Filmmaking-in-Place
Peripheral Production and Ecofeminist Aesthetics in Eden and Meek’s Cutoff

ABSTRACT In Meek’s Cutoff (2010) and Eden (2012), filmmakers Kelly Reichardt and Megan Griffiths (respectively) negotiate the interconnection between women, nature, and patriarchal capitalism through their emphasis on place, or one’s separation from it. Ecofeminist aesthetics resonate with regional production when directors emphasize relationships with environments and people over typical neoliberal concerns of production such as cost and infrastructure. A particular political aesthetics emerges when the approach emphasizes building community and the politics of place, rather than the bottom line. Reichardt’s Meek’s Cutoff shifts from the panoramic landscape shots of the classical Western to allow gendered engagement. This framing redirects the viewer away from the supposedly “male” action and instead focuses on the constant work of the women, which is the real action of survival. In Eden, Griffiths similarly frames human trafficking victim Hyun Jae in closed spaces where she is forced into sex work. Such cinematography is drastically juxtaposed with the open framing that signals potential emancipation. In each film, feminist politics intertwine with aesthetics of space to resist patriarchal capitalism co-opting women’s labor, an approach relevant to both environmentalism and feminism.

KEYWORDS bioregionalism, ecofeminism, landscape, Megan Griffiths, Kelly Reichardt, Lynn Shelton

This article explores the intersections of peripheral production, place, and the ecofeminist premise that women’s bodies and labor serve patriarchal capitalism under dominant economic structures, which include the film industry. It looks at two films, Meek’s Cutoff (2010), directed by Kelly Reichardt, and Eden (2012), directed by Megan Griffiths, both of which make these power structures explicit in relation to women’s roles, because they are formalized through landscape and environment. In doing so, these films realize ecofeminist arguments through film form and industry, and emphasize the ways in which women’s bodies and environments are treated as extractable resources. We examine these films in particular because their emphasis marks them as explicitly political cinema, particularly through the ways in which they develop and communicate political subjectivity. Furthermore, both Meek’s Cutoff and Eden are enabled by their status as peripheral productions, shot in the Pacific Northwest, where a community of women filmmakers have staked their claim, emphasizing the importance of place in relation to political, or ecofeminist, film production.

Although Hollywood North solidified in Vancouver, Canada, following “favorable tax incentive policies, visually diverse locations, and increasingly favorable exchange rates” between the United States and Canada as early as the 1970s, the Pacific Northwest remains relatively peripheral to the larger film cultures of North America that have been
established in Hollywood, New York City, Toronto, and Atlanta.\textsuperscript{1} Seattle, Washington, has a strong record of cinephilia with the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) maintaining programming year round, in addition to its ten-day festival that spans the city every spring. Portland, Oregon, boasts a sound stage that supports successful television production. Both Washington and Oregon have modest film production incentive programs—but comparatively little film production takes place in the Pacific Northwest, particularly outside of British Columbia. This peripherality has allowed place-based cultures to emerge that are not typical of the aforementioned centers. Lynn Shelton, an icon of filmmaking in the Pacific Northwest, stated that if “you have a problem with women in authority, you’re not going to work [in Seattle],” which she referred to as a “regional wonderland.”\textsuperscript{2}

Shelton tragically passed away in the prime of her career, in the summer of 2020, but she leaves a legacy of women-centered film production and support in the Pacific Northwest. Shelton began shooting in the Pacific Northwest in 2004 with \textit{We Go Way Back} (2006), and proceeded to shoot almost all of her films in the Seattle area, bringing an enormous amount of film production to the region. In a heartfelt tribute written for Indiewire, many professionals in the film world remember Shelton for either bringing them to Seattle to shoot a film, or making a space for them to work in film and television in the area. Griffiths remembers Shelton sending her a line from Sydney Lumet’s book \textit{Making Movies} (1996), which read, “I’m in charge of a community that I need desperately and that needs me just as badly.”\textsuperscript{3} The commitment to place and development of its resources and relationships made Shelton a paragon of an ecofeminist and bioregional approach to film production. She resisted the extractive tendencies of runaway production in order to tell stories not beholden to capital and global infrastructure. In this turn away from the non-places that Marc Augé argues emerge to smooth the flow of global capital,\textsuperscript{4} environment in these Pacific Northwestern films provides a different role in relation to narrative, such as when the San Juan Islands become a recuperative retreat where entirely new familial structures are formed in Shelton’s \textit{Your Sister’s Sister} (2011).

