

# The Global Registers of *Brokeback Mountain* as a Place-Bound Story

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## Abstract

This paper addresses how place consciousness has been mediated in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) so as to tell a story with global significance. The cowboy as a cultural icon in the American West is central to the film. I propose that there are two visions of the American West, the agricultural West and the Wild West, whose dialectical relationship works with the cowboy iconology in the film. The geographical and cultural specificities of the story might be spatially bound, but its political message of homophobia is globally relevant. One significant aspect of this phenomenon is the filmic representations challenging some preconceived notions regarding a classic archetype of the American West—the cowboy. Here, the classic embodiment of American masculinity and heterosexual virility is turned on its head by the depiction of a homosexual love affair between two seemingly straight cowboys. If the cowboy image and the American West conspicuously reflect the national dimension, the deliberate invocations of some core narratives of the romance in the filmic representations of *Brokeback* are what links the local and the global, making the localized representations of the film globally appealing. The cinematic voice of *Brokeback* successfully toes the line between liberal and conservative ideologies to the extent that the film is able to elicit global appeal while keeping homophobia in check in the mainstream heterosexual ideology.

**Keywords:** *Brokeback Mountain*, cultural globalization, global popular, local, global, homosexuality, cowboy, the West

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(Received 1 October 2009; accepted 13 December 2010)

## Introduction

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)<sup>1</sup> was a phenomenal success in many ways<sup>2</sup> and, most importantly, was well received in the global film market.<sup>3</sup> The widespread popularity of the film beckons us to look at the on-screen homosexual relationship between two "cowboys."<sup>4</sup> While the film seems to challenge some preconceived notions behind such cultural symbols as the cowboy and the American West by presenting a pair of homosexual lovers falling in love in the American West, the treatment of homosexual relationships is eventually contained in the tragic ending of the story. Set in the American West, *Brokeback* might be geographically and culturally bound, but its political message about the consequences of homophobia is globally relevant.<sup>5</sup>

In "Popular Culture on a Global Scale: A Challenge for Cultural Studies?" Simon During contends that many "local" cultural products have aimed at the global market and have succeeded in becoming popular in many parts of the world: this is the "global popular" (810). In view of *Brokeback's* international appeal, its apparent reliance upon a specific cultural region paradoxically testifies to and against During's concept of "the global popular." The box-office performance of *Brokeback* is impressive in many parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> However, its salient features of American cultural heritage partially contradicts During's contention that cultural products employing tropes with "historical ruptures and cycles" are more likely to reach a wider audience (826). In the case of *Brokeback*, the historical significance of the American West and the cowboy image is essential for the narrative framework, but it should be noted that the film's cowboy images do not reflect societal changes of the United States in the 1960s or 1970s as the story

<sup>1</sup> The film will be referred to as *Brokeback* hereafter in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> The film was domestically and internationally commended in several film festivals. Before it won three Oscars (director, music, and adapted screenplay) in 2006, it had been nominated or won several awards from film festivals in America and Europe. For example, it won the Golden Lion in the 2005 Venice Film Festival. See the detailed records of its awards at "Awards for *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)," *The Internet Movie Database*.

<sup>3</sup> The box office record of *Brokeback* for theatrical performance is \$178,062,759 world-wide, 53.4 percent of which comes from the markets outside the U.S. See the box office record of *Brokeback* at *Box Office Mojo*. <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=brokebackmountain.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> To call them "gay cowboys" is certainly problematic, as is Harry Brod's argument that they should be looked upon as "bi shepherds" instead of "gay cowboys." However, I would still cling to the loosely defined term "cowboy" in the paper mainly because it is the cowboy image that makes the homosexual relationship in the film even more provocative.

<sup>5</sup> This is exactly why Eric Patterson says that "[the] question that *Brokeback Mountain* poses is fundamentally a political one" (240).

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the U.S., there are fifteen countries where the box-office record of the film is more than one million U.S. dollars. See *Brokeback's* foreign total gross at *Box Office Mojo*. <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=brokebackmountain.htm>>.

is set.<sup>7</sup> Instead, cowboy images in the film are stereotypical in the sense that the cowboy characters remind audiences of traditional cowboys in classical Westerns. The purpose of this paper is, thus, to rationalize *Brokeback* as another paradigm of the global popular where American cultural heritage has been repackaged for global circulation.

I intend to demonstrate how the place-based imaginary plays a major part in the film's global appeal. First, I will explain why the Western setting is crucial to the story. Second, I will propose that two visions of the American West—the Wild West and the agricultural West—are engaged in a dialectical relationship where the cowboy hero as a cultural icon is paradoxically taking on the interconnections between the local and the global.<sup>8</sup> Third, I will elaborate upon how viewing *Brokeback* as a romantic tragedy contributes to the film's global popularity. The cinematic representations of the West have been so romanticized that the tragedy of *Brokeback* is able to elicit the audience's sympathy without tripping a homophobic response.

