

COMPULSORY HAPPINESS AND QUEER EXISTENCE

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A love that is constituted in loss is a love that yields a longing that can never be fulfilled.
It hardly needs to be silenced.

George Haggerty¹

If you are homosexual, there's a lot to keep you busy these days. It can be hard to keep up with the ever-expanding menu of rights, privileges, and lifestyle options being made available. These new opportunities include not only the right to enjoy legal sodomy in the comfort of your own home and to be protected from discrimination on the job but also widening access to niche goods and services: lesbian cruises, gay cake toppers, queer prime time. Apart from all the A-list entertainment, there are also weddings and commitment ceremonies to plan. Being in the life has never looked so good or cost so much.

With the arrival of this new set of opportunities, certain traditional narratives of gay existence are starting to look a bit dated. The dark plush interior of the closet has recently been subject to inspection and remodel; tragic love, life in the shadows, and harrowing loneliness have been tossed out to make room for lighter and airier versions of gay life. Nothing makes clearer how fungible the old stories are than the case of James McGreevey, the ex-Governor of New Jersey. Misguided generosity to a handsome aide, sex in rest stops, late-night phone calls – his story has all the makings of a tragedy on the scale of *M. Butterfly*. Such a chain of events has traditionally led to a grisly and protracted scene of gay martyrdom. McGreevey did 'face criticism' and lose his job but it just wasn't like the old days anymore. In his resignation speech, mostly spent apologising for lying to his wife and to the citizens of New Jersey, he struck a somewhat discordant note of pride, stating: 'My truth is that I am a gay American'.² After a brief time spent learning the difference between 'good shame' (shame about lying and being in the closet) and 'bad shame' (shame about being gay), McGreevey moved on to a career in advocacy and began work on his best-selling memoir, *The Confession*. Forget *De Profundis*: this book is not written 'from the depths' of Reading Gaol, but rather from the study of the sprawling suburban house McGreevey now shares with his 'life partner,' Australian financial planner Mark O'Donnell.

Thanks to decades of gay and lesbian activism, McGreevey's confession did not end his life or his chances for happiness. By his own account, accepting his homosexuality seems to have opened the door to authentic happiness. His story is, in many respects, typical. It resembles many post-Stonewall coming-out stories: painful and confused loneliness; exposure and awakening; acceptance and integration into the community. What sets this story apart is the picture-perfect quality of life after coming out: released from the lies and paranoia of the closet, McGreevey seems to be living a life that is not only purged of the shame and stigma of homosexuality, but actually enviable by any measure. Handsome, rich, and confident, he is by all appearances

satisfied personally and professionally. In his memoir, McGreevey recalls dreaming of such a life as he left the statehouse: 'I allowed myself to picture a life organized in harmony with my heart. I fantasized about being in love, really in love – ordinary, boring, romantic love, the kind that takes you into old age, the kind my parents still have' (333).

Denied the opportunity to love in public and in private, lesbians and gays have often dreamed of romantic fulfilment and of a future in which the burdens of homosexual exile would melt away. With its focus on ordinary love, longevity, and his parents' marriage, McGreevey's dream is situated in our own historical moment – what has recently been called the era of 'gay liberalism'. Unlike earlier gay fantasies of life 'over the rainbow' or in the backwoods of Finland, this fantasy is about being normal. While gay marriage is a reality for very few couples, the widespread circulation of its promise has wrought great changes in the political and psychic landscape. Lisa Duggan describes this moment of gay life as 'the new homonormativity,' which she defines as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'.⁴ The heteronormative institution that is most bolstered by the new homonormativity is marriage. By gaining access to this institution that has been defined by excluding them, gays and lesbians may finally upgrade their 'virtually normal' status to *actually* normal.

The recent critique of the mainstreaming of gay culture has focused on the embrace of white heterosexual and nationalist norms and the turn from a politics of freedom to a politics of consumption and assimilation. Critics have paid less attention to the affective dimensions of this shift, in part because it is difficult to think critically about the satisfactions promised by social inclusion and by the prospect of 'normal family life.' Same-sex marriage would be easier to dismiss if it simply promised to make us like everyone else – the problem is, it also promises to make us happy.

Marriage does not need to deliver on its promise of happiness to keep people coming back for more – fantasies of future happiness will do the job. Historically, feminists and socialists have offered a thoroughgoing critique of the injustices of marriage. Today, many still insist that, despite increasing flexibility and equality of the institution, marriage remains at best a mixed blessing for women. In their statement against marriage promotion in welfare reform, Martha Fineman, Gwendolyn Mink, and Anna Marie Smith write, 'Marriage can be a satisfying union. But as a prescription rather than a choice, marriage is a one-size-fits-all contract full of dangers for some. While marriage has provided some women with the cushion of emotional and economic security, it also has locked many women in unsatisfying, exploitative, abusive and even violent relationships'.⁵ From a different perspective, many queers argue that marriage is at odds with full erotic and affective expression and that alternative forms of intimacy offer us our best shot at happiness. In general, though, such voices have been drowned out by the rush to the altar. Despite a long history of criticism and ample evidence of marriage's failures, it remains the golden fleece of romantic fulfilment.

