the film. The life of work nomads is centered around seasonal jobs, which require frequent transportation around the country. Fern travels from Nevada to Arizona, California, South Dakota, and other locations, accepting temporary jobs wherever work is available. Unlike the settlers in *Meek's Cutoff*, whose mobility is bound to a specific

destination, the nomads' movement is cyclical. They repeatedly go to the same places, doing the same jobs, depending on the season, creating a pattern of constant circulation rather than progression. Mobility, therefore, does not function as a means of reaching a goal and instead becomes a way of maintaining stability.

The film repeatedly emphasizes the cyclical nature of movement. Throughout the film, we see Fern taking on several seasonal jobs: she joins Amazon's CamperForce program during the holiday season, works at a campground, participates in agricultural labor, and takes various short-term jobs during her travels. These opportunities allow Fern and other work nomads to maintain their lives; however, seasonal jobs become inseparable from economic precarity, since they do not provide any of the people with long-term financial security. The nomads keep moving because staying in one place often becomes economically impossible. This way, precarity, instability, and mobility become one of the few stable categories in *Nomadland*.

Nomadland, therefore, reinterprets the traditional Western myth of the American frontier. Zhao presents mobility as a response to instability and opposes it to the traditional frontier narrative where movement acts as a pathway toward opportunity and self-reinvention. The road remains open, but its meaning has changed.

3.2 Community, Marginality, and the American Dream

People portrayed in *Nomadland* exist on the margins of American society. Most of them, including Fern herself, are elderly individuals who had to choose this way of living due to various reasons: loss of stable employment, retirement savings, homes, or family support networks. Their survival depends on the temporary employment, seasonal labor, and the community they create for themselves, where the nomads

constantly support each other by sharing food, exchanging their belongings, sharing contact for potential employment, or temporary settlement. Community on the road gives nomads a sense of security and belonging, which is usually lacking in the lives of those that chose the life on the go. And although the nomads in *Nomadland* occupy a marginalized position within American society, the film demonstrates that they create alternative forms of community and belonging that challenge conventional understandings of the American Dream.

Bob Wells emerges as one of the central figures within this community. Bob is the owner and founder of Cheap RV Living website and YouTube channel. For more than 15 years, his passion and purpose in life has been to inspire, educate, and motivate people on how to live their best life possible – on any budget.⁹¹ In *Nomadland*, Bob plays himself, and is first mentioned by Linda May, who shares that he was the one inspiring her to venture on the nomadic journey.

“So I’m online, and I find Bob Wells Cheap RV living. I could live in an RV, travel, and not have to work for the rest of my life.”⁹²

Bob is a particularly important part of the nomadic community, both in real life and in *Nomadland*. As the founder of the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, an annual gathering of nomads, Wells serves as both a practical guide and a source of emotional support for individuals living on the road. Ian Christie, in his article “*Unhoused: On the American Spaces of Nomadland*,” writes: “This large gathering of modern nomads serves as a social, even tribal gathering, offering a wide range of supports for those attending. Some of these are practical, as we discover from its portrayal in the film,

⁹¹ Wells, Bob. “About Bob.” *Cheap RV Living*. Accessed May 29, 2026.
<https://cheaprvliving.com/about-bob/>.

⁹² Zhao, *Nomadland*, 00:12:03–00:12:14.

and others might be termed supportive. A key figure in the nomad movement has been the avuncular figure of Bob Wells, who has created a what amounts to a movement and appears as himself in *Nomadland*.⁹³ Unlike the traditional Western leader, Bob's authority and influence are not based on physical strength, violence, or superiority. Instead, Bob positions himself as an equal part of the community, whose influence is based on knowledge and shared experience.

However, Bob's most memorable contribution to the film is his famous speech at the end of the movie, where he and Fern share a heartfelt conversation after paying grace to Swankie, who passed away from cancer, after fulfilling her last wish: going back to Alaska, where she had dear memories. Bob opens up about his son, who took his own life, and shares his reflections with Fern.

