

Brokeback Mountain: Masculinity and Manhood

Even before its release as a film in 2005, *Brokeback Mountain* became a cultural icon, a space in which people celebrated, raged, grieved, and found company. As is well-known by now, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana's screenplay based on Annie Proulx's short story made the rounds in Hollywood for years, the common wisdom declaring that it was simultaneously too good and too risky for anyone to produce. Thus Ang Lee's somewhat surprising decision to direct the film carried more than the normal significance, nor has the film disappointed. Reviews, blogs, and now books about the narrative in its several forms attest to—what? Here opinions divide: the courage to tell a gay cowboy story? the brilliance in universalizing a local and lonely love story? the statement it makes against homophobia? its mainstream success at the box office and in the awards—the first serious homosexual love story to make it? or its danger as a tool for recruiting more males into sin?

In what follows, we will look specifically at the representations of contemporary American masculinity, manliness, and manhood in the film, comparing it in these respects to the Annie Proulx story and the McMurtry/Ossana screenplay, to speculate on some of the reasons *Brokeback Mountain* was the film to break the back of Hollywood (and popular) resistance to the scene of men making love. In brief, we think the film allows itself to assert the legitimacy and beauty of romantic love between men by endorsing more traditional narratives of manhood and masculinity. We will link these gender narratives to aesthetic forms as well. Thus we believe the

film's success in depicting sexuality in new ways—though we hope not to detract from it—needs to be understood as coming at some cost to a progressive vision for gender and aesthetics. On the other hand, we will proffer an alternative reading, through Eve Sedgwick, that makes a different and more enlightened kind of sense out of the masculinities in the stories.

The queer culture machine was very busy even before *Brokeback Mountain* was released, prognosticating the likely compromises to which the writers and director would submit in order to facilitate mainstream success, changes that would no doubt mute the narrative's gay thematic. Many a critic has subsequently argued that Ennis and Jack are not gay enough and that the gay element of the narrative has been played down in the interests of mainstream marketability. B. Ruby Rick argues that "homosexuality is incidental to the film's achievements" (48); D. A. Miller suggests that Ang Lee's much celebrated cinematic technique constitutes a "celluloid closet," detracting from the sex and sexual politics of the film, allowing mainstream audiences to forget that they are watching a gay romance (52); Scott Herring sees *Brokeback* as an "issue film that invites nothing but pure escapism" (94); Dwight A. McBride says the film "opts out of the culture wars," championing "a love story about two guys who happen to be gay" (96); and Osterweil attributes the inoffensiveness of the subject matter to the requisite "sacrifice of countercultural subversiveness" in the interests of financial success (42). Along these same lines, gay affirmative critics have cited the exclusion of homosexuality from the marketing campaign for the film which was directed at straight women who enjoy the cinematic romance genre (Berry 34; Clover and Nealon 62; and McBride 95).

The success of *Brokeback* signifies the effort to mainstream homosexuality in the American media—not so much from the position of moral or ethical imperative, but from the position of commerce. After all, the GLBT community is perceived to have a good deal of disposable income (Rorke 33). The first main screen release of a gay themed film with a kiss between two men was *Making Love* (1982), a film which was a box office disaster for predictable reasons. *Brokeback*, on the other hand, constitutes a much more successful step in the progressive integration of homosexuality into popular cinema that began with the 1982 film, a progress that includes titles such as *Philadelphia* (1993) and *The Birdcage* (1996), both of which were

profitable and appealing to the heterosexist mainstream audience because the narratives elided sex and intimacy, opting for tragedy and comedy (respectively) over the romanic genre. *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) was also a success, but it played down male on male sex and intimacy and enlisted the confirmed masculinities of Hollywood heartthrobs—Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo—and although these transvestites talk about loving men and adopt a camp affectation, they only ever succeed in facilitating heterosexual romance (a formula for success identical to that employed in *Queer Eye*). *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* (1994) was a bit more edgy than *Wong Foo*, what with Bernadette (Terence Stamp) falling in love with Bob (Bill Hunter), but the narrative includes no sex between men and allows the camp carnivalesque humor to rule over the more serious subject matter. Ultimately, the film follows a heterosexual trajectory with Mitzi (Hugo Weaving) traveling to meet his son and to assume paternal responsibilities.