Not that it needed it, but married life has recently received the imprimatur of hard science. New work in psychology on happiness demonstrates a link between marriage and overall life satisfaction. Unlike work in queer and ethnic studies on affect, the 'new science of happiness'

is profoundly positivist: it replaces 'mind' with 'brain,' and insists on the biological basis of behaviour and feeling. These studies show that being married and having a good attitude are the main factors in determining happiness. Not only that, happiness, marriage, and optimism are tied in the recent research to general health and to longevity. (Pessimists can now look forward – as they undoubtedly have all along – to frequent illness, loneliness, and early death.) The redundancy that structures this work makes it clear how difficult it is to give value and meaning to life narratives that do not involve romantic love of 'the kind that takes you into old age'. Love structured by marriage and reproduction signals longevity and satisfaction: it appears in such a context as simply another way of describing 'life itself'.⁶

It would be naïve to think that one could engage the politics of gay marriage without also engaging the fantasies that swirl around marriage. These fantasies are intensified for queers, who have been historically excluded not only from marriage but also from the serene and long-lasting satisfaction it seems to offer. Of course, the promise of conjugal happiness is not the same thing as its reality, as many who are or who have been married will tell you. Gays and lesbians are now in the unprecedented historical situation of having to pretend that we too have happy marriages. It is no wonder that, given the novelty of the situation, these declarations often have the air of a forced confession. (Mark O'Donnell on his relationship with McGreevey, 'Jim and I have a healthy, loving, committed relationship which we share with our family and friends'; Tom Cruise, 'I love this woman!')

In the era of gay normalisation, gays and lesbians not only have to be like everybody else (get married, raise kids, mow the grass, etc.), they have to look and feel good doing it. Such demands are the effect, in part, of the general American premium on cheerfulness: being a 'gay American,' like being any kind of American, means being a cheerful American.⁷ For gay Americans, the pressure to appear in good spirits is even greater. Because homosexuality is traditionally so closely associated with disappointment and depression, being happy signifies participation in the coming era of gay possibility. In this brave new world, one can be gay without necessarily being tragic; however, one may only belong by erasing all traces of the grief that, by definition, must remain sealed off in the past of homosexual abjection. Given this climate of emotional conformism, it makes sense to ask whether gays and lesbians still have the right to be unhappy.

This essay considers the politics of gay happiness in relation to Ang Lee's popular 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* and its reception. This film is inflected by the politics of gay marriage at every turn. From a certain angle it looks like a perfect emblem of the new homonormativity. *Brokeback's* ranch-hands (played by Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhall) are young, white, good-looking, and masculine. The movie allows its audience – including its gay audience – to enjoy the spectacle of same-sex intimacy and sex without having to see the signs of homosexuality itself – that is something that takes place off-screen, mostly, it seems, in Mexico.⁸ While refusing to represent its two heroes as gay, the film also projects an (impossible) ending for them as a married couple. If gay marriage was invented for anyone, it was for these two – to insulate them from stigma, to save them from their hollow heterosexual marriages, and to allow them to make, as Jack says, 'a good life' together. The fantasy indulged in *Brokeback Mountain* is characteristic of the moment of gay liberalism: a world where gay marriage is allowed between

people who are no longer gay in any significant sense. But Jack and Ennis don't get married – they don't even get close – and that failure is significant. The total refusal of a happy ending in the movie keeps *Brokeback Mountain* from being simply another fantasy of gay liberalism. It is actually something quite different, something that has been in surprisingly short supply in recent years: a full-blown gay tragedy. The film is one of the most satisfying representations of homosexual suffering in years.

It seems odd to complain about the absence of representations of gay and lesbian life as sad and tragic, since such representations dominate twentieth-century film and literature. Several critics writing in *Film Quarterly's* special issue on *Brokeback Mountain* argue that the film is not original in its treatment of gay suffering but that it merely recapitulates the dominant stereotypes of gay (and particularly gay male) existence. For D.A. Miller *Brokeback Mountain* is thoroughly retrograde, a classic 'problem film' that conceals its aggression toward the homosexual behind the veil of liberal sympathy. He writes that the gay man who sees the film is meant to be 'all gratitude at seeing exposed, in 2005, the damage done by the Closet and – in the midst of a struggle to refuse the fatality of his condition – feel nothing but admiration for a nostalgically tragic view of it'. According to Miller, the focus on homophobia serves a dual purpose in the film: de-eroticisation and the production, 'along with other carrion,' of gay corpses.⁹ Ara Osterweil points out the film's similarity to an earlier 'breakthrough' representation of male-male intimacy, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and suggests that by melodramatically punishing homoerotic desire, these films render it palatable to a general audience. In contrast to avant-garde films such as Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967), *Brokeback Mountain* panders to the tastes of mainstream audiences who 'prefer their gay sex with cathartic tears of tragedy rather than the crocodile tears of camp'.¹⁰ Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon argue in the same volume that the movie 'exhausts itself' in its strict adherence to 'tragic realism' and so makes itself unwittingly available to a queer audience. They point out that the film was marketed to the 'fourth quadrant' (older women) but argue that it has a reception in the 'fifth quadrant'; this as-yet undetermined audience makes use of the film through appropriation and resignification (in on-line parodies and mash-ups, for instance), liberating an exhilarating flatness out of the film's melodramatic seriousness.¹¹

