

Liberal Spaces: The Costs and Contradictions of Reproducing Hegemonic National Subjects in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Brokeback Mountain*

.....
Sarah Olutola is a Nigerian Canadian and PhD candidate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her current research focuses on representations of race in popular media culture and Western humanitarianism with respect to Africa, both of which consider the intersection between critical race theory, post-colonialism, and global capitalism.
.....

Abstract

Focusing on director Ang Lee's films *The Wedding Banquet* and *Brokeback Mountain*, this paper explores the ways in which Lee's articulation of queer intimacy in liberal spaces reproduces the regulatory functions of patriarchal, late-capitalist Eurocentric discourses of modernity.
.....

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur les films *The Wedding Banquet* et *Brokeback Mountain*, du réalisateur Ang Lee, et il explore les façons dont l'intimité homosexuelle représentée par Lee dans des lieux libéraux reproduit les fonctions réglementaires des discours patriarcaux et eurocentriques de la fin du capitalisme au sujet de la modernité.

Introduction

In his analysis of French queer cinema, theorist Florian Grandena (2009) notes that, since the mid 1980s, "there has been an increasing number of gay-themed/queer TV production and feature films...that have entered into mainstream culture" (75). Borrowing from Julianna Pidduck, he argues that this proliferation of diverse representations of queer sexuality is part of a crucial moment of 'hypervisibility' in the West. This condition of 'hypervisibility' has been celebrated in theoretical circles (Grandena 2008; Rich 2013). "Queer sexuality," Claire Boyle (2012) writes, "[or] so the argument goes, is no longer confined to the shadowy underground spaces: it is out in the open...across the western world, it is considered that a 'normalization process' is underway that would logically culminate in 'the end of homosexuality' as a marked category of otherness" (54). While one cannot deny the potential positive impact of the proliferation of queer visual content, recent decades have also seen theoretical debates over the possibilities and limitations of queer representations 'allowed' into the mainstream.

I am using 'queerness' here as Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2006) do, "to describe the vast array of human sexualities that actually exist outside of monogamous heterosexual procreative intercourse" (6). The acceptance of non-normative sexualities by a hostile mainstream visual culture constituted one of the key concerns of the American gay liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which continuously battled the negative queer representations in Hollywood produced by post-World War II anxieties towards communism and radical leftism. For decades, such anxieties hardened the American public and Hollywood against storylines and characters that did not "[conform] to a white, middle-class, heterosexual, jingoistic American norm" (86). And yet, while the gay liberation movement advocated for more positive representations of queer sexuality in the mainstream, the independent film-making of New Queer Cinema, arising in the 1990s and drawing

from the radical work of post-modern queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, resisted this preoccupation with portraying queer identity 'positively' (Rees-Roberts 2008, 6). According to Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street (2007), "new queer cinema seemed to offer a challenging voice from the margins...that was not asking to be allowed into the mainstream...but which asserted its difference with a proud defiance" (5).

Against the backdrop of these ongoing political debates surrounding queer visibility, Ang Lee, a heterosexual director with no explicit ties to queer political work, managed to produce two queer-themed films that received critical acclaim. I am referring to *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), which he also wrote, and the mainstream hit *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which he adapted from Annie Proulx's 1997 eponymous short story. Though both are Oscar-nominated films, some theorists regard *The Wedding Banquet*, perhaps due to it being Lee's second film and a light, romantic comedy, as being less sophisticated than the intense *Brokeback Mountain* in terms of its queer content despite its positive portrayals of queer lives (Dhawa 2014, 85). Indeed, theorist B. Ruby Rich (2013), the originator of the term New Queer Cinema, has openly celebrated *Brokeback Mountain* as evolving the transgressive philosophies of the genre: "[e]very once in a while," she writes, "a film comes along that alters our perceptions so thoroughly that cinema history thereafter has to arrange itself around it...[E]ven for audiences educated by a decade of the New Queer Cinema phenomenon, it's a shift in scope and tenor so profound as to signal a new era" (185).

There is a sense, here, that *Brokeback Mountain* achieved what *The Wedding Banquet* could not. In Rich's (2013) estimation, by "tak[ing] the most sacred of all American genres, the western, and queer[ing] it," *Brokeback* managed to demolish the borders between large-scale, multiplex mainstream movie production and small-budget, politically radical independent film-making (186). However, despite the film's accomplishment of bringing a complex, gay love story to a mainstream audience, I question the notion that Lee's two queer films greatly differ in terms of how they honour the aggressive work of the post-modern queer theorists of the 1990s and the anti-imperial queer activism of the late 1960s. I argue here that both films expose an understanding of queer identity and sex-

ual equality that is, in fact, less aligned with the radical movements on the margins and more aligned with mainstream liberal discourses of citizenship, equality, and rights, which draw their internal logic from problematic dominant social ideologies. At stake here are the sociopolitical conditions of queer inclusion into the mainstream. My analysis focuses on *Brokeback Mountain*'s "queering," as Rich (2013) would say, of the American West (187) and how its representational politics construct the U.S. as a nation. I also consider the ways in which *The Wedding Banquet* can be read as retroactively taking up these politics through its depiction of New York as a liberal safe haven of sorts for interracial queer relationships. Reading these films alongside each other reveals their problematic ideological work; indeed, despite perceptions of their differing levels of transgressive queer content, in actuality, both Lee's films play a role in narrativizing queer sexuality in a way that implicitly reinforces the regulatory practices employed by the U.S. within liberal spaces to reproduce and maintain white heteronormative nationalism in an era of capitalist modernity.