While here we focus on films by other filmmakers due to their explicit address of the exploitation of women’s labor, and how this is implicated in its framing within particular environments, we would argue that these same questions resonate with the work of Shelton and many other Pacific Northwest filmmakers more broadly. Filmmakers such as Griffiths, Reichardt, and Shelton have thrived outside the centers of film production, which have long been predominantly patriarchal. Especially telling of their relation to place in terms of production, these women filmmakers engage with the particular environments of the Pacific Northwest. Ecofeminism combined with a bioregional focus

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uniquely suits the peripheral film industry of the Cascadian bioregion, as such an intersection brings together questions of sustainability, local environments, and the production of subjectivity, as illustrated by Shelton’s argument above. In this article, we will bring together frameworks for ecofeminism and bioregionalism in order to understand the possibilities of peripheral production to address topics eschewed in mainstream cinematic production. We then turn to Meek’s Cutoff and Eden to locate these strategies on screen, illustrating the value of regional production in providing a cinematic politics of solidarity and sustainability.

TOWARD A FEMINIST BIOREGIONALISM: ECOFEMINIST SOLIDARITY AND BIOREGIONAL RESISTANCE

This article brings together two frameworks that have not been applied in the analysis of film production and aesthetics: ecofeminism and bioregionalism. These two political frameworks make a natural pairing through their concomitant focus on extraction. Ecofeminism recognizes that women’s bodies and labor are linked to natural resources that are in turn exploited by patriarchal structures. Bioregionalism considers how local relationships with the land are replaced by the methods of global capitalism in order to serve the expansion and extraction of capital to external markets. In this section, we expand upon these two political frameworks to build an understanding of a feminist bioregionalism that has been fostered in the Pacific Northwest. Considering Meek’s Cutoff and Eden through these frameworks not only provides a way of understanding why and how they emerge from this peripheral industry, but also illustrates a set of concerns that ripples across the whole of film production in the Pacific Northwest, if not other bioregional fields of filmmaking.

Women and nature have long had a complicated association—from the Mother Earth imaginary to narratives of nature and women as resources to be dominated by colonial, male progress. Because of this, feminist discourse has often struggled with distancing itself from nature, with “theories of social construction assum[ing] that nature is static and culture is dynamic, making feminist change contingent on the systemic removal of women from the category of nature.”5 Ecofeminism, on the other hand, takes the link between women and the environment as its starting point—leading to its dismissal by many feminist theorists as essentialist. Stacy Alaimo points out, however, that it is crucial to remember that “ecofeminists desire not only a transformation of gender relations but also a radically different way for humanity to interact with nature.”6 In other words, ecofeminism might offer the possibility of, as Judith Butler puts it, “reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted.”7 Ariel Salleh ends her forward to the second edition of Ecofeminism with the provocation “only connect,” where she argues, “With ecofeminism, the political focus turns outwards. Its first [premise] is that the

‘material’ resourcing of women and of nature are structurally interconnected in the capitalist patriarchal system.”

Ecofeminism, then, is rooted in the connection between patriarchal oppression and the destruction of nature for profit and progress.

Karen J. Warren locates the origin of the term “ecoféminisme” as being used by Françoise d’Eubonne in 1974 to “bring attention to women’s potential for bringing about an ecological revolution.” The connections between feminism and the environment, then, are inherently political. In 1975, Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of society.

A key concern is the devaluation of the labor of women, which results from viewing work historically done by women, such as caring for families, as less valuable in the market economy. As Salleh argues, “the economic model shaped by capitalist patriarchy is based on the commodification of everything, including women.” Capitalist patriarchy continues to oppress women and nature through commodification, and ecofeminism offers a response by “arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.” In Meek’s Cutoff and Eden, Reichardt and Griffiths negotiate this interconnection between women, nature, and patriarchal capitalism through their emphasis on place, or one’s separation from it.

In raising the specific film cultures of peripheral industries such those in as Seattle/Cascadia, we are building a bioregional focus into more traditional ecofeminist concerns regarding the exploitation of women’s labor. The integration of this environmental-political perspective shares concerns regarding the extraction of resources, albeit this time with a focus that tends to turn toward the resistance of global capital—although resistance to global capital is already implicated in the exploitation of women’s bodies to an extent, because, as Saskia Sassen points out, human trafficking already represents a “counter-geography” of global capitalism.