What these readings all have in common is a conviction that homosexual tragedy is not interesting in *Brokeback Mountain*: tragedy represents the most familiar way to frame male same-sex relations; it is what we already know. Rather than pushing through or beyond the representation of homosexual suffering in the film, though, I would like to maintain a focus on it, and to suggest that a tragic view of gayness – even if it is melodramatic, banal, or nostalgic – remains relevant to gay audiences in 2005. Despite the general familiarity of such representations, they are actually in scant evidence in recent mass media. Emotional conformism, romantic fulfilment, and gay cheerfulness constitute the dominant image of gay life in the contemporary moment. Not only are gays being represented as shiny, happy people in major media outlets, but traces of the history of gay unhappiness are being expunged as well. While the unrelenting stigmatisation of homosexuality characteristic of earlier moments is hardly to be yearned for, the current appearance of homosexuality in the mass media as a happy and healthy lifestyle poses a new set of problems. It can be nice to see positive role models, but those who are still

gripped by the old stories – who feel isolated or ashamed or who are hopeless about the future – may need something else. In the current climate we may have a greater need for bad role models, for negative examples; such representations might allow that being gay can make you unhappy, and even give a sense of what it is like to live with such feelings.

REASON TO CRY

Enter *Brokeback Mountain*. Lee's sweeping melodrama of star-crossed cowboy love offers plenty of satisfaction for the broken-hearted and the disillusioned: if you need to cry about lost love, homophobic violence, a bad marriage, the wounds of masculinity, or some youthful tenderness that can never be recaptured, this is the movie for you. Like Annie Proulx's short story that was the basis for the movie, *Brokeback Mountain* is an exploration of loss and its consequences. While the film strips away some of the grit and heat of the original story, it nonetheless maintains a focus on the conditions that eventually crush both Jack and Ennis: poverty, the humiliations of low-wage labour, the impossible demands of masculinity, the inequities of married life, and what Proulx herself called 'destructive rural homophobia'.¹² The name 'brokeback' condenses many of these forms of disenfranchisement, blurring the lines between forms of hardship as apparently distinct as doing back-breaking work, getting your heart broken, breaking down, and being broke.

Who is *Brokeback Mountain* really for, though? Who will be most touched by these scenes of lonesome cowboys and broken families? Since the film's release, critics have argued about whether the movie depicts a specifically gay experience, or whether the experience of love and loss it represents is universal. The film's tagline, 'Love is a Force of Nature,' emphasises the importance in the film of the high mountain setting as a backdrop for Jack and Ennis's romantic happiness. It also makes clear the film's liberal politics: it announces that the love it depicts – a love generally understood as 'against nature' – is as natural as any other love, and perhaps even more so. Framing the film in this way is not only meant to flatter gays and lesbians, it is also meant to attract straight viewers; because love is a force of nature, people who are neither gay nor country will be able to identify with the film's romantic plot. Both the direction of the film and its marketing were extremely successful in this regard. Not only was the film popular, reviews lauded the film for its transcendence of narrowly gay issues and its invocation of timeless themes. Brokenness, according to this reading, is the tragic result of the fleeting and fragile nature of the ideal in human life.

While it is true that the ideal in human life is fragile and fleeting, real-world conditions like being gay or poor can make it much more so. The losses that Jack and Ennis experience have universal dimensions, but they are also the result of particular forms of inequality and exclusion. In a review of *Brokeback Mountain* in the *New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn argues against a universalising reading of the film through a comparison with *Romeo and Juliet*. Although these two plots both describe inexorable social forces that keep young lovers apart, the gay specificity of *Brokeback* makes these representations quite different, according to Mendelsohn.

The tragedy of gay lovers like Ennis and Jack is only secondarily a social tragedy. Their tragedy, which starts well before the lovers ever meet, is primarily a psychological tragedy,

a tragedy of psyches scarred from the very first stirrings of an erotic desire which the world around them – beginning in earliest childhood, in the bosom of their families ... – represents as unhealthy, hateful, and deadly.

