

# QUEERING THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MASCULINE “WEST” IN ANG LEE’S *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*

JANET A. MCDONALD

## Abstract

*The colonial construction of Western dominance over Eastern ‘others’ features predominantly in postcolonial theory (as do those of the North over the South). Assumptions about geographical placement and origin are also sources of gendered space, especially if one subscribes to the representation of female space as ‘inner’ or domestic and masculine spaces as ‘outer’ or embracing of the outdoors. Popular notions of the cowboy as an embodiment of ‘outdoor’ masculinity endorses and repeats the colonial West as a dominant and desirable masculine representation, which has popularly evolved over time as a stable gender category through the use of cowboy imagery to sell ‘manly’ habits such as smoking (Marlborough Man), and to selling the hypermasculinised American Masculine Dream (John Wayne). The characters from Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (BBM) are from the great American cowboy traditions; the frontiering West of Wyoming and Texas. The film uses the celebrity bodies of Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger to queer the cowboy whilst simultaneously maintaining the dominant homosocial attributes of the colonial West. The actors’ actual bodies are neither queer nor cowboy, and their celebrity status suggests a gender performative ‘fraud’, yet the ‘star power’ of the actors alone has catapulted BBM from independent film obscurity into mainstream discussion and popular culture.*

## Introduction

This paper comes out of further deliberations about my research on the performance of actual and fictional masculinities upon the body (McDonald, 2007a; 2007b; 2006), which has encouraged me to think further on the coercive and colonial nature of constructed fictions where embodied characters speak on behalf of the audience. Actors are both products of culture and cultural products (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 2), and actor-celebrity bodies are surfaces for maintaining dominant notions of gender separateness. Film making institutions ‘normalise’ the actor-celebrity as a

stable category of popular culture, and the process of grooming and ornamentation that is involved with plucking would-be celebrities from obscurity and re-packaging them is a slick, embodied marketing tool that is a repeatable act of inscription upon the body of the actor. A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald entitled “The New Lads Muscle In” (Abramowitz, 2007) trumpets that the “age of the pretty boy is over” and that Hollywood wants its young leads to have more masculine appeal: the process of celebrity-body-making-for-popular-consumption is laid bare in this article.

The construction of the male actor-celebrity body will be explored in this paper because more often than not the hypermasculinised set of symbols and images that are rendered visible can be directly linked to a dollar value in the business; if the right combination of production team and ornamental bodies are placed in a film set, the returns on the investment can be very lucrative for all involved. The Focus Features film *Brokeback Mountain* (BBM) is no exception: the combination of director Ang Lee’s reputation for capturing intimate moments in epic-styled narratives, cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto’s vision, and the celebrity bodies of Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger, gave BBM the most (eight) nominations at the 2006 Academy Awards (winning Best Director, Best Original Score, and Best Adapted Screenplay).

BBM only cost \$14million to produce and began with a limited release in the USA in early December 2005. By Christmas it was declared a box-office success as the highest per theatre gross of any movie that year. The film grossed \$83 million in the USA alone and \$178 million worldwide. It is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the highest grossing Westerns (since 1980) – 5<sup>th</sup> highest ranking Western behind *Dances with Wolves*, *Unforgiven*, *Maverick* and *Back to the Future III*.<sup>1</sup>

I read this film as an exploration of masculinities, which postcolonially queers the

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<sup>1</sup> Rankings available from Box Office Mojo website

notion of the most revered of all American masculine symbols; the cowboy. Simply referring to BBM as a 'gay cowboy' film is fraught with problems of reactionary contradictions that maintain and limit the term 'gay' as a colonial Other to straight. This paper will explore the interface between postcolonial and queering processes upon the fictional American West cowboy as represented by the celebrity bodies of Gyllenhaal and Ledger, whose celebrity status propelled the film's surprising mainstream success.

### Putting the West in Western

In postcolonial writings, geographical symbols are used to represent and polarise difference. Notions of Western civilisation as a white, privileged and dominant space are well established over the East, (just as 'the North' is over the 'the South'). Such notions employ discourses to mark off the Other and also polarise the perceived separateness of genders in the traditional histories and fictions of the American Western. The geographical grounding of the American West began in 19<sup>th</sup> century frontiers of the United States after the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803 when a large proportion of men left the East of the USA seeking new opportunities for employment and investment (West of the Rockies was still 'uncharted' and under Mexican control until 1846-48). Although women (mostly wives) and male immigrants (Irish, Chinese, etc.) also embraced this journey, it is through the colonial discourse of the white man that this expansion takes on epic and romantic proportions. Thus began the physicalisation of the notion of Manifest Destiny which, as journalist John L. Sullivan wrote in 1839, was a God-given right of the US to spread the 'great experiment of Liberty' throughout America. This ideology very much anchored the explosion of the Western genre of literature which recounted many masculine stories of hardship and journeys, with an "unapologetic exclusion of femininity" (Tompkins in Packard, 2006, p. 8). The status of cowboys relies upon bachelorhood formed around a homosocial partnership, and Tompkins argues that this literature served as "reactionary narratives" to the "then-popular sentimental-domestic novels that were flooding the marketplace and promoting ideas of female influence at the sphere of the home" (p. 8). The popularity of Western fictions affected the culture of language in the USA;