### Why the American West?

In the opening scene of *Brokeback*, we see a cattle truck going along a western mountain ridge in a wide angle shot. This panoramic view of the landscape along with the trail of the truck brings the audience into experiencing the terrain of Wyoming and a sense of the lifestyle typical in the region. The representation of the natural landscape in the film has the effect of framing the story within a particular space and time.<sup>9</sup> The seeming naturalness of the Western mountain scenery is inextricably linked to Wyoming as a cultural space where specific lifestyles, beliefs, values and social relations inhabit the region. In effect, the geographical choice of Wyoming invokes the socio-cultural configurations of its both natural and man-made environment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s have brought about such issues as race, gender and class for widespread public debates (Hatheway 177). In *Brokeback*, Ennis seems to live in the world untouched by any of these liberal thoughts.

<sup>8</sup> Although "cowboy" is not an American invention, the reason I claim that the cowboy image in the American wilderness links the local and the global is that it has been one of the most commonly recognized American symbols through classical Westerns on television and in movies.

<sup>9</sup> Although *Brokeback* was actually shot in Alberta, Canada instead of Wyoming in the U.S., it should be noted that the filmic representations of Wyoming as a natural backdrop for the story have to give viewers a sense of verisimilitude of the American West because the monumental significance of the same-sex romantic drama relies heavily upon place-based imagination of the region.

<sup>10</sup> This set of shots is interpreted by Li Xinghua as an attempt to convey to the audience "a sublime feeling and a sense of reverence" for the landscape, so that they might suspend their judgment on homo-

In “On and Around *Brokeback Mountain*,” Robin Wood remarks: “They [Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist] could move to a less oppressive and bigoted cultural situation, though they would probably have to find professions other than sheep-herding and one can’t quite picture them as happy bank clerks” (29). It might be true that Ennis and Jack may have ended up differently if they had lived in another time and place, but the tragic sense of the story must be place-bound, for the American West as the major backdrop for the film encompasses a lot of ideological underpinnings putting the issue of homosexuality in perspective. It was thus imperative for the film to have a specific locale like Wyoming for contextualizing the story.

As most scholarship on the American West contends, the West is not merely a geographical region but also a symbol embodying a distinctive American character in the frontier experience.<sup>11</sup> The American West has been endowed with a monumental significance in terms of the natural landscape and the cultural imaginary of the region. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefébvre writes: “Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage” (220). Historically and culturally, the American West has been a space charged with collective significance in the Lefébvrian sense.

The monumentality of the West often comes in the sublime vision of the American wilderness for Americans and the rest of the world. In the westward rolling development of the frontier, the American West is collectively conceptualized as the land of opportunity where the American Dream can be realized. The traditional sense of the American West represents not only the physical fact that there is an immense expanse of uncultivated land but also a promise of hope for new settlers and a new beginning! Set in Wyoming, *Brokeback* as a romantic

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sexual behavior later on in the film (110). In general, Li is correct to claim the spatial rhetoric of invoking sublime feelings in the representations of the film, but it seems too early to arrive at a sublime feeling at this point. Rather, viewers are simply prefaced with what kind of life the characters are leading in the story, especially when it is a cattle truck going from the dark to the daybreak. It is one of the hardships that ranch workers are supposed to endure. The panoramic long shot of the mountain in the twilight does not give the audience a clear picture of the landscape. It is not imposing enough to transmit a sublime feeling yet.

<sup>11</sup> It has been an important tradition in American literature that writers see American national character as evolving from the experience with the natural environment of the North American continent. For example, in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith gives a historical survey of how the American West has been culturally imagined to foster some concepts about the American character through the notion of manifest destiny, the frontier heroes, and the West as the garden of the world since the eighteenth century. Moreover, considering the significance of the American West for conceptualizing the national character for Americans, Frederick Jackson Turner is recurrently mentioned for his thought-provoking paper on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” He argues that the westward expansion with new opportunities has been predominantly significant in the configurations of American character (28).

tragedy reverses such a promise of hope; the homosexual relationship in the story is doomed in the American West. The monumentality of the American West ironically enhances the tragic sense of their damnation.