What makes *Brokeback* unique is the traditional masculinity of the gay protagonists, and one of the principal markers or constructs of this masculinity involves the filmmaker's adaptation of the Western genre to the gay subject matter. The extent to which the narrative borrows from the Western tradition varies, depending on the critic who addresses the subject: Susan Lee Johnson argues that the film only "looks like a Western... nothing else about the movie fits the genre" (988); Grundmann hails the film as a "long overdue move for a mainstream film" "irreversibly linking the classic Western scenery and iconography with explicit images of cowboy homosexuality" (85); Rich congratulates Ang Lee for 'queering' "the most sacred of American genres" (qtd. in Clarke 30); Clarke observes that *Brokeback* merely clarifies an element that has always been present in the Western—"men getting it on (or squabbling) with other men" (30); and Jim Kitses goes further than any others, describing Ennis as "the western hero incarnate" (23) and the western setting as a "naturalization" and "nationalization" of "same-sex love" (25).

While the traditional masculinity of the protagonists has been praised by many critics, it has also had its detractors. One might argue that such depictions advance a "gay" rather than a "queer" sensibility, the former retaining a more integrationist and conformist agenda, than the latter which demands that the GLBT community be accepted on its own terms.

Grundmann observes that the narrative promotes “coming out” as a “moral imperative,” but expects the denizens of the closet to “turn out to be mainstream” upon their emergence (85). Moreover, the mental anguish of the protagonists who suffer for love has not been well received by some critics, since it hearkens back to the historic medicalization of homosexuality by the psychiatric profession, a century-long history of institutional oppression only concluding in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association, under constant pressure from gay and lesbian activism, elected to remove homosexuality from its nomenclature of pathology (Bayer 101-154). In this vein, Grundmann sees the gay portraits in *Brokeback* as ‘throwbacks’ to the 1950’s, as depictions of “anguished masculinity in crisis” (84), and Cobb calls the film a “Christmas gift to conservative Christians” (102), representing “the gay cowboy lifestyle [as] a depressing damaged lifestyle” (103) and “homosexual behavior” as self-destructive “like other addictions” (104). Moreover, the narrative emphasizes the collateral victims of homosexual relationships, such as children and ex-wives (Clover and Nealon 63).

In what follows, we will develop the ways Ang Lee’s film—even more than Annie Proulx’s story—depicts, even recuperates, traditional American masculinity. We believe that, in addition to the deserved reputations of the actors and director, the stunning beauty of the film, and the brilliant care for detail evident in every shot, *Brokeback Mountain* succeeded with a popular audience and (to a point, that point being the Academy’s “Best Picture”) with film critics because—with the exception of the object of desire—it does not challenge the central forceful prescriptions of American manhood. As a result, it has ensured that it does not alienate its audience, disappoint its financial backers, or inflame the cultural conservatives. On the other hand, as we will see, it may be serving an even more radical purpose: healing the ideological split that men still see between homosocial and homosexual desire.

Brokeback Mountain, with its gay sexuality, depicts traditional masculinities. In Ennis we see a man eager to construct and embody a very familiar manhood: the physically adept, hardworking, verbally silent, responsible, ethical western hero. In Jack, we see a man still caught up in the ambivalences produced by trying to match his father’s manhood, represented by ownership, dominance, and rodeo success. At the end of their teens, both men are already manly and are struggling to remain so in the

traditional senses prescribed by the American gender divide. They are not hiding alternative identities behind masculine performance, nor is the film. Both characters and film—to a greater degree than the story or the screenplay—draw spectators into a sympathetic and familiar relation to conventional gender. How can we interpret this apparent contradiction?

