

Transgressing Boundaries and Genders in Annie Proulx's / Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*

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E. Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" was published in *The New Yorker* in the October 13, 1997 issue to great acclaim, and not a small amount of controversy. Proulx's story caused a sensation when it first appeared eight years ago. An unlikely romance between cowboys, the story's haunting language and long arc are gently heartbreaking. Proulx, the 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Shipping News*, compressed the twenty-year love story of two loner ranch hands into 30 tight pages. Its raw masculinity and spare, realistic dialogue subverted the myth of the American cowboy and obliterated gay stereotypes. Instead, it conjured bittersweet yearning for lost love and lost opportunity, transcending any issues of sexuality or gender, portraying the love between the two men as something pure and almost sacred. Now Ang Lee has directed it as a full-length feature film, based on the script adapted by Western author Larry McMurtry (*The Last Picture Show*) and screenwriter Diana Osana from Annie Proulx's 1997 short story.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, author Annie Proulx and director Ang Lee are trying to create a very compelling love story. The focus is not on sexuality, but on love. Sexuality is actually downplayed in the story. References to physical contact are spare, rather than exceptionally explicit. What is highlighted is not the sexual theme, but the emphasis on human affection, human attraction, and love. The story and the film represent a universal take on humanity. Below the surface story, an undercurrent of commonality regarding what human beings feel—isolation, regret, longing, fear, connection—transcends gender, race, culture, social, or even political identities. And of course the most universal feeling that humans all hunger to explore and possess is that of love.

Gender Studies and Queer Studies are concerned with the interactions between people that constitute power, gender, and sexual relations. There are processes of interaction between identity markers such as gender and sexuality and axes of

difference such as race (Stoler, 1991), ethnicity, and class. “Queer theory is largely a discourse about the logocentric interdependency of gay and straight, and the centrality of queerness to “normalcy” (see Messner 1997; Warner 1993). The resulting research ranges across a wide spectrum, from a more personal, journalistic literature on self-help to vilifying social critiques (Connell 1992: 735; Kimmel 1992). Other work in the field includes examinations of homosexuality in the study of racialization, transnationalism, and globalization. Examples include Manalansan’s (2003) studies on Filipino gay males, Gopinath’s (1995) work on gender in South Asian diasporic music/culture, and Ferguson’s (2004) research on the projection of homosexuality as deviance onto African Americans.

Eve Sedgwick’s research presents a cogent analysis of the connection between early homosexual experiences and their impact on the future identity of a gay male:

If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that’s because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy.¹

Sedgwick and others in the field of “Queer Studies,” including Warner’s assessments of “normal” (2000) and Bersani’s research on “homos” (1996) have posited “an early childhood experience of sexual shame that has to be reclaimed, reinterpreted, and resituated by a queer adult who, armed with a theoretical knowledge about his or her sexuality, can transform past experiences with abjection, isolation, and rejection into legibility, community, and love.”² Similar to this, in *Brokeback Mountain*, the early experiences of the two male lovers (not yet twenty years old) cement their future bond and provide a reference point from which their lives develop, and to which they are permanently tied.

The short story *Brokeback Mountain* is a tragedy of doomed love, and for this reason, perhaps, Ang Lee has called it “the great American love story.” Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar are barely educated, itinerant ranch hands who first meet in the summer of 1963, when they are hired at the same time for a shepherding job on the

¹ Eve Sedgwick, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 35.

註解 [zoe1]: Not included in “References” (page numbers)

eponymous Brokeback Mountain—they are nineteen at the time, but these events will stay with them for the rest of their lives. In both the novella and the film, the narrative is not “told” to the viewer, but instead unfolds with slow grace. The friendless pair find themselves bonding over chopping wood, cooking beans over a campfire, and simple conversation. The simple beauty of their exchanges helps make this a quintessential Ang Lee vehicle. At last, one night after the two have been drinking whiskey, they turn to each other for physical intimacy. Both deny their homosexual activity after the fact, “I’m not no queer.” “Me neither.” However, the two share a passionate affection that neither man can erase or forget for the rest of his life.

