

Research Essay for Eckles Prize for Freshman Research Excellence

I first thought of my research topic when several of the girls in my hall decided to watch the movie *Brokeback Mountain* and were met with a response from fellow residents that was anything but subtle. With reactions of disgust from the boys, condemning the film as “gay porn,” and accusing rebuttals from the girls as they pointed out the boys’ fascination with “Girls Gone Wild,” the exchange begged several questions about our American culture. Why is female homosexuality attractive, while male homosexuality is regarded with disgust by particular audiences? Why is the acceptance of homosexuality limited to overtly sexual encounters, as implied by my peers’ reaction, and discludes the realm of lifetime/serious relationships, as represented in the film? How widespread are these patterns and points of view and what is the media’s role in this?

As you will soon see, this was by no means the final direction my project went, but merely a jumping off point for a greater project, which for me was one of the most intellectually stimulating experiences of my academic career. These questions and the ones they inspired opened my eyes not only to a discipline that examined different interpretations of sexuality, identity, and acceptance in ways in which I had never explored, but also a new approach to analyzing the world around me. As described above, my original idea was to explore how the media has shaped the dominant culture’s view of homosexuals through an examination of the film *Brokeback Mountain*, its subsequent reviews, and the effect it has had on “typical” American perceptions of male and female homosexuality. However, I was biting off more than I could chew. My initial proposal was too broad and attempted to explain too much. I formulated my topic trying to tackle *all* the issues, but as I began to outline my project, I realized my naïveté in pursuing breadth over depth. I narrowed the scope of my project to an analysis of media professionals’ reactions to the film *Brokeback Mountain* and how these reviews “frame,” or shape the film’s messages in a particular manner that, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce stereotypes regarding homosexuality.

While the entirety of my thesis was not composed at this point in my research, the direction for my project was defined and as I continued to explore the literature in my field, it became more specific. I initially looked for research surrounding the film in the disciplines of Sociology and Communication. I wanted to see what other scholars had observed and discussed in relation to the movie. I began with an exploration of the Article & Databases search engine on the Gelman Library Website and found a variety of relevant databases, including *Gender Studies*, *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Communication and Mass Media Complete*. Through this initial batch of research, I found approximately 30-40 journal articles that could help me. After reading through them, I narrowed them down, keeping only those that had potential, and then went through their bibliographies, making a list of the scholars quoted or referred to most often to research next. I spent hours on the second floor of Eckels going through the periodicals looking up specific articles, and pouring over the journals in which they were contained to look for others relating to the topic. Now that I had examined sources that directly discussed the film, I wanted to explore the theories and methods of analysis that led to such conclusions. When I exhausted that resource, I turned to the stacks where I discovered a variety of books that gave me a better understanding of the perspectives of the fields and their approaches to analyzing the issues the film and its subsequent reviews raised. I explored complex concepts such as queer theory, heteronormativity, sexual identity, , inclusion, paradox of visibility, and framing analysis, among others. In addition to spending my fair share of time on the main floors, I spent several hours in Gelman's Special Collections Research Center working closely with a particular manuscript unavailable elsewhere. I also used the Consortium Loan Service to borrow books GW did not carry from American and George Mason University, and when no member school carried a book, I used the Interlibrary Loan Service to obtain a specific text.

In addition to learning how to use the various resources GW's Library System offers, I also learned how to evaluate the quality and appropriate usage of sources. Some sources, such as academic journals and books, were appropriate to use to affirm, extend, or enhance my analysis while others, such

as the movie reviews, were the objects of my analysis through which I illustrated my thesis. Also, as I mentioned earlier, not all articles or books contained information relevant to my specific topic. Many times I would read an article and get excited about the new concepts or perspective it brought up only to go back later and realize that its ideas, while interesting and inspiring, were not actually within the scope of my paper. I had to learn to say no to certain points for the sake of the flow and coherence of my project. While I did not include all my sources in my final project and some proved to be dead-ends, having such a large research bank enabled me to pick and choose the sources that fit best with what I was trying to achieve and allowed me to learn so much about the areas in which I explored. I tried to utilize as many library resources as possible to gain a comprehensive view of the disciplines in which my project was relevant, and a deep and learned understanding of the issues I was confronting and the potential implications for my project. I wanted to produce a project that would not only command the attention of my peers, but also of the greater intellectual community; a project that would contribute to the conversations of scholars in my field and hopefully, inspire further discussion and action.