As a concept, bioregionalism first emerged in the 1970s out of conversations between two geographically remote activists, Allen Van Newkirk in Nova Scotia and Peter Berg in Northern California. Both shared an interest in the idea of “living-in-place.” The two

articulated a mode of inhabiting, suitable to each unique ecology, which would not only minimize human impact on the land but would also ultimately have a regenerative relationship with it. Our move from ecofeminism to bioregionalism and vice-versa suggests that the concept of living-in-place might be extended to the fostering of filmmaking-in-place friendly to the inclusion of women in the industry. Shelton’s coining of Seattle as part of a “regional wonderland” in relation to women working in the film industry suggests that it is already becoming so. In other words, her linking of the unique ecology and culture of a place with the refusal to exploit gendered labor is both bioregional and ecofeminist.

Cascadia is the bioregional moniker of the Pacific Northwest, and as a bioregional concept it has been mobilized by environmentalists and political activists, sharing a confluence of histories and practical uses. It is named loosely after the Cascade mountain range, with a history of use dating back to an Oregon town established in 1892. While the geographical range of Cascadia fluctuates on its use, it generally follows the Pacific Northwest watershed that encompasses the northwest of Canada, running along the coast through Washington, Oregon, and northern California. Alongside Newkirk and Berg, Ernest Callenbach (film scholar and founder of the long-running journal *Film Quarterly*) popularized the concept of Cascadia—if not the word itself—and its use as both a political and environmental framework in 1975 with his novel *Ecotopia*. The novel recounts the story of a journalist who enters the new nation of Ecotopia, which has seceded from the US, and established a green infrastructure and culture. Although the political and environmental implications are clear, and the term has alternatively referred to secessionist principles or environmental conservation, bioregionalism as a framework acknowledges the intersection of culture, place, and psychology. The way we organize around environments invariably reorients our perspective toward them, which correlates with our impact upon them, positive or negative. Crucial for this article, though, Cascadia implies a separateness—from nation states, as the borders follow watersheds rather than national or state demarcations, and from longstanding political geographies. As Callenbach makes the bioregion a home for a green future, it is no surprise that Shelton makes it a home for women working in the film industry, freed from social and political structures that would preclude the fostering of their work.

A disturbing trend has emerged, however, following this spirit of distinction from federal and/or state-based boundaries, whereby usually male, white supremacists have hijacked the concept of Cascadia to posit a new potential for a white “homeland.” White supremacists Jimmy Marr (who runs the racist twitter account @GenocideJimmy), David Woods (an anti-Semitic rapper), and Andrew Oswalt (an Oregon State University graduate student who was jailed for putting racist stickers on cars) organized through a Discord channel called Cascadian Coffee Company. With a similar agenda, Joey Gibson ran for US Senate against Maria Cantwell in Washington State, but otherwise spends his time operating the “Patriot Prayer”—an organization devoted to bigotry and white nationalism that actively seeks out violence, and which inspired Jeremy Christian, who murdered two people on a train in Portland who were protecting African American women from his violent attacks. Christian had recently posted on Facebook that he
believed Cascadia to be a “White homeland for whites only racists.” The “Wolves of Vinland,” a cultish white supremacy group, claims the Cascadia bioregion as a “spiritual and cultural home.” While such a list is disturbing, it still represents a minority and subversion of the very ideas of a bioregion, which describes a unique ecology of geography, flora, and fauna, rather than race-based identities.