The difference, for Mendelsohn, between Romeo and Juliet and Jack and Ennis is that Shakespeare's young lovers do not internalise the judgment of their families; the circumstances that keep them apart begin and end in the world, and they never believe that their love is wrong or even, until it is, impossible. Ennis and Jack's story demonstrates the tragedy of homosexual subject-formation itself: the disapproval of the world makes gays and lesbians into people for whom happy romantic love is unthinkable. Homosexual tragedy begins in the world, but it takes root in the person.

In bringing up the pernicious psychic consequences of homophobia for gays and lesbians, Mendelsohn draws a link between tragedy as a genre and the experience of homosexual love as impossible or thwarted. There is, however, a crucial difference: *Romeo and Juliet* narrates the exceptional and monumental tale of the downfall of two who should have been happy; *Brokeback Mountain* describes the lifelong disappointments that afflict those who cannot realistically expect to be happy. Reflecting on these differences make it clear how difficult it would be to identify the love between Ennis and Jack *either* as universal *or* as specifically gay. Because homosexual love is associated with failure, longing, impossibility, and loss, it can be difficult to distinguish between the everyday tragedy of homosexual existence and a 'universal' genre like tragedy. While it may at times appear that a homosexual story is being elevated to the level of the universal, it is also possible that a universal tragedy is being pinned on homosexuals, figures who unwittingly signal tragedy as clearly as mask and buskins.

In a review for the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, Andrew Holleran dramatises the specific impact of the film for gay viewers – and specifically for older gay men. According to this account, gay men who have suffered homophobia's consequences and experienced the loneliness of impossible love are most attuned to the film's tragic message. Holleran describes going to see the movie on opening day:

Standing in line for *Brokeback Mountain* the afternoon it opened in Washington at a little theater near Dupont Circle, I saw two kinds of people: silent gay men of a certain age, and clusters of laughing college students. For the former, the movie we were about to see was personal, crucial: for the students, I guess it was – cool. The college students were happily chattering away. The gay men were lined up, in our individual solitude, waiting to weep. As I counted the thinning hairs on the man in front of me, I thought: The sadness of *Brokeback Mountain* begins outside the theater.¹³

In this account, *Brokeback* is a time bomb that blasts open the gap between contemporary ('gay liberalism') and retrograde ('the closet') gay culture. While the movie is cool for college students (Holleran does not specify whether these students are straight or gay, the point being that, for them, it does not really matter), it unleashes a storm of emotion for older gay men, who are starved for such images and who take to heart the film's message about the impossibility of gay love.

Brokeback does not directly address the sense of impossibility in contemporary gay existence. Instead, the story is set in a place and a time – Signal, Wyoming in the early 1960s – where homosexuality is understood to be literally impossible: it is punished by death at the hands of the locals. For many, Holleran’s teary identification with Jack and Ennis represents a nostalgic and ultimately conservative stance – a static identification with a mythic moment before Stonewall.¹⁴ Holleran insists, however, that the grief and impossibility of homosexuality are very much alive in the contemporary moment, and that the men crying in the theatre in Dupont Circle are crying for real, and in the present tense. In a discussion of whether the film should be considered simply a melodrama or a sentimental tearjerker, Holleran insists that just because the film invokes the cliché of tragic homosexuality, we should not dismiss its message. He writes, ‘We have a strange sensitivity to stereotypes in this country when it comes to the portrayal of minorities: this means we are not allowed to portray an aborted gay love affair because in reality most gay love affairs are just that’ (14).

One hastens to argue with Holleran’s assertion that ‘most gay love affairs’ are aborted. This claim, one might say, is founded not in empirical reality, but only in the most reactionary understanding of same-sex love. Holleran’s use of the term ‘aborted’ is, in this context, anything but neutral, as it not only suggests love going nowhere but also implicates that love as violent, anti-child, and anti-family.¹⁵ Still, despite the obvious collusion between this characterisation of gay love and garden-variety homophobia, it would be a mistake to dismiss this account as irrelevant or simply self-indulgent. Holleran’s review points to an important need that the *Brokeback Mountain* filled for many gay viewers: the need, voiced by Mendelsohn as well, to see homosexual love represented as tragic rather than comic. Holleran elaborates on the power of the film as he cites screenwriter Larry McMurtry’s gloss on the film as a ‘tragedy of emotional deprivation’. Holleran writes: ‘This is surely a universal experience, but at a certain point in life most gay men seem to conclude that it’s the particular fate of being gay’ (15).