## Two Visions of the American West

In defining the word “landscape,” Don Mitchell explains that a landscape is not only “a built morphology—the shape and structure of a place” but “a form of representation, both as an art and as a complex system of meanings” (49). The cultural specificity of Wyoming as a place is significant for viewers to imagine the American West in *Brokeback*. Insofar as the social imaginary of the American West is concerned, the Wild West and the agricultural West can be looked upon as two forms of representation associated with varying meanings. In the filmic representations of the West in *Brokeback*, the two visions of the West—the Wild West and the agricultural West—represent two systems of social reproduction from which different social relations emanate. I maintain that these two visions of the West are working hand in hand in a dialectical relationship to reconfigure the American West in *Brokeback* to the extent that the American West serves not only as the important backdrop for *Brokeback* but as the key “player” that renders cultural imaginary of the American West both localized and globalized.<sup>12</sup>

The paradoxical claim that the American West can be made “local” and “global” at the same time would be best elucidated by investigating *Brokeback* with respect to the imaginary of the Wild West in conventional Westerns.<sup>13</sup> Central to the Western genre are the cowboy hero and the wilderness. Incidentally, *Brokeback* is a story about two cowboys in the American wilderness. The significance of aligning *Brokeback* with the Western for discussion lies, however, not in the justification of the genre but in the ideological sense of the cowboy as a cultural icon that has been masculinity-coded through Hollywood’s dissemina-

<sup>12</sup> It would be a challenge to conceptualize the American West in light of the global because, geographically and culturally, the American West manifests the very sense of the local, as the wilderness in the West is uniquely American. It seems less disputable to attribute the American West to be representative of the local, particularly when literary American-ness has been traditionally grounded in the specificity of the American landscape.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, *Brokeback* as a film does not fit into the genre of the Western in the conventional sense with identifiable stands of stock characters (cowboys, outlaws, sheriffs, native Americans and so on) and gun fighting. Gary J. Hausladen tells us that the Western genre contains “three basic components: (1) the cowboy as hero; (2) the frontier experience as storyline; and (3) the West as landscape/setting” (297). In *Blockbusters*, a detailed discussion of the defining characteristics of the Western genre is given including its elemental conflicts, typical plots and subvariations, settings and features, and stock characters (Graves 253-58).

tion of the Western as a film genre.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the Western as a film genre, cinematic representations of the American Wild West have mostly focused on the adventures of a cowboy hero whose deeds are to defend the family or the community despite the fact that the plot structure may vary from one to another.<sup>15</sup> In unfolding the filmic representations of landscape, Andrew Horton cites John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) as an example of how the American West is being "mythologized" as the cultural landscape of freedom from the confinement of civilization. With the lead actor John Wayne in the role of a cowboy standing in the wide open expanse of the West, Horton claims that "John Wayne is the landscape and the landscape is John Wayne" (79). The star persona of Wayne as the American hero is monumental; he has been continually recognized as one of the most well-known cowboy heroes on the silver screen in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> To claim that Wayne is synonymous with landscape is to establish his iconological sense as representative of the American West. The cowboy hero and the West have thus been inextricably linked in the minds of the public to the extent that it is almost impossible to think of one without the other.

One of the things in *Brokeback* that register globally is its thematic take on "manhood" through the cowboy image. In *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, Lee Clark Mitchell maintains that central to the tradition of the Western as a genre is "[the] persistent obsession with masculinity" (3). Such masculinity-coded manhood is often built on the cultural presumption of heterosexuality in traditional Westerns even though relationships are not a central issue in the genre.<sup>17</sup> The traditional definition of a cowboy is a man that is masculine and heterosexual.

In *Brokeback* we see a redefinition of manhood with Ennis and Jack, for they are specimens of masculinity, yet their homosexual relationship seems incompatible with the usual expectations of what a cowboy should be. Jim Kitses interprets Ennis in the film as "the Western hero incarnate, America's defender of family and

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<sup>14</sup> In terms of all recognizable film genres, the Western is a truly American invention, whose production of the Western hero casts him "as fiercely independent, with no more than tangential or temporary ties to the community" (Graves 257). Masculinity is what the Western hero represents in the Western genre.

<sup>15</sup> See the categorization of typical plot structures in the discussion of the Western as a film genre in *Blockbusters* (Graves 254-55).

<sup>16</sup> According to David Magill, John Wayne's screen image as a rugged individual (cowboy or soldier) has made himself one of the most enduring cultural icons for Americans. His star persona has embodied "the ideal American male identity" (746).

<sup>17</sup> Heterosexuality is almost a presumption in the frontier communities depicted in the Western. If a cowboy hero is involved in a relationship, it is more likely a heterosexual one.

community” in the scene where Ennis confronts two foul-mouthed rogues as he is watching the Independence Day fireworks with his family (23). Obviously, it is the orthodoxy of the heterosexual family and community being defended here by Ennis as an American hero. As for Jack, his interest in the rodeo is macho enough and his winning a rodeo contest is also proof of his masculinity.