We give these examples where the concept of a homeland has been politically positioned to invite Maria Mies’s ecofeminist critique of the concept, which extends the link between bioregionalism and feminist critique. In a chapter in *Ecofeminism* titled “Women have no Fatherland,” Mies argues, “Since the beginning of the modern nation-state (the fatherlands) women have been colonized. This means the modern nation-state necessarily controlled their sexuality, their fertility and their work capacity or labour power.” In other words, the very idea of a homeland/fatherland implicates a patriarchal power relation, which has long been the case in the film industry if we, by analogy, consider Hollywood the “home” of the American film industry. Although there are rare exceptions, as an industry Hollywood has controlled the sexuality of women via the star system and structured it formally through the male gaze. From the perspective of political economies, women’s labor power was first controlled via Hollywood’s contract labor system in the Golden Era, and later through the unequal distribution of salaries. The film industry, in other words, is structured around and made possible by the extraction of labor power from women. Mies refers to labor exploitation as “contradictory relations,” which she argues the nation-state protects via violence and coercion. The #MeToo movement reveals that Hollywood similarly employs its own forms of violence and coercion in relation to women’s labor. In Mies’s terms, the white supremacists attempt to protect contradictory relations via the constitution of a fatherland and misuse of bioregionalism as purely a separatist notion, separating not just nation-states, but also race and gender as well. Although beyond the scope of this article, the ecofeminist focus on race is relevant as well—the barriers imposed by white unions, for example—further strengthening the analogy between Hollywood and the geographical centering of power.

Outside of Hollywood, different power relations are possible. Mies concludes her critique of the fatherland with a turn to a feminist internationalism. Although the concept of the bioregion is regionally situated, a crucial aspect of bioregionalism is that the boundaries of the bioregion cut across national or state lines. In other words, bioregionalism doesn’t operate according to the old demarcations of global capitalism, which allows for new organizational principles to operate similar to those of a feminist

16. Maria Mies, “Women have no Fatherland,” in *Ecofeminism*, 120.
internationalism. Shelton’s statement about the Pacific Northwest being a “regional wonderland” resonates with this argument from Mies, because the power of women working in this regional industry suggests a cooperative capacity that operates outside of the boundaries of so-called fatherlands. We might not call this approach a feminist internationalism, but instead a feminist bioregionalism. This connection to bioregionalism is significant, because one of the key tenets of bioregionalism is that unique cultures emerge from bioregions and thus shape the way local cultures inhabit these spaces. In the case of Cascadia, this cultivates a feminist interpretation or take on the idea of filmmaking-in-place. A crucial quality in this particular case is that such peripheral production, in asserting different values from Hollywood power structures, is a form of bioregional resistance. Shelton’s proclamation is an act of resistance, and a rallying cry for a new culture of filmmaking-in-place.

We will now turn toward two key examples of films made by women within this context, because we are particularly interested in not only how women make films within this environment, but also how these women make use of the environments of the Pacific Northwest within their filmmaking, formally speaking. In other words, while the concept of a feminist bioregionalism operates industrially as women cultivate an environment of support and inclusivity, how might actual environments reflect this industrial space thematically? Shelton’s *Your Sister’s Sister*, for example, explores the possibilities of procreation outside of patriarchal, nuclear family structures—but such imagining, in this film, only takes place on a retreat on the San Juan Islands, a remote area, which separates the characters from their routines in the city. Much of the cinematography of this film emphasizes the drama’s isolation within the natural environments of the San Juans, such that the environment itself becomes a key signifier in the drama. Whether this environmental focus is framed as a result of shooting on location, the type of low-budget filmmaking that happens in peripheral filmmaking environments, or as a conscious narrative element of the story being told, all of these features reflect a feminist bioregionalism enabled in the Pacific Northwest or Cascadia through feminist community building, and which is reflected in the images produced. We now turn to Griffith’s *Eden* and Reichardt’s *Meek’s Cutoff* for examples of this environmental reflection because they even more explicitly address women’s labor in relation to the environment.

**CLOSED, OPEN, AND INTERRUPTED: FRAMING AS BIOREGIONAL FEMINISM IN EDEN**

Megan Griffiths addresses the exploitation of women’s labor, sexuality, reproductive rights, and bodies in *Eden*, a film about sex trafficking. The film follows a second generation American, Hyun Jae, and as such *Eden* provides a rather direct example of the colonial framing Mies provides in her argument—the commodification of Hyun Jae’s sexuality is made possible in part by the status of her family. The story begins with Hyun Jae graduating from high school, and, after a night out, accepting a ride home from a young man she believes is a firefighter. After being kidnapped by the “firefighter,” she is trafficked by a group of men that includes local law enforcement. The film follows Hyun
Jae’s imprisonment over the course of a year as she learns the inner workings of the trafficking ring, and discovers that the women who become pregnant are kept at another facility so that their captors can also sell their children. As a result, women’s sexuality and fertility are violently capitalized upon as an extraction of value from their bodies, placing the film squarely within an ecofeminist framework. The film builds into this focus a bioregional feminism by correlating the captivity of women’s bodies with landscape. Hyun Jae finally sets herself free after sabotaging the trafficking ring, which then begins to fall apart. The film explicitly connects the exploitation of women’s bodies and labor to the environment through the oscillation between closed- and open-framing, signifying Hyun Jae’s entrapment and the exploitation of the women with interior, artificial spaces, and their potential freedom with her access to natural surroundings.