Throughout my research project, I discovered several things not only about my field but about myself as a researcher. I learned that queer theory (which is the field I believe my project ultimately falls under, although it derives its conclusions from an interdisciplinary approach to analysis) has an almost infinite amount of available resources, contrary to my initial perception. In regards to myself as a researcher, I learned that when I am researching a topic that fascinates me, I completely immerse myself so that I can learn the most I can through the experience. However, I think the most important characteristic I discovered about the research process as a whole is its inspirational power and potential to instigate discussion. For me in particular, this project has opened my eyes to a world of access to every kind, type, or bit of knowledge. Now that I know how to use the tools, I feel that I have the power to contribute to the intellectual community, and with a lot of work and a little luck, the power to inspire and reach the greater global community as well.

Framing Homosexuality:

**Media Influence in Reconciling the film
Brokeback Mountain within the limits of a
Heteronormative Society**

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The “cinematic love story of the year” (Erstein TGIF6) and “A romance like any other,” (Turan E1) *Brokeback Mountain* took movie critics by storm. With its “eternal themes about love and longing that everyone can identify with,” (Meyers ¶ 2) Ang Lee’s film rocked Hollywood. However, in the midst of all the praise and all the excitement about “one of the greatest love stories in film history,” (Williams E1) it seems we have forgotten one very important thing: it is a story of two gay men. And what’s this? Another twist: it’s not *just* about love.

Although queer characters today are generally more “visible” in mainstream media and entertainment, the “framework” in which these characters are portrayed nonetheless places queer sexuality into a heteronormative discourse that strives to placate the heterosexual majority of popular culture. Despite the increased “visibility,” or presence, of homosexuals in shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace*, the much-needed discussion of homophobia, its destructive repercussions, and the exploration of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation are still absent. Why is this case? Why have we—twenty-first century Americans—failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of homosexuality as a sexual identity, ignored the consequences of our homophobic tendencies, and ultimately excluded these discussions from our primary means of communication, popular media?

These are difficult questions and ones I cannot answer. However, in order to add to this discussion, we need to first examine a more specific question: How have the voices of media professionals influenced the popular discourse on the homosexual themes in movies, and in turn, the popular discourse on, and interpretations of, homosexuality in society in general? To focus this question, I look through the specific lens of the film *Brokeback Mountain*, its subsequent critic reviews and how these reviews “frame,” or shape the film’s messages in a particular manner that, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce stereotypes regarding homosexuality. Through a close examination of the film *Brokeback Mountain* and the discourse that surrounded it, we can

discover how and why these reviews strengthen queer stereotypes that consequently marginalize the gay community and the idea of “queerness” itself, in spite of possible efforts to enfranchise it, and dilute the film’s message of the destructiveness of homophobia. By studying a variety of movie reviews, using Robert Entman’s methodology of framework analysis, and examining the concept of a “paradox of visibility,” all from a queer theorist perspective, I will expose the heteronormalizing effects of such “framing” by media professionals, and their consequential contribution to the propagation of heteroideological thinking in American society.

Some definitions: What is Heteronormativity?

Before I begin my discussion, there are several key terms that need to be clarified. First, let me explain what is meant by the term “heteronormative.” Essentially, the concept of heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual norms are the only correct or normal conditions in which a society should exist. One queer theorist, Cathy J. Cohen, defines heteronormativity as the practices and institutions “that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society,” (Cohen 24) in turn, implying that any non-heterosexual orientation is “unnatural” and therefore illegitimate. Jillian Todd Weiss extends this idea by adding that the heterosexual norm is not just a norm but “a normative principle...which creates a standard to be met, below which people are not permitted by society to deviate...This standard has been enshrined into law, transforming a social custom into a legal control mechanism, a sort of ‘natural law’ theory of gender” (Weiss 124). This thinking creates “cultural heterosexism” in which the dominant or mainstream culture embraces the heteronormative ideology mentioned above, and condemns any other sexual orientation—whether it be lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, or anything in between—as deviant. On the one hand, this “ongoing subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality,” as Robert McRuer describes in his book *Crip Theory*, “allows for heterosexuality to be institutionalized as the ‘normal relations of the sexes’” (McRuer 6), propagating an “institutional