"I realized I could honor him by helping people and serving people. It gives me a reason to go through the day. Some days that's all I've got. And out here there's a lot of people our age. Inevitably, there's grief and loss. And a lot of 'em don't get over it either. And that's okay. One of the things I love most about this life is that there's no final goodbye. I've met hundreds of people out here, and I don't ever say final "goodbye." I always just say, "I'll see you down the road." And I do."⁹⁴

In this reflection on death, loss, and the transient nature of nomadic life, Bob provides us with a better understanding of nomadic philosophy, which becomes one of the film's central ideas. Instead of saying "goodbye" forever, nomads often say "I'll see you down the road." This is a reflection of nomadic life, which is centered around movement and constant change, inevitably accompanied by farewells, loss, and

⁹³ Christie, Ian. "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of *Nomadland*." p. 124

⁹⁴ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 01:37:13–01:38:00.

separation. Although the nomads lack permanent homes and stable communities, they create alternative forms of belonging based on recurring encounters, shared experiences, and mutual care. Through the character of Bob Wells, *Nomadland* demonstrates that community can exist outside of the existing definition, and does not necessarily depend on permanence or fixed geographical location. Instead, meaningful social bonds can appear even within a lifestyle defined by continuous movement.

The existence of such a community seriously challenges the concept of the American Dream. Conventionally, the American Dream is associated with stability, such as home ownership, stable employment, financial and social security, and upward social mobility. Characters portrayed in *Nomadland* exist outside these structures. And despite the fact that many of them did not choose this life on the go, by having lost homes, savings, careers, or family support as a result of economic hardship, forcing them to abandon the lifestyle that the American Dream traditionally promises, a significant number of people made a conscious decision to take on the life of the nomad. Zhao does not simply portray these people as victims of the circumstances or marginals. She explores how they adapt to reality and create an alternative purpose for themselves, challenging the concept of the American Dream.

Fern's character provides us with the most evident understanding of this challenge. Throughout the film, she is presented with opportunities to leave the road behind and return to a more conventional lifestyle. Fern's sister Dolly and her husband are symbolic characters, whose purpose in the film is to accompany the fictional story of the Fern, and to emphasize the difference between her and someone with conventional values. These characters point to family ties and a settled, stable lifestyle as the highest human value. Dolly offers her a place to stay, providing both comfort

and stability. However, Fern ultimately declines the offer, saying she cannot live in the room her sister suggested her to move into. Dolly's response not only provides us with a better understanding of Fern's character, but also gives us a better look into what influences people to choose the nomadic lifestyle over the conventional one.

"I know we are not as interesting as the people you meet out there. It's always what's out there that's more interesting. You left home as soon as you could, you married Bo after just knowing him a few months, and then you moved to the middle of nowhere with him. And then even after Bo passed away, you still stayed in Empire."⁹⁵

This scene is significant because, for the first time in the film, the nomadic lifestyle is positioned as a choice. Although Fern's mobility initially stems from economic displacement and the loss of her husband, it gradually becomes a part of her identity. The road offers Fern freedom and autonomy, which ultimately becomes her priority. By rejecting the opportunity to settle down, Fern demonstrates that her attachment to mobility exists outside of necessity. However, *Nomadland* does not romanticize her choice, and shows how continuous movement does not take away her grief, loneliness or economic uncertainty. Instead, Zhao shows the complexity of nomadic life, existing between freedom and precarity, community and isolation.

Nomadland neither fully embraces nor fully rejects the traditional American Dream. Rather, it questions whether its promises remain attainable for many contemporary Americans, and how the promise's failure affects people's lives. Through Dave's character, we witness the opposite reaction to the presented opportunity of stable life.

⁹⁵ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 01:15:01–01:15:24.

Fern: “You had a flat tire on your van, Dave.”

Dave: “Oh, okay. I hadn’t noticed.”

Fern: “Cause you stayin’?”