Queer Repression and Hegemonic Longing in *Brokeback Mountain*

The idea that films can help to 'construct' a nation or, in other words, reinforce an ideological definition of a nation is key to my discussion. As Susan Hayward (2005), referencing Benedict Anderson and Frederic Jameson, famously argues in *French National Cinema*, given that the nation is an 'imagined community', a country's filmic narratives "[call] upon the available discourses and myths of its own culture" and therefore "work to construct a specific way of perceiving the nation" (15). Considering that films can act as a reflection of the nation, we must ask, as Hayward does, "what myths does a national cinema put in place and what are the consequences" (15)? At first glance, it seems that *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) counters the constructions of the U.S. as celebrated by post-World War II Hollywood narratives. To interrogate the film's framing of the U.S. as a cultural space, we must take into account not only the narrative's setting, but also how this setting is positioned in relation to Mexico.

This positioning vis-à-vis Mexico is illustrated during the final climactic confrontation between Ennis (Heath Ledger) and his lover Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal), the

two male leads of *Brokeback Mountain*. “Have you been in Mexico, Jack Twist?” Ennis asks Jack in an accusatory tone. “Cause I hear what they got in Mexico for boys like you.” The phrase “boys like you” is Ennis’ attempt to discursively distance himself from Jack and veil his identification with Jack’s queerness. Interestingly, Ennis’ need to deny his own sexual identity relates to his—and the film’s—positioning of Mexico. Jack’s earlier scene in Mexico provides a conceptual framework through which we can interrogate this denial. Earlier in the film, after being spurned by Ennis, Jack drives, devastated, to Juarez, Mexico. Once there, the camera pans across the town to reveal a dark alleyway lined with male prostitutes. When one approaches him, Jack nods and together they disappear into the darkness, presumably to engage in sexual intercourse. As Jean Mitry (2000) writes in *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, “the camera has an undoubted effect on what it shows. As well as the framing, angle of shot and lighting, its simple photographic quality is already an interpretation” (34). The reality we see on screen is always mediated. It is a representation created through the structuring of “the elements captured by the lens” (92). In other words, “the representation...is already itself a sort of connotation” (92). By showing Jack disappearing into the literal and figurative darkness of the alleyway, Mexico is constructed by the film as a space in which Jack’s lust, demonized as dark and perverse by his society, is realized. More importantly, Mexico becomes the only cultural space in which his sexual desires *can* be realized.

Ennis’ unwillingness to commit to a romantic relationship with Jack can be read as being a consequence of the longstanding practices of sexual regulation mobilized by the U.S. in order to reproduce and maintain its identity as a masculine, heterosexual nation. In this sense, the nation becomes “an agent of terrorizing brutality,” if only through the material and psychic costs that manifest in its queer inhabitants as a result of its sexual policing (Morgensen 2010, 105). We can see disciplinary techniques mobilized throughout the film. Though the eponymous mountain is the only space in the film in which Jack and Ennis can pursue their romance, it does not exist outside regulation. Here, I draw on Michel Foucault’s articulation of biopolitics. According to Foucault (1978/1990), the power exercised by modern political states depends largely on the self-regulation of its citizens. Citizens are taught,

through various sociopolitical institutions, what ‘normal’ is and looks like, how it behaves and doesn’t behave, “guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony” (141). Within this system, citizens are encouraged to regulate themselves according to these societal ideals, out of fear of non-conformity; indeed, citizens themselves act as part of the disciplinary apparatus by policing each other. Foucault speaks of the panoptic ‘gaze’, the ever-present societal mechanism of surveillance in which we watch and judge each other, thus enforcing self-regulation (141). We see this at work in one scene early in the film when Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid), the man who initially hired Jack and Ennis to herd his sheep, catches them frolicking shirtless in a supposedly secluded field.

The shot of Jack and Ennis’ romantic play situates itself far enough away to suggest the presence of an intrusive gaze, but remains fixed on the lovers. When the camera switches to show a close up of Joe spying through a pair of binoculars, which he then lowers to show his disgusted expression, the implication is clear: the intimate undertones of their play have not gone unnoticed. This is confirmed by the vitriolic response Joe later gives Jack when the latter asks to be rehired: “You boys sure found a way to make the time pass up there. Twist, you guys wasn’t gettin’ paid to leave the dogs to baby-sit the sheep while you stemmed the rose. Now get the hell out of my trailer.” This inspecting gaze also functions by shaming bodies into regulation. Through this kind of method, the modern political state can exercise power directly upon bodies, which are accordingly categorized, criminalized, and punished (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 97). When the camera angle pans out from Joe’s disgruntled face watching the two men play, to a low-angled shot of him standing on the mountain, the low angle suggests his dominance. Joe becomes, in that moment, the symbolic representation of the domineering, oppressive societal gaze. Thus, when Jack tells Ennis during their final confrontation that they “coulda had a good life together, a fuckin’ real good life” and “had...a place of [their] own,” the film suggests that for them, the possibility of carrying out their romance was impossible from the start, so long as they decided to stay under the omnipresent disciplinary gaze of mainstream U.S. society. The film hints that Jack may be fully aware of this when, in an earlier scene, he asks Ennis to come to Mexico with him.

It is important to note, however, that *Brokeback Mountain* takes place in the rural West. Rich (2013) is right in commending Lee for “reimagin[ing] America as shaped by queer experience and memory” (190). However, Rich’s lamentation that “[a]las, it cannot be a sunny picture, not in Wyoming, not in the early 1960s” (190) points to a key element in my argument: through its use of generic conventions and its aligning of biopolitical oppression with conservative eras and cultural spaces, the film suggests that Ennis and Jack’s inability to carry out their romance is because of the ‘backwards’ and ‘old-fashioned’ heterosexist ideologies circulating specifically in conservative cultural spaces such as the American Heartland.

