COWBOYS AND ANGELS AND AFFECTIVE *QUEER*S

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Abstract: Taking into consideration the critical and media attention American writer Annie Proulx's story "Brokeback Mountain" has received, this paper offers a reading of the aforementioned work while problematising issues of heteronormativity in the plot. Using Sara Ahmed's and Heather Love's theoretical contributions, this investigation interweaves queer theory and affect studies to highlight how heteronormativity is an affective orientation in which feeling bad is crucial to maintain the structure of oppression. Although more questions rather than answers are provided, this study concludes that political mobilisations are possible when affects are read and questioned, especially those considered backward.
Keywords: Brokeback Mountain. *Queer* theory. Affects. Annie Proulx. Heteronormativity.

CAUBÓIS E ANJOS E *QUEER*S AFETIVOS

Resumo: Considerando a atenção crítica e midiática recebida pelo conto "Brokeback Mountain" da escritora estadunidense Annie Proulx, este trabalho oferece uma leitura deste ao problematizar questões hete-

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ronormativas presentes no enredo. Partindo das leituras de teóricas como Sara Ahmed (2006, 2014) e Heather Love (2009), esta investigação entrelaça teoria *queer* e estudos sobre afetos para destacar como a heteronormatividade é uma orientação afetiva na qual sentir-se mal é vital para a manutenção da estrutura de opressão. Embora aponte mais perguntas do que respostas, o estudo conclui que mobilizações políticas são possíveis quando afetos são lidos e questionados, em especial aqueles considerados retrógrados.
Palavras-Chave: Brokeback Mountain. Teoria *queer*. Afetos. Annie Proulx. Heteronormatividade.

Introduction

Published for the first time in The New Yorker in 1997, a longer version of "Brokeback Mountain" appeared in the 1999 short story collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. At the time of this publication, American writer Annie Proulx had already established herself critically with prize-winning novels such as *The Shipping News* and *Postcards*, the former winning both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award. Yet, only in the first half of the 2000s would mainstream attention come with the adaptations of *The Shipping News* in 2001 and "Brokeback Mountain" in 2005.

Taking into consideration the attention "Brokeback Mountain" has received in media, my aim is to engage with the short story and approach it critically from a perspective which privileges *queer* and affect theories. My intention is not to offer a definitive answer in terms of the protagonists' sexual identity or place in the world. Instead, I would like to problematise the understanding of their identities while shedding light on how heteronormativity works as an affective orientation, one heavily laden with anxiety, disgust and even, I dare say, love.

In my discussion, theoretical notions are interwoven with quotes from the story. This means that this essay does not provide a traditional theoretical section before offering analytical comments. Interpretation comes along with theoretical discussion, thus some concepts such as heteronormativity, affect and *queer* are used throughout and defined at different points.

*Queer*ing affects or affective *queers*?

Understanding affect as a framework for political investigation, I use terms such as affect, emotion and feeling interchangeably. Other theorists have established differences for this terminology. Teresa Brennan (2004), for instance, focused on the possibility of transmission of affects in which physiological elements are crucial. Her description of feelings as "sensations that have found the right match in words" (BRENNAN, 2004, p. 5) is something that other theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz (2020) have taken issue with. Sara Ahmed, another influential thinker in contemporary theory, suggests that "[e]motion is the feeling of bodily change" and that "emotions do not involve processes of thought, attribution or evaluation [...]." (AHMED, 2014, p. 5) Yet, Ahmed's own work has relied heavily on the uses of different terms to describe what affect is — impressions, emotions and feelings are some instances. This is not, however, meant to discredit any of these critics' perceptions, especially because of their influence on my own work. Brennan, Muñoz and Ahmed are some of the names associated with what has been termed as the affective turn, a controversial phrase used to group a myriad of critical and theoretical reflections on the notion of affect drawing from the works of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze (LEONE, 2014).

Considering the impossibility of establishing a specific list with distinct terminology in this article, I have chosen to work with affect, emotion and feeling as similar concepts

which help me interrogate structures in which what we feel, *the impressions we leave*, have not been seen as political. In other words, as Ahmed (2014) highlights, the focus on what we feel helps displace the hierarchy between reason/emotion.