Even though cowboy figures and the wilderness are seen both in *Brokeback* and in traditional Westerns, they do not seem to interact in the same way. Kitses holds that *Brokeback* is relying on “genre aesthetics and motifs” in that the magnificent landscape is reminiscent of the classical Western and the cowboy images are prototypical (24). The imagery of the American wilderness and cowboys might be readily associated with the Western as a genre but I would argue that the wilderness backdrop in *Brokeback* and the classical Western aim at calling upon rather different spatial connotations while the cowboy as a cultural icon works as more of a parody than of a prototype in *Brokeback*. If the cowboy in a Western defines what makes a man, then *Brokeback* is, in a way, posing questions about this definitive “manhood” through the portrayal of the same-sex love between two masculine cowboys. They are both masculine, and yet feminine to a certain degree. Their masculinity is manifested in the portrayal of Ennis as a tough guy who beats up rascals as if he were a cowboy hero in the Western and Jack as engaged in such manly diversions as the rodeo. Traditionally, cowboy heroes are adored by female characters, and thus are not troubled by where their hearts lead them. However, in *Brokeback*, Ennis and Jack’s femininity shines through with their uncontrollable affections for each other.

Apart from a redefinition of manhood by way of the cowboy image, *Brokeback* portrays the agricultural West realistically as a way to demystify the Wild West conjured up by Hollywood’s traditional Westerns. Unlike classical Westerns where the West is more or less idealized as an adventure playground for super heroes of the cowboy ilk, the choice to go for realism is undeniable in *Brokeback*. The big screen versions of Ennis and Jack prove faithful to Proulx’s original characterizations of them as poor cowboys.<sup>18</sup> In the beginning of the film, Ennis is seen stepping out of a truck and carrying a grocery sack as his only baggage whereas Jack first appears driving an old, noisy pickup. Basically, they are presented

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<sup>18</sup> In Proulx’s short story “Brokeback Mountain,” Ennis and Jack are by no means heroic since they are “both high school dropout country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life” (284). Nevertheless, it should be admitted that the casting of Heath Ledger as Ennis and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack might have something to do with what Charles Eliot Mehler remarks as “box-office economics,” because their images fit “Hollywood ‘pretty body’ aesthetics” (144). In the short story, Ennis and Jack are simply lower-class ranch hands with rough manners. In particular, Jack is even described as “bucktoothed” (317).

as poor ranch hands seeking temporary jobs. Inasmuch as the jobs—“a herder” and “a camp tender”—are offered to them, Ennis and Jack can be seen as “wage laborers.”<sup>19</sup> There are no misleading fantasies for viewers to get the impression of Ennis and Jack as cowboys in any way like the heroic cowboys or gunslingers in Hollywood’s Westerns. Rather, they are down-to-earth ranch laborers in the agricultural West.

The realistic portrayal of Ennis and Jack as poor cowboy laborers reflects an unglamorous vision of the West. The agricultural West in *Brokeback* is a place where ranch hands work stoically while enduring various hardships including living on canned food, terrible weather conditions, lack of sleep, and loneliness. In a dingy bar where Jack and Ennis have a drink together for the first time, Jack recounts his herding experience: “Last year, one storm, the lightning killed 42 sheep. Thought I’d asphyxiate from the smell.”<sup>20</sup> The stinking smell of rotten sheep is definitely one of the daily realities that ranch hands must confront. In the film, it is implied that Ennis and Jack are exploited by the foreman Joe Aquirre, who, Ennis thinks, is trying to cut down their salary by shortening their herding time. Ennis angrily says that “the son of a bitch is cutting us out of a whole month’s pay. It ain’t right!” The biting reality confronting Ennis and Jack regarding their sheep herding demystifies the cultural icon of the cowboy as someone free from social constraint. Throughout *Brokeback*, they are simply ordinary people who need to struggle for survival on a daily basis in the agricultural West.

As a matter of fact, the vision of the agricultural West represented in *Brokeback* is, in a way, playing down the homophobic antagonism that viewers are likely to have as they see the portrayals of the homosexual relationship between Ennis and Jack. In the film, there is a Midwestern working-class value that Ennis as a leading role adheres to throughout his life. Richard Sisson and Andrew Cayton write: “For most of the past one hundred years, cultural life in Midwestern working class communities has been characterized by collective need, individual accountability and extensive sociability” (1335). Focusing on the collective need of the community, the Midwestern cultural value of the working class serves, on the one hand, as a perfect social censorship to keep Ennis from going further than having a clandestine relationship with Jack once in a while. On the other hand, the cultural imaginary of Ennis as a masculine man in the working class plays

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<sup>19</sup> In terms of the life-style the cowboy is leading, John R. Erickson refers to the cowboy as “a wage laborer” who needs to master specific skills around cattle in *The Modern Cowboy* (5).

