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"I Ain’t Queer": Love, Masculinity and History in 
Brokeback Mountain

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Ang Lee’s big gay tragic historical love story, Brokeback Mountain, was released internationally in late 2005 and early 2006. Lee’s film told the story of two cowboys who fell in love while shepherding on Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming in 1963. Although the film narrated a demonstrably American story, appeals to a socio-historical connection were widespread in Australia. Indeed, Brokeback Mountain’s cinematic release in this country coincided with “Australia Day,” a national day of celebration in which beginnings, nationhood, and “settlement” are reaffirmed. In this article, we track the explosion of publicly-audible conversations that took place in Brokeback Mountain’s wake in Australia in 2006. On the one hand, we seek to historicize this film; on the other, we also consider the political ways in which it historicized. As the “noise” about Brokeback Mountain became almost impossible to ignore in Australia, we noticed the film tended to be viewed as a cause for celebration. Through an analysis of the politics of historical stories and the gendered politics of emotion, we seek to complicate the notion that this film signified a radical departure from homophobic cinematic and cultural traditions.

Keywords: Brokeback Mountain; masculinity; love; emotion; history; homophobia

In late 2005 and early 2006, the motion picture Brokeback Mountain, directed by Ang Lee, was unleashed upon the world. As a sympathetic story about “gay cowboys” in love in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, Brokeback Mountain signaled an apparent break from Hollywood narrative conventions. It depicted the doomed love between Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), two cowboys (or, more precisely, rural itinerant workers) who met while herding sheep in Wyoming. A beautiful and powerful film, it opened with Jack and Ennis spending the summer of 1963 shepherding...
on Brokeback Mountain. Prompted largely by Jack, the homosocial intimacy of this rural setting slipped violently into the homoerotic. As Ennis said of the sex on the mountain: “This is a one-shot thing we got going on here. You know I ain’t queer.” Although at the end of the summer they both returned to their “normal” lives—Ennis to his fiancé Alma (Michelle Williams) and Jack to the rodeo that eventually led him to a fiancé of his own (Lureen, Anne Hathaway)—the love founded and found “on Brokeback” remained with them for the rest of their lives. This tension between their love and their everyday lives drove the film’s narrative, making any such return to normalcy impossible and providing an explanatory schema for each character’s ultimately tragic trajectory. Although they met sporadically over the film’s 20-year period, “for Ennis,” as Australian critic Clark Forbes noted, the “love that dare[d] not speak its name [would] never be possible” (Forbes, 2006, p. E9). By film’s end, it became clear that Ennis was the central character, left to grapple with the loss of Jack, a victim of a homophobic attack in 1983. The film positioned its viewers to experience this moment as a profound and tragic loss. 

On January 26, 2006—“Australia Day,” a day celebrating this nation’s frontiered beginnings —Brokeback Mountain was released to critical acclaim in Australia (Craven, 2006a; Lusetich, 2006b; Ryan, 2006; Stratton, 2006b). As one of the more eagerly anticipated Hollywood film productions of recent years, the screening of the famous (or possibly infamous) “gay cowboy movie” prompted an explosion of conversations in the Australian public domain. Australian media commentators, film critics, and social analysts waxed lyrical about this “groundbreaking” historical film. The presence of Australian actor Heath Ledger, together with the apparent national and historical resonances of the subject matter—namely rural, horse-loving, “manly” men on the frontier—produced a space where appeals to socio-historical connection were both possible and prevalent. As a consequence, Brokeback Mountain “could easily [have been] set in outback Queensland,” as David commented on the film’s website (Share Your Stories, 2006). While Brokeback Mountain was undoubtedly a transnationally distributed story of Americana, there was something specific about the event that was “Brokeback” in Australia in 2006. Indeed, a series of specifically Australian cultural, political and social events were prompted by the film’s release; that these events occurred within national boundaries thus produced and were productive of specifically Australian meanings. Within these events and conversations, Brokeback Mountain tended to be understood as evidence of “our” collective sexual and social liberation.

1 There has been some speculation in the U.S. gay and lesbian press about whether Jack’s death is a dream sequence of Ennis’. However, press reportage in Australia spoke for the most part of impossible loves and—at the very least—narrative death for one of the characters.

2 Throughout this article we use Brokeback Mountain to refer to the text and “Brokeback” to refer to the cultural referent. While a neat analytic division between texts and their readings is impossible, we do offer a reading of the film itself, which is informed and directed by—but analytically separable from—the events that constituted the cultural referent.
With this in mind, our key question in this article is: what did it mean to tell this historical story about love between American gay men in contemporary Australia? As historians interested in the possibilities of historical film, our analysis is directed by dual concerns. On the one hand, we seek to historicize the film—to situate it in a specific time and place; on the other, we would also like to consider the political ways in which it historicized—to interrogate how it temporialized particular sexualities, loves and oppressions. The meaning of films such as Brokeback Mountain is never finite or fixed. Rather, particular meanings are produced by the operation of these texts in particular times and places. Brokeback Mountain’s meanings were not predetermined; it necessarily meant different things in different places. As the “noise” about Brokeback Mountain became almost impossible to ignore in Australia, we noticed the film tended to be viewed as a cause for celebration (Christopher, 2006; Lusetich, 2006a; Rogers, 2006; Watts, 2006). We think it is worthwhile, though, taking a closer look at this film and its reception to consider the types of spaces “Brokeback” opened out for historical, masculine, and emotional truths.