After their initial summer together, the two men’s lives take them in different directions. They both become husbands, to wives whose suspicions are only raised gradually over time, and each has children. The conformist society of their families and neighbors forces them to keep their true feelings a secret. Within these strict confines, neither can imagine or define a lifestyle that would keep them together. The homophobia of American society in the sixties and seventies—especially in the American heartland and Midwest—changes too slowly for them to truly make a life together. A reunion four years after they first meet—which ends up as a tryst at a roadside motel near the Grand Tetons—brings these issues to a head, as Jack asks Ennis to set up a ranch with him, and says the heartbreaking lines, “You got no idea how bad it gets,” and “I wish I knew how to quit you.” Over the years, the men continue to see each other on rare camping trips, trying to hold on to the innocence and beauty of their first connection on Brokeback Mountain.

The setting of the story, in Wyoming, is crucial to the narrative’s poignancy. In the mountains and the wilderness, where the men are isolated geographically and emotionally from the rest of society, they are free to behave how they wish without moral or social restriction. They are away from the probing eyes of an unforgiving society which would normally keep their behavior in check. The story is essentially about two very poor young men who have nothing but the raw beauty of rural Wyoming and themselves to bring them comfort in an otherwise bleak and colorless existence. The tragedy lies in the fact that although they can bring each other happiness, the strict conventions, mores and taboos of the period keep them apart.

² Judith Halberstam, “Queer Studies,” in *A Companion to Gender Studies*, edited by Philomena Essed,

Only away from those restrictions, on Brokeback Mountain, are they free. The story plays out over the cruel passage of time as the men age. Only when Jack dies does Ennis discover the true depth of his devotion, visiting his childhood home and finding his own shirt tucked inside Jack's in an endless embrace.

The film, which stars Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, has stirred controversy with subject matter some consider subversive. Others welcome it with great humor, calling it a "gay western," "the first mainstream gay cowboy movie," and "a gay man's *Gone with the Wind*." Ang Lee's scenery—filmed in the Canadian Rockies—has also been humorously compared to Marlboro cigarette advertisements, which are known for their nostalgic portrayal of the masculine and rugged cowboy-in-nature image. There is a vast amount of innuendo and preconception facing the film, which has resulted in the studio releasing it in limited areas around the Christmas blockbuster season (it is aimed at a young female audience—the younger generation is thought to be sympathetic to homosexual relationships). In January and February it will be given much wider release, to peak as the Oscar competition heats up. James Schamus' aggressive campaigning comes through in these quotes: "We have never made an apology from the beginning for making this movie," he says, "which we believe will deliver an emotional experience to a larger audience than the art house. The movie gives us the tools to create that appeal. We're saying, 'Here's the movie, here's what it looks like, come join us.'" ³

Schamus's mission is to find people who are empathetic and "able to reach their emotions. And younger folks are way out ahead on this stuff. Overall, they are not worked up about gay issues.... If you have a problem with the subject matter, that's your problem, not mine. It would be great if you got over your problem, but I'm not sitting here trying to figure out how to help you with it."⁴ Schamus believes that *Brokeback Mountain* will be heavily favored at the Oscars, pushing the film into must-see territory, as happened with the film *Philadelphia*. In an early discussion of how to market the film, when Ang Lee assumed the film was aimed at a gay audience, Schamus insisted instead that the film would also appeal to women. Consequentially, when Schamus and his team selected the poster design, they did not turn to the

David Theo Goldberg, and Audrey Kobayashi, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 63.

³ James Schamus, in Anne Thompson's "Ang Lee's 'Brokeback' explores 'last frontier.'" Reuters/Hollywood Reporter, Yahoo News, 11/11/2005, p. 1.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20051111/en_nm/brokeback_dc

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

designs of famous Westerns, but to a choice of what were considered the “fifty most romantic movies ever made. If you look at our poster,” Schamus says, “you can see traces of our inspiration, *Titanic*.”⁵ The final poster indeed resembles *Titanic*’s placement of the two main actors with lowered eyelids, one face nestled in another’s shoulder, with Heath Ledger’s massive arm replacing the position occupied by *Titanic*’s hull in the former design.

The short story “Brokeback Mountain” was published in *The New Yorker* in the October 13, 1997 issue of the weekly literary magazine. This was almost exactly a year before the October 7, 1998 killing of the 21-year-old gay man Matthew Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming, who was beaten to death by two men on his way home from a bar. Pistol-whipped and lashed to a fence, Matthew Shepard died of massive brain injuries. On trial, his killers confessed to the murder being due to “gay panic.” *Brokeback Mountain* touches close to this territory when Ennis tells Jack about two cowboys who lived with each other on a ranch, sparking disapproval in the nearby community. Ennis explains that one of the cowboys was taken out and beaten to death, his genitals removed with a tire iron. It is during this story we see one of the film’s few flashbacks of a man lying dead, a victim of violent physical abuse. Ennis remembers this event because his father actually took him to view the corpse to demonstrate his (the father’s) intolerance of the gay lifestyle.