the phrase 'going West' originally meant 'going bad' or 'off the rails' (presumably going West to get away from trouble), yet it quickly became 'Go West, young man, go West', used by New York Tribune journalist and aspiring politician Horace Greeley in reference to the vast opportunities available to develop manhood along frontier USA (Quinion, 2003).

In theatre and movie scholarship it is widely agreed that the two most popular and organic creative products of the USA came from this era: the stage musical and the Western. The latter emerging from the hyper-realistic frontiers melodramas (such as Davy Crockett, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West extravaganzas that toured throughout the 1880s-1890s), which were hugely popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century both in the USA and Europe. The Western film genre did much to perpetuate the myth of the cowboy as a true and stable embodiment of American manliness; the Western remains one of the most popular film genres of all time. The Classic Westerns reached their zenith in the films of the all-American director John Ford. Throughout the 60s-70s such films made John Wayne a household name. The Western continues to create a hyper-frontier-masculinity that is a highly consumable and desirable product, made manifest corporeally on the bodies of male actors (sometimes female, but not often) who are agents of dissemination. The Western had and has the power to make stars out of actors; it may even be considered a right of passage for some American actors whose celebrity status has certainly upturned after a stint in a popular Western. The appeal to the larger audience is bankable; Westerns are a good investment even if, generally, films are not.

The American West represented in these films is a hypermasculinised and colonial space where notions of being outdoors, living rough, 'conquest' and appropriation are masculine and dominant. The Western literature that preceded the film genre was also a mass process of naturalising white men into the frontiers, so that the West represents a desirability of dominance, particularly over the South (Mexico, not southeast of the Mississippi). By the late 1850s the term 'going South' replaced 'going West' as a euphemism for situations turning sour/turning for the worse, but also for sexual activity that might be perverse. In American States that border

with Mexico, 'going south' continues to mark off the South as somewhere where rack and ruin awaits; where contraband can be obtained and exploitation of all sorts can be purchased. These Southwestern states position Mexico with some hostility, as foreign (more so than Canada) and abject. The character Jack Twist in BBM makes a habit of slipping off unseen at night across the **border** from Texas into Mexico to have silent and anonymous sex with a dark Latino male body in an alleyway. The 'south' is therefore menacing as it is maintained as a place of dark pleasures in this film, consistent with white colonial perspective of the South.

### **Queering Cowboy, Queering Celebrity**

Certainly the romantic, melodramatic narrative used in BBM maintains and perpetuates several binary differences. From a performance perspective, the Western film is predominantly in the style of a melodrama (again harking back to its theatrical debut in the Wild West shows). The melodramatic form is a highly coercive narrative structure that mixes the tensions between romantic love and the interface between clearly delineated good and bad behaviours. The popularity of this genre is imbedded in the belief by the audience that wrongs or 'unnaturalness' will be resolved and righted by the end of the story or film. As it turns out, the abject, outed 'gay' bodies are put to death in the film (the old man of Del Mar's memory and Twist both experience tortuous deaths reminiscent of Matthew Shephard's brutal death in Casper Wyoming in 1998). Rural queers it seems don't live for long, which increases the audiences' empathy with Ennis Del Mar who maintains the façade that cowboy masculinity is a definable and stable, which automatically sets up a binary notion of gender in the film (Petersen, 2003, p.58). The feminine domestic sphere is in direct conflict with the mountain scenes where Del Mar and Twist are able to consummate their homosexual attraction. The outdoors in BBM is a masculine-only realm that naturalises and nourishes male-male relationships which then remain unspoken and inexplicable to the women and children occupying the domestic space. Like most Western films before it, this duality of gendered space is key to all the tensions in the story: once the men enter into the domestic sphere, their lack of

independence begins to deform their once Arcadian-like masculine existence in the wilderness. Chris Packard in his book *Queer Cowboys* (2005) tells us that the "normalising function of marriage to women and the domesticating influence of femininity [was] a "deal-breaker" for those following the cowboy code (p. 8), and BBM faithfully reconstructs this.