Thinking about what we feel — or, as Ahmed (2014) puts, the impressions we leave and the ones we are left with — becomes a possibility for investigation as we have often been taught to overlook the meaning behind these emotions. Whether straight or not, what we feel has been conditioned by a series of constructions made natural by repetition. What happens, then, when one refuses to follow the same line? What happens when one does not accept to perform feelings and emotions the way they have been inherited?

At the heart of my investigation is my interest in understanding how "Brokeback Mountain", a story of two so-called cowboys in love, can be read from another perspective, especially one in which their feelings and emotions are taken into account. The representation of these feelings and emotions illustrates the theme of loss and impossibility, elements which have become crucial in *queer* historiography. Moreover, this focus on affects helps expand the field of literary criticism into other productive sites such as philosophy and sociology, establishing a transdisciplinary approach. Here *queer* and affect theories are key elements in helping dismantle the structure of heteronormativity.

Queer theory is not a field, but a *battlefield*: although its institutionalisation and growth in academic departments dates back to the beginning of the 1990s, several other critical and theoretical practices from the 1970s and 1980s already approached issues of identity, sexuality and gender from what we now understood a *queer*/feminist perspective. In other words, I do not expect to offer a history of *queer* theory due to its complicated and rich roots which other theorists have tackled (MISKOLCI, 2016). The term *queer* here is

used as an umbrella term which welcomes theorisations of sex, identity, gender and sexuality in contrast to normativity. Therefore, *queer* is understood as an attack on the normative, a position in which what is considered normal is questioned and destabilised (BASH BACK, 2020).

Focusing on the intersections between *queer* theory and the affective turn, Wen Liu (2020, p. 2) offers a perspective in which "three distinct yet related strains of affective scholarship" are at work: *queer* negativity, *queer* temporality, and *queer* as a machinic body. Liu's intention is not to exhaust the debate, but rather to present a bird's-eye-view of the field so as to highlight specific theoretical orientations.

Liu (2020, p. 3) argues that *queer* negativity and temporality take on an approach of cultural critique in which they "make visible the feelings, sensations, and expressions that are often not recognized by the liberal framework of private emotions." The third strain, *queer* as a machinic body, follows a deleuzian perspective to emphasise "the necessity of rejecting the preoccupation with conceptualizing the *queer* body as a unique, singular, and organic entity." (LIU, 2020, p. 3) Instead of offering an in-depth analysis of each strain, I prefer to focus on how interconnected they are as modes of investigation, especially considering that questions associated with each sphere are intextricably intertwined with the others.

Affect is, thus, an element which has received attention in *queer* theory. As the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and Elspeth Probyn (2005) highlight, negative affects have become central to investigations for their central productive sites for new discussions. Relying heavily on this notion of how negative affects permeate *queer* life, I am interested in offering an analysis of Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" which questions the (in)ability to articulate feelings and emotions due to a heteronormative structure.

"if you can't fix it you've got to stand it": heteronormativity and affect

"Brokeback Mountain" tells the story of two men, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, who meet for the first time in 1963 while working in the mountains. Although both express their identity in heteronormative terms, they engage not only in same-sex sexual intercourse, but also in maintaining some affective connection for twenty years. At the end of the story, readers find out, as Ennis does, that Jack died — or was murdered. In a nutshell, their story of "love" ends the way it had always been: "Nothing ended, nothing begun, nothing resolved." (PROULX, 2000, p. 276).

Ennis and Jack have often been called and described as cowboys, yet what they really are is different:

> That spring, hungry for any job, each had signed up with Farm and Ranch Employment — they came together on paper *as herder and camp tender* for the same sheep operation north of Signal. [...] It would be Jack's second summer on the mountain, Ennis's first. Neither of them was twenty (PROULX, 2000, p. 254, my emphasis)

Herder and *camp tender*: this is a description which does not echo what a cowboy is. The tendency to emphasise that both Jack and Ennis were cowboys not only goes back to a sense of heteronormativity which attempts at producing a masculine identity, but at the same time it deploys a deconstructionist strategy — cowboys they are *not* and can *never* be. Yet, what draws my attention is the metaphor behind being a herder or a camp tender precisely because of what they are meant to do: a herder is meant to keep large groups of animals or people together and a camp tender is supposed to take care or look after something or someone. What Ennis and Jack do throughout their first summer on Brokeback Mountain is *keep themselves together* — physically and emo-

tionally — while also *tending to each other* in ways they did not know which were possible.