heterosexism” in which established laws, practices, and customs systematically discriminate against non-heterosexual people (Koppelman 236, 244). On the other, the institutionalization of heterosexuality itself “allows for homosexuality to be subordinated” (McRuer 7). It is a continual cycle, with the subordination of homosexuality being both the cause and effect of heterosexual institutionalization. Often times, this perpetuation of prejudice results in gay bashing and homophobia, or the fear or hatred of homosexuals, (Koppelman 241) which further promulgates discrimination against the people of the gay community.

It is the widespread acceptance of heteronormativity that marginalizes non-heterosexuals, often times leading to violent and homophobic rhetoric, especially in the social and political discourse found in the media. In our heteroideological society, media professionals “normalize” their movie critiques, attempting to fit films into homogenized narratives and heterosexual discourse with which “dominant” heterosexual audiences can identify. In films that include same-sex desire, homosexuality is recoded and normalized to be consistent with the privileged heterosexual order and gay identity is only made legitimate through assimilation into the dominant heterosexual structure. By trying to fit a film such as *Brokeback Mountain*, that clearly challenges the ideas of heteroideology through its exposure of destructive homophobia, into a heteronormative mold, these reviewers disregard the discussion of different sexual identities and overlook the movie’s critique of social norms. It is through an analysis of the rhetoric used in these movie reviews that we will discover the heteronormativity permeating our society and be able to recognize the normalizing effects of such heteronormative discourse.

Framing Analysis & A “Paradox of Visibility”

The manner in which these media professionals (both intentionally and unintentionally) shaped their reviews of *Brokeback Mountain* was through a process that communications scholar Robert Entman described as “framing.” In his essay, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” Entman articulates the process of framing in communicative texts and

emphasizes that analyzing the specific frames used by media professionals is key to discovering the way in which the media can maintain influence over human consciousness. According to Entman, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient (or more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to their audience) in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 52). Increased salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive information, discern meaning, process and store it according to the analysis of the communicative text. Media studies scholar Alice Hall reiterates this point stating that reviews tell viewers how to think about a film and its content by providing “frames and background information that is likely to shape how viewers interpret and respond to the film” ultimately shaping their evaluation as a whole (Hall 401). This potential power to “guide the receiver’s thinking” (Entman 52) can significantly influence how individuals respond to a specific text and its subject matter, more specifically, as in the case of *Brokeback Mountain*, how readers of movie reviews responded to the homosexual context and homophobic themes it contained. It is this salience of information, the ability to make an idea meaningful in a particular way in order to direct human thought in a particular direction, that instigates the normalizing process through which homosexuality is molded into the heteronormative framework fashioned by the media. Entman also cites repetition of certain phrases or association of information with culturally familiar symbols as ways to make communicative pieces more salient. In the case of *Brokeback Mountain*, heterosexual reviewers tended to link our gay protagonists with heterosexual couples in literature and film such as Romeo and Juliet or American icons like the cowboy. Media scholars Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery claim that by using such popular “frames of reference,” however, reviews betray their attempts to place films into the “normative limits” acceptable to our hetero-dominated society (Allen & Gomery 90). In the cases in which a film is “different” and does not “fit neatly into the customary frames of reference,” violating

“[hetero]normative stylistic standards,” critics often struggle to position the film “within some familiar discursive space” (Allen & Gomery 90, 120). Despite reviewers’ apparent desire to frame the film in a way that transcends binary sexual boundaries, their struggle to position the movie within “familiar discursive space” reveals the “inescapable” heteronormative limits that characterize our discourse. This struggle can be seen in the actions of *Brokeback Mountain’s* critics as they strived to relegate the movie’s queer narrative to a heteronormative framework, resulting in a failure to see the film’s messages about the destructiveness of homophobia. By reducing *Brokeback Mountain’s* story to encompass only what “fits” into the heterosexual model, reviewers attempt to normalize what is considered by the heterosexual majority of popular culture as abnormal or unnatural and make our characters fit the universal mold of heterosexual love.