Dave: “Yeah. I never expected to. Never thought I’d spend another night under a roof, but...”⁹⁶

Dave’s return to a stable and conventional way of living complicates the film’s ambivalence toward the American Dream. On the one hand, settling aligns with traditional narratives of recovery and reintegration into stable domestic life, which is an end goal for many nomads who did not choose the lifestyle voluntarily. However, Dave’s hesitation when explaining his decision suggests that the decision to return to stability is a necessity, dictated by the cruel circumstances surrounding the life of the nomad, rather than a triumphant upward mobility. Homecoming was not a desired end goal for Dave, but rather a wise and necessary decision. Dave, as a distinct character, acts as the protagonist’s guide into the domestic space. Like Fern, Dave is played by a professional actor, David Strathairn. He and his story represent a transitional state. Dave opens up to dialogue with both his own family and the nomadic community. However, in his final scene, we see him effectively merging with his son while playing the piano, thus choosing the home as his path.

Through the post-Western lens, this arch further destabilizes the frontier logic of settlement as a resolution. In classical Western narratives, movement from frontier exploration into settled life often signifies closure and successful domestication of the space. In *Nomadland*, however, settlement and stability are challenged and stripped of their ideological certainty. Dave’s decision to settle down interrupts a mode of survival

⁹⁶ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 01:24:26–01:24:41.

defined by precarity. By including this scene, *Nomadland* reconfigures both movement and stasis. Neither of them guarantees fulfillment, and both exist in a realm where the promise of the American dream is no longer structurally reliable.

Building on this ambivalence, Dave also presents Fern with an opportunity for a stable life, by offering her to move in with him to a guesthouse owned by his son. Dave's growing attachment to Fern suggests the communal form of domestic stability, which is dictated by companionship, rather than economic security. However, the depiction of Fern's ultimate refusal showcases strong emotions behind her decision. She never explicitly says "no" to Dave; instead, she takes off early in the morning, after clearly reflecting on the option for a little while. This refusal complicates any straightforward reading of Fern's mobility as either freedom or compulsion. On the one hand, her decision can be interpreted as a form of loyalty to the past, suggesting she is not ready to move on. This idea is supported by the scene where Fern talks about Bo, her deceased husband, with Carol, a woman she met on her work site.

Carol: "Are you married?"

Fern: "I am, but my husband died."⁹⁷

Instead of calling herself a widow, Fern chooses to identify as married to a deceased man. This attachment prevents her from accepting new relational opportunities and transforming them into new forms of settlement. Her loyalty to Bo reinforces the idea that Fern's mobility is not solely based on economic precarity, but also temporal, as she remains oriented toward the past, which prevents her from full integration into the community or stable settlement.

⁹⁷ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 00:56:10–00:56:15.

If we read it through a post-Western framework, this moment questions the traditional Western narrative in which settlement is linked to Romantic resolution and the establishment of a domestic endpoint. Instead, *Nomadland* presents both mobility and settlement as emotionally and structurally insufficient, revealing a landscape in which even sentimental forms of belonging fail to produce lasting stability.

The concept of community in *Nomadland* is further complicated by Fern's eventual return to Empire. Her "homecoming" does not function as a return to belonging or settlement. Rather, Fern is faced with an absence and the reality of loss and the inability to return. The house is no longer a lived-in space, but a site of memory, strongly attached to the past and sense of community and belonging Fern used to possess. Her return serves as a farewell to the past and an acknowledgement that neither place nor community can be restored in the previously existing form.

Community in *Nomadland* is not rooted in permanent settlement and belonging, but in a shared experience and mutual understanding between nomads that face similar circumstances. Unlike the traditional Western narrative, *Nomadland* challenges homecoming and narrative closure, and instead of marking the completion of the journey, Fern's return confirms that there is no longer a place for Fern to return. By giving away the rest of her and her husband's belongings that remained in a storage unit in Empire, Fern confirms her readiness to continue her nomadic journey, refusing to settle down in a stable place or community.

3.3 Landscape, Space, and the Post-Western West

Landscape has always occupied a central position within the Western genre. The portrayal of deserts, mountains, plains, and open horizons in classical Westerns has always symbolized freedom, expansion, and opportunity. Vast landscapes often function as visual manifestations of the frontier myth, presenting the American West as a space to be explored and conquered. The environment is frequently depicted as a challenge to be overcome by the Western hero, whose movement across the land reinforces ideas of mastery, self-reliance, and territorial expansion.