This process of keeping together and tending to each other is not devoid of suffering or pain because they understand that the way they are read by society is at stake. They both expressed that they were not *queer* — "[...] except once Ennis said 'I'm not no *queer*,' and Jack jumped in with 'Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours.'" (PROULX, 2000, p. 260) — not knowing that the man who had hired them was carefully observing their daily routine.

This tension between being seen and being invisible is again noticed when, after a hailstorm, the sheep got mixed with another herder's flock of sheep. The fact that the sheep only got mixed after Ennis and Jack had had sexual intercourse helps metaphorise their own situation, one in which their own understandings of gender and sexuality were as unstable as the scene — "In a disquieting way everything seemed mixed" (PROULX, 2000, p. 260).

Their being entangled is again metaphorised when Ennis and Jack part ways after their first summer together when

> Within a mile Ennis felt like someone was pulling his guts out hand over hand a yard at a time. He stopped at the side of the road and, in the whirling new snow, tried to puke but nothing came up. He felt about as bad as he ever had and it took a long time for the feeling to wear off (PROULX, 2000, p. 262)

What I read in this scene is not only Ennis' inability to put into words his feeling of anguish or distress for not knowing whether he will see Jack again, but also his feeling of disgust at himself for not knowing what he feels for Jack. This is an affective moment in which bodily expressions make up for the lack of words, especially considering this is when they have just left the mountain and are exchanging what was then their last words after their first summer. The mountain itself is an affective expression which I am going to tackle

ahead, but now I want to focus on this backward feeling of Ennis'.

Heather Love (2009, p. 4) describes some feelings as backward due to their connection to "the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire." The *queer* experience Love is interested in is one which refrains from offering affirmative political representation, thus her attention to "feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, resentment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness" is not to suggest happy endings or to encourage "a brighter future for *queer*s." (LOVE, 2009, p. 4) Rather, she discusses that her work is a diagnosis of *queer* historiography which resists and critiques "the inadequacy of *queer* narratives of progress" (LOVE, 2009, p. 27).

What entices me is that Love's compelling argument questions the own inadequacy with which readers have responded to the story. Proulx herself has complained about how the audience has misread a story of homophobia as one of love in which Ennis and Jack were supposed to stay together (WYATT, 2014). In other words, it seems as if readers' obsession with romantic love — the idea of Ennis and Jack together — has tethered the story to a single theme which means that only some affirmative happy endings should be accepted. This is the reason Love's focus on backward feelings helps shed some light on the apparently progressive aspects of stories: *how* would a story between two men in Wyoming in 1963 have a happy ending? Also, how is a happy ending, defined here as *happily ever after*, not saturated with neoliberal understandings of subjects?

While my aim here is not to critique readers' interpretation of desire for assimilation, it is worth highlighting what the story offers as a platform for political thinking: what do these feelings of inadequacy, disgust, anxiety and self-hatred tell us about the story? Unlike Heather Love, I understand

affects as a framework for reflection in which philosophical enquiry is not detached from activism — be it in the streets or in the classroom. However, my interest in backward feelings leads me to agree with her decision to focus on elements which are not immediately pleasant for their portrayal of violence and homophobia because

> As long as homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget (LOVE, 2009, p. 29).

What makes Ennis stop his car in an attempt to puke is his mixed desire — *for Jack, for the mountain, for what cannot be expressed in words* — and his own aversion to himself — *to heteronormativity, to social rules, to life in society*. This scene illustrates a backward feeling in the sense that it is not just a case of love or hate: it is a thin line between both. This feeling of aversion is again felt when the focus changes to Ennis' family after the birth of his first daughter: "[...] their bedroom was full of the smell of old blood and milk and baby shit, and the sounds were of squalling and sucking and Alma's sleepy groans, all reassuring of fecundity and life's continuance to one who worked with livestock" (PROULX, 2000, p. 262).