In this journal and elsewhere, social historian Michael Roper makes the case for a move away from the historical study of representation in favor of individuals, subjectivity and emotion (Roper, 2005). We would like to suggest, however, that representation is historically important. Indeed, there are compelling methodological and political reasons for maintaining a focus on representations and their worlds - namely, texts and contexts. As Antoinette Burton (2001) points out in her discussion of the debates between cultural and social historians:

Culture is understood to represent the production, interpretation and contestation of meaning itself. For feminists ... culture has come increasingly to mean that which ... gives ideologies power and that which makes hegemonies seamless. (pp. 62-63)

As a cultural event, “Brokeback” was one of the mechanisms through which hegemonies, politics and identities were made and remade in 2006. What we mean here is that representations such as Brokeback Mountain are important for their potential to produce and police meaning in everyday life. Following Judith Butler (2004) and the insights of queer theory more broadly, we consider representation to be involved in the production of boundaries between the sayable and unsayable, and thus between what is livable and unlivable. Far from meaningless or arbitrary referents, representation both shape and form part of the political possibilities for everyday lives, loves and oppressions.

Furthermore, the meanings of representations such as Brokeback Mountain are not produced in isolation; rather, these (necessarily historically specific) meanings are secured via an interactive relationship with particular contexts. Accordingly, we are interested in the constitution of “Brokeback” as a cultural referent in a particular historical location, namely, Australia in 2006. As historians, we consider it vital to engage with texts in historically specific ways. As Alexander Doty (1993) argues, the meanings of texts are always subject to reinscription and renegotiation (pp. 2-4). In this article, we
are concerned to track the parameters of these reinscriptions in a particular time and place.

In order to do so, this article both reads the film, and engages with the readings and intertextual events that surrounded it. Press coverage, film reviews, advertising, and narrative and figural echoes throughout the media were important because they helped define the discursive parameters for the meanings of “Brokeback.” We include in these readings and events the comments and discussions of the film’s authors. This is not because their interpretation will necessarily yield more textual insight, but, because the figure of the author functioned to stabilize particular truths about this film. While we might happily reaffirm the death of the author, his influence, in this context at least, seemed alive and well in the public imaginary. Of course, in filmic terms there is no single authorial figure. However, in the public domain some of these authorial voices are more potent than others. In Australia, the film’s director, Ang Lee, and leading man, “our own” Heath Ledger (Elliot, 2006, p. 1), were the voices with the strongest fixative power. Indeed, in many ways these figures performed what Michel Foucault terms the author-function for “Brokeback” (Foucault, 1998).

In Australia, this referent came to mean more than simply the love story of Ennis and Jack. Precisely because “Brokeback” was deployed in so many and varied places and forms, its meanings exceeded anything that could be “found” in the film. More than “just” a film, “Brokeback” functioned as a cultural event in Australia. In December 2005, fervor surrounding the impending release of the film was palpable. For much of 2006, it was difficult to escape the feeling that Brokeback Mountain was everywhere. At various sites of cultural and social production—with sometimes independent and sometimes intersecting audiences, communities, and constituencies—“Brokeback” became a potent referent. There was a virtual epidemic of gay cowboy cartoons in the national daily newspapers, which were quickly followed by stories of “Australian real gay cowboys” in print and on television (McMahon, 2006, p. 1). In a strange coincidence, a gay horseman materialized in the house of the local version of the reality television series Big Brother. “Brokeback” was also, not surprisingly, a dominant motif at the 2006 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade (Dow, 2006, p. 4).

The ease with which these references were generated could perhaps be explained by the cultural familiarity of the film’s subject matter. Indeed, part of the resonative potential of this film lay in its engagement with frontier pasts and presents, motifs with much historical power in “settler” societies like Australia. Despite its distinctly American subject, this event was produced in explicit and firmly drawn dialogue with Australian national identities, mythologies and histories. In one sense, this film harmonized with many of the symbols, figures and identities of the “Australian Legend,” with all its homosocial authority and homoerotic negations, precisely the gendered forces to

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3 In so doing, we are drawing on an analytic framework used by Christina Twomey (2006, p. 32) in her analysis of the historical film, Paradise Road, which, in turn, is based on that of film historian Robert Brent Toplin (2003).
which “Brokeback” spoke so powerfully (for an elaboration, see Pinto & Boucher, 2006). The links between Brokeback Mountain’s filmic history and Australian (hi)stories of nation both generated and were generative of a specifically Australian “Brokeback.”

While Brokeback Mountain was a transnational phenomenon—with all the resonances of a global American cultural empire in late capitalist modernity that the scholarly attribution of “transnational” can imply—its release in Australia produced a national domain of meaning. Articles were published in national newspapers, national governments referred to the text, national mythologies were mobilized, and national television programs drew on its figural echoes. “Brokeback” provides a compelling example of the ways in which national cultural boundaries—and by implication, exceptionalisms—are both ruptured and reanimated by transnational historical processes. In making a claim for the analytic purchase of the national domain within a transnational frame, we draw on the work of Antoinette Burton (2003, pp. 1-25) and Ann Curthoys (2003, pp. 70-88), who both argue that scholars must unpack the ways in which so-called transnational cultural currents provide opportunities for nations to reimagine themselves.

Different representational forums, of course, constitute different communities within the so-called nation. It is no surprise, then, that in Australia there were a number of communities making claims upon the “Brokeback” referent. While the mainstream—and thus heteronormative —press engaged in a virtual “Brokeback” feeding frenzy, from a slightly different orientation, the gay and lesbian press in most capital cities was titillated by the thought of “our Heath” getting friendly on the mountain.4 Before the film’s release, “Brokeback” was fuelled by speculation in this press about tops and bottoms, and where “Heath” would fit in this sexual equation (DNA, December 2005, p. 3). This kind of explicit speculation was almost entirely absent from mainstream publications. In Australia, Brokeback Mountain was thus not only mediated by particular national imaginings, but also by particular constituencies and their forums within the nation.