In *Nomadland*, many of the characteristics traditionally associated with Westerns remain present. We see protagonist Fern traveling across deserts, rock formations, open highways and vast landscapes of the American West. The cinematography intentionally puts forward wide natural spaces that resemble classical frontier narratives. However, Zhao transforms those frontier spaces into a space where questions of displacement, precarity, and belonging are explored.

The road is another character in the film. It is a symbol of general cinematic significance, representing a certain order of life's rules, revealed to the spectator and dictated by the post-Western genre. However, these rules imply constant movement, a life of perpetual breakthrough and exploration of the world and oneself. The heroine travels along a road that has no end, but instead faces numerous unclear and unexpected obstacles and trials. In the film, the road never ends; it always stretches beyond the horizon, into the thick of the forest, and disappears into the desert hills. Individual stops along this road are not ends in themselves, but exist only as short-lived refuges for the heroine.

The landscapes in *Nomadland* are not the spaces to be conquered or mastered. Instead, they become Fern's home wherever she goes. Having lost everything she had in Empire, Nevada, Fern develops a relationship with the space, that is not based on ownership or settlement. Deserts, camp sites, and parking lots become home for her. Some of these places provide refuge and solitude, allowing Fern to reconnect with nature and process her grief. Others offer community and companionship through encounters with fellow nomads. Still others appear hostile and temporary, reminding her of the precarity that accompanies life on the road and forcing her to move on once again.

Some readings of *Nomadland* present a more optimistic interpretation of nomadic life. As João Medrado writes in "*Nomadland* and the Value of Filmmaking," "*Nomadland* also presents us with the important message of living life to the fullest. Nomads live in harmony with nature."⁹⁸ From this perspective, nomads' relationship to the landscape can be viewed as a form of liberation and a stronger connection to nature. This interpretation of nomadic experience positions it as a path to liberation from the constraints of consumer society and conventional institutionalized labor, and a way to reach authenticity and simplicity. Nevertheless, such a reading runs the risk of failing to take into consideration the very conditions that lead to this mode of existence. Although there are clearly many scenes in the film where nature is engaged aesthetically, they should not necessarily be seen as representing a simple and direct harmony but rather as taking place alongside the constant presence of hardships related to economic vulnerability, unstable employment, and social dislocation. In this light,

⁹⁸ Medrado, João. "*Nomadland* (Dir. Chloé Zhao) and the Value of Filmmaking." *The Talon*. October 18, 2021. <https://www.gradedtalon.com/6043/showcase/nomadland-dir-chloe-zhao-and-the-value-of-filmmaking/>.

the seeming closeness between the nomads and their environment cannot simply be interpreted as a transcendent romance but rather must be viewed as part of the new American frontier.

The film's treatment of landscape is also reinforced through visual references to classical Western cinema. As Megan Feeney observes, *Nomadland* opens with Fern framed in the doorway of a storage unit in Empire and concludes with her framed in the doorway of her abandoned house before she walks into the open landscape. Feeney notes that these shots are intentionally reminiscent of the film *The Searchers*, which also begins and ends with shots of a doorway. In John Ford's film, the doorway symbolizes the boundary between civilization and the frontier, while the protagonist remains outside of domestic life, choosing freedom over sedentary life. Zhao borrows this iconic image of the Wild West but significantly changes its meaning. Ethan Edwards's position at the doorway represents individual choice, connected to the mythical freedom of the Wild West hero, whereas Fern's movement through the landscape is shaped by economic decline and personal loss. As Feeney argues, *Nomadland* begins not with free will and progress, but with social determinism and decline. Fern does not escape home to seek the frontier; she enters the frontier because home no longer exists. Consequently, the landscape ceases to function as a space of conquest, possibilities awaiting exploration; instead, it becomes the only remaining space available to an individual, torn from home and community.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Megan Feeney, review of *Nomadland*, by Frances McDormand, Peter Spears, Mollye Asher, Dan Janvey, and Chloé Zhao, *Cinéaste* 46, no. 3 (2021): 44–46.