So what specific sacrifices to a mass audience—or moves toward a new vision of male sexuality—has the film *Brokeback Mountain* made? When she was asked about the theme of the narrative, Annie Proulx said that her story is not about “gay cowboys” but about “rural homophobia” (130). Yet one could argue that the film has paradoxically appropriated a certain homophobia in order to challenge homophobia. In the story, Ennis is right in thinking that Jack has been lynched by men, not killed by a tire iron. In story, screenplay, and film, we have seen Jack meet his new neighbor, the ranch foreman, and heard the man proposition Jack, offering a place where the two of them can “get away.” In all, Jack is likely lying when he tells Ennis he’s “had a thing going with the wife of a rancher down the road” (19); we suspect him when his father tells Ennis, in all versions, about the male ranch neighbor with whom Jack’s been planning to settle down. When Ennis first hears the story of Jack’s death from Lureen, he is incredulous, “No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron” (23). The film represents this visually, by cutting to Ennis’s imagined scenario. Later in the story and the movie, Jack’s father tells Ennis that Jack had “got another one’s goin a come up here with him and build a place and hep run the ranch, some ranch neighbor a his from down in Texas. He’s goin a split up with his wife and come back here” (23). These lines, like almost all the story’s dialogue, are replicated in the film. Yet in the story the next paragraph begins, “So now he knew it had been the tire iron” (25). The film offers no representation of this certainty, leaving the viewer to conclude with more ease that Ennis is simply projecting onto Jack his own horrific childhood memory of the dead and mutilated Earl, also beaten with a tire iron.

In spite of their own desires, even Jack and Ennis themselves have internalized their culture’s most enduring prejudices about homosexuality and homosexuals. Even after it is clear that their passion will last, they never modify their claims that they are “not queers.” Instead, they name their powerful love as a “thing” that grabs hold of them. The story makes

Ennis's internalized homophobia especially clear. In a passage left out of the film version, he says:

"You know, I was sittin up here all that time [the four years since Brokeback] tryin to figure out if I was ___? I know I ain't. I mean here we both got wives and kids, right? I like doin it with women, yeah, but Jesus H., ain't nothin like this. I never had no thoughts a doin it with nother guy except I sure wrang it out a hunderd times thinkin about you. You do it with other guys? Jack?" (13)

And Jack replies, lying, as we know, "Shit no." Jack is actively gay; he goes to Mexico to have sex with hustlers, and he comes on to other men at home, such as the rodeo clown, and poses provocatively against his truck even when he first sees Ennis. Nor does he continue to hide his queer desire: eventually he tells Ennis that he can't do without it the way Ennis can. Yet Jack's experience with gay sex does not mean he is less vulnerable to homophobia, has internalized it less, or protects himself against it any more easily than the relative newcomer Ennis. After the rodeo clown dismisses his offer, the bartender insults Jack's masculinity by asking this man who has just ridden a bull if he has ever tried calf roping.

Jack and Ennis' sexual relationship is frequently rendered in forms that emphasize the masculine. When Jack and Ennis first have sex, it takes a hyper-masculine form, in opposition to the traditional gay romance that codes men as weak via sentimentality. In the story, more explicitly than in the film or screenplay, Jack draws Ennis's hand down to his own erect cock. Ennis jerked his hand away as though he'd touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours, and with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he'd done before but no instruction manual needed. They went at it in silence except for a few sharp intakes of breath and Jack's choked "gun's going off," then out, down, and asleep. (7)

Jack's reference to the gun keeps this masculinized, as does the silence and near violence of the interaction. Ennis' heterosexual propensities are confirmed well in advance of sex with Jack. He indicates that he intends to marry Alma as soon as he comes down from Brokeback. Jack's

hetero-normative gender construction is confirmed in another way. As a rodeo bull rider, he engages in a very dangerous sport with a high risk of injury, one not appropriate for the effete and faint-hearted. Thus he associates himself with hegemonic, even hyperbolic masculinity. His failure at this career—while his wife Lureen succeeds as a barrel racer—and his parodic “riding” of the huge farming machines he sells underline his desire to be manly in conventional ways.