This topic has polarized audiences in America, who are already sharply divided on the issue of same-sex marriage because of legislative debates concerning the definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman (and George Bush’s early claims that he would amend the constitution to make this semantically clear). Religious groups in the U.S. want to present homosexual love as a lustful, debased act, while the political agenda of gays is to normalize same-sex relationships, presenting them as steady and characterized by meaningful love. Ang Lee and James Schamus have walked into the fray with their eyes open. The gay agenda seems to be championed by James Schamus, while for Ang Lee, the challenge seems to come from simply daring to normalize and conventionalize people who are normally considered outsiders and unacceptable, as he does in many of his films (i.e., the Hulk in *Hulk*). The casting of film stars Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger adds a further controversial dimension, because in the recent past Hollywood actors feared the

⁵ Sean Smith, “Forbidden Territory” in *Newsweek*, November 21, 2005.

career downfall brought on by homosexual roles, while in *Brokeback Mountain* the young, popular actors were proud to take on the challenge. Jake Gyllenhaal, usually the man's man on the screen, was happy to challenge himself with a new romantic interpretation. Gyllenhaal said in the September 4, 2005 *New York Times*, "When I read it, it moved me so much that I couldn't not do it."⁶

Brokeback Mountain is a groundbreaking film in that it ventures into territory never before given wide play in the mainstream American film industry. While independent films have had their share of gay romances given limited play in art houses, it is a much larger risk for a major studio to release a film dealing with the subject matter of homosexual love. One only needs to review the recent history of gay subject matter in film to see why this is the case. In the 1970's, the homosexual act was displayed as bestiality in the film *Deliverance* (1972); in that film homosexuality was portrayed as the shocking, deviant behavior of uneducated hillbillies. In 1982, the first sympathetic gay romance, *Making Love*, bombed at the box office and was widely blamed for derailing the career of (straight) actor Harry Hamlin. A single onscreen kiss between the two male leads in the film caused audible gasps in the theatres and widespread audience walk-outs. Possibly due to this, the 1993 Jonathan Demme film *Philadelphia*, for which Tom Hanks won an Oscar for his portrayal of an AIDS patient fighting for his rights, steered a wide berth around gay romance—Hanks and his gay partner in the film, Antonio Banderas, did not film any sexual scenes, nor did they kiss onscreen. With its full-blooded sex scenes and passionate couplings (Ledger reportedly nearly broke Gyllenhaal's nose while filming a kissing scene), *Brokeback Mountain* breaks both of these former taboos. Far from the deviant bestiality of gay sexuality in *Deliverance*, in *Brokeback Mountain*, backwoods love is treated with tenderness and respect.

The making of the film took a circuitous route since no major Hollywood studio would back it (in this way, the film's production resembles Ang Lee's early experience with his other gay-topic film, *The Wedding Banquet*). Director Gus Van Sant (*Good Will Hunting*) and producer Scott Rudin (*The Hours*) originally tried to make *Brokeback Mountain* at Columbia Pictures, but they were unable to get any actors to commit; the actors and their agents both feared the taboo subject matter.

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/10017716/site/newsweek/page/2/>

⁶ Jake Gyllenhaal quoted in Karen Durbin's "Cowboys in Love... With Each Other." *The New York Times*, September 4, 2005, p. 9.

Osana and McMurtry's screenplay languished; it became notorious in the industry as one of the great unproduced screenplays. New York veteran independent film producers James Schamus and David Linde eventually took over the project, and when they were promoted to head Universal's Focus Features, a studio specialty division, in 2002, they brought the script, which they had already been trying to make for several years, along with them. Finally, Ang Lee, who has a history of collaboration with writer-producer James Schamus, agreed to direct the movie, and began filming near Calgary, Alberta in 2004.