<sup>20</sup> This episode is narrated in Proulx’s short story as this: “Jack telling Ennis about a lightening storm on the mountain the year before that killed forty-two sheep, the peculiar stink of them and the way they bloated” (285).



down viewers' homophobic antagonism against the portrayals of homosexuality in the film. After Jack and Ennis are finished with their shepherding on Brokeback Mountain, Ennis continues to work as a laborer—a construction worker or a cowboy.

In the meantime, Jack becomes a salesperson selling tractors after he marries his wife Laureen Newsome. The vision of the agricultural West is somewhat like the one indicated by the term “agribusiness.” Erickson remarks:

agribusiness . . . [refers] to production agriculture (farming and ranching) as well as to the support business that have sprung up around agriculture, those that deal in chemicals, feed, medicine, seeds, fertilizer, irrigation equipment, implements, and commodities. “Agribusiness” evokes images of bankers, accountants, lawyers, commodities traders, feedlot owners, and real estate brokers, not noble cowboys. (181)

Jack is working with his wife in the farm equipment business. He is a top tractor salesman in the company. Ennis continues his life mostly as a cowboy laborer, whose life patterns are “tied to the rhythms of animals: a cow that must be milked twice a day, chickens that must be turned out in the morning and shut up at night, horses that must be fed or watered, pregnant heifers that must be watched, and, in winter, cows that must be fed” (Erickson 5). In the scene where Ennis leaves his two daughters to his wife Alma at work in the grocery store, he says: “I can’t afford to not be there when them heifers calve. Be my job if I lose any of ’em.” Ennis’s cattle work might not be a shared work experience by all but it is quite commonplace for employees to worry about losing their jobs because they have not gotten their work done. The images of Jack as a salesman and Ennis as a cowboy laborer provide audiences the scenario to conceptualize their lives in the agricultural West. To make them relatable in this way is more likely to make viewers go beyond the usual antagonism provoked by homosexuality and then become sympathetic to their suffering in their unspeakable relationship because it is easier for audiences to relate to Ennis and Jack as just ordinary people who need to struggle for survival.<sup>21</sup>

From the Wild West to the agricultural West, *Brokeback* has been playing with varying images of the cowboy figure. The historical precedent of the cowboy as a rugged individual puts “manhood” in perspective insofar as a homosexual relationship is portrayed in the storyline. The depiction of Ennis and Jack as average Joe’s in the agricultural West makes it easier for viewers to imagine being in their shoes. Different from the Wild West where dreams and hopes are invested in the frontier experience, the conservative society of Wyoming in the film

<sup>21</sup> In “The Chinese Side of the Mountain,” Chris Berry claims that the melodramatic elements recurrent in Ang Lee’s films make the film acceptable to a wider audience.

is likened to a land of stasis where Ennis and Jack are unable to find a way out of their dead-lock situation. The reality for the same-sex relationship in the West restrains Ennis and Jack from fantasizing about any possibility of their union; the American West is far from a liberating space but is instead a stifling prison for them.

### The Tactics of a Romantic Tragedy

In the story of “Brokeback Mountain,” there is a strong sense of nostalgia for the past insofar as the American West is concerned. This lament for the West reverberates with Ennis’s memory of his relationship with Jack on Brokeback Mountain. The wilderness is presented so sublimely that it not only idealizes but venerates the same-sex love between Ennis and Jack.<sup>22</sup> In the film, the wilderness is often presented in a wide-angle long shot, giving the impression that the West is still endless and untamed. As Ennis and Jack start off on their journey on Brokeback Mountain, the magnificent scenery of the American West comes into full view with the immense number of sheep inseparable from the natural grandeur of the open range. In effect, the Wild West is romanticized through the picturesque representations of the landscape, and thus so is the love story, by association.<sup>23</sup>

The successful intermingling of romance and the American West in *Brokeback* appears to have been a major reason for the film’s global popularity. The romantic elements in *Brokeback* have catalyzed the localized representations of the American West and its cultural associations into something transnationally communicable and thus marketable. As Lynne Pearce indicates that romance usually “tells the familiar story of a chance/fateful meeting between two lovers, a series of obstacles (husband/geographical separation), and reunion” (524), the nearly twenty-year relationship between Ennis and Jack in *Brokeback* follows the trajectory of a classic love story except that there is no happy reunion of the lovers. The relationship between Ennis and Jack gets started in a way that neither of them would have expected beforehand. It is a night when Ennis is too drunk to return to the sheep they are herding and it is too cold for him to stay outside, he joins

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<sup>22</sup> Since homosexuality as a social taboo is often culturally underrepresented, it is virtually elevated when it is juxtaposed with the sublime vision of the West.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly invoking a sublime feeling, classical Westerns employ the wide open space of the American West in a different way. In classical Westerns, the American West is usually visualized in the wide open space of the desert like Monument Valley in Utah that John Ford as an auteur of the Western genre repeatedly uses in his films. Such a rendition of the West aims at mythologizing the American wilderness as an untamed space free from social confinement.