The film begins in media res, with the first shot establishing a visual motif based on a dichotomy between entrapment and freedom. The film opens with a low-angle shot that reveals the silhouette of a man opening a trunk as Hyun Jae cries out for help. The film then cuts to a high angle of Hyun Jae in the trunk of a car, framed in darkness. The film then cuts back and forth between these angles until the man finally shuts the trunk on Hyun Jae again. She is framed so that she is completely isolated from the environment, and only point-of-view shots from her perspective show any element of the outside world. This relatively simple visual motif is complicated later, but it serves as a visual reminder of Hyun Jae’s lack of freedom. After this opening sequence, the film returns to “One Day Earlier” via text overlay, and Hyun Jae discusses going out for the night with her friend Abbie. Again, closed framing of Hyun Jae’s work in her parents’ taxidermy shop is juxtaposed with a sequence where she sneaks out back for a smoke break with Abbie, before she is drawn back into the banality of the shop and her mother’s strict rules about when and where she can spend her time—including her mother telling her when she suggests staying to finish up work for the night, “I don’t want you here at night
alone.” And finally, at the beginning of the film, when she sees the multiple nametags her firefighter paramour has in his vehicle and realizes she is being kidnapped, she attempts to escape the confines of the car into the open night air. The film proceeds along these lines with Hyun Jae’s repeated attempts at escape.

Wide shots of open landscape complement these moments of promised escape, accentuating the film’s political emphasis on environment. The film’s source material, the alleged abduction of a young woman named Chong Kim, took place in Texas in 1994, but the film’s obfuscation of this point (at one point a character furnishes a New Mexico
ID, further disentangling narrative from source material) underscores the fact that it is shot in the diverse landscapes of the Pacific Northwest—eastern Washington, more specifically, which has a drier climate like Texas or New Mexico. And although the term “Cascadia” resonates with the cascading falls of the Cascade mountain range, the larger watershed it belongs to contains a great deal of ecological or landscape diversity, sometimes referred to as landscape and/or vegetational patterns.\footnote{Thomas C. O’Keefe, Scott R. Elliot, and Robert J. Naiman, “Introduction to Watershed Ecology,” Environmental Protection Agency, 20–22, https://cfpub.epa.gov/watertrain/moduleFrame.cfm?parent_object_id=516.} In this respect, consideration of bioregion relates more to industry than narrative veracity. Griffiths likely shot the film in the Pacific Northwest for a matrix of reasons: the social environment, which encourages women to develop their stories in the region; support from Washington Filmworks, a state-based incentive program; and the landscape diversity that allows production to remain in the region. Although we also discuss the strategies of *Eden* in relation to an aesthetic politics of bioregional feminism, we raise these points because its use of landscape places the film resolutely within the Pacific Northwest, despite the implication of the historical event it might have been based on. This location is emphasized by the film’s judicious use of cinematography emphasizing the landscapes of eastern Washington.

The sequencing of landscape in the film is strategic, because the majority of the film actually takes place in interior spaces: the warehouses where the trafficked women are housed and groomed, and where their sexuality is commodified. As a result, Hyun Jae’s access to the outside world takes on increased significance. In the beginning of the film, access to the outside is mainly associated with Hyun Jae’s escape attempts. But over the course of the narrative Hyun Jae learns that Svetlana, another women held captive, is granted increasing freedoms because she begins to help the trafficking ring with the daily

operation of their activities. In this way, Hyun Jae gradually obtains more freedoms, and the patterns of cinematography shift from the interior spaces of trafficking to more sequences set amid the open environments of eastern Washington. Eventually, this increased access to the outside world and the operations of the traffickers allows Hyun Jae to subvert them.