HE WAS A FRIEND OF MINE

We cannot look to *Brokeback Mountain* for such flat assertions of the tragic nature of homosexual love. The movie is too even-handed for that: it insists that this failed romance is merely a gay instance of universal tragedy, and, at the same time, it holds out hope for a happy ending for Ennis and Jack. The film grants happiness to them ‘way out in the middle of nowhere’; it also suggests, through its attention to the hostility of its rural setting, that these two men might find happiness in a more accepting time and place. Despite these gestures toward the possibility of homosexual fulfilment, *Brokeback Mountain* nonetheless presents homosexual love as essentially impossible and thwarted. The film need not emphasise this view of homosexuality in its explicit content because it makes the argument most powerfully on the level of genre. While the film has been repeatedly identified as tragic, its closest generic ties are to the pastoral elegy. This genre, best known for its idyllic rural retreats, ambient homoeroticism, and early death, includes such richly homoerotic texts as Virgil’s ‘Fifth Eclogue’, Milton’s ‘Lycidas,’ and Shelley’s ‘Adonais.’ With his idealised images of labour and passionate friendship, Lee identifies Ennis and Jack with a long tradition of perfect but doomed relationships between young men.

From the sun-dappled images of Jack and Ennis's first summer together to the final shots of Ennis's closet memorial to Jack, the film repeatedly announces its membership in the genre of the pastoral elegy. Elegy is perfectly suited to represent both the unfettered joy of Jack and Ennis's first encounters and the infinite pain and regret of their ruined lives: it celebrates their love at the same time that it marks it with absolute impossibility. Pastoral elegy is an idealising genre, one that represents the dead beloved as perfect and irreplaceable. It draws on a long tradition of the celebration of male friendship as a transcendent and singular bond. Insofar as Ennis and Jack's relationship conforms to this model of male friendship, it remains highly idealised. The two young shepherds enjoy perfect affection and erotic love in their first summer on Brokeback Mountain. If the spectacle of Heath Ledger sporting with his Amaryllis in the shade does not fit your idea of perfect love, Lee rounds out the picture with endless images of bubbling brooks, green meadows, and wandering sheep.

In his essay on the elegy form, 'Desire and Mourning,' George Haggerty discusses the strain of homoeroticism that runs through this traditional and culturally valorised genre. According to Haggerty, the untimely death of the friend in these poems frees the poet to express desire much more freely, since the possibility of a real erotic relation is buried in an inaccessible past. Furthermore, Haggerty argues that by representing and cultivating such unrealisable desires, the elegy actually reinforces the real prohibition on male-male desire. He writes,

By equating desire with loss, the elegy allows a public articulation of the inner workings of patriarchal, homosocial culture at the same time that it pushes the 'traumatic, real kernel' of male-male erotic love so deeply into the cultural unconscious that these poems can be celebrated for their beauty at the same time that their erotic significance is ignored ...

The elegy tradition offers a particularly telling example of the ways in which transgressive desire can be articulated so as to foreclose the possibility of its realization. This explains something about the ways in which literary form and ideological control work so smoothly together (193).

Drawing on examples from Milton, Thomas Gray, and Shelley, Haggerty describes the way that these poets eroticise the wounds and pallor of the dead male body. The eroticism and the formal beauty of these poems are inseparable from their investment in the ideal but corpse-like unavailability of the male form.

Haggerty's suggestion that transgressive desire can be represented in a way to foreclose its realisation might help us to make sense of the formal qualities of *Brokeback Mountain* as well as its appeal and reception. The film differs from the elegies that Haggerty treats because the fact of explicit homosexual desire is not barred from representation as it is in these earlier texts: we clearly see Jack and Ennis having sex, and they show an awareness that such intimacy marks them as queer. In the end, it is not homosexual desire that is impossible in *Brokeback Mountain* but rather a happy, fulfilled homosexual relationship: in place of a dead young man, the film offers an image of the happy gay couple as a desired but impossible ideal. What is presented as infinitely desirable and unachievable in the short story is the 'fuckin' real good life' that Jack

and Ennis might have built together. This 'happily ever after' remains resolutely in the realm of fantasy in the film – it is only ever voiced by the dreamer Jack Twist, and is presented on the same level as patently unrealistic fantasies such as money raining from the sky and whiskey springing from the ground. *Brokeback* evokes the image of a perfect and fulfilled gay love; at the same time, it cancels and withdraws that image, suggesting that such a match can never come to pass. As in the traditional elegy, lingering over what can never be adds glamour and pathos to the spectacle of this aborted affair.

At the beginning of their liaison, both Jack and Ennis seem to agree that neither is queer and that this is a 'one-shot deal'. It is not long, though, before Jack becomes the permanent spokesperson for the possibility of a relationship between them. In their first encounter since the original summer, Jack says during a peaceful moment together, 'You know, it could be this way. Just like this, always'. Ennis responds blankly, 'Yeah? How you figure that?' refusing to join in even in this desultory fantasy about a future together. In response, Jack ventures a specific plan involving a payoff from his father-in-law that would make it possible for them to live together. 'What if you and me had a little ranch together somewhere, little cow-and-calf operation, it'd be some sweet life. Hell, Lureen's old man, you bet he'd give me a downpayment if I'd get lost'. Jack's dreams for his life with Ennis are consistently linked to fantasies about domesticity, lifelong partnership, and property ownership.