Based on the previous examples, it is obvious that what media professionals say can have powerful repercussions in shaping public perceptions about homosexuality and what orientations are right, wrong, natural, and unnatural. However, what is NOT said is just as significant as what is included. To finish his argument that the rhetoric used by media professionals communicates and propagates social sexual norms, Entman asserts that the omission of certain words or ideas can be sometimes even more important than those discussed. By ignoring and omitting discussion of controversial, or different, images and issues, entertainment reviews often perpetuate stereotypes or disregard them as unimportant or unworthy of social attention. As we shall see through our analysis of the reviews, many critics ignored the homophobic themes altogether, downplaying the importance of the movie’s core message and subsequently “de-gaying” the film and leading the reviewers’ audiences to do the same.

Although the press often reinforces “homophobic myths and stereotypes”(Meyers 321) that perpetuate an endless cycle of prejudice towards same-sex couples, as scholars Robert A. Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus point out, this perpetuation of prejudice is not always

obvious and is often masked by the increased positive representations of queer characters in the media. While on the surface many popular mainstream TV shows such as *Ellen*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, etc, appear to embrace homosexuality, there is a disconnect between the growing *presence* of LGBT characters and level of *legitimacy* that non-heterosexual orientations have in the eyes of popular culture. Despite the ever-increasing visibility of homosexuals in both news and entertainment, media depictions “while ostensibly welcome[ing] gays and lesbians into the mainstream,...frequently do so in a way that simultaneously tames and contains gays and gay experience” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus 142). This contradiction can be summed up in Kevin Barnhurst’s concept of a “paradox of visibility,” in which the mere presence of queer characters in the media is often wrongly interpreted for acceptance and whereas “visibility is no guarantor of legitimacy” (Shugart 68). By placing queers into a popular culture that speaks and understands only through the “heteronormative sensibilities that characterize the mainstream context,” (Shugart 68), media portrayals only accept sexual minorities while simultaneously reaffirming the heterosexual order. The media does this through what Brookey and Westerfelhaus refer to as “deification,” or veneration. Through “deified representation of the queer experience,” they argue, “mainstream culture can appear to embrace them, [the culturally marginalized non-heterosexual community,] while at the same time defining queers in terms that dehumanize, marginalize, and attempt to tame” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus 153). Therefore, the “success” of the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, seen in all of the “positive” reactions it received, “doesn’t mean that discrimination against gays and lesbians is erased,” (Dow 137) but rather that it is reinforced in the way in which critics normalized it to fit the heteroideological mold of society. In fact, the aim for inclusion in popular discourse may be the problem. As Robert McRuer states, “inclusion” can be a dangerous concept, especially when it comes to the media’s attempts to incorporate the queer community into a heteronormative space. Inclusion is “a way to contain us [queers], to dilute our critiques, to

transform us” (McRuer) into a watered-down version of ourselves that fits the heteronormative mold. Through inclusion, queers are stripped of their sexual identity in order to appear less threatening to the hegemony of heterosexuality in the mainstream. While on the surface, inclusion hints at assimilation and understanding, in reality it is a façade for the normalizing efforts of the heterosexual majority to tame and contain the queer experience. In examining the film, we can utilize the concept of a paradox of queer visibility to highlight the reviewers’ acts of drawing attention to the characters’ homosexuality, while simultaneously extolling their story as universally applicable, regardless of sexual orientation. Through this idea, we can also see the delegitimization and subsequent marginalization of homosexuality.

Brokeback Mountain: The Film and Short Story

Before I discuss how reviewers and other media reacted to the movie, it is important to take a brief look at the original narrative by Annie Proulx and its film adaptation, directed by Ang Lee and written by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana. To fully understand the normalization that is created by the heteronormative discourse surrounding the film, we must first understand the core message of the destructiveness of homophobia that was portrayed in both the short story and the movie. Because the film and short narrative are almost identical in plot evolution and character dialogue, I will describe them as a whole. The story takes place in the summer of 1963 in Wyoming where two young men are hired as sheep herders for the season. During the long months of isolation, they develop a special bond, one which they are only vaguely aware of at first until one night when it rises to the surface in a passionate encounter. When the herding season ends, they awkwardly part ways, claiming that it was a one-time-only incident and that they “ain’t queer,” only much later, to realize later the true depth of their feelings. They fall in love, participating in a decades-long secret love affair as they struggle not only through marriage and children, but through coming to terms with their own identities,

sexual and otherwise. They face extreme adversity, as they are crushed under societal constraints, including a destructive and dangerous homophobic community. While there are a great number of scenes and aspects of the film that illustrate the destructiveness of homophobia, for the purpose of this paper and within our short time limit, I will only describe a few.

