

7. UNSHAMING *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*: ROCKING *HEIMAT* IN TRANSNATIONAL COMING-OUT MOUNTAIN MOVIES

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Home can mean many things. Most would presumably associate home with a place such as one's homeland or the house where one grew up in. But a home is much more than merely a physical location; there is a special kind of relationship with a place called home. "Home-as-a-relationship is something actively pursued and oriented to distinctive material and social settings, which affect it in turn," as Paolo Boccagni points out (2017, 4). Many movie audiences of the past two decades have associated *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) with the film's protagonists, Ennis and Jack, as illegitimately paired significant others who claimed and over the course of their lives reclaimed "their" mountain as home. In this, *Brokeback* has not only affected them; the film has affected us. The male couple, beset by restrictive social norms, created for themselves a mythic place that has entered our cultural imaginary, signifying a space freed from civilizing constraints, a space affected by and affecting queer desire. As such, *Brokeback Mountain* partakes in mythic place constructions that, as David Bell argues, "[free] up sex from social norms, marking same-sex desire as 'natural' and even as spiritual" (2000, 553). And arguably, it is above all *Brokeback*'s mountainscape that "forms the perfect backdrop for the unrestrained passions of 'manly love' to flow" (Bell 2000, 553).

Beyond the mythic, queer life amidst mountainscapes also is a reality, full of contradictions and complexities. Whether located in Wyoming's Rocky Mountains or Yorkshire's rolling hills, queer mountain culture is rich and

nuanced in its nonmetropolitan spatial scale and “provides a corrective to the assumptions that urban spaces are the only utopias for LGBTQ individuals” (Eaves 2016, 149). Claiming home in a region that is commonly thought to be unsociable, queerphobic, and backward may not always provide the utopia that LaToya Eaves describes for communities such as North Carolina’s Asheville, the Blue Ridge Mountain community that is “racially, socioeconomically, and sexually diverse” and “welcoming travelers seeking respite from urban life” (149). Accordingly, accounts of queer mountain life resonate with recent queer critical ruralism works that aim to counter the cherished cultural truism “that lesbians, gay men, and members of other sexual subcultures somehow belong in cities in a way that they don’t belong in suburbs, small towns, or the rural recesses of the [...] hinterlands” (Johnson 2007, 5), or what Jack Halberstam has described as the metronormative construction of queer subjectivities that maps the story of migration from country to town onto the coming-out narrative (2005, 36).

The films I have chosen to discuss with regard to gay male homesteading in the mountains address and problematize antipathies against foreigners, deep-rooted apprehensions against non-normative sexualities, and the burdens of solitary, agronomic lives. The films speak of the difficulties and sometimes impossibilities of overcoming shame and coming out of the closet within such a setting. Michael Brown’s definition of the closet as space captures the vagaries of presence/absence for LGBTQIA+ persons and is particularly pertinent for queer ruralities:

The closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence—and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless—in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be. (2000, 1)

This closeted and invisible feeling attests to the lasting effects of queer rural experiences of isolation and intolerance, even or especially after returning from urban areas where queer life might or might not have been a less shaming encounter. In her ethnography of rural queer youths, Mary Gray speaks of how young people negotiate the tension between asserting queer difference and claiming status as a local, and she highlights a governing private/public split and the challenge of in/visibility for coming-out efforts since

discovering a sense of one’s queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one’s queer differences [...], a visible community able to recognize and return one’s queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution. (2009, 5)

The films I discuss are set in rural mountainous locations and show that a sustainable community of like-minded persons is mostly missing completely (with the notable exception of *Big Eden*) and that expressions of queer sexual desires remain relegated to a “world-excluding privacy” (Warner 1999, 177) of either open nature or enclosed rooms. Such privacy of discovering and exploring queerness, required for sustainable coming-outs, mostly proves to be problematic and ambivalent. Katherine Schweighofer argues that the creation of spaces in the case of rural farm life is

simultaneously extremely public and private. A wide-open back pasture, with no one watching but a few grazing horses or cows, is a space that defies clear public/private divides. These places are always available, yet must be sought out by the queerly desiring subject. They are both far from the hustle and bustle of everyday family life, yet structurally central to that world. (2016, 230)

Therefore, claiming sexual possession of landscape is significant. Especially when marginalized persons such as queer people and migrants recruit nature to realize their sexual desire, they move beyond the purely private and into a “world-making publicness” (Warner 1999, 177). This can be dangerous, even deadly,¹ but it can also lead to real utopias. Ennis and Jack of *Brokeback Mountain*, and Johnny and Gheorghe of *God’s Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017) are excellent illustrations of the ways that queer people can explore their sexual passion only in times and places remote from their ordinary family life. And while the former example ends in death and solitude, the latter offers a utopian model of queer mountainous homesteading. In each case, claiming rural home as a queer space does not come easily, if at all. In contrast to the coming-out paradigm of urban queer visibility “with dominant notions of LGBT community centers and pride parades” (Schweighofer 2016, 231), rural queer visibility thus may be much more governed by the urge to blend in, to belong, to be “different-but-similar” (Baker 2011, 50).