The impossibility of a real future is emphasised again and again, but it is most pointedly addressed in the last conversation between Jack and Ennis before Jack's death. The pathos of this discussion is generated by the fact that it takes place in the past tense. Jack says: 'Tell you what, we coulda had a good life together, a fuckin' real good life, had us a place of our own. You wouldn't do it, Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that'. Gesturing toward the mountain range in the distance, Jack indicates the beautiful but worthless kingdom he shares with Ennis: a something that can serve as a foundation for nothing. Jack acknowledges that in place of a real bond he and Ennis share an impossible, ruined form of relation: a 'brokeback' marriage.

Because the movie is not about the beautiful impossibility of homosexuality but rather the beautiful impossibility of homosexual marriage, the camera does not linger too long on the corpse of the beautiful young man. Ennis takes a frank erotic pleasure in Jack's living body, and he does not eroticise his corpse, or not exactly. After Jack's death, he fetishises the two shirts, one folded inside the other, that they wore during their first summer together. Ennis's memories of Jack are identified with these shirts and with a postcard of Brokeback Mountain. These images represent their lost intimacy, but also the domestic future that they can never have. In the final scene, Ennis, alone in his trailer, stares at these traces and pronounces a melancholic and belated oath to Jack: 'I swear ...' This choked 'I do' consummates the impossible marriage at the centre of the film.

The spectre of the gay married couple is embodied not only by Jack and Ennis, but also 'tough ol' birds' – two homesteaders who have settled down together – whom Ennis remembers seeing lynched in his childhood: 'I tell ya there ... there were these two old guys ranched up together, down home. Earl and Rich. And they was the joke of town, even though they were pretty tough ol' birds. Anyway they ... they found Earl dead in an irrigation ditch. Took a tire iron to 'im. Spurred him up, drug him 'round by his dick 'till it pulled off'. Ennis repeats his

own violent indoctrination into patriarchal homosocial culture, now presenting this tableau for Jack's eyes. Instead of a dead childhood friend, Ennis mourns this aged couple, whose life together is transformed into an object lesson, a self-evident and properly fetishistic testament to the impossibility of homosexual domesticity.

The lesson is not lost on viewers of *Brokeback Mountain*, who may be given over to regret that Earl and Rich were not left in peace, and that Ennis and Jack never got to start up their cow-and-calf operation. While a liberal pedagogy would suggest that the sorrow caused by such representations might inspire viewers to try to change the social conditions in order to secure a happier outcome for these couples, Haggerty suggests that the pleasures of mourning modelled by the elegiac form may themselves inhibit further action. Commenting on Gray's Latin elegies for Richard West, he writes,

The tears that Gray pours out at the tomb of his friend are the tears of sensibility that identify love and loss in modern culture. They are also tears of unrealized and unrealizable desire, the tears of accommodation that culture provides to those who feel. There is no consolation here that is separate from desire. And there is no desire that is separate from loss. (196)

Haggerty's reading of the elegy makes it clear that there is nothing new about this kind of mournful investment in desires that cannot be realised, but also that such an investment is not incompatible with a desire to maintain the social prohibitions that continue to render such desires impossible.

The movie has it both ways: it makes us long for another world in which Jack and Ennis might live together in peace and it makes it clear that they never will – and for reasons that are not only social. Miller addresses this contradiction, suggesting that liberal politics serve as an alibi for aggressive fantasies about the homosexual in the film.

On the one hand, homosexuality is only interesting (marketable) if it is the occasion for rehearsing a fantasy of the Homosexual as thrillingly, pointlessly asocial, a *bête noire* who must die. On the other hand, this fantasy is neither compatible with, nor even tolerable to, the liberal politics of homosexuality as we know them and as *Brokeback Mountain* would espouse them. Thus the film must give us, along with this fantasy, a 'progressive' alibi for indulging it; even while trading on the fantasy, it must tame it into appearing to authorize the formation of gay married with children (55).

Miller's reading of the disavowed aggression at the heart of *Brokeback Mountain* reminds us that the elegy is characterised not only by mourning but also by violence. The traditional elegy accommodates not only the existent social order but also the mutilated body of the friend. Yet there is more to *Brokeback Mountain* than liberal sentiments and violent urges; longing is also central to the film, and it is a longing that is directed not at a graspable domestic future but at an irretrievable 'brokeback' past. This longing for what can never be recovered is a direct inheritance of pastoral elegy – and, judging from the response of at least some gay viewers, it continues to powerfully organise gay experience in the present. It has a particular resonance

for gays and lesbians looking out over the promised land of married life. Will we ever arrive? Will our intimate bonds ever be fully recognised? It's an uncertain prospect at best. No longer merely the object of violent or salacious fantasy, we occupy a strange position at the intersection of 'virtually normal' and 'sad impossibility.' Our friends say, 'Let them marry!' and, in the same breath, 'It's a shame they can't *really* get married.'