Blood, milk and shit all lay out how heteronormativity works and what Ennis accepts. Women in "Brokeback Mountain" appear only as ways to remind Ennis and Jack of the system they have promised to uphold by marrying them. It is not a coincidence, though. Women's bodies have often been commodified as the heart of the house, the ones who keep life in order by attaching themselves to discourses of family and marriage. As Jack Halberstam (2011, p. 200) notices, the presence (or the absence) of women in the Western genre is curiously and highly problematic: "Given how much time men spend together in the Western, there must be many women spending time without men".

Alma and Lureen, respectively Ennis' and Jack's wives, play a central role in maintaining heteronormativity. Alma plays the role of the good wife — only divorcing later — and Lureen takes control over the business inherited from her father. The fact that Alma and Lureen are represented as one-sided women helps Ennis and Jack become the centre of attention and mobilise feelings of empathy towards their doomed love. Alma and Lureen fade into the backdrop as a way to emphasise how Ennis and Jack suffer, yet it is Alma and Lureen who manage to counter societal pressure and act on their own (limited) terms: Alma marries another man who respects her while Lureen becomes successful as the owner of the company. They settle into heteronormativity without a shadow of doubt, but they do so by managing their own terms of survival, unlike their husbands.

The presence of domesticity — Alma, home and the baby — is disrupted by Jack's return. Temporally it is four years, but textually it is a small gap between paragraphs. Between "the little apartment which [Ennis] favoured because it could be left at any time" and "the first sign of life of Jack] in all that time" (PROULX, 2000, p. 263) one is to find a blank space splitting paragraphs in the short story, a gap in which life as a heterosexual man is erased. This textual gap makes room for what Ennis and Jack did for four years away from each other: a busy life as husbands and fathers, a complicated life with blood, baby, and shit. A life, I dare say, in terms of heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity, in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's words (1999, p. 355), is a system of "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent — that is, organised as a sexuality — but also privileged." Organised as a normative site, heterosexuality goes beyond only the idea of sex as an act. Rather, by suggesting that heteronormativity is a system, it is crucial that attention be given to the discourses

surrounding us — whether educational, religious, medical etc. The "creation" of heterosexual subjects oriented towards the same goal is not something natural, then. It is enforced by several institutions which sustain what subjects are normal or abnormal according to the ways in which they exist.

Ennis' failed attempt to throw up is, for me, a sign of heteronormativity at work. His inability to articulate words to express how much he is going to miss being with Jack is mixed with his own aversion towards being *queer* as he himself states. However, his feelings do not negate his state of being as he feels distressed for apparently no reason. This is where I am able to articulate heterosexuality as an affective orientation.

Orientation is a concept which, in Sara Ahmed's words,

> allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return (AHMED, 2006, p. 21).

This lengthy quote comes in handy for summarizing briefly what an orientation is and what being oriented means. We are raised to desire certain objects in our lives and, when we fail to achieve those, we are deemed inferior or made to feel bad. In addition, not achieving the goals socially expected from us is a reminder of our inability to fit in in what has been termed as society. There are lines which we must follow so as to become subjects with a future. We are, after all, oriented towards a future laid out in front of us: a life with what Halberstam (2005) calls "paradigmatic markers of life experience" such as marriage and birth.

As a matter of fact, an orientation stresses that we have to be in the correct direction. Ahmed (2006) reminds us that the word "direct" is related to "being straight" and, thus, it is not a surprise that orientations tend to be towards heterosexual objects. Also, it is Ahmed (2006, p. 2) that underlines the connection between emotions and orientations: "The attribution of feeling towards an object (I feel afraid because you are fearsome) moves the subject away from the object, creating distance through the registering of proximity as a threat." An orientation, then, is an affective form of existence which informs people what to feel depending on what objects they are faced with.

Ennis del Mar, for instance, is faced with a heteronormative crisis when Jack is gone and he feels the need to throw up. The need to eliminate something from his body is very telling: does he want to eliminate his attraction to Jack or does he want to get rid of this heteronormative orientation? Whichever answer is given to these questions, I doubt whether they are going to be as productive as the critique of the situation itself.