Hyun Jae’s last, and most promising, escape attempt accentuates *Eden*’s bioregional relationship with landscape and natural environments through the interruptions of human-engineered environments. As discussed previously, bioregionalism as both environmental demarcation and political praxis considers local ecologies in relation to how we inhabit the land, embodied in the key dichotomy for Berg and Raymond Dasmann between “living-in-place” and “making-a-living.”¹⁹ Usually such a distinction pertains to the forces of global capital that redefine regional practice. In *Eden*, Griffiths formalizes a bioregional feminism through the connection between the exploitation of environments and the exploitation of women. As a film about sex trafficking, there is little question about the exploitation of women’s bodies, but during Hyun Jae’s final escape attempt, the film also provides an example of a community built in the dry grasslands of the Columbia Basin, which disrupts the natural visual and ecological patterns of the region. Within this arid environment, there is a sharp line where a suburb with its manicured, green-grass lawns cuts into the local landscape. This sequence is framed in such a way so that each shot includes a diagonal line of composition that separates the artificial palette of engineered environment from the monochromatic tans and browns of the Basin in summer. While at face value this contrast provides a simple cinematic example of human relationships with the environment that bioregionalists decry, with

the intersection of human trafficking as a narrative element in this film it also provides a crucial exploration of a bioregional feminism. Although earlier scenes with open framing signal potential emancipation from sex trafficking in this film, such open framing is complicated by the suburban encroachment, which signals another kind of colonialism. When Hyun Jae runs up to three women drinking wine in their green-grass suburban backyard, rather than rushing to her aid, the women look as if they’ve been intruded upon (even though Hyun Jae’s face is bloodied from an earlier altercation). Her captor tells the women that Hyun Jae escaped from an asylum, which seems doubly spurious given her injuries and the fact that she has been costumed in a short mini-skirt as part of her sex work. While the concept of the suburb, associated with white flight, already represents a sort of protectionist seclusion—as Hyun Jae’s captor says: “it doesn’t matter if you scream, they’re cowards anyways”—it is intensified by the way that the environment has been forcefully reorganized in eastern Washington in order to accommodate this separation. Perhaps predictably, Hyun Jae’s abductor is able to recapture her in this scene due to the seeming unwillingness of the suburban women to engage in Hyun Jae’s plight (and the argument is racial here as well, since most of the women being trafficked are women of color or are foreign born). The suburb is no longer a natural setting, and as such provides no safety for Hyun Jae, her body like the grasslands torn up to support the growth of capital.

Here, Griffiths provides an example of women filmmakers working in Cascadia who are explicitly critical of gendered exploitation, and she draws upon the environments of the Pacific Northwest to formalize her critique. Indeed, even the use of the diverse landscapes of the Pacific Northwest presents a bioregional reversal of runaway production: rather than seeking outside shooting locations to satisfy historical veracity, Griffiths cultivates the possibilities of place by utilizing the landscapes of her community.
THE ECOFEMINIST WESTERN: REFRAMING WOMEN’S WORK IN MEEK’S CUTOFF

Bioregional and ecofeminist approaches to filmmaking, or filmmaking-in-place as we suggested earlier, emphasize connection and regeneration when it comes to both the place and the process. In the Western, place, and its relationship to gender and capitalism, is central to the genre. Landscape is a key part of the iconography of the Western, with industry closely connected in the spirit of Manifest Destiny. In the Western, the frontier is something to be conquered: the male protagonists are generally shown “making a living” by dominating the environment—driving cattle across the plains, building towns and railways, “civilizing” the West through violence against indigenous people. This relationship between landscape and men has several dimensions for considering Meek’s Cutoff in terms of how the film uses the Western genre to offer a critique of its patriarchal structures. Kelly Reichardt’s visual presentation, and the way her characters inhabit the codified frontier, suggest a “kind of historical counter-narrative” that interrogates the classical Western’s associations with masculinity, capitalism, and place.20 Through patterns in the cinematography that emphasize the labor of women, Reichardt draws attention to the relationship between domestic work and the landscape of the frontier that is typically overlooked in the Western genre. By bringing women to the forefront and compressing the framing of the landscape, Meek’s Cutoff challenges the classical generic relationships between gender, industry, and landscape central to the Western, specifically in the way that women’s work is typically devalued.