The American gay liberation movement began in the late 1960’s in California and was led by anti-imperial political queer communities in San Francisco (Hobson 2009, 1-2). However, during this period (and for many decades following), the American Heartland maintained its strict heteronormative regulation, making such movements scarce. This makes Wyoming a curious case; with its sparse, predominantly working-class population, Wyoming became the first state to grant female suffrage (Kowal 2000; Handley 2005). And yet, this early display of progressiveness did not extend to its queer communities, which remained largely invisible and unaccepted. It took the brutal, homophobic murder of gay university student Matthew Shepard in 1998 for queer rights activism in Wyoming to advance. However, despite this, by the time *Brokeback Mountain* opened in theatres, Wyoming still lacked social services, programs, and community spaces to support its queer community and combat homophobic sentiments (Connolly and Leedy 2008, 19-31). As Dwight A. McBride (2007) argues, *Brokeback Mountain*’s mainstream appeal can be attributed to its adherence to generic conventions; in particular, it is structured as a traditional star-crossed romance. Star-crossed romances provide a way to critique the social norms keeping the two protagonists from fulfilling their love (96). Thus, we can read the film as critiquing the repressive, heteronormativity of its setting: a conservative space in a conservative time. The film follows Hollywood formulas and generic conventions that have long conditioned audiences to feel sympathy towards the protagonists of this kind of story, whether it succeeds or not. In encouraging contemporary audiences to sympathize with its star-crossed lov-

ers, the film also implicitly encourages the audience to identify conservative spaces as problematic and unjust. We can further analyze the ideological investments of the film by applying Greimas’ square as a semiotic tool of analysis. The semiotic square is a graphic representation of the semiotic system of meaning, bringing together ideological oppositions and contradictions in order to draw meaning from (usually literary) narratives (Corso 2014, 69-70).

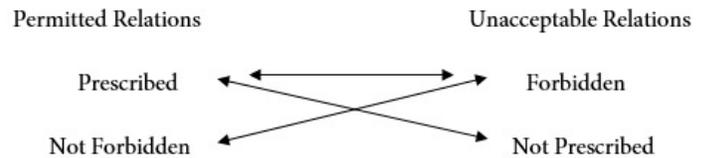


Figure 1: A model of the Greimas’ Square applied to describe a narrative’s semiotic production

Source: Armstrong, Nancy. 1977. “Character, Closure and Impressionist Fiction.” *Criticism* 19 (4): 321.

Indeed, the film’s narrative seems to present binary oppositions. It represents a world with specific rules as to what is prescribed versus forbidden, desired versus feared, profitable versus unprofitable. These systems of semiotic meaning determine which actions, behaviours, identities, and relationships are considered acceptable in the represented world of the narrative. Greimas uses the word ‘epistemy’ to describe particular semiotic social hierarchies, including those depicted in texts (Armstrong 1977, 322). In *Brokeback Mountain*, the heterosexual epistemy limits any sexual relationships (particularly that of Jack and Ennis) that, according to Greimas’ semiotic square, are on the axis of the forbidden, the feared, and the unacceptable. The fact that Jack and Ennis’ inability to be together is framed by the text as a ‘tragedy’ not only suggests the power of the setting’s dominant heteronormative epistemy, but also highlights its cultural values as negative. This agenda is furthered through the construction of characters like Joe, through the filmic techniques discussed above that demonize the repressive codes of behaviour he symbolizes.

By aligning this repression with the conservative past, the film constructs ‘America-as-it-was.’ The cultural space of 1960s Wyoming, foreshadowing the

murder of Matthew Shepard, becomes symbolic of an America that, according to liberal discourses, has failed to uphold the very ideals it was supposedly founded upon: “freedom in democracy” and “the ideals of the Constitution” meant to be a “reality for all” (Cone quoted in hooks 1992, 11). By tying these failures to the past, the film suggests that such conservative spaces and ideologies are dangerously ‘behind-the-times’; they are in direct contestation with America-as-it-should-be in the modern era within this liberal discursive framework—an America in which two handsome, gay white men can pursue a monogamous relationship in peace. This film almost anticipates this America, encouraging a modern movie-going audience, through its sympathetic portrayal of Jack and Ennis, to see 1960s Wyoming as an early stage of the U.S.’s socio-political evolution.

At this point, it is important to examine more deeply the America that *Brokeback Mountain* anticipates: America-as-it-should-be. Obviously, this America would have to be one that allows Jack and Ennis’ love to flourish, a country that upholds its own national ideals of liberty and equality. The recent, historic Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage is perhaps a step towards this progressive vision, though it would not, in and of itself, be enough to erase homophobia or prevent conservative backlash. However, it is important to note here that this film, written, adapted, and directed during an era when Eurocentric, heteronormative global capitalist ideologies abound, seems to already suggest what liberty and equality means and whom it is for. According to McBride (2007), the film’s financial success is commonly said to be due to its popularity among (white, heterosexual) American women who consumed the narrative as the star-crossed love story Lee intended it to be (95). Ennis and Jack are white, “straight-acting” (95), rugged romance heroes whose tragic love story follows the generic conventions of the romantic melodrama (Osterweil 2007, 38). Audiences are meant to root for the two lovers to leave their ‘unsuitable’ partners and pursue an exclusive relationship with each other. Considering that the love stories at the center of the Hollywood moviemaking formula are always implicitly and conventionally white and heterosexual, *Brokeback Mountain* does not seem to deviate from this, beyond the fact that both protagonists are gay men and their ‘unsuitable’ partners are female (McBride 2007, 96). That the characters are both played by actors

who publicly perform as heterosexual lends to these characters’ alignment with white heterosexual convention, facilitating the intended audience’s consumption of the narrative. The preoccupation of the film with the relationship between two white men seems to mirror contemporary mainstream discourses of sexual equality. Scholars like Trinity A. Ordon (2012) and Jasbir Kaur Puar (2001) have discussed the privileging of white gay males in contemporary mainstream calls for sexual equality. Considering this, one can read Lee’s film as inevitably affirming the white, heteronormative directives that its content appears to challenge. The U.S. it anticipates, then, most likely affirms the same.