The possibilities of these mobilizations were nevertheless shaped by the filmic and narrative conventions within which Brokeback Mountain was placed. This film tapped into—and drew coherence from—several different generic storytelling and filmmaking modes. With all the promotional accoutrements of a blockbuster movie, Brokeback Mountain nonetheless managed to carve out a space claiming the authenticity and integrity of an “art house” film with a social agenda. Indeed, for Ang Lee, the film’s production background and art house profile facilitated its challenging political

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4 The audiences cultivated by non-heterosexual press in Australia are complicated and cater for different constituencies within the GLBTIQ community. We deal with some publications destined for identified gay and lesbian audiences and some for GLBTIQ audiences. As such, this article is concerned with the gay and lesbian reception, precisely because the BTIQ community has been excluded from some publications.
possibilities: "I think if you can stay small, on a shoestring budget, and you only release in art-houses, you can do anything" (Cited in Ryan, 2006). Through the widespread reportage of its "small" budget, "challenging" subject matter, and reputation as the "greatest unproduceable script" in Hollywood, the principled credentials of this film were assured.

At the same time, however, *Brokeback Mountain* conformed to many of the generic narrative tropes of the grand, sweeping Hollywood romance. As prominent Australian film critic David Stratton (2006a) remarked, it was “one of the greatest love stories ever brought to the screen” (p. 21). In sharp contrast to its apparently controversial theme of cowboys having sex with each other and liking it, this film was positioned and understood as a universally comprehensible story of unstoppable love. Indeed, as the by-line of the film declared: “Love is a force of nature.”

Without question, then, part of the film’s significance was generated by its efforts to turn the big, tragic love story of conventional Hollywood romances into a big gay tragic love story. 5 As many film commentators observed, *Brokeback Mountain* apparently marked a significant departure for the Hollywood romance. Indeed, as the *Townsville Bulletin* pointed out, this was “the first gay romance to make a bid for mainstream respectability” (“Not that there’s,” 2006, p. 42). Until then, the political legitimacy that comes with this genre had generally been “off-limits” to gay male characters. This is not to suggest that there had been no gay male presence on Hollywood screens; rather, as Vito Russo (1987) highlights, the manner of their characterizations was the problem (p. 5). Indeed, this film’s disruption of the genre’s exclusions and inclusions was duly noted throughout the film’s mainstream media coverage and thus buttressed its characterization as a “progressive” phenomenon (Knight, 2006, p. 3). So too, observers in the gay and lesbian press celebrated *Brokeback Mountain*’s “breakthrough” (Walker, 2006, p. 9).

Like many Hollywood love stories—such as *The English Patient*, or *Titanic*—this was an historical love story. As such, this film conformed to the filmic conventions and narrative strategies of many of Hollywood’s big tragic historical love stories: grand narrative, “authentic” historical detail, sweeping scenery, heavy atmosphere, lingering shots, deliberate cinematography, affective music, intense characterizations, and a narrative driven by the intimate moments of intricate selves. To put it simply, *Brokeback Mountain* was a “gay Gone With the Wind” (Forbes, 2006, p. E9) In this way, the film made a forceful play for the legitimacy of its story and subjects.

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5 There has been a sporadic debate about whether Ennis and Jack were “actually” gay or bisexual in both wider and academic responses to the film (See, for example Brod, 2006, p. 252-253). In Australia in 2006, however, “Brokeback” was generally the “gay cowboy movie.” Furthermore, we would suggest that searching for the “right” way to label Jack and Ennis is a less than productive enterprise. For a nuanced discussion of the constitutive role of the bisexual in figurations of heterosexual identity in the 20th century west, see Angelides (2001).
In Australia, this story centered on figurations of the gay male. As Paul Ricouer (1984) argues, identities are supported by the construction of precisely such collective narratives of and about those identities from/in the past. The relationship between past and present identities can sometimes take the form of characterizations of distance—"look how far we’ve come"—or characterizations of immediacy—"we have all suffered and loved in the same way." Regardless of their temporal orientation, as Margaret Somers (2001) argues, historical narratives of oppression and suffering usually buttress so-called minority identities (p. 359).

This story of love and oppression was necessarily characterized by a historico-political logic. What we mean here is that historical stories always perform political work. As Hayden White (1973) persuasively demonstrates, the ideologically determined conventions of form and genre shape historical narratives in political ways. Precisely because this film was set in the past, its ideas about gay men were necessarily historicized with particular political implications. Cultural referents such as "Brokeback" thus provide the storytelling support for the collective maintenance of identity politics in particular presents.

That this film was an apparently universally comprehensible love story did not remove it from the workings of these processes. On the contrary, as the work of Judith Butler (1997), David Eng (2000), and Joy Damousi (2002) demonstrates, the recognition (or denial) and mobilization of particular emotions in the public domain is an act with concrete political implications. Indeed, the ways in which specific emotions are understood to function has the potential to open out, close off, reinforce and disintegrate different kinds of political, ethical and existential possibilities. As Damousi declares "[we] need to broaden our understanding of what is political ... [discussions of] class, gender and race need to include the emotional ... [because] emotional and political life are intertwined" (p. 112). Part of our intervention in this article, then, is to problematize the politics of romantic love mobilized by this film.