The *Brokeback* protagonists’ responsibility for their alternative desire is further mitigated by the presence of alcohol, which plays a clichéd role in many conversion narratives in which ostensibly straight men are compelled to engage in queer sex because they are too inebriated to know what they are doing. The inaugural sex act between Jack and Ennis results from happenstance. The men drink too much, and Ennis decides not to return to his pup tent residence and vigil over the sheep. The weather also conspires to bring the men into the same bed roll. The only attribute of the conventional gay guilty pleasure narrative that does not seem to be present is the participants’ pretense that they were so drunk they could not remember anything that happened the night before. Ennis is silent the next morning, but Jack comes out of the tent—in the film—to say he’ll see him for supper. That night—in the story, the date isn’t specified—they do speak. In a model of ambivalent dialogue from McMurtry and Osanna, Ennis both enables and rejects a continuing relationship when he says “It’s a one-shot thing we got goin’ here” (Screenplay, 20).

Jack and Ennis’s guardianship of the flock on Brokeback Mountain plays upon a variety of familiar metaphors. On the one hand, the sheep serve as analogues to the innocence of the young cowboys who have only recently left parental (or sibling) homes. The image of Jack carrying a lamb on his saddle as the cowboys move the flock through the mountains reinforces the moral connection between the men and lamblike innocence; viewers may recall New Testament references to Jesus as the shepherd of his flock. On the other hand, the sheep, if only by contrast, evoke the common cliché that rural men, particularly adolescents, in the absence of women, may satisfy themselves with sheep. Remembering this stereotype offers yet another extenuating circumstance—the absence of women, the alcohol—mitigating the two men’s eventual union, indicating as it does the extraordinary lengths to which men will presumably go in the pursuit of grati-

fiction. Following the first sexual encounter between the two cowboys, Ennis returns to his high altitude post on the following morning only to find that one of the sheep has been slaughtered by wolves or coyotes, its carcass a gaping hole. The shot is reminiscent of the one we see of Earl, the man whose castrated body Ennis's father shows his sons to train them in homophobia. Both are images of feminization; the sheep's body looks like a large and gory entrance to a vagina, labia spread apart. The links between irresponsibility—he has left his flock untended—and homoeroticism are clear; the reward for “sinning” is the loss of the very center and symbol of manliness.

Neither Jack nor Ennis accepts a “gay” identity even after they have acknowledged that they are hopelessly, even tragically, in love with each other. This seeming failure of self-knowledge can be explained through a variety of assumptions regarding the connection between sexual object choice, gender construction, and lifestyle. Jack and Ennis cannot accept the appellation “gay” or “queer” because they cannot reconcile gay male stereotypes with their ego ideals and/or their lifestyles. One could argue that Jack and Ennis are in love with each other partly because they are both in love with an idealized western masculinity that fetishizes the outdoors and the ascetic lifestyle. By this argument, as Leslie Fiedler made it so long ago, it is civilization that Jack and Ennis shun, specifically the civilizing influence of women. They chafe against interiors and domesticity, longing for their seasonal return to the wild places like Brokeback Mountain, what's left of the American outback and what's left of their unconfined youths. Yet at the end of the film and the story, the central symbol of their love is two shirts, one enfolded by the other, hanging first in Jack's and then in Ennis's closet. Similarly, in the film, Ennis has some difficulty accepting domestic responsibility. While he clearly loves his daughters, he drops them off at Alma's work because he is called in for a roundup; he refuses to serve their dinner when his wife accepts an extra shift at work, and he will not allow his teenage daughter to live with him to escape the restrictions of her mother's new marriage. When she announces her own impending marriage at the conclusion of the film, he is forced to choose between walking his daughter down the aisle and attending a yearly roundup. Remembering the failure of his love to Jack, due in part to his choice of work

over relationships, he finally chooses the former. The film thus adds to the story's apparent reversal of priorities.