Arguably, the rural closet that we still can see in *Brokeback Mountain* is gradually breaking apart, possibly through the omnipresence of the internet, social media, dating apps, and popular culture streams, through which young queer people can connect to the world beyond their immediate physical reach and which significantly reduces the former information gap that queer adolescents had to suffer from growing up in remote rural spaces. This connecting to a translocal queer community has the countereffect, however, that in this age of hypervisibility everybody else also knows a lot more, consequently making young queer people more vulnerable in their visibility. The result is an even greater lack of privacy and, as Gray maintains, despite or rather because of this increased level of visibility where “everyone knows about them,” often

queer youths are expected to remain “functionally invisible” (2009, 96), that is, not to be or act “too gay.” This protective behavior, in turn, may well result in continued internalized homophobia heightening feelings of shame and guilt, but also in amplified fears of being out. Comparing dimensions of the “closet” in the city and at home in the mountains in 1995, for instance, gay Appalachian men still stated that they “experienced much more physical aggression at home and seemed to have a limited definition of the term ‘fear,’ equating it with the threat of physical violence” (Black & Rhorer 1995, 21).

In the depiction of the vagaries of queer homesteading and the hazards of homophobic violence, *Brokeback Mountain* can be linked to several film genres, the Western melodrama being the most obvious. Historically, however, the cinematic representation of forms of male-on-male violence within mountain settings reaches back to the silent era and the Southern mountain melodrama beginning with *The Moonshiner* (Wallace McCutcheon Sr., 1904). J.W. Williamson describes the great majority of these spectacular melodramas as “featuring assaults of all kinds: woundings, murders, abductions, attempted rapes and successful seductions, ambushes, desperate chases, and hand-to-hand combat with fists, knives, and axes” (1994, 8). Crucial for understanding how mountains mattered in these melodramas was that “almost always the mountain brutes were bested by the law in the final reel [...]. In other words, mountain nature was officially *un-natural* more often than not” (Williamson 1994, 9). Although by 1920, the genre became “box office poison,” the appeal of crude masculinity in action did not, but “shifted to other social types in other landscapes” (Williamson 1994, 10–11). And while the gangster type soon thrived in urban cinematic settings, the true successor of the Southern mountain melodrama would become the Western, especially with the film industry’s relocation to Southern California having already started a decade before, so that there was an “early blurring of the mountain melodrama into the Western” (Williamson 1994, 10). To be sure, the shift in geographics brought along a shift in the relation of landscape and character, or as Jane Tompkins writes: “Not just any space will do. Big sky country is a psychological and spiritual place known by definite markers. It is the American West, and not just any part of that but the West of the desert, of mountains and prairies” (1992, 4).

While there certainly is no lack of violence in Western films, showing off violence became a matter of balance, between the hero and villain as well as between feminine and masculine traits, since “the terms of masculinity are always essayed if never quite resolved in the Western, a lack of resolution that itself contributes to the genre’s appeal” (Mitchell 1996, 183). Robert Warshow’s assessment of the Western hero, originally published in 1954, famously captures the classical Western hero as a lonely man, the last gentleman with honor and style, his presumed moral clarity reflected through his

physical image against the landscape; and yet this hero is morally ambiguous: He kills, after all (1999, 659–67). Warshow's essay was published at a crucial turning point in the Hollywood Western tradition, a turn toward an increasing melodramatizing of the genre, which led to an erosion of hegemonic masculinity and the rise of a softer and neurotic rebel hero played by actors such as Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando (Seeßlen 1995, 105; Hamilton 2016, 46; Cohan 1997, 204; Mitchell 1996, 158). The figure of the hillbilly, prominent in the Southern mountain melodrama as a caricatured stereotype of crude masculinity, survived in even more exaggerated versions in films such as *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), which entails perhaps the most disturbing cinematic male rape scene to date. But the threat of sexualized male-on-male violence remains a key subtext to the Western film genre, palpable in classic Westerns like *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) and moving to the surface in Spaghetti Westerns such as *Django Kill ... If You Live, Shoot!* (Guilio Questi 1967).