3.4 Fern as a Post-Western Hero

The main character Fern can be seen as an alteration of the traditional Western hero, which takes place through the lens of precarity. Similar to the classic Western hero, Fern is portrayed as an isolated individual who is characterized by mobility, independence, and continuous wandering through enormous territories. However, Fern's mobility cannot be associated with conquest and expansion characteristic of the classic hero since it is dictated by her economic needs and lack of any stable options. In this context, one may say that the relationship between Fern and the landscape differs significantly from that typical of a traditional Western hero. While the latter usually aims to master nature and conquer the frontiers, Fern's role is to learn to adapt to the existing state of things.

The nature of the connection between Fern and the idea of community destabilizes this typical Western understanding even further. Unlike classical heroes who are always defined as separate from any communal connections, Fern demonstrates an intricate relation to her social surroundings. Communities that she encounters throughout her journey can provide a sense of home for her, but they are, at the same time, fragile and dissolving in their nature. This also applies to Fern's relationship with Dave, where he is offered a chance to lead a domestic life together. However, Fern chooses not to accept this invitation, not out of the feeling of superiority to other people, but rather due to the impact of grief and nostalgia for her lost husband. In light of this, Fern's rejection of settling should not be seen as independence but rather a temporal attachment to the past that makes integration impossible.

Fern's role as a post-Western hero is also supported by her sister Dolly's comment about how she views Fern's way of living. "You know, I think that um, what

the nomads are doing is not that different than what the pioneers did. I think Fern's part of an American tradition."¹⁰⁰

Dolly's comment positions Fern within a context of mobile figures, who occupied the central place in American mythology, from pioneers and frontiersmen to drifters, explorers, and other individuals who search for meaning beyond the boundaries of settled society. The scene establishes the connection between contemporary nomadism and the historical mythology of the frontier. However, Fern's mobility is caused by the unavoidable need to adapt to loss and economic insecurity, which simultaneously reveals the limitations of the mythical figure of traditional Western, making Fern an example of the post-Western hero.

Another example of Fern as a post-Western hero can be found in Ian Christie's "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of Nomadland." Christie argues that "Fern is alienated from what has come to signify 'home' in modern America, and indeed from the idea of the conventional family."¹⁰¹ Fern's rejection of traditional notions of home and domesticity reflects her departure from conventional societal expectations. Much like the heroes of classical Westerns, Fern exists on the margins of society and conventionally accepted institutions. However, her motivation for rejecting traditional notions is not caused by expansion and settlement.

Christie further suggests that "nature at its rawest seems to be mobilized here to resist any collapse into the temptation of domesticity – or perhaps this marks a deployment of the "pathetic fallacy."¹⁰² The natural landscape that Fern inhabits in the film serves more than just a scenic background; they become spaces that reinforce her

¹⁰⁰ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 01:14:17–01:14:26.

¹⁰¹ Christie, Ian. "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of Nomadland." p. 128.

¹⁰² Christie, Ian. "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of Nomadland." p. 128.

continuous movement and separation from society, yet appear hostile enough to sustain Fern's appearance as a post-Western hero. Fern navigates among them as a passing resident who must adapt herself to the conditions here but is never unaware of her own vulnerabilities. Here the film manages to retain the Western connection between mobility and the open landscape but free it from its heroic idealism.

This way, Fern's refusal of domesticity exemplifies the revision of the classical frontier hero. Her refusal of a conventional settled life does not signify the triumph of individualism and the complete dismissal of the mythical Western hero, but recognizes that neither traditional notions of home, nor the continuous movement can fully resolve Fern's displacement caused by loss and economic instability. Fern emerges as a post-Western heroine who embodies both the mobility of the Western hero and the uncertainty, precarity, and ambiguity of the contemporary frontier.

3.5 Ambiguity, Loss, and the Future of the Frontier

Zhao in *Nomadland* kept the ending open, resisting the classical Western narrative where the story concludes in triumph. Instead, the film concludes without providing a destination for the protagonist. Fern's final journey signifies neither success or failure, but rather continuation of life defined by mobility, adaptation, and uncertainty. In this sense, the film embodies a central characteristic of the post-Western: the rejection of clear resolutions and the questioning of the myths that traditionally structured frontier narratives.