Jack also rebels against domesticity. However, his wealth brings him a greater freedom than Ennis enjoys. There is clearly no heat in his marriage to Lureen; he admits that their relationship could be conducted over the phone, an apt metaphor for the business-like beginning of the union and perhaps an object lesson, warning against the mistake of marrying for money and conforming to compulsory heterosexuality. On several occasions when the camera focuses on Lureen, she is engaged in calculations and office-related tasks, only semi-conscious of her husband's activities. She clearly finds him frustrating and feels less and less passion for him, as her increasingly brittle makeup and hairdos suggest. When she speaks with Ennis on the phone following Jack's death, she is critical of her husband's idealism and seemingly indifferent to his demise.

The screenplay and film, however, add a key scene to the story that emphasizes once again the men's struggle for—and the narrative's apparent endorsement of—traditional manhood. Thanksgiving dinner scenes, juxtaposed, show both men in moments of gender trouble. For most of his marriage, Jack has been treated disrespectfully by his dominant father-in-law who refers to him as “rodeo.” Given Jack's failures in that same venue, this is a cruel appellation. Yet at Thanksgiving dinner, after allowing his father-in-law to carve the turkey (a sign of the patriarch), he draws the line and stands on it. His wife's father overrides Lureen's rule about not watching TV during the dinner, turns it back on, and says to her, “You want your son to grow up to be a man, don't you, daughter? (direct look at Jack) Boys should watch football” (Screenplay, 66). Jack stands up and says “not until he finishes the meal his mama spent three hours fixin'.” When Mr. Newsome gets up to go to the TV again, Jack says “Sit down, you old son of a bitch! . . . This is my house! This is my child! And you're my guest! So sit the hell down, or I'll knock your ignorant ass into next week. . . .” He sits, and Jack carves the turkey. It is hard not to cheer with Lureen as she secretly applauds her husband, but we need to recognize that Jack's behavior is coded not as an adult's taking an adult role, but as a man claiming his manhood. And that manhood is grounded by and in guns, knives, and ownership. By contrast, Ennis has no ownership in the Thanksgiving dinner he attends with Alma, his daughters, and Alma's new husband. Monroe's

masculinity is mocked by his carving style—he uses a loud, wimpy, ineffective electric knife—but he still owns the place and, in effect, the people. When Alma finally tells Ennis what she knows about his relationship with Jack, she provokes his rage and violence:

ALMA

Jack Nasty. You didn't go up there to fish. You
and him . . .

(ENNIS grabs her wrist and twists it.)

ENNIS

Now you listen to me, you don't know nothin' about
it.

ALMA

I'm goin' to yell for Monroe.

ENNIS

Go on and fuckin' yell. I'll make him eat the fuckin'
floor and you, too. (69)

It is the accusation of sex—more precisely, the homophobic charge of the accusation—that sets off Ennis. And his struggle for his “masculinity,” like Jack’s at his dinner, takes place in gender terms that are all too familiar: anger, denial, and physical violence. When he storms out, Ennis goes to a bar, but before he can even get in, he punches a roughneck and is in turn badly beaten. In these two scenes, then, the screenplay and film again participate in a seeming endorsement not of traditional heterosexual desire, but of traditional masculine behavior.