Brokeback Mountain, and most recently *The Power of the Dog* (Jane Campion, 2021), critically treat such violence as detrimental for young sexually non-normative men, forcing them into a life of closeted shame and lethal assault. Both films are set in a pre-Stonewall past—the 1960s and 1920s, respectively—but reflect on the present situation of LGBTQIA+ persons struggling to make home in rural mountain regions. Facing fears and dealing with shame have hopefully changed since then, given that a significant amount of narratives of rural coming-outs have moved beyond the framework of formula stories that, according to Emily Kazyak, rely on stock characters such as the “oppressed rural gay [...] who must flee to the city to come out, find a queer community, and become liberated” and “the rural heterosexual who is homophobic (thus necessitating the need for gays and lesbians to flee” (2011, 562). In my film readings I follow her suggestions of taking note of diverse cultural narratives and popular representations of queer sexualities as they are embedded in particular geographies, and supersede those formulaic rural stories “where gay and lesbian sexualities are unclaimed, stunted, or destroyed and, in contrast, urban spaces are where those identities are constructed and made visible” (561). Reassessing *Brokeback Mountain* through the lens of other queer films set in other mountain regions allows me to skirt seeing the film primarily as a formulaic Western melodrama and regard it from the angle of the *Heimatfilm*, instead.

A major factor playing into the politics of privacy and visibility of the films I discuss with regard to queer homesteading lies in the complicated social structures of rural mountain regions. Arguably the key generic framework to address questions of home is the *Heimatfilm*. While many critics such as Thomas Elsaesser insist on the Germanness of the genre (1989, 141) peaking in popularity during the 1950s and replacing the attraction of the *Bergfilm* of

the preceding decades (Martin 2017, 34), the *Heimatfilm* has survived and currently thrives with a transnational outlook. Already the trendsetting Austrian film *Echo der Berge* (*The Forester of the Silver Wood*, Alfons Stummer, 1954, popularized in Germany under the title *Der Förster vom Silberwald*) was compared at its release to the American Western, arguing that the Alpine mountains were as vibrant as the Westerns' landscapes (Peterson 2010, 130). Typically depicting an idealized version of rural life in picturesque landscapes, and with archetypal characters such as the hardworking farmer, the virtuous young woman, and the troublesome outsider, these formulas have since been adapted, updated, and often queered along with the genre's transnationalization. Films such as the Hungarian-German *Land of Storms* (Ádám Császi, 2014), the British-Finnish *A Moment in the Reeds* (Mikko Mäkelä, 2017), and the Georgian-Swiss *Wet Sand* (Elene Naveriani, 2021) deal with queer returnees struggling to face their forefathers' inherited homes, whereas the German *Neubau* (Johannes Maria Schmit, 2020), the Austrian-Belgian *Hochwald* (*Why Not You*, Evi Romen, 2020), and the Polish *Elephant* (Kamil Krawczycki, 2022) are amongst those films that feature queerly resilient characters unsure whether to remain home under potentially precarious circumstances. In these films, a queer romance is often being played out between a local who does not quite fit into the traditional community and a foreigner, such as a migrant worker, who seems even less able to integrate into the close-knit village living. The ensuing dynamics of power and hierarchy based on status and nationality might be even more relevant in the drama of acceptance than any particular gendered or sexual behaviour, which suggests that some rural queer people do not position sexuality as the principal characteristic of their identity, "because doing so could easily negate other parts of their identity, such as ethnicity, class, and local familial history" (Baker 2011, 45).

One is tempted to ask: Why stay or even return to a life that seems so predictably restricted? What are the benefits? As most of the mentioned films and their featured gay couples show, a life beyond the rural is neither desirable nor realizable. Even while the gay men may feel like outsiders in their rural communities and despite repeated shaming experiences and endured injustices, they still loathe the metronormativity of a queer urban lifestyle and continue "the work of making home, affective and physical, [as] an ongoing process" (Ahmed et al. 2003, 9) away from the city. Recent backlash developments in the United States and in several European countries notwithstanding, such a turn to political conservatism, especially in rural areas, has nevertheless "not stopped minorities from speaking up or moving in" (Hagstrom 2015, 160), thus asserting the rural their rightful home as "spaces of otherness and belonging" (Mhurchú 2021, 413). I appreciate the discussed films as partaking in the move against ongoing queerphobic pushbacks by advocating—rocking—rural coming-outs and queer homesteading.