Throughout the film, both characters struggle to hide their true sexual identity, fearful of what society will do if it discovers the truth. This particular fear manifests itself most prominently in Ennis, the guarded, quiet one, who refuses to settle down with Jack, the dreamer of the pair who wants to make their relationship work, in spite of the homophobic attitudes of their rural community. We find that Ennis's anxiety about publicizing his and Jack's relationship is caused by a traumatizing incident in his childhood regarding two gay men in his neighborhood.

Describing it to Jack, as they lay embracing in a motel room after four years of separation, Ennis tells the story:

There was these two old quys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich... They was a joke even though they was pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They'd took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until pulled off, just bloody pulp... Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. Hell, for all I know he'd done the job. (Proulx 29)

This gruesome scene is a constant reminder for Ennis of society's homophobic repression and his inevitable fate if his secret is ever revealed. This scene is once more repeated in the film, in the end, when Ennis learns of Jack's death from Jack's widow Lureen. Although she tells Ennis he died of an accident when fixing a flat tire, the scene that flashes across Ennis's mind (and the screen) is of Jack being beaten to death by some men with a tire iron. This horrifying image graphically illustrates the destructiveness of homophobia on both physical and psychological levels, with Jack's death and Ennis's perpetual suffering at the loss of the lover with which he could never fully be.

Another graphic example of extreme homophobia found in the film occurs during Ennis and Jack's first trip to Brokeback Mountain. In the scene the morning after the two lovers first

have sex, Ennis returns to flock where he finds the corpse of sheep, apparently attacked by a coyote (Brokeback Mountain). Surrounded by flies, the corpse is vividly depicted with the sheep's body torn open, revealing the tattered organs and bloodied flesh. By placing such a grotesque and violent image immediately after Jack and Ennis engage in intercourse, the film alludes to the destructive homophobic attitudes of society. The dead sheep is a symbol, an indication of what might become of Jack and Ennis if their "unnatural behavior" is discovered. Like the innocent sheep was murdered, the love of our protagonists will be destroyed by the oppressive homophobic forces in society. This image appears to Ennis as an omen and a warning: your differences will get you killed. These scenes, among others, illustrate the intentioned message of the author, as she described in an interview with the Associated Press as "the story of destructive rural homophobia" and an exposure of a brutal culture that keeps gays locked in the closet and where the consequence of being different can be fatal (Proulx).

The Reviews: How do reviewers frame the queer relationship between *Brokeback's* protagonists and the greater message of destructive homophobia?

Now that I have established the core message of the destructiveness of homophobia in the film and narrative and explained how framing by media professionals can propagate a heteronormative ideology, let us examine the movie reviews themselves to see if they live up to their normalizing potential. To do this, I will closely follow a study of 113 reviews of *Brokeback Mountain* conducted by Brenda Cooper and Edward Pease of Utah State University as well as other reviews found in media outlets from around the country. Although U.S. movie critics from this diverse pool of national daily newspapers, large-circulation daily regional and state newspapers, smaller dailies, religious magazines, entertainment magazines, blogs, and gay publications, generally gave the film "high marks," the discourse underlying their reviews generated complementary but conflicting frames that direct attention away the movie's core theme of destructive rural homophobia. In their study, Cooper and Pease argue that "reviewers