This story is put together using the true-to-life language and idioms of the less-educated farmhands, who because of the restrictions of the times and their lack of education, have no words to express their feelings. What is most painful is the characters' inability to deal with their relationship, nor even to define it. They know what they feel, but societal norms, their upbringing and all they have experienced thus far in life has taught them that 'this thing' cannot exist. They are both high school dropouts and come from broken homes and they simply do not have the frame of reference to acknowledge what is going on. Instead they are rough-mannered and rough-spoken, describing their feelings crassly without sensitivity. Because of their stoic characters, the story has much to do with what is unspoken, with the shame and guilt that fills them. In this way, the story is similar to *The Ice Storm*, which also had very little direct communication—most of the emotions were repressed. In fact, the whole language of *Brokeback Mountain* lies in circuitous words, and dialogue that creates an artful and poetic though simple and roughhewn code. Their words are few, and the two never mention their feelings, nor do they utter words such as 'sex', 'love' or 'relationship'. Instead, they constantly refer to their relationship as 'this thing'. On the other hand, through their actions and body language it is impossible to be mistaken about their true feelings.

“That summer,” said Ennis. “When we split up after we got paid out I had gut cramps so bad I pulled over and tried to puke, thought I ate somethin bad at that place in Dubois. Took me about a year a figure out it was that I shouldn't a let you out a my sights. Too late then by a long, long while.”

“Friend,” said Jack. “We got us a f—kin situation here. Got to figure out what to do.”

註解 [zoe4]: Gotta or Got to...

Other examples include the following:

“You know, friend, this is a goddamn bitch of a unsatisfactory situation. You used a come away easy. It's like seein the pope now.”

The spare language used by Proulx beautifully captures the rhythm of the Western setting, as in the paragraph in which she describes the places Ennis and Jack worked over the years. In this paragraph, the names of mountain ranges provide a bleak, rhythmic litany, beautiful and heartbreaking. Again, it is the sound of names like “Medicine Bows” and “Owl Creeks” that conjure up poetry in an otherwise featureless expanse, names full of vivid life in a place that provided little respite from dullness:

Years on years they worked their way through the high meadows and mountain drainages, horse-packing into the Big Horns, Medicine Bows, south end of the Gallatins, Absarokas, Granites, Owl Creeks, the Bridger-Teton Range, the Freezeouts and the Shirleys, Ferrises and the Rattlesnakes, Salt River Range, into the Wind Rivers over and again, the Sierra Madres, Gros Ventres, the Washakies, Laramies, but never returning to Brokeback.⁷

A conversation between Ennis and Jack’s ex-wife Lureen demonstrates the truncated and emotionless communication style, as the two discuss Jack’s death and burial:

The little Texas voice came slip-sliding down the wire. “We put a stone up. He use to say he wanted to be cremated, ashes scattered on Brokeback Mountain. I didn't know where that was. So he was cremated, like he wanted, and like I say, half his ashes was interred

here, and the rest I sent up to his folks. I thought Brokeback Mountain was around where he grew up. But knowing Jack, it might be some pretend place where the bluebirds sing and there's a whiskey spring."

"We herded sheep on Brokeback one summer," said Ennis. He could hardly speak.⁸

Ennis doesn't want to accept his homosexual urges, and continues throughout the story to lie to himself, to protect himself from reality. This is demonstrated by the last line in "Brokeback Mountain:" "There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it." This "space" between what Ennis knows and what he tries to believe is the interesting space with which Ang Lee is so familiar and so skillfully presents in his films. The depth of the tragedy seems wrought here; that Ennis can never run away to make a life with Jack (even though Jack does propose this early on), because he is never fully willing to admit that he's gay. Ang Lee has compared the self-denial, guilt, and twisted psychology of Ennis to the Hulk. The character of Ennis, like Hulk, has an irresolvable tension, a tragic flaw, which carries bottomless grief and a sense of anguish and loss. "You know, I was sittin up here all that time tryin to figure out if I was—? I know I ain't. I mean here we both got wives and kids, right?"

Jack, however, is the more courageous one who comes to accept the romance:

What Jack remembered and craved in a way he could neither help nor understand was the time that distant summer on Brokeback when Ennis had come up behind him and pulled him close, the silent embrace satisfying some shared and sexless hunger. ...Later, that dozy embrace solidified in his memory as the single moment of artless, charmed happiness in their separate and difficult lives. Nothing marred it, even the knowledge that Ennis would not then embrace him face to face because he did not want to see nor feel that it was Jack he held. And

⁷ Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain," in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (New York: Scribner, 1999) 278.