CLOSET AND UTOPIA IN THE MOUNTAINS OF WYOMING AND MONTANA

“Old Brokeback got us good, don’t it?” whispers Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) into the ears of Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) when the couple reunites years after their first encounter on Brokeback Mountain. This memorable utterance testifies both to the endurance of love and the prominence of location. “Mountains loom large in the realm of our imagination,” writes Sabine Sielke (2023, 53), and she asks how mountains matter in *Brokeback Mountain*, wondering why Ang Lee’s film does not make it into hit lists such as “100 Best Mountain Films” compiled by IMDb users. The film’s Rocky Mountains setting is crucial, both in its physicality and symbolism, especially if we recall that the Rockies are named “the backbone of the continent” (see, for instance, Schmidt 1990). “What is Brokeback-ness?” rightfully asks Jim Kitses (2007, 25) in view of Brokeback’s sublime mountainous grandeur encompassing beauty and wilderness, romanticism and isolation.

Brokeback Mountain has certainly left its mark on our cultural imaginary, not least by establishing “Brokeback” as a lexical term to describe things pertaining to homosexuality or being of questionable masculinity, and also more specifically, a secret relationship between two closeted gay men (“Brokeback”). Already in 2006, a *New York Times* article adapted the term to discuss “Brokeback” marriages and a research study compared the differences in the treatment of such Brokeback marriages between white and black men who carry on clandestine sexual affairs with other men, finding “that white bisexuality is described using pitying language, garnering sympathy for white men who are in the closet while black bisexuality is described using pejorative language, painting black men as a ‘threat’ to black women” (Han 2015, 233).² Although Ennis Del Mar’s name is of Gaelic-Hispanic origins, thus suggesting a hybrid ethnicity, the film never addresses this explicitly, installing “Brokeback” as a “site that teaches its viewers about homosexuality and White masculinity” (Esposito et al. 2007, 95), instead. And whereas his name translates as “island of the sea” or, as Richard Block suggestively adds, “queer to mountain country, [...] the one Hispanic who remains forever removed by a border of a different kind” (2009, 254), Ennis ultimately learns that no man is an island, leaving him angry and bereft. “I wish I knew how to quit you,” complains a frustrated Jack in another later haunting scene, to which Ennis retorts: “Then why don’t you? Why don’t you just let me be, huh? It’s cause of you Jack, that I’m like this. I’m nothing, I’m nowhere.”

Would it have been possible for the two of them to live together and set up a permanent home in the mountains, as Jack suggests at some point? “Two guys living together? No way,” Ennis answers. The film resolutely says no to a queer home as it negotiates and confirms the closet as a love between two men that is “marked with shame and fear, and ultimately they chose to keep

it hidden instead of celebrating it" (Esposito et al. 2007, 96). For Ennis, the closet remains the term for this prison, metaphorically describing a closet where hidden secrets are kept under lock and symbolically reducing *Brokeback Mountain* to Jack's postcard pinned inside Ennis's restricted trailer space. But nowhere is this image more physically evident than in Ennis and Jack's shirts folded into each other and kept in a back corner of Jack's closet for twenty years and until after his violent death.

Ang Lee's film has been celebrated variously for its audacity and criticized for its reticence in showcasing a love story between two men. Annie Proulx, the author of the original short story, recalls that "urban critics dubbed it a tale of two gay cowboys. No. It is a story of destructive rural homophobia" (Proulx 2005, 130). B. Ruby Rich, who famously coined the term *New Queer Cinema*, praises *Brokeback Mountain* in this context as turning the homoerotic subtext of classic Westerns inside out,

reading back the history of the West through a queer lens. Not only does *Brokeback Mountain* out its own cowboys, but it outs the Wyoming landscape (actual Alberta, Canada) as a space of homosexual desire and fulfillment, a playground of sexuality freed of societal judgment, an Eden poised to restore prelapsarian innocence to a sexuality long sullied by social shame. (2013, 187)

Whether the film overcomes shame or rather reinstalls it seems to remain within the affective and critical responses of its viewers. Certainly unforgettable is the scene when the summer in the mountains, which brought the two strangers together, comes to an abrupt and premature end, due to the sudden onset of winter, but not least because their boss had observed the sexual affair between the two men. Ennis says goodbye to Jack in his usual barely intelligible way, makes no concessions or offers of a possible future, strolls down the street seemingly untouched, and then has to take refuge in a gateway, where he violently vomits all his pent-up and unexpressed feelings out of his body. If the boss's "[s]eeing is the agency of shaming," Ennis's reaction accounts for "being seen as shameful" (Pajaczowska & Ward 2008, 9).