Queer Liberation and Hegemonic Fulfillment in *The Wedding Banquet*

Ang Lee’s earlier film, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), represents a kind of corrective to Ennis and Jack’s tragic love story. Set in New York in the 1990s, the film presents its audience with a different articulation of the social and cultural boundaries regulating queer bodies in the U.S. This film imagines it not as a conservative biopolitical nation that “institutes heterosexuality as a key disciplinary regime” (Gopinath 2005), but as a cultural space in which the love of two gay men can be fully realized. *The Wedding Banquet*’s main character, Wai-Tung (Winston Chao), is a successful Taiwanese businessman living with his white male partner, Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein) in an upscale apartment in Manhattan. In stark contrast to the star-crossed Jack and Ennis, Wai-Tung and Simon have a functional relationship. The primary threat to this relationship comes from Wai-Tung’s parents in Taiwan who, unaware of his queerness, continuously pressure him to enter into a heteronormative reproductive union. Once they cross borders into the U.S. to visit him, Wai-Tung and Simon manage this threat by employing Wai-Tung’s female tenant, Wei-Wei (May Chin), who pretends to be his wife for as long as his parents are visiting.

Brokeback Mountain enables a retrospective analysis of *The Wedding Banquet* and its construction of the U.S. nation. Despite a few interesting moments of homophobia and racism (or, possibly, because of those moments), the film presents modern-day America as a space of late-capitalist modernity and thus a haven of equality and possibility for its diverse, multicultural inhabitants. By being able to secure a private space where

they can live comfortably and happily, despite being an interracial queer couple, Simon and Wai-Tung act as a symbol of the supposed progressiveness of the U.S in the modern era.

I am hesitant to scrutinize the inclusion of a happy, gay interracial couple in mainstream cinema, particularly because, as Siobhan Somerville (2005) has argued, queer interracial relationships in America have been subjected to intense and, at times, brutal levels of scrutiny (345-6). Positive examples of queer and interracial relationships are undoubtedly needed in Western cinema, which is still dominated by white, hegemonic representations of romantic coupling and kinship models. At the same time, these relationships, including Simon and Wai-Tung's, cannot be separated from America's history of power and brutality. Other films have addressed this explicitly, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a film that, as Gayatri Gopinath (2005) suggests, "speaks to how the queer racialized body becomes a historical archive for both individuals and communities, one that is excavated through the very act of desiring the racial other" (1). Screenwriter Hanif Kureishi addresses Britain's past history of racial oppression and its contemporary material and psychic costs, even as he crafts his love story between South Asian Omar and white British Johnny. It is from this perspective that I unpack the construction of Simon and Wai-Tung's relationship. As I believe that, despite its attempts to present a utopic space, the film's representation of their relationship ultimately cannot be extricated from racist histories and contemporary strategies of racial management. Indeed, it is embedded within the larger racial, neoliberal, sexual, and gendered relations of power underscoring the liberal space *Brokeback Mountain* implicitly longs for.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) notes that, in this present era of globalization and the mass migrations that come with it, "diasporic public spheres...are part of the cultural dynamic of urban life" (10). Urban, metropolitan spaces like New York in particular "constitute a new sense of global as modern and the modern as global" (10). Accordingly, *The Wedding Banquet* uses Manhattan and New York to symbolize America-as-it-should-be in the global era, representing it as a liberal, cosmopolitan space. In the film's representation of Manhattan, Simon and Wai-Tung's relationship flourishes, despite conservative moments of panic. In fact, the film stra-

tegically uses moments of conservative panic in order to help present the cultural space in which Wai-Tung and Simon occupy as liberal. In one scene, for example, Simon walks out of his apartment to take out of the trash only to be met with the seemingly derogatory jeers of a young man, Steve (Neal Huff). "Hey, you homo," comes the voice off-screen. "What are you doing in this neighbourhood?" The camera then pans to show Steve riding towards Simon aggressively on his bike. The lens follows Steve's relentless pace, generating a sense of terror, only for Steve to hop off his bike and give Simon a kiss on the cheek. The subversion of the expectation generated through the camera work not only establishes the relationship between the two as being friendly, but also subverts the aggressive act and words, divesting them of their oppressive power and allowing the two gay men to reclaim them as expressions of ironic affection.

Just as with Ennis and Jack, Simon and Steve's homosocial friendship is shown to be under surveillance by disciplinary conservative forces. In the next shot, the camera shows a middle-aged couple, the Witchells, watching the pair with disdain. Yet, in contrast to the analogous portrayal in *Brokeback Mountain*, the film does not allow this conservative scrutiny to carry any significant weight even as it acknowledges its existence. The direction quickly divests the couple, along with the repression they represent, of their regulatory power by having Simon and Steve dismiss the couple in the very next shot: "cute," says Steve, referring to the Witchells' attempt to shame them, and they continue on with their conversation. At the end of the scene, as Steve rides away on his bike, the camera once more shows the Witchells' disapproving gaze. However, the audience is clearly meant to identify with Steve. The camera shows us the glaring Witchells through Steve's perspective; they move out of the frame as Steve rides his bike. The direction then ultimately gives Steve final word. As he rides away on his bike, he jokingly waves 'goodbye' to the couple. The direction privileges this mocking gesture by allowing it to close the scene, thus making clear that despite the Witchells' attempts, neither Simon nor Steve are shamed into self-regulation.