For Roper, historians must incorporate a consideration of the emotional in order to move beyond representation to understand the lived realities of historical actors. These realities, however, are made more or less livable by the processes of emotional recognition—and, by implication, political legitimacy—that take place within and between texts and their contexts. As such, the examination of representation remains a crucial political and analytic project.

In political terms, "Brokeback" was a groundbreaking event, if only because it brought into sharp relief connections between homosociality, homosexuality and homophobia. In "gaying up" the cowboy, *Brokeback Mountain* "brazenly set a homosexual love story in the grand national—and decidedly heterosexual—narrative genre of the western" (Lusetch, 2006a, p. 19). Indeed, the homoerotic subtext of the western was convincingly brought into view by the film. Within the film’s depiction of Jack and Ennis’ time on Brokeback, there was a constant connection made between their boyish games and manly love. There were strong figural echoes, for example, between scenes of tumbling play and scenes of tumbling in the tent. By juxtaposing images of Jack and
Ennis in homosocial play and then homosexual practice, *Brokeback Mountain* made the implicit homoeroticism of the western explicit.

As was evident in these scenes, Jack and Ennis were both "men" (and in fact, they were cowboys so their masculinity appeared to be secure) and they were falling "in love." This narrative leap was accomplished in the film in a deceptively simple manner. Indeed, *Brokeback Mountain* forged a convincing connection between same-sex social practices and play and same-sex sexual practices and love almost effortlessly. In so doing, it rendered filmically visible a complex and politically challenging insight. It took Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) an entire book, for instance, to make her argument about the tenuousness of the boundary between male play and male-to-male desire; this film, however, managed to show this in the space of twenty seconds. As B Ruby Rich was quoted arguing in the gay and lesbian press,

> ever since the dawn of feminist film criticism and theory in the 1970s, film scholars have analyzed the homoerotic subtexts in the homosocial world of the classic western. But *Brokeback Mountain* [went] much further. It turn[ed] the text and subtext inside out. (Cited in Farrar, 2006)

Interestingly, the film went further than simply making this connection. Like feminist theorists such as Carole Pateman (1988), *Brokeback Mountain* also made the impact of male bonds upon women quite clear: Jack and Ennis' love impacted unambiguously on the lives of their women. Unsurprisingly, this impact, for the most part, was overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, the film frequently encouraged us to sympathize with their plights.

Ennis, for example, had an almost uniformly catastrophic effect on the lives of the women around him. In a potent sequence that neatly articulated the effect Ennis had on "his women," a girlfriend subsequent to his divorce quietly reprimanded him for his poor behavior toward her. While Ennis may have looked like a promising prospect of earthy manliness, Cassie (Linda Cardellini) was inevitably greeted with his fundamental emotional unavailability (and possible sexual pathology). So too, Michelle Manesis (2006) characterized Hathaway’s Lureen as the “beleaguered wife of Jake Gyllenhaal’s gay cowboy” (p. W8). “Brokeback” thus delivered a level of prominence to the complex ways in which women’s lives can be fractured by the force of masculinity. In doing so, it could be understood to address one of the strongest criticisms made of scholarly studies of male homosociality and masculinity: the virtual absence of women from the content of much of this academic analysis (Ditz, 2004).

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6 In one of the few scenes of sexual activity between Alma and Ennis, Ennis forces Alma reluctantly onto her stomach so that he can enter her from behind. The resonances between this sex scene and that between Ennis and Jack are pronounced. Indeed, this film gently suggests that Ennis can only perform sexually while evoking these normative positions of gay male sex.
That this film created such spaces speaks of the enormous possibilities of the representations of historical film, and by possibilities we mean those of creating different conversational spaces in the public arena. *Brokeback Mountain*'s big gay tragic historical love story thus functioned, in part, to create a legitimate space for public discussions of gay male love, desire and sex. It also opened discussions of the psychological impact of coming out (or not coming out, as the case may be). Indeed, Simon Levett (2006) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in early March noted that the New South Wales Department of Education had no policy to deal with the difficulties of coming out. Making reference to "Brokeback," Levett asked his readers to share their stories: "have you come out or got a friend who has? Tell us" (p. 4). Furthermore, in "gaying up" the western, one of the heartening aspects of the film was that it provided narrative possibilities for gay men to comprehend their experiences.

As an example of the latter point, the film's website became a forum for individuals to "share" their stories. This section of the website received media attention in Australia (Heard, 2006) and became an arena for both an outpouring of sorrow, grief and loss and a legitimation of same-sex love. These personal testimonies revealed stories that reverberated with the narrative structure and themes of the film. Indeed, these authors could often be found thanking the film for the opportunity to speak.

I feel that it’s going to be exceedingly special and will profoundly affect many lives. Thank you for acknowledging this kind of deep love that knows no boundaries. (James, Australia)

Oh my god this film has awoken something in me that I have been trying to move on from ... I am sure brokeback mountain will be a great movie but I will wait for its DVD release as I feel people might judge me for it and my secret be revealed. I love you people who have shared these stories they helped me heaps. Thank you Sam (Sam, Australia) (*Share Your Stories*, 2006)

Another such conversation occurred in the Northern Queensland press. Conservative member of parliament Bob Katter was reported in the *Townsville Bulletin* in January asserting that "maybe there are some (gay cowboys) out there, but I’ve never heard of ‘em" ("Brokeback movie criticized," 2006, p. 3). Unsurprisingly, Katter’s comments provoked outrage in the mainstream and gay and lesbian press alike, with gay activists offering to provide Katter with a list of gay station-owners and station-hands. ("Cowpokes to get ‘Brokeback,’” 2006, p. 3; Stannard, 2006, p. 7). In this way, "Brokeback" forced the contemplation of the often-elded existence of homosexuality in non-urban spaces.