While it can be argued that *Brokeback Mountain* serves as a space of escape and freedom, as Rich's take on the film from the perspective of *New Queer Cinema* suggests, the mountainscape at the same time is the location of the couple's enduring closet. Thus, on the one hand, the isolated space offers the lonely lovers a chance for love in the wilderness. But in fact, the mountain is just deceptively free of civilizing restraints; in truth it is subjected to being scrutinized and policed by a homophobic supervisor who controls not only the allotted land sections but also his employees. Shame, seemingly absent in open range, is never far away when Ennis and Jack meet on *Brokeback*

Mountain, or, as Kitses quips, “[t]he men soon find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place” (2007, 26). Whether Kitses had the slang meaning of “rock” as aroused male genitalia (“Rock-Rock”) in mind or not, Ennis and Jack’s first “hot queer sex act” certainly plays on the closet as part of “manipulative Hollywood magic pressed into the service of gay romance—particularly in rural space” (Howard 2007, 101). Although happening high up in the mountains, the act itself takes place inside the shelter—and protective privacy—of a tent. They have been drinking out of boredom and loneliness, the night is cold outside and warm inside the tent, the physical closeness after weeks of withdrawal feels good and so instinct seems to guide the action and the sexual act is determined above all by the discharge of urges. John Howard even goes as far as suggesting that the film’s sex scenes stigmatize rather than normalize queerness: “*Brokeback* admits associations of homosexuality and bestiality. Animal passions. Rural queers ostensibly closer to nature. Grunting, squealing, if not exactly like a pig” (2007, 101). Still, feelings arise in the process and they are unintentional and frightening, especially for Ennis. The film might therefore have queered the landscape of the traditional Western, but it has also crucially brought the closet to the mountains, “disrupting our conventional understanding of inside and outside space [...] brought about by the ‘placing over’ of the metaphor of the closet onto the Western landscape” (Todd 2009), or, as Jack puts it more simply, yet more painfully: “You have no idea how bad it gets! I’m not you. I can’t make it on a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year!”

Even if the film refuses the radical aesthetics and affirmative identity politics that the *New Queer Cinema* called for ten years earlier, relying on well-trying pathos formulas established in melodrama instead, it must also be said that the film set new standards for Hollywood conventions in its addressing gay role clichés and the visualization of gay sexuality, which made at least parts of straight audiences uneasy (see Cooper & Pease 2008). The film has been compared to Douglas Sirk’s 1950s melodramas—although without his bittersweet, tearful finales (Kitses 2007, Holleran 2011, McCabe 2011)—as well as linked to the queer tongue-in-cheek practice of recognizing the homoerotic subtexts in many classic Westerns (e.g. Brower 2010; Halberstam 2011; Warren 2011; Piontek 2012), but there is especially one film that played with the fascination of the queer cowboy within remote mountainscapes: Thomas Bezucha’s 2000 film *Big Eden*. The film is set in the idyllic Montana mountains with a utopian community of elderly gay-friendly people who try to make Henry Hart (Arye Gross) realize that Pike Dexter (Eric Schweig), a local Native American, has long been in love with him from afar. While Rich writes that “[t]he two-step has never looked sexier than it does when danced by two men in love, celebrated by their whole Montana clan” (Rich 2013, 188), other critics may list it besides *Brokeback Mountain* as an important

film dealing with rural homophobia, but still call it a flawed attempt to imagine a small mountain community in rural USA without homophobia (Clarke et al. 2010, 274). While the film's seemingly formulaic narrative taps into various generic traditions such as the Western melodrama and the romantic comedy, *Big Eden* can also be more productively viewed from the perspective of the transnational *Heimatfilm* addressing queer homesteading: the long-lost village son, who has favored the big city over his rural home-*stead* but returns due to a calamity, here Henry's father, who suffered a stroke and needs assistance. Troubling himself with adapting to rural customs again, which above all entails his official coming-out, Henry does not realize that he has become as much a stranger as the "real" village outsider Pike, who is the sole non-white person of the film. What makes this film stand out is the unabashed depiction of a queer mountain haven. With this, *Big Eden* also touches on cinematic traditions such as the *Heimatfilm* and its complex ideology of serving a "compensatory function in providing images of settled, rural existence seemingly far removed from the concerns of everyday life;" but the *Heimatfilm* has always also been concerned "with the various tropes of mobility and displacement that mark the eruption of the present into *Heimat* as 'uncontaminated space'" (von Moltke 2007, 43–44). *Big Eden* integrates both aspects of the seemingly eternal far away and the intrusion of the here and now. It is true "that the film subsumes indigenous subjectivity within its anglicized version of a queer small-town utopia" (Tatonetti 2010, 157), since Pike's tribal affiliation remains unclear and the narrative's outcome hinges on the rom-com-like happy ending for the lovers. Viewed critically, this representation of disconnected and detribalized Native Two-Spiritedness stands in the tradition of representing "the white man's Indian" (Berkhofer 1979) whose othered racial identity merely serves to highlight and intensify the white hero's desire, or, as bell hooks put it in culinary terms that are particularly apt in his scenario, since Pike secretly cooks meals that might well be called love potions for Henry: "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992, 14).