By injecting these moments of discrimination, the film acknowledges power relations in the U.S., but by disempowering them, it creates an environment in which discrimination, though present, cannot outright hinder same-sex interracial relationships from both

forming and flourishing. To return to Greimas' square, gay men and gay male relationships are not quite framed as desired or prescribed by society; however, they are, regardless of race, allowed to exist on the interstitial axis of the square: they are, at least, not-forbidden and not-unacceptable. This is all to construct New York as a particular kind of space. Martin F. Manalansan's (2003) ethnographic study of Filipino men in New York troubles this narrative, offering a more complex view of Asian queer life in the city. As he writes, "it has increasingly become apparent that even the gayest global spaces such as New York City are rife with cultural fissures and divides between various queer communities" (viii). Indeed, Filipino gay men constantly negotiate their intersectional identity to claim a space for themselves within a mainstream white gay culture "suffused with class demarcations, which, in turn, hide racial boundaries" (69). At the same time, they must navigate queer and non-queer spaces in which they may become targets of economic, queer, and racial violence (70). These complexities can become lost amidst celebrations of modernity. As Appadurai (1996) argues, the diversity that characterizes metropolitan spaces in the U.S. reinforces notions of democracy, equality, and prosperity in American social consciousness; this plurality of identities that characterizes the modern U.S. is tied together by the notion of a quintessential Americanness, which, according to rather idealistic liberal discourses, hypothetically all Americans can ascribe to equally (171). It is this particular configuration of equality that constitutes mainstream understandings of sexual and racial equality in the modern era.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as gays and lesbians became more visible in the American mainstream and increasingly lobbied for rights and fair representation, the fulfillment of their demands came to depend on their assimilation into the nation. Queer concerns became framed by a rights discourse dependent on essentialist sexual and gender identity categories. Members of the LGBTQ community were consequently encouraged to perform these identities in order to fully participate in and reap the benefits of rights activism (Mertus 2007, 1062-4). The U.S.'s championing of LGBTQ rights is thus entirely conditional, dependent on queer individuals becoming "an 'acceptable' kind of queer citizen" (Puar 2007, 2). Within this framework, the 'acceptable queer' is one whose perception of rights and freedoms

align with the heteronormative ideals of consumerism and property ownership, family and marriage. As David Eng (2003) writes, in the late twentieth century, "U.S.-based gay and lesbian activist movements have culminated in demands for legal rights to same-sex marriage" - demands, in other words, for inclusion into the heteronormative mainstream (5). Different from the radical and transgressive politics of more marginal liberation activism and theory, current mainstream queer activism, in Eng's estimation, is channelled through dominant political discourses, governed by "the rhetorics of equal opportunity and multicultural inclusion," into the sphere of global capitalism (5).

In *The Wedding Banquet*, this rhetoric underlies the film. The film depicts Wai-Tung and Simon as citizens largely (though still not perfectly) included into the nation not only because of their citizenship, but also because of their ability to participate in consumer capitalism. Wai-Tung's job involves the restructuring and renting out of old buildings. It is a lucrative business, made clear to the audience when Wai-Tung tells Simon early on in the film: "If they let me convert the Hudson building, I'll make millions." Though they are certainly not a part of Manhattan's elite economic class, the film still establishes their level of affluence by setting an early scene inside Wai-Tung and Simon's apartment. During this scene, Wai-Tung and Simon have dinner. The establishing shot shows Wai-Tung's hands placing his food onto an expensive-looking plate flanked by two lit candles (framed in glass candlewicks). As Mitry (2000) explains, techniques of design can help to present a particular interpretation of the world represented by the lens (8). In accordance with the design elements of the set that signify the couple's conspicuous consumption, the dialogue suggests the couple's economic privilege. Simon and Wai-Tung spend their dinner discussing vacation options. In fact, the mood of the scene is initially sombre with Simon unhappy with Wai Tung postponing their travelling: "What's the point of being able to afford a vacation if you won't even take time off to have one," he laments. However, the conflict in the scene quickly vanishes when Wai-Tung promises to "take [him] to Paris" for his birthday and Simon ends the scene with his satisfied smile. In the film, Wai-Tung's lucrative work is only a problem in so far as it has limited their private time. Being able to participate in New York's global capitalist modernity, being able to live happily as

an interracial gay couple with economic privilege seems to attest to the progressiveness of New York and other such cosmopolitan areas.