Prompted by *Brokeback*'s concern with the difficult lives of rural gay men, the story of Adam Sutton, a gay cowboy who had suffered the trauma of rural homophobia, was featured on the front page of Australian newspapers in March (McMahon, 2006, p. 1). A month later, ABC TV’s *Australian Story* picked up Sutton’s plight and aired a programme about his experiences. According to this programme,
the cowboy has long been romanticized as the ideal image of masculinity.... But for a young bloke living on the land it’s a tough life if you don’t fit the mould (“Since Adam was a Boy,” 2006).

In an alternative representational arena oriented toward an urban gay and lesbian readership, “Brokeback” made the contemplation of homophobia in a rural context possible. Commenting on the inclusion of an “Outback Jacks” float in the nationally broadcasted Mardi Gras parade, float organizer David Graham commented that “we’re all outback blokes and it’s sending the message to young guys out there thinking they don’t have a place in the bush” (Wearing, 2006a). Two months later, the Sydney Star Observer returned to the problem of rural homophobia when it drew attention to the fact that Graham had taken up residence in the Big Brother house (Wearing, 2006b). As Iain Clacher (2006) remarked in the May edition of Queensland Pride,

hopefully, David’s inclusion in the show might also expose some of us relatively complacent city-born and bred gay people to the issues faced by those who choose to stay in rural Australia. (p. 3)

Clearly, “Brokeback” created a space for the complication of the cowboy myth and the revelation of stories of same-sex desire within it. By forging narrative links between the tragedies of lost love, homophobic contexts, the oppressions of masculinity, and the marginalization of rural gay men, “Brokeback” functioned as a productively disruptive force in 2006-Australia. As John Heard (2006) remarked in The Australian, “walls [were] indeed crumbling. This mark[ed] a moment, one of the very rarest in modern cinema history” (p. 8). His comments echoed sentiments expressed in the gay and lesbian press: “something transformational [was] happening because of this movie” (“Burn toast,” 2006, p. 5).

As we mentioned earlier, we are keen to interrogate the many meanings of this film. However, we don’t seek to do so by invalidating the experiences of individuals for whom Brokeback Mountain offered hope, solace, or comfort. Indeed, the cultural event that was “Brokeback” legitimated memories of trauma, loss, love and pain that would otherwise, perhaps, have remained publicly unrecognized; this in and of itself provides compelling evidence for the political value of the film. Having said that, we think a question worth asking might also be: as these “walls” crumbled, what kind of revelations and subjects did they make possible? And how did these revelations of past rural homophobia, repression and denial constitute a particular understanding of the present?

One of the primary ways that Brokeback Mountain constructed its narrative of historical homophobia was through the language of love. Importantly, this love was apparently universal in nature. As Heath Ledger remarked during the film’s media road-show, “the level of intimacy and the level of love they experience is the same as that we would experience [sic] as heterosexual people … their love does transcend all”
(Schwartz, 2006, p. 5) So too, Clark Forbes (2006) excitedly discovered that “what you find is a heartbreaking love story that could equally apply to straight couples” (p. E9).

On screen, *Brokeback Mountain* rendered the love between Ennis and Jack as universal by placing it outside the specificities of time and place. Accordingly, the structure of the film consistently placed their love outside the historicizing drama of the narrative. This was literally the case, as Sam Walker (2006) pointed out, given that “nature,” rather than cultural context, “cradled Ennis and Jack’s love” (p. 9). Their love occurred and was experienced in an unchanging natural landscape, while the world changed (and indeed oppressed) around them. All the accoutrements of historical change in the film—electric knives, cars, tractors, Farah Fawcett hairstyles, Linda Ronstadt on the jukebox, and, of course, access to the divorce court—made their historically-specific presence felt in domains removed from their experience of love. Indeed, it was precisely when Ennis and Jack were forced to confront the historicized spaces of this film that they encountered problems. In effect, the “problem” of Ennis and Jack’s relationship was an historical one; in Ennis’ words, they would find trouble if their love took hold in the “wrong time[s]” and “wrong place[s]” they were unfortunate enough to inhabit. In many ways, the tragedy of Ennis and Jack was that they fell in love at the wrong time and in the wrong place. For this film Jack and Ennis’ love wasn’t the problem, rather, the political and social restrictions of rural Wyoming in the past were the source of their misery.

We make these points to demonstrate the way in which the film historicized their oppression at the same time as it universalized their love. As “a universal love story about heartbreak and thwarted commitment … *Brokeback Mountain*’s men were] constrained by the times, community prejudices and Ennis’s fear,” wrote Peter Crayford (2006, p. 34). So, while much commentary about the film pointed out the historical and spatial specificity of Ennis and Jack’s oppressions, the very “subject” of that oppression—namely, their love—was presumed and celebrated as a universal phenomenon. Indeed, as Miriam Cosic (2006) noted, *Brokeback Mountain* was “a movie about love, loneliness, and other universally human emotions” (p. 13, emphasis added). Even in specifically gay and lesbian representational domains, the universality—rather than specificity—of Ennis and Jack’s love was affirmed. As the commentary in *Blue* declared, “love is universal, it has no bounds” (Dent, 2005, p. 22).