Contemporary films such as *Nomadland* rework and reinterpret frontier narratives, and are often based on or use new ways of rewriting national myths and legends. The most prominent way of doing so is, according to Mayer, is the inclusion

of the history of colonization from the perspective that was ignored in the American West national imagination and its historiography.¹⁰³ Such perspectives that were ignored before became an integral part of the revisionist Western movies and the road movies.

The film concludes with the dedication — “Dedicated to those who had to depart. See you down the road.”¹⁰⁴, at last reinforcing the post-Western narrative of *Nomadland*. The dedication frames departure as necessity, displacement, and structural compulsion. Read through this lens, the dedication reorients the film’s visual and narrative economy of movement. Nomadic experience is no longer positioned within the mythic structure of the frontier, but within a post-Western condition defined by social fragility. *Nomadland* simultaneously challenges the closure associated with both the Western and American dream. Where, in classical frontier fictions, coming to a destination marks the end of the story (either in terms of arriving at home or settling or mastering), in *Nomadland*, we get the ending of the dream of arrival as an ending point of any sort, either for a narrative or societally.

Nomadland retains characteristics of the classical Western, such as mobility, self-reliance, and life on the margins of settled society; however, it fundamentally redefines their meaning. Frontier in the film is presented as a place marked by precarity, loss, and economic insecurity, instead of a space full of opportunity, conquest, and national expansion.

¹⁰³ Mayer, “Neo Frontier Cinema.”

¹⁰⁴ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 01:43:21–01:43:36.

Conclusion.

This thesis aimed to examine the ways that contemporary cinema revises the theme of American frontier from the perspective of post-Western genre through analyzing two works: *Meek's Cutoff* by Kelly Reichardt and *Nomadland* by Chloé Zhao. The American frontier is no longer depicted as a place of conquest, progress, and the destiny of the nation. In this regard, both movies reflect the transformation of the genre as a whole, which preserves its features at the same time changing its meaning.

Meek's Cutoff is a revisionist Western, that reinterprets the entire genre by challenging its traditional representations of mobility, authority, gender, and frontier expansion. Rather than portraying the Great West as a space of opportunity and conquest, Kelly Reichardt presents the frontier as unstable, hostile, and resistant to human control. Through repetitive landscapes, physical exhaustion, and the gradual collapse of certainty within the group, mobility becomes associated not with freedom and progress, but with vulnerability and survival.

The film also destabilizes the conventional Western narrative by questioning the role of the Western hero. Instead, film shifts attention toward ordinary pioneer women, particularly Emily Tetherow. Through silence, observation, domestic labor, and practical judgment, female experience becomes central to the narrative, challenging the traditional gender hierarchies of the genre. At the same time, the gradual erosion of Meek's authority exposes the fragility of masculine power and the limitations of the frontier myth itself.

Furthermore, *Meek's Cutoff* examines the relationship between the Native people in the frontier and the settlers, offering a new perspective on the Western. The Native American man is not portrayed as a simple antagonist but as a figure whose

knowledge and connection to the landscape reveal the settlers' dependence and insecurity. Reichardt therefore reverses traditional Western narrative and questions colonial assumptions of superiority.

Finally, the film's unresolved ending reinforces its post-Western character. Reichardt rejects certainty of meaning by refusing narrative closure and leaving the settlers' fate uncertain, which erases the triumph traditionally associated with the genre. Instead, *Meek's Cutoff* presents the frontier as a space defined by ambiguity, fragility, and the constant instability of human authority, where the fate is not defined, and the frontier is in charge of humans' fate.

The analysis of *Nomadland* has established that mobility occupies a very central role in the film, but it always remains an ambiguous factor. While the nomads have some freedom and independence, the reason behind their mobility is not personal choice but economic need. This means that the film rejects the conventional relationship between mobility and success that is the basis of the Western movie genre, as well as the American dream. *Nomadland*, through Linda May and Fern, demonstrates how a society fails to offer stability or social mobility of ordinary people within the frontier.