It is also true, however, that such white-washing of queerness is a staple in many other, non-American films with different histories of racial and ethnic subjugations. If *Brokeback Mountain*'s "closet has never seemed more cruelly constricting than in comparison to the wide open spaces of what Americans are pleased to call 'God's country'" (Hoberman 2005), the British film *God's Own Country* and the Spanish film *Alder* (Roberto Castón, 2009) are amongst the wave of contemporary queer films on *Heimat*, opening and redefining the rural closet as well as featuring ethnically marked migrant workers who function as saviors for the white protagonists.

MUCH MORE THAN JUST BROKEBACK IN THE YORKSHIRE HILLS
AND THE BASQUE PYRENEES

Francis Lee's 2017 feature debut *God's Own Country* has been saluted as Yorkshire's *Brokeback Mountain*. But whereas *Brokeback Mountain* was understood as representing a pre-Stonewall era of enforced and unescapable rural closetedness,³ *God's Own Country* is called "post-gay": "Fifty years after the Sexual Offences Act partially legalised male homosexuality in Britain, the parallels with *Brokeback Mountain* show how far attitudes towards LGBT people have changed—the sensibility of *God's Own Country* is decidedly post-gay" (Davidson 2017).⁴ Moreover, it strikingly differs from its predecessor in the ways the film depicts "the unsparing drudgery of agricultural life in contemporary Britain" and the "stereotypical image of Yorkshire masculinity [...] with an attitude that's as hard and flinty as the constituent parts of the dry-stone walls lining the hills hereabouts" (Lawrenson 2017).

This indeed describes the situation of the film's protagonist Johnny Saxby (Josh O'Connor), a gruff gay man obliged to look after the family sheep farm because his father is disabled after a stroke, his mother fled the farm, and his grandmother feels overburdened. He finds relief in binge-drinking and casual sex, but otherwise his emotional privation mirrors the dreary and black moor of the Yorkshire countryside—hardly a promising "God's country." But, as John Wylie notes, "landscape is not only something we see, it is also a way of seeing things, a particular way of looking and picturing the world around us" (2007, 7). Director Lee (2017) asserts that it is the world from Johnny's perspective we see, "the effect the landscape had on [him] rather than the landscape itself." With the arrival of the Romanian migrant worker Gheorghe Ionescu (Alec Secăreanu), Johnny reluctantly starts to see and feel the landscape with the foreigner's eyes. "It's beautiful here, but lonely, no?," says Gheorghe, and his "entering Johnny's life transforms this landscape of desolation and stagnation," brings to the forefront Yorkshire's wild beauty beyond its agricultured topography and even a sense of "divinity, which reminds us of the title of the film" (Yamaguchi 2019, 164, 166).

In its thematizing an ethnically marked migrant worker and his romantic involvement with a local farmer, the film was hailed as revolutionizing the (British) migratory film that had centered on urban and heterosexual scenarios with migrants being either chaste, or abused, or invisible ghostly presences, notably exemplified in Stephen Frears's immigrant film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) (see Williams 2021, 72–73). *God's Own Country* not only sexualized the migrant film, but also queered it, even verbally. Johnny, who joins the villagers in their discriminatory demeanor against Gheorghe by using racist slurs such as "Paki" or "gyppo," in the end has to humble himself and beg: "I want us to be together. I don't want to be a fuck-up anymore." Gheorghe,

after yet another of Johnny's behavioral glitches, left to work on a potato farm in Scotland, but relents and, before sealing the reunion with a tearful kiss, rekindles the earlier playful banter between the two:

Gheorghe: "You're a freak."

Johnny: "So are you."

Gheorghe: "Faggot."

Johnny: "Fuck off. Faggot."

Together, they set up home at Johnny's family farm, with the blessings of both his father and his grandmother. A queer mountain film with a happy ending, for once. *God's Own Country* herewith relates to other contemporary *Heimatfilme* in exploring identity and migration through "stories of the often less represented life and structural change in rural and remote areas" ("Der Neue Heimatfilm"). Although Francis Lee sees as a major difference between his film and *Brokeback Mountain* that *God's Own Country* is not set in a homophobic society (quoted in Crummy 2017), there are other voices who state that the region, the Silsden area of Keighley in West Yorkshire, is still often "regarded as a site of gay oppression and repression—an isolated, hostile zone where both gays and migrants can be invisible figures" (Williams 2021, 75). As the plot follows Johnny's development and he learns to resist the "violently hetero-patriarchal spaces" and starts to relate to the world around him in an alternative, queer mode "based on the empathetic embodied communications between human and animal" (Pember 2018), the film revises such hostile rural spaces and offers a home in the hills for its queer protagonists.