One way in which heteronormative orientations are enforced is by means of violence. Ennis, for instance, describes his father's decision to show him what happens to those who do not stay in line:

> There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich — Dad would pass a remark when he seen them. They was a joke even though they was pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They'd took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp (PROULX, 2000, p. 268).

The fact that such violence was made a spectacle out of for a 9-year-old child is one of the ways heteronormativity enforces its law: seeing the punishment *in the flesh*, as a wit-

ness and as a soon-to-be target. Ennis' comment raises the question of how fear, associated with disgust, can be an affective response, especially because this is what prevents Ennis from accepting another heteronormative idea, Jack's suggestion that they find a ranch to have "some sweet life." (PROULX, 2000, p. 268).

Heteronormativity is, then, an orientation in which feeling bad is essential. By means of this feeling bad, it makes itself *known* and *knowable*, both as abstract and concrete experiences. It may be argued that heterosexuality becomes an inheritance (AHMED, 2006) and a trauma (CVETKOVICH, 2017) by not letting subjects forget that they shall feel bad for not staying in line. Yet, we cannot ignore that "[s]pace and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition" (AHMED, 2006, p. 92).

This leads me to question how the notions of public and private spheres are again mixed as far as the mountain is concerned. Luis Alberto Brandão Santos and Silvana Pessôa de Oliveira (2001) remind us that spaces are not only geographical and physical, but also social and psychological. This means that the mountain on which Ennis and Jack meet and go to regularly for twenty years is not simply a geographical formation. Rather, as highlighted by Christopher Madden (2013), it becomes a symbolic place for the problematisation of heteronormativity.

Madden focuses on the number of "morally unambiguous" words which add to the metaphorical aspect of the mountain:

> The mountain boiled with *demonic* energy, *glazed* with flickering broken-cloud light, the wind combed the grass and drew from the *damaged krummholz* and *slit rock* a *bestial* drone. As they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow-motion, but *headlong, irreversible fall* (PROULX, 2000, p. 261, my emphases).

Madden reads in this description of the mountain the same turmoil of feelings Ennis was going through, especially by highlighting words with religious undertones. It is even noted by the researcher that the *krummholz*, a specific time of deformed and crooked vegetation, emphasises how Ennis and Jack have *queer*ed the space of the mountain.

While I agree with Madden's close reading of the passage, I would also like to highlight that it is not that Ennis and Jack *queer* the mountain as much as the mountain *queer*s them. It is a two-way street: they produce the *queer*ing of the mountain by making public something which is supposed to be private whereas the mountain allows them enough safety from the public eye.

In addition, the cold weather of the mountain stresses the tension between them — Jack enquires the last time they ever meet "[...] why's it we're always in the friggin cold weather? We ought a do something'. We ought a go south. We ought a go to Mexico one day." (PROULX, 2000, p. 274). If love is expected to be stereotypically an expression of fire and heat, it is the cold weather that keeps both of them together. The paradox is always present to remind of the ways in which heteronormativity operates: they cannot have what they want because they have been oriented in specific ways.

Whether it is feelings of self-hatred or confusion, Ennis never allows himself to fully disorientate himself from heteronormative lines. When Jack suggests that they find somewhere to live together, Ennis reacts by bringing up stories of violence. Ennis is not able to let go of the heteronormative constructions surrounding him, the so-called "paradigmatic markers of life experience" which Halberstam (2005) mentions: marriage, children, work, *life as he knows it*. On the other hand, Jack seems to be much freer in his own terms. He is willing to abandon his previous life and does not show signs of faltering. This is one of the reasons readers are likely to picture Jack as a more affective subject than Ennis — possibly

influenced by the Ang Lee-directed cinematographic production which is not the focus here.

In "Brokeback Mountain", Jack seems to be a much more confident man than Ennis. The latter questions, for instance, whether other people also go through the same crisis: "'Shit. I been looking at people on the street. This happen a other people? What the hell do they do?'" (PROULX, 2000, p. 269). In addition, Ennis is described as "not big on endearment", but he expresses superficially how he felt after four years away from Jack: "Took me about a year a figure out it was I shouldn't a let you out a my sights. Too late then by a long, long while." (PROULX, 2000, p. 267) Were he "not big on endearment", he would not have been able to touch on his feeling of missing after four (long) years.