Jack in the tent where their passion is ignited for the first time. It is treated by them as if it were something accidental, as Ennis later says to Jack: "This is a one-shot thing we got goin' on here." In response, Jack says: "It's nobody's business but ours." Speaking of the "one-shot thing," Ennis and Jack both decline to see themselves as homosexual. Their denial sounds like they are dismissing it as a chance encounter even though it can be seen as their refusal to confront their homoerotic desires. But it turns out this "accidental" occurrence has kicked off the irresistible infatuation between them throughout their lives.

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes writes: "I encounter millions of bodies in my life; of these millions, I may desire some hundreds; but of these hundreds, I love only one" (19). The conviction that there is only one other person for any given person to love is persistent in the romance genre. In the film, Jack gets into contact with Ennis again after four years of separation. On the day of their first reunion, we see Ennis's eager anticipation when he restlessly looks out the window for Jack's arrival. Upon seeing each other, their immediate and eager embrace looks like that of a couple burning with passion for each other. For the love story between Ennis and Jack, we see that, from their first night to their passionate reunion, they hit it off like the typical romantic couple in a movie—they are meant for each other and neither one is replaceable in their relationship. That is why Jack says to Ennis in the film: "You got no idea how bad it gets . . . I'm not you. I can't make it on a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year . . . I wish I knew how to quit you." Jack is comparing his love for Ennis to an addiction that he has no way of stopping; to be continually addicted to another's love is to reveal how irreplaceable the love is. This discourse on love is almost universally applicable to all human beings, heterosexual or homosexual. This is one of the global aspects of the film, namely, the universalization of same-sex love as any other romance by appealing to human emotions.<sup>24</sup>

The Spring 2007 issue of *Film Quarterly* has a special feature on *Brokeback*. Among critics of *Brokeback*, there seems to be a consensus on recognizing the film's featuring of "human feelings" as part of the reason why it has been well accepted in the global market.<sup>25</sup> Particularly in "The Chinese Side of the Mountain," Chris Berry sees the film's orientation towards the familial aspects of the story because Lee as a director has been constantly featuring family ethics

<sup>24</sup> By saying the discourse on love is applicable to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, I am not suggesting that the common ground for them should overwrite their respective particularities, which are beyond the scope of my paper. Here, I am suggesting the same-sex love story following several core narratives of the romance makes it intelligible for audiences of whatever sexual inclinations.

<sup>25</sup> Critics often underscore "sympathy" or "melodramatic elements" as they explain the film's reliance on human emotions as a significant feature.

in the films he has worked on.<sup>26</sup> Berry attributes the treatment of the conflict between homosexual love and familial duty in the film to the director's Confucian upbringing that emphasizes familial duty over desire. Their homosexual yearnings are continually obstructed by familial duties. The scene where Ennis has to turn down Jack's request for getting together because of his daughters is interpreted by Berry as an example of how Ennis sacrifices his love for fulfilling his duty as a father.

Berry goes on to argue that there is another stress on family values in Ennis's consent to attend the wedding of his daughter Alma, Jr. regardless of his job toward the end of the film. He writes: "With Jack, he had to give up his personal desire to stick to his duty. But with his daughter, duty to family trumps duty to employer" (34). The need to repress desire in order to fulfill your duty might be conventional doctrine in Confucianism, but the family ethics that Ennis has observed are not necessarily Chinese. At best, we can say that there is something universal about family values that Lee, with his Chinese cultural background, shares and makes it a point in the film. Moreover, it should be noted that the sideline development of familial duties overpowering a homosexual relationship is actually underlining their suffering even though it is shown from the perspective of the family. This again goes with the core narrative of the romance in the sense that familial duties are just some of the many obstacles in the way of love for Ennis and Jack.

Given that the picturesque representations of the natural landscape accentuate the romantic elements in *Brokeback*, there is a great deal of dejection and impotence that the film evokes to enhance the pathos of the tragic ending. Toward the end of the film, we see Ennis's affections can only rest upon the Brokeback Mountain postcards with no one to send them to and with no messages to write because his lover has been deceased for years and the messages between them are unspeakable secrets. As a matter of fact, Ennis's longing for his love, in a way, serves as a reminder of what consequences will be met with any sexual deviation.