Although the "fairy tale-like ending" (Feldmann 2021, 114) has been criticized, specifically because of its reliance on the queer, darkly exotic, and sensually open migrant as savior of the repressed pale local (White 2017; Williams 2021, 77), it is politically relevant that the film leaves behind *Brokeback Mountain's* melodramatic "air of martyrdom" (Gilbey 2017) and celebrates queer ruralism. This decidedly is not a failed coming-out story; in fact, it is not a coming-out story at all. The characters and their environment know about their queerness and—if grudgingly—accept it. Conceived before the Brexit referendum, the film nevertheless contributes to a post-Brexit discourse of (il) legal migrancy with a bi-national romance that nowadays would be well-nigh impossible. Negotiating the terms of their homesteading, Gheorghe, of whose background we otherwise know pitifully little, offers a reason for his migrancy: "My country is dead. You can't throw a rock in most towns without hitting an old lady crying for her children who have gone," he says. "I've been through this before. On my farm. I can't go through that again. I would not survive, believe me." Gheorghe's existential concerns are heightened by his already broken heart, and yet he is willing to seek home anew with Johnny in England,

which he can only do by leaving behind an undesirable place to migrate to a more desirable place hopefully offering escape, safety, and the freedom to pursue his queer sexual desire.

The traditional *Heimatfilm* has always balanced the precariousness of an escape destination against the impossibility of including foreigners and sexual, ethnic, and other minorities (see, for example, Hudelist 2017).⁵ Unrestrained, unpoliced, and unpunished outdoor sex between men has not been part of such a repertoire up until recently, including *Brokeback Mountain*. This is why the explicit sex scenes in *God's Own Country* matter, because such *Heimatfilme* traditionally endorsed “clear-cut gender roles and unambiguous sexual identities” (Fritsche 2013, 116) and thus stood for guaranteeing an “eternally promised” straightness. This space, however, becomes “the field for the (utopian) reinvention of the world,” as Cante and Restivo (2004, 143) suggest, when the space opens up for other—queer—agendas. Continuing the aesthetic politics of the *New Queer Cinema* of the 1990s and the “New Gay Sincerity” trend of the 2010s⁶ in revolutionizing the screen by refusing to shame the queer subject, *God's Own Country* employs an emphatic naturalist style that embraces explicit rough sex in muddy fields among Yorkshire's hills and unusually extended casual static post-coital scenes with full-frontal nudity that feature “John's personal revelation in a phallically graphic way” (White 2017). While a staple in these queer cinema movements, the overt move against the *Heimatfilm*'s starkly heteronormative gender politics is recent and particularly conspicuous regarding critiques of rural practices of naturalizing bodies, families, and homes, thus calling for assertions of belonging and defiance against ostracism.

God's Own Country joins other films in such explorations of multiple understandings of queer rurality and its political aspects, since “for all the fun and playfulness that can come with a romp in the hay, [we should not] assume that same-sex desire and LGBTQIA+ individuals are incompatible with rurality” (Keller & Bell 2014, 518). The earlier 2009 Spanish film *Ander* by Roberto Castón, set in the mountainous region of the Pyrenees, is another example worth mentioning, not least for the fact that it was financed by the Basque government, who specifically asked director Castón, a Galician film director, for an LGBTQIA+-related film set in the Basque region (Izurieta 2021, 139). By having *Ander* (Josean Bengoetxea), a closeted and hardly attractive Basque farmer in his forties, sexually engage with his hired help, the young Peruvian migrant worker José (Cristhian Esquivel), the film challenges traditional Basque hypermasculine and heteronormative expectations. This is explicitly articulated by Reme (Mamen Rivera), a Galician prostitute, after one of *Ander*'s violent outbursts that signify his internalized homophobia: “How afraid you men are of each other.” The film ends with a most remarkable scenario: *Ander* opens his house as a home for José, Reme, and her fatherless

son. As a neighbor insultingly jests: “Vaya trío, dos maricones y una puta” (“What a threesome, two faggots and a whore”). The film’s last scenes show the newly assembled family in the kitchen, eating lunch that José has prepared, and then the male couple in their bedroom, not having sex but cuddling and smiling, listening as a small transistor radio announces the New Year.