TROUBLE IN MIND

The tie between homosexuality and unhappiness is so deep and persistent that it is hard to imagine how it will ever be undone. Richard Fitzgibbons of the Institute for Marital Healing deploys this association with particular force in an article available on-line at the Catholic Educator's Resource Center. While many have argued that homosexuality will make you sad and lonely, Fitzgibbons actually argues that being sad and lonely will make you homosexual: 'The most common conflicts ... that predispose individuals to homosexual attractions and behaviors are loneliness and sadness, profound feelings of inadequacy, mistrust and fear, narcissism, sexual addiction, excessive anger, sexual abuse in childhood and a lack of balance in one's life. During times of stress these inner difficulties are activated. In an attempt to seek relief or to escape from this unconscious emotional pain, strong sexual temptations can occur. This dynamic of inner emotional suffering leading to homosexual desires and activity rarely can begin during childhood but usually it develops in adolescence'.¹⁶ The association between unhappiness and homosexuality that Fitzgibbons deploys is so taken-for-granted that he is able to argue not only that homosexuality will make you unhappy but that being unhappy can make you homosexual.

Sometimes it seems that the only way for queers to start being happy is to stop being queers. As gays and lesbians gain more social acceptance and more access to 'normal' ways of life, the question of the value of queer history becomes more urgent. Robert Reid-Pharr has recently suggested that access to the happier futures promised by gay liberalism is contingent on the disavowal of the past. We can only gain access to such futures, he writes, by sacrificing 'our hardscrabble queer existence, our history, on the great, exacting altar of marriage'.¹⁷ The history of homosexuality is closely bound up with the impossibility of that particular version of happily-ever-after; the illegitimacy that has marked all amorous relations between people of the same sex is constitutive of queer culture.

It will not do, of course, to wax nostalgic for the history of homosexual denigration and suffering. One might, however, register a protest against the compulsory happiness of contemporary gay and lesbian life without wishing for the return of the closet or for the repeal of progressive legislature. There have been recent calls in queer theory for a turn to consider happiness and positive emotion more generally in relation to queer existence. Critics such as Elizabeth Freeman and Michael Snediker have argued that the melancholic turn in queer studies has run its course, and that not only loss, shame, and suffering are important and interesting, but also joy, pleasure, happiness, and queer optimism.¹⁸ There are, of course, many reasons for pursuing a politics of gay happiness, not only because gays and lesbians do deserve some happiness for their pains, but also because a great deal of anti-gay propaganda still feeds on the assumption that homosexuality is tragic. So, while it is true that we need accounts of queer joy, in this historical moment of enforced happiness,

attention to queer unhappiness remains paramount.

Because of the long history of queer unhappiness, queers have been remarkably inventive in cultivating alternative modes of happiness: from seeing our exile as a mark of Romantic distinction to living in the glow of brilliant homosexual pasts to dreaming up unknown futures 'over the rainbow.' In addition to creating new forms of happiness, we have also developed a remarkable ability to live without happiness, or without hope of ever reaching the most familiar kinds of happy endings. We might think, for instance, of Morrissey's strangely fervent prediction at the end of the Smiths song 'Hand in Glove,' which tells the story of a love 'not like any other love,' one threatened by the misunderstanding – stares and laughs – of the 'Good People' in the street. The song ends: 'For the Good Life is out there somewhere, so stay on my arm, you little charmer. But I know my luck too well, yes I know my luck too well, and I'll probably never see you again'. These final lyrics are less joyful in their content than earlier lines that narrate a shared defiance against hostile on-lookers: this love not like any other love, it is 'different – because it's us'. Along with the insistence on singularity, Morrissey describes these lovers as fonts of pure radiance: 'the sun shines out of our behinds'. But neither the claims of singularity nor the anticipation of 'the good life' is matched in its intensity or manic joy by the song's closing anthem, which narrates the end of this affair: 'I'll probably never see you again'.

Such negative capability is one of the historical resources of queer culture, along with more familiar forms of expression including cynicism and bitchiness. We are now being told that it is time to give up on these outdated modes of queer feeling and build a happier future. It seems hard that we have to choose between the manic cheerfulness of James McGreevey, busy becoming his parents, and the dark outlook of Holleran, convinced that homosexuality is a tragic fate. And of course, we do not have to choose: homosexuality is never simply a blessing or a curse. But sometimes the alternatives do appear quite stark. Given such a choice, contemporary queers may find themselves in the odd position of making a claim for the right to be unhappy. If there were ever a time that we needed our cynicism, it is now – when the future that is being marketed to us is so insistently bright. The Good Life may be out there somewhere – then again, it may not. In any case, we have tended to find our pleasures elsewhere.

My thanks to Sara Ahmed, Benjamin Kahan, David Kurnick and Mara Mills for their generous readings of this essay.