The film promotes this framing through its depiction of Taiwan. In particular, it uses Taiwan to construct America, comparatively, as a space of modernity, liberty, and equality and, in doing so, it reveals the violent dimensions of its supposedly liberal politics. Simon and Wai-Tung are not simply a symbol of progress, but more specifically a symbol of progression away from the nationalist, conservative logic of Taiwan, which is presented as a space characterized by restrictive traditions. It is important to consider, for example, that the very first voice heard in the film is Wai-Tung's mother, Mrs. Gao (Ya-lei Kuei), who in a voice over expresses her desire to see her son marry. "When will you marry? You know, Pa came from China to Taiwan by himself and you're his only precious son. So don't be such a snob." This voice works to thematically frame the film. Here, she appeals to his sense of familial duty as a way to pressure him into marrying, dismissing his disinterest in heterosexual marriage as a character deficiency (he's a 'snob'). Mrs. Gao is the driving force behind Wai-Tung's arranged dates, enrolling him against his will into a Taipei singles club to meet a (female) match. His parents' preoccupation with heteronormative reproduction is humorously displayed in one scene in which Mr. Gao (Sihung Lung) and Mrs. Gao meet Wei-Wei, who Wai-Tung has deceptively introduced as his 'wife'. Mr. Gao expresses his approval by telling his wife, while looking at Wei-Wei's figure from behind: "She'll make a lot of babies."

Indeed, the narrative frames Taiwan's conservative culture as infiltrating the 'liberal' space of Manhattan. The film makes this subtext obvious during a montage in which Wai-Tung, Simon, and Wei-Wei prepare their home for Mrs. and Mr. Gao's arrival. The camera focuses largely on their hands, rapidly replacing references to Wai-Tung and Simon's relationship with more heteronormative iconography. For example, a full-bodied photo of a naked and smiling Wai-Tung is replaced by a yearbook-like photo of Wai-Tung in military garb. Here, a potential reference to queerness is hurriedly tidied away. In its wake, we get what the film suggests is a representation of Wai-Tung more palatable to Taiwanese gender codes; stone-faced in his uniform, the second picture of Wai-Tung represents a more accept-

able serious and disciplined heterosexual male identity. In addition to this, Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei hang scrolls of Taiwanese calligraphy on the walls in order to, as the film suggests, placate Wai-Tung's parents through the performance of a 'traditional', intra-racial, and heteronormative kinship model. Indeed, there is an emphasis not only on pairing Wai-Tung with a woman, but also on pairing him with someone of the same ethnicity. Mrs. Gao, after all, does not appeal for Wai-Tung to find a woman in America, but enrolls him in a match-making club operating out of Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. The film thus suggests that the threat arising from his parents' continual efforts to pressure Wai-Tung into marriage has as much to do with the imposition of culture and tradition as it does with heteronormativity.

Constructing Taiwan as a repressive force of both heteronormativity and culture certainly emphasizes the U.S. as a liberal nation. At the same time, this articulation seems complicit with Orientalist, imperial discourses that have historically positioned Asia in binary opposition to Europe, its 'strangeness' becoming a source of European fear and fantasy used to justify Europe's ongoing construction of the East as a 'threat' (Said 1978, 60). Further, the film's depiction of Taiwan reinforces those liberal discourses invested in downplaying histories of discrimination, as well as its contemporary material costs. Sara Ahmed (2010) speaks of dominant discourses of multiculturalism, for example, as a way to manage racial inequality, while maintaining the privilege of whiteness in Western settler nations. As she writes, multicultural inhabitants of such nations are expected to be 'happy', and so the discourse of multiculturalism cannot abide those who remain dissatisfied with unequal power structures and for whom this inequality has manifested psychically. According to this discourse, the "truth behind the [melancholic] migrant's suffering," Ahmed states, is simply that they "suffer because [they] do not play the game, where not playing is read as self-exclusion" (142).

If happiness has come to be tied, according to Ahmed's (2010) historical, linguistic, and social analysis of term, to what gives us "pleasure or pain" (22), and if what we consider to be sources of this 'pleasure or pain' involves an intentional and affective "orientation toward the objects we come into contact with" (24), then 'happiness' is simply a form of cultural hegemonic coercion; to be happy is to follow the 'script',

to desire the same 'things', to derive pleasure from the same objects, all of which is regulated by dominant hegemonic frameworks. To be happy, to be a true citizen, is to 'fit'. The unhappiness of the excluded, therefore, is due to their own unwillingness to shed the difference responsible for their exclusion and their insistence on "reading their exclusion as a sign of the ongoing nature of racism" (143). This insistence, of course, necessarily involves re-politicizing racism and reimagining it not as a personal problem that one must 'get over' in order to find happiness, but as an institutionally supported and historically-derived social reality that continues to maintain the conditions of systemic inequality. Racial politics in America make this a difficult task for minorities who find themselves differentially positioned in relation not only to whites, but also to each other. Asian Americans in particular, as coalition activist Andrea Smith (2006) argues, are privileged over other minorities, such as Native Americans and African Americans (68). They are encouraged to take up a 'model minority' identity model, which, in turn, encourages Asians to embrace these privileges and take them as a sign of superiority over other minorities; it deceptively promises assimilation. This phenomenon surely affects, whether the film is 'aware' or not, the happily multicultural relationship between Simon and Wai-Tung, the latter performing this model minority identity through his assimilatory practices. And yet, as Smith continues, despite their privilege, Asians "are still cast as inferior... [t]heir privilege is not a signal that they will be assimilated, but that they will be marked as perpetual foreign threats to the US world order" (69).