The relationship between people and place is a theme in Reichardt’s work: Meek’s Cutoff is the third film she has made focusing on the Pacific Northwest, following Old Joy in 2006 and Wendy and Lucy in 2008. Reichardt herself is not a native Pacific Northwesterner, but her first film, River of Grass (1994), explored the Everglades bioregion in Florida with a similar emphasis on environment and human encroachment into it. Although her later emphasis on the Pacific Northwest seems to be born of her collaboration with Portland-based writer Jon Raymond, the entirety of her work emphasizes relationships with environments, and often their destruction. Night Moves (2013), Certain Women (2016), and First Cow (2019), Reichardt’s later films, for example, also deal with environmental concerns. Matthew Holtmeier argues that Reichardt is a bioregional, or even Cascadian, filmmaker, given her focus on the intersection of place and culture, which is formalized by a cinematography that emphasizes the environments her subjects inhabit. Specifically, he argues that Reichardt’s films operate in this way by “comingling environment and individual subjectivity via cinematic means.”21 While this previous article doesn’t discuss Meek’s Cutoff in particular, our larger reflection on Reichardt’s work highlights the relation between landscape, cinematography, and character subjectivity.

First, while Reichardt borrows the westward narrative by focusing on a group of settlers making their way through Oregon who are led astray by their guide, her emphasis is on the inability of the settlers to establish any kind of dominance over the landscape. Based on historical events, *Meek’s Cutoff* follows several families attempting a shortcut across the Oregon desert with Stephen Meek as their guide. As their water supply dwindles, it seems Meek has likely gotten them lost and the group debates whether to continue following him or try to devise their own plan. The tensions of the lost group are complicated further when they encounter a lone member of the Cayuse people, whom they take prisoner in the hopes that he will lead them to water. Between the cowboy bluster of Meek and the unintelligible (to them) monologues of their hostage, the situation becomes increasingly tense as the days progress and there is no sign of water or the mountains they are trying to cross.

To return to the distinction between living in place and making a living, the typically male drive to conquer the frontier on display in the Western is critiqued by Meek’s clear ineffectiveness. When he is first introduced, he exits his tent with his face covered by unkempt hair, seemingly disoriented while the rest of the party is shown reading, sewing, and engaging in productive daily tasks. As he stretches, gazing over the vista in an almost parody of mastery over the landscape, his dirty buckskin outfit blends into the background. When Meek speaks, in a film with very little dialogue, he is mostly telling Jimmy, the only child in the party, tall tales about his past or offering opinions on matters irrelevant to the survival of the group. This can be contrasted by the focus on Emily Tetherow as the character who seems the most proactive and aware of the situation: while sidelined from the male conversations about how to proceed, she takes her own actions and speaks privately with her husband to counteract the increasingly dire
situation. Often, Meek’s rambling serves as the background to shots of Emily, or the other women in the party, as they perform seemingly endless domestic work.

Warren discusses the way that domestic tasks, and the environmental engagement they require, often serve to sideline women. She argues that “carrying water and searching for firewood are feminist issues wherever and whenever women’s primary responsibility for these tasks contributes to their lack of full participation in decision making, income producing, or high status positions engaged in by men.”  

This connection between labor and power is formally depicted in *Meek’s Cutoff* through framing and sound, as the conversations of the men are muted and impossible to hear, even for the audience, as the camera keeps us with the women gathering firewood and setting up camp. Repeatedly, the women are sidelined with domestic tasks, even as they are aware of the precarious situation created by Meek’s arrogance.

The contrast between Stephen Meek and Emily Tetherow, as well as the way the film foregrounds the domestic work of women as central to the party’s survival, is clearly illustrated during a conversation between the two characters one day while the party is camped. Meek has been talking to Jimmy, promising the boy that the mountains in the distance will be named after him when they reach the Willamette Valley, but when the boy walks away to get water, Meek is suddenly left in the company of only women. A series of medium shots reveal that all three women are knitting, while Meek idly plays with his pipe. He pushes Emily to admit she doesn’t like him, and when she deflects by saying “I don’t like where we are,” he proposes that her lack of faith in him as a guide might be a way of flirting. When she politely suggests that he doesn’t know much about

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women, Meek replies with his thoughts on the difference between men and women. As he claims that “women are created on the principle of chaos . . . the chaos of creation, disorder, bringing new things in the world,” the camera lingers on Emily and Millie Gately as they continue knitting. Again, the medium shots keep the focus on their industrious movements, further contrasted with Meek declaring that men are “destruction.” Emily diplomatically says she’ll “think about” what he’s said and the conversation is interrupted by the return of Jimmy and Millie’s husband, Thomas. The disparity of the women’s orderly and constant knitting, and Meek’s useless pacing and patronizing, underscores the danger of Meek’s bluster and assumed dominance over the women and the landscape. This emphasis on the women’s work is a repeated visual pattern in the film, anchoring the viewer away from the supposedly “male” action, or inaction, and instead focusing on the real action of survival: gathering firewood, lighting fires, cooking, knitting, sewing, and taking care of other campsite logistics.