Traditionally, masculinity has been measured by the capacity of the male subject to inflict pain on other men; however, less frequently cited is the role that suffering plays in the same gender construction. The subject’s ability to endure great pain may be every bit as important in the performance of masculinity as his ability to inflict it. In his study *Power at Play*, Michael Messner discusses both the internal and external pressures on athletes to continue to play while they are hurt, revealing that the ability and willingness to suffer for the benefit of the team is central to the construction of hyper-masculinity (72-76). Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* and David Savran in *Taking It Like a Man* have analyzed the role of what is called variously masochism, passivity, and stoicism in the making of men. While we do see the self-loathing Ennis lashing out at other

men, such as when he assaults a passing motorist after Alma upbraids him for his love of Jack, his most masculine-masochistic attribute is his brooding self-neglect, which ensures his poverty. Both Jack and the audience believe Ennis unwilling to make sacrifices to suffer for love at key moments in the story. Yet at the conclusion of the narrative, Ennis reveals that his poverty is that sacrifice. While Jack married wealth and is at leisure to vacation on impulse, Ennis is forced to forfeit his economic well-being in order to meet Jack on their seasonal rendezvous. Ennis has quit several jobs and subsequently sacrificed his marriage in order to be available when Jack wanted to meet. The spartan life that Ennis leads is an analogue to the emotional poverty of his life.

Jack's pipe dream about the two men working their own ranch—a dream that has as much to do with his desire to prove himself to his father as it does with romance—is undermined by Ennis's fear of public humiliation, grounded in that traumatic childhood lesson about Earl and Rich. Indeed there is a voyeuristic element to the narrative that also becomes metacinematic. Ennis repeatedly expresses his fear that their desire might be revealed. Ironically, after his uninhibited passion results in Alma's discovery of his love for Jack, Ennis argues the necessity of discretion, explaining that if they are found out publicly, they could be killed like Earl and Rich, who tried to live together on a ranch. Ennis believes that his father showed him (a nine-year-old boy) the gruesome scene to dissuade him from same-sex passion, and the lesson remains with Ennis throughout his life. While Jack is still alive, Ennis rarely agrees to meet with him anywhere but in the mountains where they cannot be observed. However, even there, they become the object of scrutiny, even on that first summer. The private passion that they sought to hide from the world is observed by their former boss Joe Aguirre who watches them having sex through his binoculars and, in all probability, cuts their time short on Brokeback Mountain to punish them for their transgression. While Ennis never learns of the discovery, Jack is denied work the following year when Aguirre upbraids him for the neglect of the sheep in favor of time spent “stemming the rose.” Aguirre's voyeurism is an analogue of that which Ennis dreads, the public scrutiny and condemnation of his love for Jack, and by extension the voyeuristic element encompasses the assumed heterosexist and skeptical film audience who also assess the content of the narrative and consign it to financial

success or failure. In a manner of speaking, just like Aguirre, if the cinematic audience does not like what it sees, it will make the boys come down early from *Brokeback Mountain*, and the commercial audience will only support the content of the film if the homoerotic and homo-romantic themes are toned down (a minimal amount of kissing and romantic dalliance) and the characters appropriately filled with self-loathing and punished, either physically or emotionally. The compromises that Lee makes with the voyeuristic audience are intended to rescue the film from financial failure, the same failure that Ennis considers his sacrifice for love.

In sum, Ang Lee's film does some important cultural work for the gay and progressive community, enabling a heterosexual public to acknowledge that same-sex passion is not merely a comic parody of the heterosexual paradigm, that male-to-male passions are not merely the consequence of the inaccessibility of women, that the obstruction of same-sex passion for the satisfaction of social convention is a betrayal of our culture's romantic mythology, which holds that sincere and enduring passion should be pursued against all odds and in spite of all consequences, and that the gay romance can be tragic even in the absence of HIV. The film's effort to legitimize same-sex desire asserts itself into the contemporary debate over gay domestic arrangements, demonstrating that compulsory heterosexual marriage is damaging to both partners, particularly for the spouse who can never be the principal focus of his/her partner's love, but only an unhappy substitute. Lee's film is clear in its portrayal of wives as the unwitting victims of obligatory heterosexuality. Each of the two wives constitutes a complementary partner to her husband's relative homophobia. Alma knows too much and Lureen too little. Complementarily, Ennis would at times like to forget or diminish his connection to Jack, while Jack openly embraces his love. All of the partners in the two marriages of *Brokeback Mountain* would have been happier and more fulfilled with someone else. Perhaps most importantly, the film creates visibility for a subject that is often confined to an art house audience. However, this visibility comes at a price. The queer narrative must always negotiate its place within the mainstream media, offering up its sacrifices to Moloch and Mammon, practicing what Jonathan Dollimore termed "strategies of inclusion" (51), the techniques and capitulations by which gay culture gains access to mainstream audiences.