As Ahmed (2010) states, to be conscious of racism is to be painfully aware of being "out of place in a world oriented around whiteness" (86). In supposedly liberal nations, the path to happiness is thus discursively dependent on consciously or unconsciously accepting certain hegemonic norms. Queer subjects are also encouraged to mimic the logics of heterosexuality within the heteronormative space of the nation in order to be happy. Heather Love (2007) suggests this, when she asserts that the "fantasies of future happiness" offered by the institutionalization of monogamy and marriage work to delegitimize the "full erotic and affective expressions" that "alternative forms of intimacy offer us" (53). Yet, according to Eng (2003), it is not simply the white heteronormativity of the U.S. nation that, if un-

challenged, can dictate the parameters of modern queer identity. We must also consider interracial queer relationships as they are expressed through and produced by the Eurocentric formation of late-capitalism. As Eng writes, "prior historical efforts to defy state oppression have, to a striking extent, given way to the desire for state legitimacy and inclusion" and the "[move] from wage labor to particular modes of consumer capitalism" (5) has in many ways provided the conditions for certain queer individuals to fulfill this desire (5). Globalization tends to organize and normalize individuals around the interests of capital—in Ahmed's terms, we can say that capital becomes an object of 'happiness' around which individuals can orient themselves to achieve a kind of sameness and be included in the nation. Differences of race, sexuality, and ethnicity become subsumed under the obligation to accumulate capital goods. "This neoliberal portrait," however, "is based on a privileged form of market-generated individualism that operates on ideas of universalism and similitude established at the expense of economic and racial inequalities" (Manalansan 2007, 100). Indeed, Simon and Wai-Tung, despite being gay, occupy an economically privileged position in society. Living in Manhattan, an economically affluent area of New York, Wai-Tung owns many buildings, including Wei-Wei's. His work signifies power, particularly when one considers that the seizing, restructuring, and re-selling of space has often been used to displace marginalized individuals, communities, and populations. In the film's narrative, this work materially shifts the balance of power in his favour when it comes to Wei-Wei, whose gender, ethnicity, and economic status puts her in a much more vulnerable position.

Wei-Wei's lack of security in the U.S. is the result of being an immigrant without a green card. Her precariousness is further intensified by the fact that she cannot pay her rent: "I'm not like you," she tells Wai-Tung, "rich American citizen." One might say that Wei-Wei can be, at the start of the film, counted as 'wastes of modernity' (Bauman 2004, 27). As Zygmunt Bauman (2004) writes, "[w]aste is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret. Captains of industry would rather not mention it at all—they need to be pressed hard to admit it" (27). The refugees, "unacknowledged lovers, illegal immigrants, indentured laborers" that are "consigned to outcast status and confined to the edges of globalization" inevitably ghost those able

to reap the benefits, able to be secure in the civil rights and economic profit to be gained (Eng 2003, 8). Importantly, it is only because of Wai-Tung's choice not to press her for rent (instead taking a painting of hers as payment) that Wei-Wei can stay in her studio. Wei-Wei herself articulates her own vulnerability as well as her relative powerlessness when she tells Wai-Tung just before he leaves: "Simon's lucky to have a handsome and rich boyfriend. Ask him to get me one too, then I'll pay the rent." Inevitably, Wai-Tung's capital and Wei-Wei's economic vulnerability places her in a position where her labour can be used and exploited in exchange for security in the form of money and a green card. The very same processes of globalization that gave Simon and Wai-Tung a chance at (neo)liberal 'happiness' also produced the conditions for her precariousness, which she could only solve through her labour. After she and Wai-Tung have sex while inebriated, her resultant pregnancy does inevitably give her a way to stay in America, since at the time, US immigration policy stipulated that, "[l]egally, U.S citizenship [could be] granted on the basis of either birthplace (jus soli) or descent" (Eng 2003, 8). Thus, for Wei-Wei, having a child who is an American citizen would potentially confer on her certain (though not complete) legal protections as the mother (Koshy 2004, 10). However, in order to gain these protections, Wei-Wei must bear the burden of reproductive labour as well as that of motherhood, a fact that remains to be true despite the apparent alleviation of her initial distress at the end of the film. That this is required of her is itself a testament to the ways in which globalization, a result of imperial projects, has transformed racialized female bodies in particular into, as Foucault would say, "a dense transfer point for relations of power" (Härting 2008, 66). The exploitation of Wei-Wei's labour, the coercing of her reproductive labor, and her commodification for First World consumption all seem inextricably linked to the Western logic of capitalist modernity.

Conclusion

The Wedding Banquet's representation of its interracial gay couple thus reproduces Eurocentric, heteronormative discourses of capitalist modernity, but this representation depends on the construction of those (often racialized and gendered) bodies it pathologizes. That Wei-Wei's pregnancy, for example, is treated as a potential threat to Simon and Wai-Tung's monoga-

mous relationship echoes "the history of Asian women's exclusion from the U.S." (Koshy 2004, 10). Their sexuality signifies the ability of ethnic communities to reproduce themselves and challenge the ideological (racial) meaning of the nation. Their framing as a threat thus facilitates their exclusion. Likewise, Wai-Tung's ability to participate in the space of American citizenship implicitly requires the marginalization of certain bodies against which his inclusion can be measured and valued. In other words, his status as citizen can only be realized through its construction against those deemed unfit for the category of 'us' and placed among those who constitute 'them.' Thus, despite the film's progressive inclusion of gay protagonists, the U.S. constructed by the film's privileging of mainstream liberal logics and the implicitly longed-for (by *Brokeback Mountain's* tragic narrative) is, in actuality, both a reassertion of heterosexuality and a "call for whiteness that reproduces the white episteme of queerness at the nation's boundaries" (Puar 2001, 172). Just as Wei-Wei and Wai-Tung's parents ghost *The Wedding Banquet's* celebration of queerness, so too do the bodies of the Hispanic, male prostitutes in Mexico who draw Jack into their lustful, pathological 'darkness,' away from an 'ideal' performance of queerness that can be realized with Ennis.