NOTES

1. George Haggerty, 'Desire and Mourning: The Ideology of the Elegy,' in *Ideology and Form in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, David H. Richter (ed), Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1999, p203.

2. James McGreevey, *The Confession*, New York, Regan Books, 2006, p8.

3. 'Gay liberalism' is considered at length in a recent issue of *Social Text* entitled 'What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?' David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz (eds), 23, 84-85 (Fall/Winter 2005). See especially the introduction, pp1-15.

4. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2003, p50.

5. The statement can be found at <http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/ams3/npmposition.html>. I encountered this citation in Lisa Duggan's article 'Holy Matrimony!' published in *The Nation*, 15/03/2004.
6. For a related reading, see Michael Warner's analysis of the NASA drawings of human society in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. This cartoon drawing of male and female figures testifies, according to Warner, 'to the depth of the culture's assurance (read: insistence) that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous.' Of course, what is being insisted on in the era of homonormativity is the idea that humanity and long-term monogamous coupling are synonymous. Warner, Introduction, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Warner (ed), Cultural Politics, 6, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pxxiii.
7. On the history of American cheerfulness, see Christina Kotchemidova, 'From Good Cheer to "Drive-By Smiling": A Social History of Cheerfulness,' *The Journal of Social History* 39, 1 (2005): 5-37. On narratives of ethnic assimilation and happiness, see Sara Ahmed's reading of *Bend It Like Beckham* (in this volume).
8. Martin F. Manalansan IV discusses the relegation of homosexuality to Mexico in his article, 'Colonizing Time and Space: Race and Romance in *Brokeback Mountain*.' For Manalansan, the film offers 'a neoliberal story of gay love'— a private business conducted between two white men. He contrasts the representation of Mexico as 'chaotic, dirty, dim, narrow, and claustrophobic' to the postcard-perfect empty Northern spaces of the film. Manalansan, 'Colonizing Time and Space' in '*Brokeback Mountain* Dossier', Scott Herring (ed), in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13, 1 (2007): 97-100.
9. D.A. Miller, 'On the Universality of *Brokeback Mountain*' in 'Special Feature on *Brokeback Mountain*' Rob White (ed), *Film Quarterly* 60, 3 (Spring 2007): 50-59.
10. Ara Osterweil, 'Ang Lee's Lonesome Cowboys' in *Film Quarterly* 60, 3 (Spring 2007): 38-42.
11. Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell Me' in *Film Quarterly* 60, 3 (Spring 2007): 62-67.
12. For Annie Proulx's thoughts on the film adaptation of her story, see 'Getting Movied' in Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, New York, Scribner, 2005. Proulx notes the continuities between the time of the film and the present moment. She insists that the story is fundamentally an account of 'destructive rural homophobia' and notes that '[a]lthough there are many places in Wyoming where gay men did and do live together in harmony with the community, it should not be forgotten that a year after this story was published [in 1997 in *The New Yorker*] Matthew Shepard was tied to a buck fence outside the most enlightened town in the state', p130.
13. Andrew Holleran, 'The Magic Mountain', *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, (March-April 2006): 12-15.
14. See the essays critiquing the tragic representation in the essays in *Film Quarterly* cited above. Also see the critiques of 'Gay Shame' in the recent issue of *Social Text*. The claim in these articles is that thinking about the history of gay suffering before *Pride* installs a white gay male subject as universal, and refuses to see the differential experiences of queer people of colour, women, and the poor. *Brokeback Mountain* may be seen to exemplify this kind of nostalgia; at the same time, the film gestures toward a wider range of social experience.
15. For a related discussion of the rhetoric of abortion, see Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman considers the association between gay men and the death of children and of futurity; he suggests that rather than mounting a liberal defense to argue that queerness is about life and about the future, queers ought to claim these associations and insist that we are against the Child and pro-abortion. While Edelman joins with Holleran in refusing to resist these homophobic narratives, his tone is quite different: rather than a 'realist' and mournful acquiescence, Edelman counsels an aggressive and strategic embrace of such narratives in order to undo the given political order of 'reproductive futurism.' Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004.
16. Richard Fitzgibbons, 'Origin and Healing of Homosexual Attractions and Behavior,' Catholic Educator's Resource Center website, <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/homosexuality/ho0011.html>, accessed January 9, 2007.
17. Robert Reid-Pharr, 'Clean Queers,' a paper presented at the 2006 MLA Convention in Philadelphia, PA.
18. Michael Snediker, 'Queer Optimism,' *Postmodern Culture*, 16, 3 (2006). Elizabeth Freeman, 'Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography,' *Social Text*, 23, 3-4/84-85 (2005): 57-68. See also José Estban Muñoz, 'Thinking Beyond Antirelativity and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique' in 'Forum: Conference Debates,' 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory' in *PMLA*, 121, 3 (May 2006): 825-26.

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