However, as so much scholarship of the past thirty years has demonstrated, there are political implications to the invocation of universal human characteristics. While appearing all-inclusive, appeals to universal experiences—and thus subjects—have often maintained exclusionary political practices. Indeed, as Gayatri Spivak (1999) notes, “the norm of universal humanity” tends to be “no more than a politically interested figuration of the privileged male” (p. 147)—namely white, western, middle-class, urban and, most importantly for our discussion, straight.

In a recent consideration of the politics of love, Paul Johnson (2005) forges correlative analytic connections between ideas about universal love and the maintenance of heterosexual normativity. He describes how “ideas about love ... act as the vehicle
for normalizing heterosexual practice” (p. 3). Moreover, for Johnson, the “social construction” of love in our current era “serves a legitimating purpose for heterosexuality” precisely because it makes love an innate and essential component of humanity (pp. 45-46). Indeed, the film’s director Ang Lee was keen to encode “Brokeback” as a love story, effacing the specificity of its sexual subjects: “I don’t want it called a gay film ... it’s a love story,” Lee directed audiences (Mitchell, 2006). Far from a “brazen,” “provocative,” and “challenging” intervention into the heterosexual love story, Lee’s comments point toward the tendency to disavow the very homosexuality of this intervention. In his analysis of the “unexpected success” of Brokeback Mountain, Andrew Sullivan (2006) wrote that “more and more people recognize that the central homosexual experience is the central heterosexual experience: love” (p. 14). Accordingly, the question then becomes: who is this film of historical oppression and universal love for?

Not, apparently, rural audiences, at least in the first instance. Indeed, Brokeback’s positioning as an “art house” film of “social comment” effectively prevented it from showing on screens outside urban areas. The film’s distributors, Roadshow, initially brought just 48 copies into Australia—compared this to, for example, The Chronicles of Narnia (2005) with 412, King Kong (2005) with 288, Rumor Has It (2005) with 238, Munich (2005) with 211, or even Mrs Henderson Presents (2005) with 75 (George, 2006, p. 14; Gibson & Dick, 2006, p. 22). As the Australian pointed out, this meant “Ledger’s controversial cowboy film [would] not be shown in the home town of the Cowboys rugby team” (“Cowboy snub,” 2006, p. 3). The regional Queensland audience wouldn’t, it seemed, be interested in this film. And while Roadshow were forced by complaints to increase showings so that, as one gay and lesbian publication put it, the gay “cowpokes [could] get Brokeback” (2006, p. 3), Australia only ended up with 95 reels in circulation (George, 2006, p. 14).

Clearly, then, the intended audience of Brokeback was an unashamedly urban one. This urban audience, moreover, was radically distanced from the subject matter of this big gay tragic historical love story. Australian author Christos Tsolkis’ reaction to seeing the film seems emblematic here:

I came out of it thinking “This is not a gay film,” because it actually deals with men who are not urban; they don’t fit into ... metropolitan, urban experience. (Cited in Watts, 2006, p. 15)

This is a significant point. Coupled with the film’s placement of homophobia in a specific time and place—namely rural Wyoming between 1963 and 1983—Brokeback Mountain effectively expelled the problem of homophobic oppression from the contemporary experiences of audiences in Australia. As Christine Cremen (2006) concluded, it was “the problems of time and place that mean[t] the cards [were] stacked against ... a happy conclusion” for these lovers (p. 33). Had times and places been different, presumably, Jack and Ennis might have “made it.”

Ironically enough, given this film is apparently a social comment on the “problem” of homophobia, it consequently created the space for a series of congratulatory conver-
sations about “our own” progression. “Brokeback Mountain,” according to one Melbourne publication, was “a stepping stone to higher levels of acceptance of the gay community” (“Vent your spleen,” 2006, p. 12). For Pia Ackerman (2006), for example, Brokeback Mountain “signal[ed] an important shift in mainstream culture” (p. E6). So too, Sullivan (2006) considered that “the unexpected success of Brokeback Mountain suggest[ed] homophobia is on the wane” (p. 14). In effect, the cultural event that was “Brokeback” provided an opportunity for metropolitan audiences in Australia in 2006 to celebrate “our” acceptance, tolerance, inclusiveness and sexual freedom. As such, it seems to us that making, seeing, and talking about this film became a way to demonstrate these credentials.

Ackerman and Sullivan’s comments, however, were made in two metropolitan daily newspapers—the Herald-Sun and the Australian. In publications that spoke for, with and to gay and lesbian communities, these types of overwhelmingly celebratory claims were far less possible. Indeed, such “progressive” narratives would have been difficult to make convincing alongside stories of violence, homophobia and continuing legal inequalities that often feature in these publications. This contradiction was gestured towards by Ian Gould (2005) in his analysis of “what made headlines in 2005.” As Gould noted, at the same time as the state of South Australia “failed to pass a long-awaited gay rights bill ... whether the Ang Lee film ... succeeds in changing attitudes ... remains to be seen.”

Indeed, there was a concern that the historical distance of the “Brokeback” story wouldn’t necessarily be so historical or so distant for many gay and lesbian viewers at the time of the film’s release. The Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of New South Wales, for example, provided additional support for “people affected by the emotionally wrenching movie.” GLCS co-president Michael Nelson worried that “there could be a significant number of men and women in NSW who could see this representation and relate to it” as people who “are currently in that position and may need some help” (Gould, 2006a).

Whilst the coherence of the “Brokeback” referent was thus complicated within different representational forums, there were some elements of this story that retained their consistency. The meaning of love, for instance, seemed to cross the boundaries between straight and gay in Australia. In the gay and lesbian press as much as its mainstream counterparts, Jack and Ennis’ love was cause for celebration. For Stephen Holden, for example, “Brokeback Mountain [was] ultimately not about sex ... but about love; love stumbled into, love thwarted, love held sorrowfully in the heart” (Cited in Farrar, 2006).