Both films encourage an acknowledgement of only certain kinds of queer citizens and, when taken together, they craft a teleological history of modernity; a narrative that assumes the inevitability of social progress and promotes the notion that the conservative past should and will always give way to a more progressive future. However, neither film takes into account the ways in which queer liberalism is part of a more complex and messy terrain of hierarchy and domination at work in the present. Here, we must consider, as Eng (2003) does, intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. The existence of oppressed, racialized, and gendered bodies has and continues to support the socioeconomic conditions that make possible the liberation of those in the queer community willing and able to participate in the dominant structures of citizenship (8-10). Only by teasing out these complex entanglements of power can a transformative queer politics be achieved.

These films and their role in proliferating mainstream queer representations can indeed be celebrated. However, we cannot dismiss the fact that they, along with their perceptions of the socio-political and eco-

conomic conditions of sexual equality, are always already entangled in the unequal relations of power underlying the neoliberal American body politic. We must, therefore, take into account the boundaries and limitations of the socioeconomic and cultural possibilities promised by America's liberal multiethnic landscapes if we are to nuance discussions of queer hypervisibility in American mainstream media.

.....

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Armstrong, Nancy. 1977. "Character, Closure, and Impressionist Fiction." *Criticism* 19 (4): 317-337.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Vol. 1. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2004. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean Griffin. 2006. *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. Washington: Rowman & Littlefield.

Boyle, Claire. 2012. "An Ethical Queer Cinema? Hypervisibility and the Alienated Gay Gaze in Ducastel and Martineau's 'Ma vraie vie à Rouen.'" *Modern & Contemporary France* 20 (1): 53-69.

Brokeback Mountain. 2005. Dir. Ang Lee. With Jake Gyllenhaal, Heath Ledger. Paramount Pictures.

Connolly, Cathy, and Gail Leedy. 2008. "Out in the Cowboy State: A Look at Lesbian and Gay Lives in Wyoming." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 19 (1): 17-34.

Corso, John J. 2014. "What Does Greimas's Semiotic Square Really Do?" *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47 (1): 69-89.

Dhawa, Huai Bao. 2014. "Repression, Silence, and Cine-

matic Language: Eastern Sensibilities in Visualizing *Brokeback Mountain*." *Journal of East-West Thought* 4 (1): 83-94.

Eng, David L. 2003. "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas." *Social Text* 21 (3): 1-37.

Foucault, Michel. 1978/1990. *The History of Sexuality: Vol 1. An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

Grandena, Florian. 2008. "Du glissement de l'homosexualité." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 12 (1): 99-106.

_____. 2009. "Zooming In, Coming Out: Languages in Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Ma vraie vie à Rouen/The True Story of My Life in Rouen* (2003)." *Studies in French Cinema* 9 (1): 75-86.

Gopinath, Gayatri. 2005. "Impossible Desires: An Introduction." In *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, edited by Judith Halberstam and Lisa Lowe, 1-28. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Handley, William R. 2005. "Belonging (s): Plural Marriage, Gay Marriage and the Subversion of 'Good Order.'" *Discourse* 26 (3): 85-109.

Härting, Heike. 2008. "Global Humanitarianism, Race, and the Spectacle of the African Corpse in Current Western Representations of the Rwandan Genocide." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (1): 61-77.

Hayward, Susan. 2005. *French National Cinema*. East Sussex: Psychology Press.

Hobson, Emily K. 2009. "Imagining Alliance: Queer Anti-Imperialism and Race in California, 1966-1990." PhD diss., University of Southern California.

hooks, bell. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.

Koshy, Susan. 2004. *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Amer-*

- icans and Miscegenation*. Redwood: Stanford University Press.
- Kowal, Donna M. 2000. "One Cause, Two Paths: Militant vs. Adjustive Strategies in the British and American Women's Suffrage Movements." *Communications Quarterly* 48 (3): 240-255.
- Love, Heather. 2007. "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence." *New Formations* 63: 52-64.
- Manalansan, Martin F. 2003. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- _____. 2007. "Colonizing Time and Space: Race and Romance in *Brokeback Mountain*." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (1): 97-100.
- McBride, Dwight A. 2007. "Why I Hate that I Loved *Brokeback Mountain*." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (1): 95-97.
- Mertus, Julie. 2007. "The Rejection of Human Rights Framings: The Case of LGBT Advocacy in the US." *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (4): 1036-1064.
- Mitry, Jean. 2000. *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*. United Kingdom: The Athlone Press.
- Morgensen, Scott Lauria. 2010. "Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (2): 105-31.
- Ordon, Trinity A. 2012. *Coming Out Together: An Ethnohistory of the Asian and Pacific Islander Queer Women's and Transgendered Peoples's Movement of San Francisco* (Studies in Asian Americans). New York: Routledge.
- Osterweil, Ara. 2007. "Ang Lee's Lonesome Cowboys." *Film Quarterly* 60 (3): 38-42.
- Puar, Jasbir Kaur. 2001. "Configurations of Desire." In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, edited by Eric Brander, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, Birgit Rasmussen, and Matt Wray. Durham: Duke University Press.
- _____. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rees-Roberts, Nick. 2008. *French Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Rich, B. Ruby. 2013. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Smith, Andrea. 2006. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing." In *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence*, edited by Beth E. Richie, Andrea Smith, and Julia Sudbury, 66-73. Cambridge: Sound End Press.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. 2005. "Queer loving." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11(3): 345-56.
- Stacey, Jackie, and Sarah Street. 2007. "Introduction." In *Queer Screen: A Screen Reader*, edited by Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street, 1-18. New York: Routledge.
- Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. 2001. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Wedding Banquet*. 1993. Dir. Ang Lee. With Winston Chao, Mitchell Lichtenstein, May Chin. Samuel Goldwyn Company.