framed the film as a 'universal' love story while simultaneously encouraging audiences to read it as a 'gay cowboy movie'" (Cooper & Pease 249). This contradiction of meanings—treating the film as “universal” while at the same time distinguishing it as something strange, different, and “gay”—subsequently led to varying results in the interpretations of the film. The frameworks for analysis that resulted were the universality of the film’s love story, homophobia as an illness of the past, a depiction of the protagonists as the victimizers over victims, and an outright exclusion of homosexuality as a part of the discussion altogether. The discrepancies among these contradictory and sporadic frames “illustrate how efforts in the mainstream press to privilege queerness struggle to exist within heteronormative space” (Cooper & Pease 249). This attempt to place a square peg (the queer love story) into a round hole (heteronormative framework) propagated heteronormativity as reviewers lacked the language to transcend the homosexual-heterosexual binary mindset, effectively disguising the queer experience in the telling of our protagonists’ story and revealing dominant popular culture’s heterosexual bias. Rather than celebrating *Brokeback Mountain* for its exposure of modern homophobia’s destructive attributes and its unprecedented challenges to heteroideology, press reviews ultimately diluted the social critique by universalizing Ennis and Jack’s relationship, removing it from its queerness, and placing it into a heteronormative framework.

A “Universal Love Story,” No Homophobia Involved

A large number of the movie reviews critics framed *Brokeback Mountain* as a “universal” (or “normal”) love story like any other. In fact, not only did critics praise the film’s universal appeal, many seemed eager to assure readers that it was not, in fact, promoting a homosexual agenda. For example, Rod Dreher of the *Dallas Morning News* described the film as clearly not being “about the need to normalize homosexuality, or ‘about’ anything other than the tragic human condition” (Dreher 25A) Although he recognizes the “tragedy” involved in the characters’ story to some extent, like many conservative op-ed writers, he universalizes the

problem as a characteristic of the general “human condition,” resulting in a distraction from the homosexuality and violence of homophobia in the film. In addition, numerous other reviewers compared Ennis and Jack (the movie’s queer protagonists) to some of the greatest lovers of all time, a strategy that sought to normalize for straight audiences what might otherwise be a strange or peculiar gay story and associate Entman’s “culturally familiar symbols” with the lovers of *Brokeback Mountain*. For example, Mike LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* likened the pair to Romeo and Juliet (LaSalle E1); the *Christian Century*’s John Petrakis compared their relationship to that of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (Petrakis 43); and Glenn Whip of the *LA Daily News* said *Brokeback* recalled the doomed lovers of *Gone with the Wind* and *Titanic* (Whipp). By comparing queer characters to “familiar heterosexual symbols such as Romeo and Juliet, or Western icons John Wayne and Clint Eastwood,” reviewers ironically elevated queer visibility “while simultaneously relegating queers and queer experiences to the margins” (Cooper & Pease 249). Also, by “framing *Brokeback Mountain* as just another love story,” critics made it “familiar and safe for heterosexual audiences” (Cooper & Pease 258). While Jack and Ennis’s love has the same passion and same quality as any of the heterosexual icons mentioned earlier and should be celebrated as such, to applaud their story as *just* a universal narrative about love and ignore their homosexual identity discounts the important social critique regarding destructive homophobia. Without the homosexual distinction in this case, one loses all constructive meaning, left with another tale of star-crossed lovers. The cycle of heteronormative subjugation continues.

While making *Brokeback Mountain* a universally applicable love story in itself normalizes the film’s social message, we must not forget to examine the equally detrimental contradiction we pointed out earlier: the propensity of reviewers to “de-gay” the protagonists in order to make them acceptable. By universalizing Ennis and Jack’s relationship, reviewers eschewed the queerness that might otherwise challenge the heteronormative ideals with which its

heterosexual audiences were comfortable, while simultaneously claiming such universalization made same-sex desire acceptable in popular culture. This, however, was not the case. Although reviewers sought to normalize and include gay characters into their discourse, the only way in which they could accomplish this within the heteronormative limits that constrain our homophobic society was to strip them of the sexual identity. In their reviews, critics frequently dismissed the central characters' homosexuality as "beside the point," (Houston, Toppman) "only a minor detail," (Franklin) "secondary," (Bloom) and "inconsequential" (Dujsik) They raved that anyone, "regardless of your sexuality" (Douglas, Ferguson, Sage) can relate to the story for universal love is the film's thematic core and you can "forget everything else" (Ellis). All of these portrayals completely exclude the discussion of homosexuality, and therefore that of homophobia, that make up the core of the film's message. This is a quintessential example of Entman's concept of omission. Such dismissal (or omission) of the queer sexual identity of the characters strips away all meaning from their struggle, just as regarding their love as "universal" diminishes the story to just another tale of forbidden love. By placing these characters within the "safe" area of a heteronormative framework, reviewers effectively sought to "un-queer" and normalize them, refusing to acknowledge their homosexual orientation and therefore refusing to recognize the problem of homophobia. Ultimately, this frame of universality underlying press reviews positions gays safely within the boundaries of heteronormativity and ignores the very real problems it creates.