What I mean is that I disagree with the perceptions in which Ennis is the one who is thought to have both feet on the ground due to his consistent identity (an attachment to heteronormative constructions of maleness) whereas Jack is the one with wild dreams. I read Ennis in a different light because of the ways his feelings of discomfort creep into his discourse. He is not as able as Jack is to express himself freely. This does not mean, however, that Jack is hierarchically better positioned as a subject. It is a difference in affective terms which draws my attention as Jack does not necessarily undergo the same major transformation as Ennis does.

Only after Jack dies — *or is murdered* — does Ennis realise the impossibility of their affection. As Heather Love suggests, there is a strong association of *queer* history with loss and this is what Ennis is faced with at the end of the story when he visits Jack's parents and finds an old shirt of his in Jack's closet. Supposing it had been lost, Ennis clearly understands the powerful feelings this shirt evokes:

> He pressed his face into the fabric and breathed in slowly through his mouth and nose, hoping for the faintest smoke and mountain sage and salty sweet

> stink of Jack but there was no real scent, only the memory of it, the imagined power of Brokeback Mountain of which nothing was left but what he held in his hands (PROULX, 2000, p. 281).

What this excerpt does is depict the absence of any possibility of love, one unavoidable trace in *queer* historiography. Ennis is supposed to mourn the loss of Jack and we, as readers, are supposed to understand what this emotion does. The sole action of feeling empathetic towards Ennis' loss is allowing oneself to be trapped in heteronormativity. What I argue is that this feeling of empathy is empty and useless if it does not make room for any political interrogation of the very structure which not only made Jack's life unmournable as a *queer* life, but also Ennis' as a subject in crisis. Not noticing the ways in which heteronormativity operates only maintains it in place and does not allow any critique to get to the bottom of the issue, the psychic and physical damage of *queer* subjects.

As previously states, backward feelings are "tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire." (LOVE, 2009, p. 4) I read "impossibility" of love in "Brokeback Mountain" not as an expression of fate itself as if *queer* people were meant to suffer, but as one of realising and materialising the limits with which they are faced. Impossibility here then means the inability to articulate a life in which same-sex love is possible and not the absence of their existence. It becomes explicit at the end of the story that Ennis is still unable to express his feelings *in* and *because of* a heteronormative paradigm which offers him very little room to deviate. Jack, on the other hand, pays the price for living his life more "freely" — and I am fully aware of the dangerous suggestion here of being free and having to die for it. It is no coincidence, thus, that the last line of the story reminds us that "[...] nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (PROULX, 1999, p. 283).

Inconclusive conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to offer a reading of Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" by focusing on how affect plays a central role in the plot. My focus on specific scenes does not exhaust the investigative possibilities the story still has. Yet, the intersections between *queer* and affect theories have helped me question specific elements which had previously gone unnoticed in my readings of the story.

By paying attention to how heteronormativity is an affective orientation, it is possible to understand how Ennis and Jack, main characters in "Brokeback Mountain", are directed towards specific heterosexual goals. In other words, it is crucial to underline the presence of backward feelings in *queer* relationships so as to mobilise them as political enquiries. Noticing, for instance, that being a herder or a camp tender adds another undertone to the construction of heteronormativity may offer new investigative routes which stray away from traditional perspectives which try to prove that Ennis and Jack were gay men.

I come to the conclusion that this essay has raised more questions than actually answered others, yet, as *queer* readings *tentatively* do, this one cannot help but *feel* the only way out is through: asking questions about elements which are apparently natural is an opportunity to destabilise meanings and engage in new interpretations of how life is oriented. In all his normative goals, Jack seemed aware of the limits and how to push them, but Ennis only learns about this a little too late.

This reminds me of one of George Michael's hit singles, "Cowboys and Angels", a song about the "it's about the ridiculousness of wanting what you can't have." (MICHAEL, 2004) Isn't *queer* history fraught with impossible longings and unattainable desires? Perhaps this is the understanding which affirmative stories need to come to terms in their final reck-

oning: the impossibility of the past is the transformation of the future.

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