In fact, there are two ends of the cultural politics in the filmic representations of spatial exclusions for Ennis and Jack. First, it enhances the tragic sense of the story, so that viewers might become more sympathetic to their plight. Second, it serves as a containment of homosexuality. In the scene where Jack comes for Ennis all the way from Texas to Wyoming upon receiving the message of his divorce, he misinterprets Ennis's intention to send him the message thinking that there

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<sup>26</sup> In the special features of *Brokeback Mountain* on DVD, Lee has made it clear that he as a director would like to present the story from as many perspectives of the characters as possible. It comes as a natural step to have a family member like Alma look at the relationship between Ennis and Jack.

will be some hope for a steady relationship. We see a pickup entering the border of Wyoming and then a head shot of Jack in the pickup apparently in a great mood. He is grinning and whistling the song "King of the Road" on the radio and even uttering its refrain with an involuntary pat on the steering wheel as if the song were speaking his mind. Unexpectedly, Ennis has to fulfill his family value by staying with his daughters. Here, Ennis clings to the Midwestern cultural value of the family rather than his homosexual desires. Such a plotting secures the preeminence of family values while inviting viewers to be sympathetic to Jack's suffering.

In giving the same-sex love between Ennis and Jack in the conservative society of Wyoming a tragic ending, *Brokeback* is able to work up the poignancy of Ennis and Jack as star-crossed lovers. The suffering for Jack whose craving for love is constantly tantalized is, in a way, typical for all ill-fated lovers in the romance where lovers are affectionately attached to one another but their unions are somehow denied. Ennis and Jack are living in a society full of animosity against homosexuality and they need to go to the wilderness to shun social censorship whenever they get together. The open spaces of the American West are antithetical to the bigotry of homophobia in the civilized world. It seems politically correct and realistically accurate to give *Brokeback* a tragic ending as far as the mainstream ideology of heterosexuality is concerned. As a matter of fact, the ending of the film appears to maximize the tragic and romantic sense of the story while simultaneously making the same-sex love conform to the ideology of monogamy. The camera shows a close-up of Ennis with stinging tears in his eyes holding dearly to his face the ensemble of his shirt on top of Jack's. He says: "Jack, I swear . . ." What Ennis has exactly sworn to Jack is left open-ended, but it sounds like a vow of loyalty to his deceased lover. Both tragic and romantic, this arrangement reflects the core logic of romance where love is undying and irreplaceable.

As a romantic tragedy set in the American West, *Brokeback* does not conclude with the happy union of two lovers but with a tragic ending. For D.A. Miller, the pathos of a tragic ending by which the film has successfully won the audience's sympathy is insufficient, for such a treatment fails to put the homosexual in perspective. With the contention that "the wish to return the Homosexual to latency is universal" (59), he criticizes how the craft of the film has locked homosexuality in the closet and Proulx's objectified narratives have remained at sympathy without empowering the homosexual. In terms of Lee's being praised for "the prim repressiveness with which he handles the homosexual themes" (52), Miller holds that the director's craft has worked upon sublimating homosexual desires rather than openly dealing with homosexuality; he remarks

that the gay love plot is continually reversed whenever there is a homoerotic desire implied in the shot.<sup>27</sup> Miller's critiques of Lee as well as Proulx's handling of the story seem orchestrated by the stance that the film has failed to do justice to the homosexual on the agenda of cultural politics.

In my view, it is on the wrong track to expect a cultural product like *Brokeback* to shoulder some specific agenda with respect to homosexual issues. Considering the film's global popularity, there must be some cultural politics concerning homosexuality that calls out for attention, but that does not mean the filmic representations of homosexuality have to be so politically correct as to help the homosexual to come out of the closet. It can be argued that *Brokeback* has become a cultural phenomenon that might have an enduring significance for popular culture in general and the Hollywood film industry in particular.<sup>28</sup> B. Ruby Rich remarks that "[as] the film escaped its status as a commodity to become a compass by which people fixed their own coordinates, it also escaped the expiration date common to films released into a generally unforgiving marketable and achieved a shelf life of indeterminate longevity" (47). The film has not only captured the sublime vision of the open range in the American West, but has also teased out the most intimate feelings hidden behind the mask of the rugged individual through the same-sex romance between Ennis and Jack. Sympathy for the tragic ending of their story should not be taken as a stopping point as suggested by Miller's critique of Proulx but should be seen as a starting point, because what matters for *Brokeback* as a gay-themed film does not rest upon how much its filmic representations can do justice to homosexuality but upon its ramifying repercussions for the "global popular" on the issue of homosexuality.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

In *Brokeback*, Ennis and Jack first meet in 1963 and continue their relationship for twenty years or so. Historically, this is a period when American society is

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<sup>27</sup> Miller gives an elaborate analysis of how the shots in relation to homosexual desires are being impeded in the film. See Miller, "On the Universality of *Brokeback Mountain*" 56-58.

<sup>28</sup> For a deliberate discussion in this direction, see John Ibson's "Lessons Learned on *Brokeback Mountain*: Expanding the Possibilities of American Manhood" (178-87).