Moreover, Fern's portrayal adds to the post-Western revision of the idea of the frontier present in this movie. Just like in traditional Westerns, where the heroes are marked by their ability to move, be strong, and be independent, Fern also possesses these traits. Nevertheless, Fern's desire to move does not come from the wish to conquer and explore; instead, it is associated with her state of mind caused by grief, memory, and poverty, which establishes Fern as a post-Western hero.

The ending on *Nomadland* further emphasizes the ambiguity. Instead of portraying a coming home for Fern, her going back to Empire represents absence and the impossibility of retrieving the past. Also, her departure in the end does not offer the sense of narrative closure typically expected from movies with frontier themes. This theme is also evident in the dedication at the end: "To those who had to depart."

Overall, *Nomadland* challenges the notion of the frontier as a destination by turning it into a dynamic concept. The film puts the spotlight on marginalized individuals, undermining the American Dream and avoiding closure. *Nomadland* turns the idea of the frontier into something more ambiguous, forcing spectators to reflect and adapt. This makes it an example of a post-Western approach to films based on the mythology of the American West.

Ultimately, *Meek's Cutoff* and *Nomadland* are two examples showing that the role of the frontier in American cinematography still exists but has changed dramatically. The post-western does not remove the myth of the frontier; however, the limitations of the myth become clear through its comparison with the reality of historical and contemporary figures. Through this process, the movies show that the American frontier exists as an ambivalent place rather than a place of achievements.

Works Cited

Atanasova, Aleksandrina, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Nomadland: The New Frontiers of the American Dream at the Periphery of the Market." *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 6, no. 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2021-06-01-02>.

Bazin, André. "The Western; or, the American Film Par Excellence." In *What Is Cinema?*, translated by Hugh Gray, 140–48. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Blanke, David. "When East Goes West: The Loss of Dramatic Agency in DeMille's Western Women from the 1910s to the 1930s." In *Women in the Western*, edited by Sue Matheson, 3–20. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Bordin, Elisa. *Masculinity and Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the New Millennium*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014.

Bruder, Jessica. *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Calder, Jenni. *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and Reality*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1974.

Campbell, Neil. *The Post-Western: Cinema, Region, West*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

Carter, Matthew, and Marek Paryz, eds. *The Post-World War II Hollywood Western: Genre and History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Cawelti, John G. "Some Ruminations on American Fantasies of Heroism." *The Journal of American Culture* 2, no. 4 (1980): 684–89.

Carter, Matthew, and Marek Paryz, eds. *The Post-World War II Hollywood Western: Genre and History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Cawelti, John G. "Some Ruminations on American Fantasies of Heroism." *The Journal of American Culture* 2, no. 4 (1980): 684–89.

Christie, Ian. "Unhoused: On the American Spaces of Nomadland." In *Spaces: Exploring Spatial Experiences of Representation and Reception in Screen Media*, edited by Ian Christie. Amsterdam University Press, 2024. 124–29.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11895527.12>.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Crockett, David. *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee*. Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1834.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Abingdon: Routledge, 1994.

Dykstra, Robert R. "Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence." *Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2009): 321–47.

Feeney, Megan. "Doorways to the Infinite: Space and Place in *The Searchers* and *Nomadland*." *Cinema Journal* 61, no. 2 (2022): 45–68.

Frankiewicz, Shane Joseph Willis. "Revisionism and the Subversive Cowboy in the Classic Western: Challenging the Definitions and Boundaries of the American Western." PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 2017.

Ford, John, director. *The Searchers*. Warner Bros., 1956.

Fuller, Graham E. "The Oregon Trail." *Sight & Sound* 21, no. 6 (2011): 36–39.

Jacobs, Margaret. "Western History: What's Gender Got to Do With It?" *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2011): 297–304.

Kollin, Susan, ed. *Post-Westerns: New Essays on the American West*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987.

Mayer, Hervé. *The Wagon Trail and the Frontier: Gendered Hierarchies and Marginalized Perspectives in Western Cinema*. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2019.

Medrado, João. "Nomadland and the Value of Filmmaking." *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2021): 24–31.