In the research field known as New Western History (which is now only a decade old), the interrogation of colonial cowboy masculinity is dedicated to retelling and recovering history from the view of silent (yet nonetheless coded) 'voices' from the American West. This field also investigates the inherent and falsely assumed 'stability' of the hypermasculinised cowboy. According to Packard the cowboy is queer when analysed inside a heteronormative cultural context; "he resists community, he eschews lasting ties with women but embraces rock-solid bonds with same-sex partners, and practices same-sex desire" (2006, p.3). Certainly the literature from the West that Packard investigates reveals a rich example of complex male relationships that suggest intimacy that is homosocial and homosexual. The 'norms' of what constitute 'partnerships' are changed on the frontier so that overt homosociality queers the notion of a life-long partner from one that is colonially separate (women's domestic space) to one that places male-male affection as a necessity for survival. In other words, this 'queering' moves away from simply addressing the complexity of cowboy homosociality as something *in opposition to* female-ness, and towards considering it as something where inside its 'maleness' there are complex amorphous notions of masculinity at work which parallel heteronormative desires. The writings of New Western Historians are not dissimilar to those of contemporary queer theorists, in that the colonial binary opposition that underpins discussion of difference between male/female, straight/gay gender becomes compromised and outmoded by investigations into the complexity of the assumptions about duality and separateness.

Several contemporary queer theorists state their awareness and avoidance of adhering to these 'dualist distinctions' when discussing difference, although these oppositions were first presented in early feminist and queer theory (Petersen, 2003, p. 57; Walters, 2005,

p. 8; Linstead & Pullen, 2006, p. 1287). Petersen and Walters both argue that maintaining a discourse of differences empowers a normative understanding of gender (Petersen, 2003, p. 59) that fails to move beyond a discourse of contradictions or reactions (Walters, 2005, p. 9). Gender is a complex social and cultural practice where binaries are disrupted and displaced by practices and performances that articulate liminal spaces beyond oppositional structures. Inside the colonial setting of BBM, the naturalised homosociality (instantly recognisable in the first 40 minutes of the film) becomes deliberately and inalterably 'queered' through the act of penetration that Leger and Gyllenhaal embody on the screen, taking place in a tent, on the mountain, in the wilderness. For many audience members, this was the line that crossed into homosexuality and the characters quickly became 'gay' and the movie known as the 'gay cowboy movie'. Yet, to dismiss the film in this way denies the film any agency for the complex queering going on. The term gay is just as much a construction as the terms 'male' and 'female' in BBM, and thus queer theory as it is employed in this paper is about moving away from the dualism of difference and opening the aperture on 'queering' as a process of questioning the dominant and colonial insistence on structured 'stable' categories of gender etc. Queer theory offers a critical discourse with which to menace and "challenge gender hegemony...[to] make both theoretical and political space for more substantiative notions of multiplicity and intersectionality" (Walters, 2005, p. 11). As such, there is a genuine connection between queer and postcolonial theory that pursues gender as a process of construction written upon the body.

Just as the cowboy is queered in the New Western History, I would suggest that the actor-celebrity body is also a queered surface in the postmodern world. Aspects of Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender are somewhat compromised upon entering a discussion about celebrity; the celebrity body is contrived and therefore self-aware of the performance of itself. Yet, the desirability of this body is a significant aspect of representation which produces what Buchbinder calls the process of ex-citation, that is, an external citation of gender that is rendered visible, repeatable, coherent and natural (1998, p. 122). Before embarking on

the BBM project, the bodies of Ledger and Gyllenhaal were already hypermasculinised in the popular press as objects and agents of heterosexual and homosexual desire, which is nothing new for Hollywood actors who are a consumerable commodity. To varying degrees actor-celebrities are co-constructors of symbolic orders which are "simultaneously productive and produced" (Brickell, 2005, p. 37), and which can be read as "phoney" as they represent an illusion, or a deceit of the "actual" body (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 123). The business of celebrity-making is therefore 'queer' as the actor's actual body becomes a public agent for fiction. It is the vehicle upon which the fiction is delivered and read by the audience, and this fictional contagion crosses over onto actor's actual body creating a veneer of 'celebrity' that is "something akin to the actual, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p.86). The celebrity surface has slippage and is highly unstable as a category of signifying of anything precisely because it is an abject triangulation of the actual, the fictional and the celebrity body. The celebrity aspect queers any simple dualistic distinction between the 'fictional' and 'actual' body of the actor, because their bodies are never entirely fictional *nor* actual.