Furthermore, this universalizing act, in its quest to make Ennis and Jack's story universal, also depicted modern society as immune from homophobia, describing it as an illness of the past. According to queer theorist David Grindstaff, reviewers "displace the homophobia that confronts them in *Brokeback Mountain* by relegating social prejudice and anti-gay violence to another time and place" (Grindstaff 235). In this view, Ennis and Jack become "calamitous victims of time, stuck in a narrow-minded world of the 1950s and 1960s where homosexuality was wholly

unaccepted and something never spoken about” (Grindstaff 235). By referring to homophobia and the discrimination against homosexuals solely in the context of the 1950s and ‘60s, and depicting the characters as “victims of time,” they relegate the destructive nature of homophobia to past. Another review all but erases society’s current homophobic attitudes, stating: “[W]hen young gay people are ready to begin searching their heritage and the evolution of the struggle of those who came before them, this film will be a valuable tool in their understanding of just what an arduous journey gay people have endured to have the freedoms and acceptance we enjoy today” (Lodger). This naïve view that queer persons live in a “free” world pats present-day society on the back, completely denying the presence of anti-gay prejudice that permeates social and political discourse. By erasing the story’s queer content through a heteronormalization and universalization of the film’s narrative, reviews are able to dismiss the very real problem of homophobia as a myth belonging to history, once again denying the discrimination still present in our society.

Protagonists as Victimizers and Corrupters of Family Values, & the Plight of the Women They Hurt

Another way in which reviewers framed *Brokeback Mountain* was to ignore the message of destructive homophobia altogether and focus instead on other aspects of the film to draw attention away from the plight of our protagonists. This framework also specifically exemplifies how what is not said in reviews can have significant ramifications on how audiences will interpret the subject matter of the film. One such aspect critics focused on instead of homophobia was that of the adultery and a lack of family values. In “Brokering *Brokeback Mountain*—a Local Reception Study” by Harry Benshoff, he discusses how “conservatives—even gay ones—were upset by the film’s seeming validation of adultery and betrayal of family values” (Benshoff 9). While Jack and Ennis do commit adultery, it is not because they are nymphomaniacs or lack respect for family values. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Ennis has two little girls whom he

“loves to pieces” (Proulx 1997) but with whom he cannot build a strong relationship for fear they will discover his secret and disown him. Throughout his life, he sacrifices his love with Jack and his own needs to support them financially and in the end, he sacrifices his hermitage from the community to come to his daughter’s wedding, even under the threat of public ridicule and harassment. Jack is portrayed as being the concerned parent, not his wife, when it comes to his son’s performance at school, and is depicted as a good son who is willing to “lick [his parent’s] ranch into shape” (Proulx 1997). Jeffery Overstreet wrote in his review of the film: “essentially, the story of *Brokeback Mountain* is the same as most stories of infidelity—two people who can’t control their desire for each other end up hurting others, telling lies, and excusing themselves of responsibility for their actions” (Overstreet). By framing Ennis and Jack’s relationship as ordinary heterosexual adultery and completely overlooking the influence of the heterosexist social climate, Overstreet transforms homophobic society into a utopian world devoid of social forces and places the emphasis on the destructive attributes of adultery rather than those of homophobia. For our protagonists, adultery is not an act of free choice but rather a product of a “bitch of an unsatisfactory situation” (Proulx 1997). If they were permitted by society to be together, neither would have gotten married in the first place, or at least would have been able to divorce, marry each other, and still maintain a relationship with their children. However, because society is driven by a heteroideology in which homosexual love is unnatural, illegitimate, and wrong, Ennis and Jack were forced to the margins. They were coerced by society to practice adultery for it was the only way for them to embrace their love and true identity.

