

C

W

FIRST COW
review by alexandra ebert gold

O

**biscuits and
brother-
hood: first
cow imag-
ines fron-
tier con-
nectedness**



Director Kelly Reichardt's intimate exploration of 1800's Oregon, First Cow, opens with a quote from the Romantic poet William Blake: "The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship." And indeed, man and friendship go hand in hand in Reichardt's reimagining of early America. Surly Western archetypes and grim individualism are overshadowed by tender, even loving, collaboration. First Cow is a study of blossoming camaraderie amid forceful industrialization and flooding commerce.

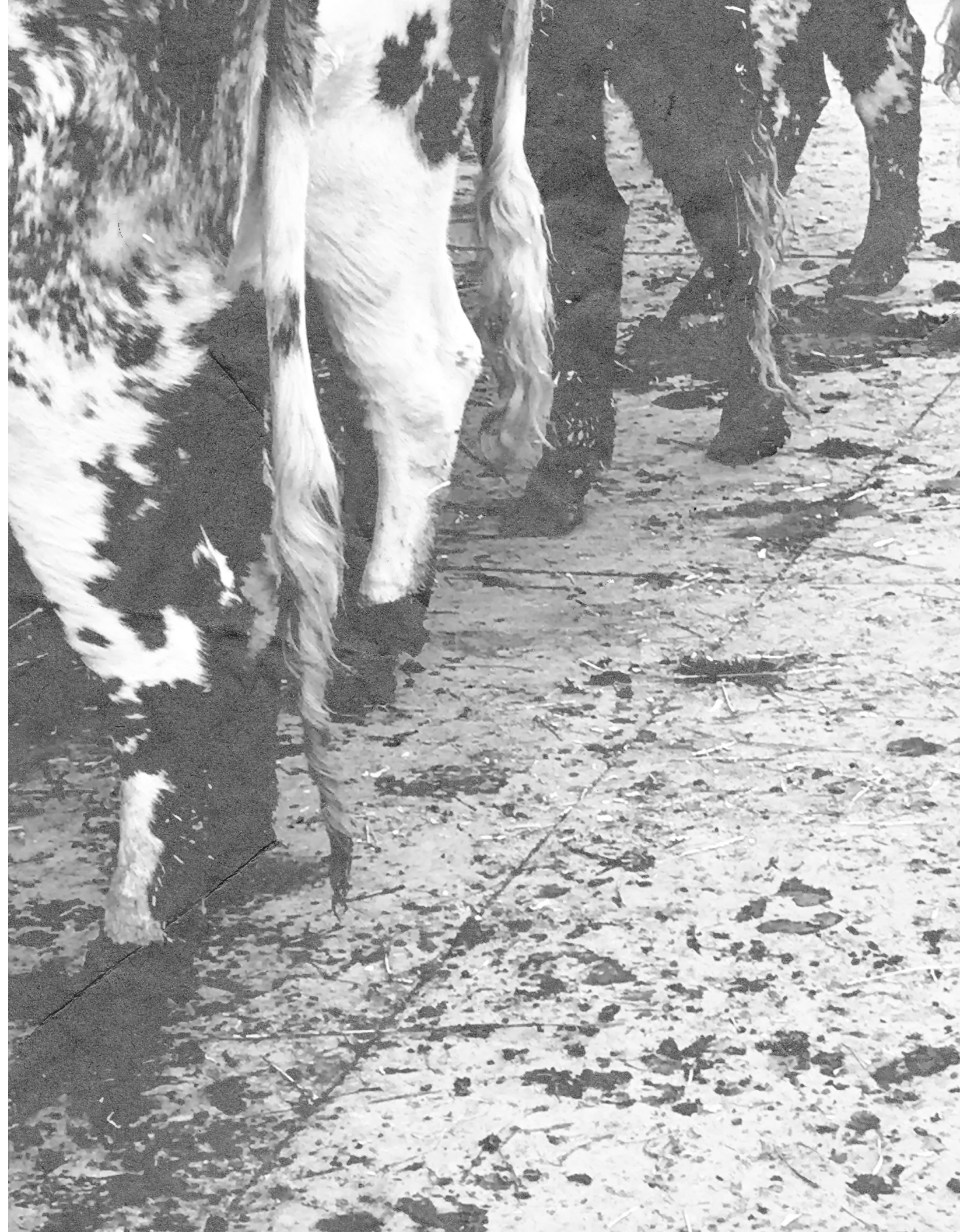


man

The pioneer's belief of human sovereignty is proved to be a myth.

based on the half life by jonathan raymond, first cow tells the story of two american settlers, and outsiders, in the 1820s northwest. cookie figowitz (john magaro) a gentle orphaned european chef, and king lu (orion lee) an entrepreneurial chinese man with a knack for sales. their differences separate them, but their connection as foreigners to the aggressively masculine white settler unites them. they band together with opulent visions of striking it rich and leaving for california, but their plan — selling homemade buttermilk biscuits at the local market — is dependent on pilfered milk from a lone dairy cow. this cow, later identified as evie, belongs to a noble higher-up in society. evie becomes a symbol of the growing exploitative market of the early industrial americas, and the alien position of cookie and king is solidified.

the first words are spoken nearly 10 minutes into the film. intentional gaps in dialogue will continue until the last shot. the narrative picks up leisurely, after establishing an almost life-like pace of events. lush, primordial, western oregon comes to life through the crunch of pine needles and soft squelch of foraged mushrooms. the film is scored with meditative instrumentals by william taylor. his contemporary folk sound highlights the understated delicacy, rather than taking away from the organic forest soundscape. taylor's harp and banjo score set the natural pacing for the harmonious relationship between the people and the land. the scenery becomes a character, with owls, dogs, and a cast of forest creatures asserting themselves as equals in the space. the pioneer's belief of human sovereignty is proved to be a myth.



man

friendship



ds robin hood parallel outsiders, cookie and king use theft to level the playing field and to make their way in a rather callous developing marketplace. king manages to use the racism fervent in the colonial town to benefit himself and his friend: the succulent taste of the cakes they make from evie's milk is an "ancient chinese secret," and not, in fact, grift. when the duo collaborates to overcome the system, their clever dispositions prove complementary.

director kelly reichardt makes clear that solidarity is what makes their success (despite their inevitable failure) possible. together, they flourish. apart, they barely survive. reichardt subtly advocates for american companionship, rather than ruthless every-man-for-himself independence, as a path to prosperity.

**man, friendship —
first cow depicts
a primal need for
friendship that tran-
scends the brutal in-
dividualistic climate
of 1800s americas.
amity cannot deter
encroaching cap-
italism, but reich-
ardt ensures that
goodwill persists in
all of the bleakness.**