⁸ Proulx, 275.

maybe, he thought, they'd never got much farther than that. Let be, let be.⁹

It comes as no surprise that Ang Lee is willing to characterize a story of two cowboys falling in love as “the great American love story.” This is because Ang Lee’s previous work on 1993’s *The Wedding Banquet* already presented a sympathetic and stereotype-free vision of a gay relationship. Viewers have been treated once before to Ang Lee’s tender portraits of gay men in love. Ang Lee is also familiar with the difficulties of this topic since he had to wait six years for help from Taiwan to produce his first gay feature. In addition, he had to cast an unknown actor in the lead role of *The Wedding Banquet* because no known Asian actor was willing to play a gay male lead. Winston Chao was a former flight attendant who had never before acted in a film. Ang Lee selected him from photographs and flew him to the US to read for the part. Thus, to make the film, Ang Lee had to cast someone untrained as an actor, and direct him so that the audience could not perceive that the lead had never previously appeared in a film. In addition, Winston Chao was unable to realistically portray his physical engagement with the other male lead in *The Wedding Banquet*, to the point that his face is turned away from the camera in a scene of a kiss.

The Wedding Banquet was Ang Lee’s breakthrough film in the West, bringing him to the attention of the international film community. In 1995, he was invited to direct Emma Thompson’s script of Jane Austen’s romantic comedy of manners, *Sense and Sensibility*—his first English language film, his first period film, and his first time directing major stars—which earned seven Oscar nominations and won for best screenplay. Again, what gives Ang Lee the eye for this material is his position as an outsider, not molded to cultural convention. Ang Lee shares with Jane Austen a keen sense of the tension between human behavior and the social restrictions and taboos that are meant to keep it in check. “Repression is a main element of my movies,” Ang Lee explains. “It’s easier to work against something than along with something. People say I bend or twist genres. I think I’m twisted. It’s a tricky thing for foreigners. You’re not molded to cultural convention. You can do it as authentic as you want. That’s the advantage of the outsider.”¹⁰ In preparation for the filming of *Brokeback*

註解 [zoe6]: Sense and Sensibility

⁹ Proulx, 273.

¹⁰ Ang Lee, in Anne Thompson’s “Ang Lee’s ‘Brokeback’ explores ‘last frontier.’” Reuters/Hollywood Reporter, Yahoo News, 11/11/2005. http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20051111/en_nm/brokeback_dc

Mountain, Ang Lee steeped himself in the iconography of the American West. He gained a familiarity with and a deep respect for Western film heroes (Gene Autry, John Wayne, and more recently, Clint Eastwood), the photography of Richard Avedon, and the Westerns based on McMurtry's books (*Hud* and *The Last Picture Show*). He realized that the story was challenging the "sanctified" image of the ultra-masculine Western man, yet as an outsider he felt the freedom to make an honest film about a taboo subject considered the "last frontier."

註解 [zoe7]: He realized that the story was...

The movie is about longing for lost love, for lost opportunity, and a bittersweet yearning for that impossible, unfinished love the two men shared. Ennis blames his lover, for he could never move on his life and failed his marriage. Jack blames himself for never quitting this love. There is an honesty in every passionate look, every affectionate touch, every word of anger, the pain of a tear falling, the happiness of being together, the anxiety of waiting for another summer to come, the impossible hope of an everlasting love. These moments, comprised of nothing more than subtle glances, brief facial expressions, and the slightest of body language, discharge their energy so intensely that a hint of truth is suddenly illuminated. Ang Lee was especially pleased by the depth of emotion revealed in the performances by his two main (heterosexual) actors. He said: "There's a private feeling to the movie, an intimate feeling...I think eventually everybody has a *Brokeback Mountain* in them. Someone you want to come back to. And of course, some people don't come back."¹¹

In whatever medium, short story or film, *Brokeback Mountain* tells a powerful and visceral love story. Part of the story's power lies in its breaking of stereotypes, in that the men's affection for each other defies classification and categorization. The story involves family, children, prejudice, and anger, but it also deals with the topic of love, of the truth and mystery of a love relationship. The story is reduced to elemental experiences of the natural world, and human love.

¹¹ Ang Lee, quoted in Karen Durbin's "Cowboys in Love... With Each Other." *The New York Times*, September 4, 2005, p. 15.

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