In addition to depicting Ennis and Jack as adulterers and “corrupters” of family values, the reviewers further shaped the film in such a way that distracted its audiences from the dilemma of one oppressed group by pointing out the oppression of another, less threatening minority: women. One straight feminist journalist Benshoff quotes in his article, Jacquielynn Floyd, criticized the film for ignoring the plight of the protagonists’ spouses. She claimed that

the movie characterized “the poor wives,” Alma and Lureen, as being “written as stock characters: one is tearful, frumpy, perpetually nagging drudge; the other is a brittle big-haired harpy” (Floyd). She focuses on the plight of Ennis and Jack’s spouses, essentially condemning the film as being sexist in its static depiction of its female characters. However, the static nature of the female characters should be easily understood as they are merely supporting roles in a greater story, one that is not about the relationship between the men and their wives but about society’s homophobic attitudes towards Jack and Ennis’s relationship and its deadly repercussions.

Other reviewers also focused their attention on the supporting female characters, some going as far as holding Jack and Ennis responsible for their pain. One movie critic, Phil Villarreal, concludes in his review that “[Jack and Ennis] victimize the women they trick into becoming their wives,” (Villarreal) implying that our protagonists purposefully get involved in their marriages out of spite and with hurtful agendas. This view not only suggests Ennis and Jack had a master plan to bring malignant suffering upon their wives, but also downplays the quality of their love and struggle. Justin Vicari, in his reflections on *Brokeback Mountain*, cite the tragic circumstances of all three female roles (Alma, Lureen, and later Ennis’s girlfriend Cassie) as they “find themselves in love with men who closed off to them, emotionally unavailable, and barely interested in even having sex” (Vicari 6). The film, he claims, is a “moving portrait of these women’s struggle for selfhood” (Vicari 6) in which the women “suffer emotional pain nearly as savage as that suffered by Ennis and Jack” (Vicari 6). While we cannot discount the evident heartbreak experienced by the female characters, to place the pain they endure as a result of their thwarted, yet socially accepted, heterosexual love on the same level as Jack and Ennis’s socially prohibited, forbidden love completely misrepresents and distracts from the film’s intentioned critique of our culture’s homophobia. Alma, Lureen, and Cassie, while heartbroken, are able to move on to other men, get involved in other relationships, and have no qualms

regarding their own identity, in spite of mild insecurities resultant of their significant other's lack of interest. They may suffer because their love is not reciprocated by the men for whom they have fallen, but they were at least able to express their love in public. They do not have to cope with the forced separation Jack and Ennis had to endure. Jack and Ennis are madly, passionately in love with each other but cannot express it, cannot embrace it, and are forced to the margins by society's homophobia. Bruce Bennett, another reviewer, reasons that "despite the rather unoriginal device that is used at the end of the film [homophobic violence] to satisfy its 'tragic' aspirations, Ennis and Jack are not, in fact, the primary victims of their unbridled passions. That distinction falls to the wives" (Bennett). By placing "tragic" in quotation marks and describing their passions as unbridled, Bennett mocks the protagonists' circumstances as an uninhibited manifestation of their perverted sexuality, deeming their pain and suffering illegitimate and unworthy of a "tragic" label. Depicting homosexual desire here as pathological and damaging ultimately serves to justify society's homophobic attitudes, which completely contradicts the intentioned message of the story. It is not homosexual desire that is pathological and damaging but the homophobia of society itself. Locating the females as "the story's 'true' victims renders Ennis and Jack as victimizers rather than victims" (Grindstaff 234) and completely alters the film's central meaning. By making the movie about the heterosexual women and falling into a heteronormative discourse, we lose sight of its real message: the destructiveness of homophobia.

Why does this Matter?

As Jeffrey Montgomery said in his Matthew Shepard Memorial Lecture, "homophobia is the last socially accepted form of bigotry" (Montgomery). The previous discussion is important because it not only sheds light on important issues concerning the increased visibility of homosexuals in the media without increased legitimacy of homosexuality as a sexual orientation, but also exposes the strong heteroideology and homophobia that is ever-present in our society. It is therefore imperative that we cautiously examine what *Brokeback Mountain's* movie critics say

and more importantly, how they say it, so we can understand the media's influence on our judgments. Only then, will we have the ability to consciously choose whether or not to marginalize the queer community. It is only through this recognition and rejection of heteronormative thinking in America as the *only* way of thinking in America that we will ever overcome our homophobic tendencies and evolve into a truly tolerant society.

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