Jack and, particularly, Ennis refuse to accept any but the most hegemonic masculinity, refusing to allow sexual object choice to define or even affect their normatively gendered self-image. Thus the film is less about gay cowboys than about cowboys who happen to love each other, if gay means claiming a gay identity. *Brokeback Mountain* does less to invalidate gay stereotypes, of which there are none in the film, than it does to broaden assumptions about traditional manhood. Men can fuck each other and still ride a bull, punch a cow, brawl, herd sheep, and make love to their wives. *Brokeback* is the story of traditional men who love in spite of their own masculinist assumptions and heterosexist paradigms, who love without becoming gay. While *Brokeback Mountain* does much for the visibility of same-sex desire, demonstrating that the love between two men can be moving and even tragic, it is not a movie about gay men, and the efforts made by the writers and especially the director to salvage Jack and Ennis's masculinity in spite of their activities seem at times overly labored. Unfortunately, approving of Jack and Ennis's love is not the same as validating the love of gay men. *Brokeback* succeeds in deconstructing the gay/straight binary by validating a poly or bi, not a gay sexuality. The narrative walks a thin line, doing work for both sides of the gay/straight, progressive/conservative binaries, and it erases the line as it passes.

How then should we interpret the internalized homophobia and hypermasculinity of the *Brokeback* narratives? Are they simply sacrifices to the box office? Eve Sedgwick will offer an alternative. Sedgwick has argued there is a breach between two sorts of male relations, a rupture between the homosexual and the homosocial, where between women there is a continuum of intimacy and desire. Thus men who form intimate social bonds within hyper-masculine and often single gendered environments—such as the military, the police force, the athletic team, etc., where men must work closely together and rely upon each other—often require a hyperbolic repudiation of same-sex desire, while within female environments, the ideas of women loving each other erotically and forming helpful social bonds are not mutually exclusive (1-20). The Wyoming setting as well as the homosexual and gay bashing subject matter combine with the “shepherding” motif to generate a subtle allusion to Wyoming’s (and America’s) most notorious hate crime against gay men, the murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in 1998. Shepard was pistol-

whipped and tied with his shoelaces to a fence to die; he lived for five days. To some, his violent death seemed to reinforce a fundamental incompatibility between the masculine ideal of the western male and the more feminized/civilized demeanor of many gay men. From this point of view, Proulx, McMurtry, Ossana, and Lee seem to be trying to dismantle the gay/straight binary in the construction of masculinity within the American Western tradition, to heal the rupture Sedgwick sees. The idealized image of the roughneck and cowboy radically excludes same sex desire. Thus the formation of a combined homosexual/homosocial bond between Ennis and Jack—men who are a part of perhaps the most hyper-masculine profession in our culture, the cowboy, which, according to Michael Kimmel, embodies the “rugged outdoor masculinity” (148)—generates some radical possibilities in the construction of gender relations. *Brokeback Mountain* heals Matthew Shepard’s wounds, if only figuratively, reconciles the animosity between the murdered college student and his antagonists by imagining a love between men who may just as well have been the perpetrators of the young man’s murder, by recognizing that there is a homosexual subtext or tension within homosocial bonds. Jack and Ennis’s love reveals a radical possibility—that male bonding could evolve/devolve into desire.

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