<sup>29</sup> From B. Ruby Rich's research, we learn that there will be more actors in the Hollywood considering taking homosexual roles afterwards and a homosexual man has come out to his family with the help of the film and of a *Brokeback Mountain* forum on the Internet. See Rich, "Brokering *Brokeback*: Jokes, Backlashes, and Other Anxieties" (47).

undergoing radical changes.<sup>30</sup> However, throughout the film, the protagonist Ennis is characterized as someone sticking to the conservative West. He remains a cowboy laborer without any intention to make a change. Witnessing the lynching of a homosexual couple during his childhood, Ennis rules out any possibility of his living with Jack in a ranch. His philosophy of life is: “if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it.” In the cultural backwater of Wyoming, he is virtually insulated from any radical thought that has been going on in many parts of America. The traditional values of the conservative West are being kept intact because of Ennis’s endurance and reticence.

The global popularity of *Brokeback* provides another paradigm of what Durand terms as the global popular. Such apparent American cultural symbols as the cowboy and the West are playing crucial roles in the film. These two symbols have long been portrayed in popular television shows or movies in the Western genre. As *Brokeback* features two cowboys falling in love in the American West, it is almost impossible to talk about the film without considering how these two symbols have been charged with meanings in traditional Westerns despite the fact that *Brokeback* does not share the storyline of heroic adventures in the Western genre. In traditional Westerns, the cowboy hero defines his manhood by defending the family or the community and seeks his freedom in the American wilderness. In *Brokeback* the cowboy is no longer a national hero with a communal commission but is distressed about his homosexual relationship. Neither does the American West promise any hope for a same-sex love. The land of freedom for the cowboy hero in traditional Westerns has become a hopeless place in *Brokeback*. The images of the cowboy might be culturally bound but the shifting images of the cowboy from a heterosexual defender of the community to a homosexual victim of society calls for reevaluating a universal issue: what, exactly, makes one a man?

It is probably premature to celebrate the homosexual’s coming out of the closet by the global success of *Brokeback*. The film addresses the universal issue of human relationship by invoking American cultural heritage to tell the story. The cultural politics of *Brokeback* lies mainly in the rendition of homosexuality in the most sublime vision of the American West. Nevertheless, the romance between Ennis and Jack has to end tragically as a way for the mainstream ideology to contain homosexuality as a deviation. In the film, Jack must die because it is

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, we see some societal changes reflected in the film. Alma’s divorcing Ennis and marrying her boss can be seen as an assertion of women’s rights. This echoes women’s liberation as one of the significant social movements in the 1960s. Examples of industrialization and commercialization are, for example, seen in Jack’s going into business as a top tractor salesman and ranches turned into targets for real estate speculation.

a tragic story and Jack is the one who succumbs to his homosexual desires rather than works hard to fulfill his social obligations. Ennis has to survive and live in solitude because he is the one who clings to the Midwestern cultural values of the family. For the conservative audiences, his survival secures the most traditional values of the dominant ideology while the poignancy of his undying love might win over the sympathy of the liberal audiences.

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## 《斷背山》中以地方想像為基礎的 全球印記

### 摘要

本文以李安所執導的《斷背山》(2005)為例，嘗試理解在文化全球化中「在地」與「全球」之間看似對立卻互相為用的關係。這部影片不管是故事情節或是視覺再現皆不時召喚與中介觀眾對美國西部的文化想像，電影中刻意再現的地理景觀與地景所投射出的意識形態，雖然指涉的是美國西部，具有文化的特殊性與地域性，但故事中同性戀人所遭遇的困境卻具有全球性的指標意義。在文化上，美國西部與牛仔形象之間緊密相連，代表的是西部拓荒的傳統文化價值，牛仔的英雄形象彰顯的是陽剛的特質，西部原野是提供展演英雄事蹟的場域，兩者相輔相成。《斷背山》援用西部與牛仔的符碼，以一對牛仔在西部荒野燃起情愫的愛情故事為敘事架構，藉此重新思考以異性戀取向為主的牛仔與西部所代表的文化意涵。因此，在電影中故事發展主軸由愛情取代了英雄行徑，串接西部在地的文化想像。影片中對美國西部的再現反映出兩種視野的辯證關係，一是農牧發展的西部(the agricultural West)，另外一個是西部荒野的想像(the Wild West)。電影中所召喚的牛仔形象與兩種迥異的西部想像，鋪陳兩位同志牛仔的苦戀情節，強調愛情與命運的乖舛，轉移同志主題可能引發的爭議性，藉此提高異性戀主流觀眾的接受度，讓《斷背山》成為文化全球化中值得深思的例子。

**關鍵字：**《斷背山》，文化全球化，全球，在地，同性戀，牛仔，西部