### **Queering as Ambivalence: Intersectionality and Interdiction**

The celebrity-cowboy body is not only queer, it is an inscribed body that does not speak of or for itself, but of the writers of the narrative. Larry McMurty and Dianna Ossana (who produced the film also) wrote the screenplay from Annie Proulx's (2000) short story, and thus it may be suggested that the pre-textual constructions that preceded the visual representation of characters in BBM was also a process of mimicry of the American West's cowboy. The deliberate location of the picture as a melodramatic and romantic Western that maintains the heterosexual dualism is an act of what Homi Bhabha might call "colonial mimicry" which sets up a recognisable Other "as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p.86). The potential power of the representation of the queered cowboy (produced through this ambivalence associated with mimicry; which is almost but not quite the classic cowboy) points to the constructedness of the colonial image; it "does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an

uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a partial presence" that is "incomplete and virtual" (Bhabha, 1994, p.86). The visibility of this mimicry, of course, is inscribed upon the celebrity bodies of Gyllenhaal and Ledger who are neither cowboys nor homosexual in their actual lives, and yet their mimicking of the Western cowboy tradition must have genuine resemblance in order to for the ambivalence to "menace" the absolute notions of the Western cowboy (p. 88).

The production team that constructed the images for the screen from the script were also agents for this mimicry as their non-Western experiences influenced how they also read and represented the hegemonic Western cowboy image. Ang Lee is an 'Eastern' Taiwanese national whose film work straddles Chinese/Taiwanese and English cultures. Lee works wholly within both cultures, yet it was his English-subtitled film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) that positioned him as a serious contender (winning four Academy Awards including Best Director). He is described, somewhat colonially in the popular press, as a 'gentle', 'introspective' auteur who chooses his co-artists on films. His choice of cinematographer for BBM was a 'Southern' Mexican Rodrigo Prieto who created the visual silences and starkness of BBM (and who incidentally, has a cameo as the male prostitute chosen by Twist in a Mexican alleyway in the film). In interviews about the film, Gyllenhaal and Ledger both intimate the ambivalence they felt was an aspect of how Lee worked with them; that Lee's mixture of benevolence and manipulation was challenging and mysterious. **Nowhere have I been able to ascertain that the actors believe Lee's "difference" was attributed directly to his Taiwanese heritage. If anything, interviews suggest their awareness of not stating this as a mark of respect, but also as an understanding of their whiteness in the production event. Mostly they seemed to be in awe of Lee's particular way of 'reading' the film-making process.** Gyllenhaal specifically described his and Ledger's apparent disbelief at seeing the final cut of the film; it was particularly *not* what they expected from their own perception of their performances on site (Cavagna, 2005a). They suggest there was an ambiguity in the process of filming scenes. Lee is quoted as saying that it was the "unfamiliarity" of the narrative that was attractive to him; presumably the unfamiliarity

of how his perceived 'Otherness' might affect the colonial discourse around The Western genre (Cavagna, 2005b). Lee also told reporter Howard Feinstein (2005) from *The Advocate* that "people say I twisted the Western genre in Brokeback. I think I untwisted it" (p. 73).

**And yet, the active mimicry of the straight/queer cowboy is mirrored in the mimicry of the Western genre by the postcolonial perspectives of non-American, non-white males from East (Lee) and South of the West (Prieto) who developed the aesthetic for the film. This mimicry is invisible to the audience as they deliberately set out to reconstruct a seamless Western and not 'make-obvious' neither their postcolonial mimicry nor their mimicry of the hetero-cowboy (which is almost like, but not).** Characters in BBM are never in opposition to the film's heterosexual life, their queerness exists in an ambivalent parallel to it because they are complicit within its construction, so there is no overt binary opposition to heterosexuality; the film maintains a sense of naturalness about the American West which 'menaces' our thinking about what constitutes cowboy-masculinity. John Ford could not have made this film. The postcolonial disruption and queering lies in the mimicry (importantly not mockery) of the colonial Western genre; it exists in how close to the genre BBM is so that a complex reading of Gyllenhaal and Ledger's actual, fictional and celebrity bodies results in rendering a "visibility of mimicry" that explores how "historically contingent, constantly in flux and open to contestation" (Petersen, 2003, p. 64) male embodiment is. Homi Bhabha says that this visibility is "always produced at the site of interdiction, that is, a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which... must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them... mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (1994, p.86 and 89).