Minz, Christopher. "Performative Masculinity vs. Biological Maleness in the Western Genre." *Journal of Film and Gender Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 112–28.

Pye, Douglas. "The Western Genre: White Male Authority and Its Structural Functions." In *Movie Books: Genre and Hollywood*, edited by Ian Cameron, 204–18. London: Movie Magazine, 1996.

Reichardt, Kelly, director. *Meek's Cutoff*. Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2010.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum, 1992.

Studlar, Gaylyn. "Ideological Concerns, Family Structures, and Domesticity in Post-War Westerns." *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 1 (1999): 72–95.

Tasker, Yvonne. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1993.

Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Paper presented at the American Historical Association, Chicago, 1893.

Wells, Bob. *Cheap RV Living: A Guide to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous and Mobile Freedom*. Self-published, 2015.

Wright, Will. *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

Young, Mary. "Reflections on Violence: The Indianization of American Identity." *American Studies Journal* 28, no. 4 (1987): 401–22.

Zhao, Chloé, director. *Nomadland*. Searchlight Pictures, 2020.

Zhao, Chloé, director. *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. Kino Lorber, 2015.

Zhao, Chloé, director. *The Rider*. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

Il/La sottoscritto/a [Arina Ermakova](#), matricola numero [899131](#), iscritto/a presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea/Laurea magistrale in [English and American Studies](#), autore/autrice dell'elaborato finale/tesi di laurea [The Frontier Reimagined: From Expansion to Precarity in Contemporary American Cinema](#), relatore/relatrice [Elisa Bordin](#), consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

DICHIARA

- ☐ di NON aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura del suo elaborato finale/della sua tesi di laurea;
- ☒ di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura del suo elaborato finale/della mia tesi di laurea, in particolare *(per ogni punto scrivere per esteso quanto viene richiesto)*:
 - *indicare il nome dello strumento (es. "ChatGPT" se applicazione o "GPT" se modello) con riferimento alla versione specifica (ad esempio, "ChatGPT-4, versione rilasciata a marzo 2024")*;
 - *se sono stati utilizzati più strumenti, specificare ciascuno di essi indicandone nome e versione*;
 - *fornire informazioni su come è stato utilizzato lo strumento*:
 - ☒ *revisione e ottimizzazione dei testi per migliorare chiarezza e coerenza*;
 - ☐ *generazione di grafici e diagrammi per la presentazione dei dati*;
 - ☐ *supporto alla scrittura automatica di frasi*;
 - ☐ *produzione di immagini illustrative per integrare la parte metodologica*;
 - ☐ *altro (specificare)*;
 - *indicare le sezioni/i capitoli interessate/interessati*;
 - *indicare come è stata verificata la correttezza, la qualità e l'attendibilità delle informazioni o dei testi eventualmente generati*.

DICHIARA INOLTRE

che tutto il materiale generato dall'IA è stato attentamente verificato, rivisto e rielaborato dall'autore/dall'autrice, che si assume la piena responsabilità per la qualità, l'accuratezza e l'integrità scientifica del lavoro.

DICHIARA

☒ di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura del suo elaborato finale/della sua tesi di laurea, in particolare:

- strumento utilizzato: *ChatGPT (OpenAI), modello GPT-5;*
- utilizzo dello strumento:

☒ *revisione e ottimizzazione dei testi per migliorare chiarezza e coerenza;*

- sezioni/capitoli interessati:

Capitolo 1 (quadro teorico); Capitolo 2 (Meek's Cutoff); Capitolo 3 (Nomadland); Conclusioni. L'utilizzo dell'IA è stato limitato alla revisione linguistica, alla riformulazione di alcune frasi e al miglioramento della chiarezza espositiva.;

- verifica dei contenuti:

I contenuti prodotti tramite IA sono stati utilizzati esclusivamente come supporto alla revisione linguistica e stilistica. Le informazioni, le analisi e le argomentazioni presenti nella tesi sono state elaborate e verificate dall'autrice sulla base delle fonti bibliografiche utilizzate, che si assume la piena responsabilità dell'accuratezza e dell'integrità scientifica del lavoro.