As we argued earlier in this paper, there is a need to consider the types of political work emotions perform and police. Accordingly, the politics of this love relationship—and its players—warrant interrogation. Given that, as so much feminist and queer scholarship has demonstrated, economies of love and sex function to install and regulate particular politics, the love/sex politics of Jack and Ennis’ relationship are worthy of analysis. While Jack and Ennis seemed to unsettle normative sexual positions—they were, after all, two cowboys in love—their relationship to each other in fact made sense
via heteronormative models of sexual and social practice. Ennis and Jack’s relationship was made coherent—according to the logic of the film’s narrative—through their occupation of contrapuntally articulated feminized and masculinized social and sexual positions.

The first act of *Brokeback Mountain* was pivotal to the gendering of Jack and Ennis’ relationship. From the different attitudes the camera had toward their bodies in the opening sequence, to the economies of looks and talk between them, to their differing sexual positions and experiences, this act masculinized Ennis while it feminized Jack. As Phillipa Hawker (2006) observed in *The Age* newspaper, Jack was “wide eyed and pretty … the lighter, more extroverted role” while Ennis was a “devastating depiction of a man living a life of quiet desperation” (p. 27). Hawker’s comments contrasted the pretty, extroverted—and thus feminine—Jack against the stoic, quietly desperate—and thus masculine—Ennis. Annette Willis’ (2006) remarks in the gay and lesbian press seem equally relevant here: “Ennis is a rough, hard working type who, we gather, hasn’t had any real experience of love or affection and Jack … is like the affectionate puppy dog who jumps all over Ennis” (p. 31). As John Gray (1992) declares in his classic heterosexual relationship manual, in times of stress and hardship, “Men Go to Their Caves and Women Talk” (p. 29). As far as their relationship is concerned, then, Ennis was from Mars and Jack was from Venus.

Not only in their relationship with each other, but also in their relationship with the world (and camera), Jack and Ennis consistently evoked tropes of femininity and masculinity. The film opened with Jack and Ennis arriving separately to seek employment with Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) on Brokeback Mountain. As they waited outside Aguirre’s trailer-office, they were swiftly encoded in gendered counterpoint to one another; Ennis compactly and quietly leaned beside the trailer door, head bowed, Jack noisily arrived on the scene. In the following minutes both the camera and Ennis surreptitiously surveyed Jack’s body as he attended to his appearance (by shaving in the car mirror) and slouched seductively against the side of his vehicle. Indeed, it was all too apparent that Jack was aware of the gaze upon his body.7

As their buddy-relationship unfolded, these encodings were largely maintained within specific modes of selfhood. Jack talked excitedly and idealistically about his past, present and future, whereas Ennis’ communication rarely moved beyond a monosyllable. Similarly, Ennis was far more comfortable with the accoutrements of cowboy masculinity—shooting animals, riding horses, and coping with the elements, for example—than Jack. This differentiation culminated in the scene of their descent from stuttering friendship to potent sex/love relationship. On a cold night on the mountain, Jack invited Ennis into his tent “for warmth,” at which point the seduction continued. Curled up in the tent, Jack pulled Ennis’ hand toward his groin, eliciting a violent reaction. The ensuing sex found Ennis punishing Jack from behind. The next morning, Ennis headed

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7 We are, of course, gesturing toward the account of the male gaze and the female body articulated and developed by Susan Bordo (1997, pp. 10-19).
back up the mountain to tend to the sheep while Jack scrubbed his body and clothes in the creek in a classic feminized enactment of post-rape shame. While we don’t wish to essentialize the relationship between sexual positions and power, it is highly significant that Ennis was on top.

Jack’s sexual feminization continued in the film when he found himself straddled by his future fiancé in the back of her convertible. In this scene, as Melanie La Brooy (2006) noted, Lureen was firmly agentic: it was Hathaway who was “lustily humping Jake Gyllenhaal,” not the other way around (p. 13). Indeed, aside from a few moments of masculinized competence, Jack tended to occupy a firmly feminized position in the logic of his various relationships. His wife Lureen controlled the business; her father consistently questioned his husbandly authority; Ennis reprimanded him as a romantic; and, as became apparent in one of the concluding scenes of the film, even Jack’s father wrote him off as a flinty child who was incapable of dealing with the “real world.” As his characterization as a Venusian female determined, Jack was also constantly attempting to talk through the romantic possibilities of his relationship with Ennis. Like all needy females on screen, Jack wanted more.

For the masculinely pragmatic Ennis, however, theirs was a relationship of impossibilities. While Jack had his head in the clouds, Ennis was firmly tied to the “real world” of jobs and fatherly responsibilities. But within this world, Ennis had great difficulty giving voice to his emotional life and hopes. As Jeanti St Clair (2006) pointed out in the gay and lesbian press, “he averts his eyes and hunches over, all to avoid saying what he feels”. In one sense, Ennis was emotionally illiterate. Not only with Jack, but in all his sex/love relationships, Ennis was apparently unwilling and unable to find a verbal language with which to express himself.