Gyllenhaal and Ledger's actual corporeal bodies undertake a silent contract with the director to visibly render the characters' sexual relationship visible for the consuming audience. There's an aspect to the process of acting that demands an intimacy, compliance, and embodiment within the fiction that is unlike any other performance product. Ang Lee certainly suggested that this was achieved

in his description of the intimacy between the actors in the tent scene as one that crossed over into a "private moment" that he felt he saw from his hand-held camera when filming (Cavagna 2005b). The actors also suggested that the most vulnerable scenes for them were simultaneously fictional and actual in that their commitment to the mimicry did transgress into corporeal reality; a sense of leaping into the fiction as reality where the celebrity body slips away. The intimacy between the actors and the director suggests a transcendence of the fiction that, like the actual cowboys from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remains silent and coded for them as a site of interdiction. Chris Packard (2006) suggests that these kinds of constructed moments allow for an acceptable queering in that context, where what he calls "situational homosexuality" is the kind practiced in all-male environments (prisons, football tours, military, etc) to varying degrees; its interdiction is the locus of the queering and mimicry processes at work inside the making of BBM.

The research of sociologist Robert Heasley on *Queer Masculinities of Straight Men* (2005) has also produced a typology of queer-straight males involving five (fluid) categories (2005, p. 314): straight sissy boys; social-Justice straight-queers; elective straight-queers (or the elective queer); committed straight-queers; and males living in the shadow of masculinity. He states that these categories help address the slippage around straight men who appear 'queer' because they actively disrupt heteronormativity and are problematic as 'Others' but, he argues, not necessarily in direct opposition to 'straight' (almost like, but not quite); they queer the notion of queer and straight because, paradoxically, there is no language (interdiction again) available to discuss how straight men can disrupt dominant masculine paradigms (Heasley, 2005, p. 311). Heasley's proposition of the Elective Queer seems to encompass queer performances by straight men for the purpose of temporarily liberating the self from the constrictions of heteronormative expectation. They bring their "queer wardrobe into everyday life", but nonetheless return to "straight" without losing power in the dominant culture (2005, p. 316). In true celebrity re-invention, subsequent film projects for Ledger and Gyllenhaal after BBM were *Casanova* (2005) and *Jarhead* (2005), both hyper-masculine portrayals of heterosexually-

charged masculinity that may well have served to re-establish a heteronormative gaze upon their work and avoid any labels of 'gayness' that may have lingered from their BBM experience.

## Conclusion

We can never know for sure the affect of this elective queering process upon the actual bodies of the actors in BBM. The notion of a contrived 'elective queerness' suggests the actor-celebrity body can only remain a fraudulent pretence that possesses little potency as a disruptive tool upon the hegemonic processes presumably inside the movie-making industry. However, it is the visibility of straight celebrities representing America's 'official emblem of masculinity' (Packard, 2006, p. 13) as a gender conundrum that simultaneously exists in and subverts the dominant colonial hegemony. The queering in BBM takes place at the level of or via the rendering visible of the interdiction between male-male partnerships from the American West cowboy traditions, thus opening an aperture to stall and expose myths of colonial masculinity (Heasley, 2005). Del Mar and Twist are fictional characters whose construction does not mock the West, but rather their West-ness necessarily remains intact (even when it is clear that the price of overt queerness is death) so that the resemblance of 'stability' invested in the West becomes brittle upon exposure. There's little doubt in my mind that a film like BBM which was initially destined for only limited release in the USA (the producers perhaps nervous as to how it would be received) crossed over into a mainstream audience specifically because of the masculinised celebrity bodies that Gyllenhaal and Ledger brought to the film. The mimicry at the core of the postcolonial disruption to the Western order is also queer because the mode of delivery of this ambivalence imbedded in the story, as well as in the film making process, is through the unstable agent of 'the celebrity' that affects our reading of the fictional and actual body on film. As a colleague said to me recently: "let's face it, who doesn't want to see two gorgeous boys snogging?!" The voyeuristic eye that consumes the celebrity body (as well as the film's Western genre) made the film's fiscal success, and not any altruistic notions by the filmmakers to reveal a Hollywood empathy for gay cowboy stories.

## Author Note

Dr. Janet McDonald received her Ph.D. majoring in Theatre for Youth from Arizona State University in 1999, where she was also awarded the 1998/99 Distinguished Graduate Teacher Assistant Award. She has been a high school Drama teacher since 1987 and is currently lecturing in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba. Her current research interests include: regional youth theatres, developing strategies for sustaining theatre arts practice in regional towns, as well as her ongoing research into masculinities and actor-training. Email: [mcdonaja@usq.edu.au](mailto:mcdonaja@usq.edu.au)

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