Ander uses “talking silences” (Izurieta 2021, 145) throughout the film, just like *God’s Own Country* does, to produce a documentary feel and an overall atmosphere of rural loneliness and ennui that eventually shifts to indicate longing and belonging. This entails a resignified meaning of landscape as *Heimat* in a social and emotional sense, since the isolated mountain space becomes instilled with positive, sexual life. Furthermore, the human space has also been invigorated and transformed into a new, perhaps even utopian mode of idyllic homeliness.⁷ This cinematic queer revision of mountainscapes and the way they offer a home for gay protagonists resists assigning the urban queer scene with a superior status and relegating non-metro queer people to an unwelcoming space. As a consequence, this upends a logic that equates the geographical marginality of mountainous rurality with a social negligence by placing the rural, as Rob Shields notes, “on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other” (1991, 3). Films such as *God’s Own Country* and *Ander* have taken on the rural space and deliberately queered its connotations of inferiority and backwardness alongside toxic notions of hegemonic masculinity, queerphobia, and heteronormativity. They offer a “homing desire” that combines the migrant seeking hominess elsewhere and the local staying put in productive ways that “remove the sentimental and fetishist cloak that wraps the ideal of home” as inherently not-queer and redefine home as “queer,” or more broadly “as a space of differences rather than home-as-sameness” (Fortier 2003, 129, 131). Such films radically resignify and queer rurality, and excel in visual appraisals of mountainous landscapes. But more importantly, the appeal of the beauty of such rurality is intimately connected to the protagonists’ affective search for a shared *Heimat* in a world increasingly threatened by de-democratizing backlashes against LGBTQIA+ communities. The films’ outspoken advocacy of rural multicultural queerness counteracts discrimination, homophobia, and other forms of violence that prevent queer people in rural areas from fully participating in the civic lives of their native or chosen homeland.

NOTES

1. The 2017 Finnish-British film *A Moment in the Reeds* (Mikko Mäkelä) is an example of the former, the 2014 Hungarian-German film *Viharsarok* (*Land of Storms*, Ádám Császai) of the latter.
2. On Ennis and Jack’s bisexuality, see Brod 2006, on their straightness, see Leung 2008.

3. *Brokeback Mountain* was heavily criticized for ignoring gay history, since the plot starts out before the Stonewall Riots, where in 1969 patrons of the Stonewall bar in Manhattan resisted police raids and queerphobic attacks and which generally are considered a milestone for the gay, lesbian, and transgender movement, and ends in 1983 marking the beginning of the AIDS era. It is as if the *Brokeback* world has nothing to do with these events. See Chamberlain & Somogyi 2006; Liebrand 2008; Manalansan 2007; Dale 2011; Morrison 2011; Krass 2016.
4. In their assessing the utility of the concept “post-gay,” Benjamin Kampler and Catherine Connell (2018) contend that “the two most enduring characteristics of post-gay politics or discourse are (a) a de-emphasis of the centrality and necessity of nonheterosexual identities and (b) an assumption that anti-gay sentiment is rapidly disappearing in most Western contexts.” *God’s Own Country* can be said to reflect both tendencies.
5. Keller and Bell (2014, 513) succinctly point out that as far as cultural representations of sexual minorities go, an easy recourse is the violent murder of Jack Twist in *Brokeback Mountain* and the actual murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, or the rape and murder of Brandon Teena in Nebraska, recounted into Kimberly Peirce’s film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) (See also Hunt 2011). The two most significant examples of the German so-called critical or anti-*Heimatfilm* repertoire are Peter Fleischmann’s *Jadgszenen aus Niederbayern* (1969) and Uwe Brandner’s *Ich liebe dich, ich töte dich* (1971), both of which feature a homo- or bisexual character, who is publicly chased down for his sexual behavior. More recent and more optimistic examples of a subgenre that has been called urban *Heimatfilm* or *Stadttheimatfilm* (von Moltke 2003, 121; Halle 2013, 175), featuring queer exiles coping with homo- and xenophobic environments in their efforts of queer home-steading, include Guy Lee Thys’s *Mixed Kebab* (2012) and Faraz Shariat’s *Futur Drei* (2020).
6. This trend in current independent queer British cinema is characterized by low-key depictions of quotidian and non-metropolitan gay life. Films such as *Weekend* by Andrew Haigh (2011) resort to an “earnestly non-judgmental and naturalistic style” (Moor 6) and are particularly known for sex scenes that “are not overly eroticised and neither do they adopt an explicitly pornographic grammar” (Moor 14).
7. This would also explain the choice of Ander’s name, which has Greek roots meaning “man,” “husband,” “warrior,” and “hero.” In stark contrast to a customary heteronormative understanding of “Ander,” the name here represents an “oxymoron outside of that custom: to be a man (άνήρ) and to be gay” (Izurieta 2021, 148).

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