Framing is one example of how Reichardt’s visual compositions work in contrast to a traditionally masculine relationship with the landscape in the Western. The film also uses the less common Academy ratio of 4:3 to signal an immediate, visual shift from the panoramic landscape shots of the classical Western. This contrast in framing can be seen in a still from The Searchers directed by John Ford (1956), and a still from Meek’s Cutoff depicting how people are framed in relation to the landscape. Rather than invoking “the belief in the plentitude, opportunity, and expansionism of Manifest Destiny,” Reichardt’s boxed-in framing “feels like a denial, an impingement on visual freedom.”

23. Fusco and Seymour, Kelly Reichardt, 59.
a different, gendered, engagement. Instead of emphasizing the possibility of the frontier, the aspect ratio of *Meek’s Cutoff* walls in the settlers, emphasizing the lack of progress toward their goal of the Willamette Valley. Combined with the images of the large bonnets worn by the women, the film creates a sense of entrapment with the landscape as its endless sameness taunts both the characters and viewers.
Through the cinematography, Meek’s Cutoff reveals the false mythology of Manifest Destiny and the Western genre’s celebration of male progression across the frontier. Rather than shifting between extreme long shots of the sublime landscape and close-ups of the men who will conquer it, Reichardt uses the square framing and extensive medium shots to create a claustrophobic landscape that emphasizes the directionless wandering of the small party as well as the domestic work of the women. By emphasizing the importance of the labor of women, and the inefficacy of men like Meek, the film revises the relationship between place and patriarchal capitalism so often celebrated by Westerns to center women’s labor as the necessary action of survival.

CONCLUSION

We began articulating a bioregional feminism in relation to the film industry by exploring Lynn Shelton’s characterization of the Seattle film industry as being a powerful place for women to work, and posited that part of this power comes from the peripheral relationship of this regional industry to the “mainstream.” Women in Film Seattle has been operating since 1986 to foster the culture Shelton describes, and this culture is unique in the film industry when situated against Hollywood with the backdrop of #MeToo, although we acknowledge too the long history of patriarchal cultures within the film industry, despite our relatively contemporary focus. The emergence of a feminist culture is not unusual in this context, with Cascadia’s strong regional identity, providing inspiration to organize gendered relations in the industry counter to centers of film production.

Ecofeminist aesthetics resonate with regional production when directors emphasize relationships with environments and people over typical neoliberal concerns of production such as cost and infrastructure. A particular political aesthetics emerges when the approach emphasizes building community and the politics of place, rather than the bottom line. Meek’s Cutoff shifts from panoramic landscape shots of the classical Western to allow gendered engagement. Framing and sound design redirects the viewer away from the supposedly “male” action and instead focuses on the constant work of the women, which is the true action of survival. Eden similarly frames human trafficking victim Hyun Jae in closed spaces where she is forced into sex work. Such cinematography is drastically juxtaposed with the open framing that signals potential emancipation, and the subjugation of environment is made analog to Hyun Jae’s plight. In each, feminist politics intertwine with aesthetics of space to resist patriarchal capitalism co-opting women’s labor, an approach relevant to both environmentalism and feminism.

As we illustrate with Eden and Meek’s Cutoff, if the extra-filmic industrial environment facilitates such cultures, in the more environmentally minded films this concern with the exploitation of women is also reflected in the physical environments of the films. We’ve given just a few examples of women filmmakers working in Cascadia using the environment as part of their critique of patriarchal cultures via what we have called a bioregional feminism that turns to the environment to make key interventions. The films may begin their critique of fatherland through their peripheral industrial context,
but *Eden* and *Meek’s Cutoff* further highlight the exploitation of women through their respective visual strategies that emphasize the environment.

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