Heath Ledger “wanted [Ennis] to be a clenched fist.” Indeed, Ledger firmly characterized Ennis as a repressed man prone to violence. For Ledger, “violence [was] the one form of expression [Ennis] allow[ed] himself” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 5). Everything about Ennis’ character suggested that he was an angry young man. This anger was particularly acute in response to disturbing experiences of loss and suffering. Faced with the prospect of coming down the mountain to the “real world,” for example, Ennis—in response to Jack’s flirtatious play—punched Jack in the face. So too, after a scene of domestic disturbance with Alma, Ennis sought and found another man with whom to violently engage.

This is in direct contrast to Jack, who responded to disappointment with tears and an attempt to find solace in the arms of another man in Mexico. Ironically, in Brokeback Mountain, Jack and Ennis—the apparently gay cowboys—made sense within a heteronormative model of love and sex. So, while this event was read as a celebration of the legitimacy of gay male love and sex, it functioned instead to revalorize the very gendered coupling that makes this legitimacy impossible.

For many public observers, however, “Brokeback” was a demonstrably “queer” phenomenon. For Gould (2006b), for instance, Brokeback Mountain was an example of the “queer roles” now available on Hollywood screens; so too, Big Brother resident David Graham became a “queer cowboy” (Wearing & Burfitt, 2006). Without ques-
tion, scenes of cowboy sex certainly functioned to destabilize some determinative models of sexuality and gender in 2006. However, as Annemarie Jagose (1996) argues, queer theory and politics are united by their commitment to disturbing, incohering, and unmaking heteronormativity (p. 4). Reliant on a heteronormative coupling of Jack and Ennis, the queering potential of “Brokeback” was thus limited. While, for some observers, the “Brokeback phenomenon” offered the potential for gay men to “break the straightjacket,” in many ways Jack and Ennis seemed to be straight (Watts, 2006, p. 15). In fact, “Brokeback” was deployed to highlight the ways in which gay men could (or should?) fit within normative models of masculinity. For Peter Craven (2006b), for example, “Brokeback’s” political value was derived from the fact that it “g[al]ve gays a good name” precisely because intertextual figures such as Adam Sutton and David Graham were “masculine in manner” (p. 27). Sutton and Graham’s masculine manners, presumably, meant that they could pass into the heterosexual world with ease. As the filmic characters themselves declared,

Ennis: You know I ain’t queer.
Jack: Me neither.

Jack and Ennis made sense, not because they were queer, but because their gendered coupling was and is so familiar. The coherence of “Brokeback’s” love-story was, in this way, limited and enabled by the parameters of the heterosexual couple to which it referred. Love is not somehow exempt from the operations of politics and power. It is not simply a “force of nature.” The celebration of Jack and Ennis’ love, therefore, must be considered for the political work its recognition performed. This is even more prescient, given that the language of “love” was the vehicle for the apparent political legitimacy of these subjects. Indeed, as the celebration of Jack and Ennis’ love as an indicator of our progression and inclusiveness continues, it might be worth remembering that the familiarity of heteronormativity is what makes it recognizable. Ironically, as Jack and Ennis’ love was recognized on screens, in newspapers, on the internet and on television, a similar recognition was denied to same-sex couples by the federal government in Australia. When it came to what Prime Minister John Howard termed the “most sacred” institutions of heteronormative love—namely marriage and children—gays and lesbians remained unwelcome. In fact, in 2006 the Howard Government struck down a bill legalizing same-sex marriage. Despite “Brokeback’s” declarations to the contrary, how far have we really come?

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8 We are fully aware of the complex debates about the politics of “passing.” We certainly don’t mean to imply that any performance of heterosexuality is necessarily always and already conservative. Rather, we are suggesting that in this specific instance, Craven seems to be arguing that acceptance of gay men should be dependant upon their disavowal of any “gay” characteristics. Carol Johnson (2002) conducts an excellent discussion of “passing.”

9 In response to all this one could ask, “What can we expect from a big gay tragic historical Hollywood love story?” However, as films like Bill Condon’s Kinsey clearly demonstrate, economies of desire can be disrupted by historical films coming out of Hollywood.
As an everyday social practice, filmmaking and film-going creates and makes particular meanings and possibilities. *Brokeback Mountain* was no exception. As we’ve discussed, this film has opened up the possibilities for critical conversations about the limitations and oppressions of a particular gay male identity. When Judith Butler (2004) asks us to interrogate the boundaries of what has become sayable and unsayable, it is precisely because these boundaries constitute what is a livable and unlivable life. When “Brokeback” drew attention to the violences of gay and lesbian life in the Australian bush, perhaps some lives were made a little less difficult. And in 2005, was it possible to say that a cowboy might be gay? In explicitly homoeroticising the homosocial, perhaps “Brokeback” enabled different answers in 2006.

As we liberate the cowboy, however, it is also worth considering how this story functions historically in the present. The shape of our historical narratives are part of the way we justify particular understandings of our current contexts. In removing homophobia from our time and our place, did “Brokeback” become part of the way we tell ourselves a particular story of progress and liberation? In positioning Ennis and Jack’s love as universally comprehensible and their oppression as historically specific, perhaps “Brokeback” created the possibility of ignoring the continuing operation of homophobia in our present times and places.

In the making of this story, we have suggested that a particular politics of love was offered recognition. Indeed, this recognition was made possible, it would seem, through the attribution of a universal mode of love that was demonstrably delineated by its heteronormativity. However, while attributions of universality efface difference and specificity, this film was made and remade differently in specific contexts. Politically interested communities thus employed “Brokeback” with different purposes and meanings. As love seemed to communicate across these contexts and their boundaries, remembering the political power and consequences of invocations of apparently universal human emotions is vital. For “Brokeback,” as elsewhere, we need to interrogate what heteronormative love can and cannot be made to do.

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