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Fictions of Western Hypermasculinity and Freedom:

A. Proulx's Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories

The collection of contemporary Wyoming stories by Annie Proulx, containing “Brokeback Mountain,” which served as a basis for the eponymous film, opens with the following epigraph: “Reality has never been of much use out here.” It is a statement uttered by an anonymous retired Wyoming rancher. This sentence can be read as a call for re-examination of the pervasive influence of mythical American West in general and its hallmark – the concept of western hypermasculinity in particular.

The mythic West featuring skillful, brave and independent cowboys appeared in American literature at the end of the nineteenth century as the period of open range and the frontier days came to an end. The idealization and romantic transformation of a low-paid ranch hand into a chivalric and masculine cowboy was popularized primarily by Wister Owen’s literary western, *The Virginian* (1902). As Michael Kimmel shows in the cultural study entitled *Manhood in America*, imaginary reinvention of the West as a testing ground of manhood coincided with immense cultural changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization and immigration and the ensuing identity crisis of the modern civilized man (1996: 121). The Wild West Shows and the rodeo competitions organized since 1880s (the 1st Wild West Show – 1882, the 1st rodeo – 1883 in Pecos, Texas) were the new ways to revive mythic western masculinity (Kimmel 1996: 83). The western outdoors became increasingly available to the white American men as a result of the Indian Removal Bill (1830) and the Homestead Act (1862), as well as economic changes which aimed at uprooting of the Native American tribes inhabiting the contested areas. The physical acts of removal and destruction were accompanied by symbolic erasure of Native Americans from the “imagined West.”

This effect was achieved by representation of Native Americans as a degenerated, emasculated “vanishing race.”

The emergence of the New West in American history and literature aimed at destabilization of what Richard White called, “the most strongly imagined section of the United States” (1991: 613). Historians and writers of the New West undermined the master narrative of the triumphant “winning of the West” conducted by the American men by focusing on such issues as race, ethnicity, class and gender in the Old and New West. The appeal of the films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), based on A. Proulx’s short story, featuring enduring icons of the American West, the twentieth century versions of cowboys, has contributed to the process of revision of the stereotypical American western masculinity. The hallmarks of the mythical West, such as rugged hypermasculinity of the ranch hands or rodeo cowboys are re-imagined in the collection of short fiction by Annie Proulx entitled *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories*. The familiar image of the mythical West is complicated in Proulx’s collection by motifs of relationships involving bisexuality and homosexuality, violence and sexuality, problems with aging or injured male bodies, troublesome relationships with fathers and their western legacies.

Proulx’s *Close Range*, the collection of Wyoming stories, opens with a story entitled “The Half-Skinned Steer,” which was selected by John Updike for inclusion in the “The Best American Stories of the Century” (1999). Mero, the old man, travels by car from Massachusetts to Wyoming for his brother’s funeral. His brother’s death is quite grotesque. He is killed by an emu on their family ranch, now transformed into a tourist attraction called “Down Under Wyoming” featuring emus. Even though Mero, who is in his eighties, is advised not to take such a long trip by car because of harsh weather and his age, he insists on his self-reliant four-day journey: “He intended to drive (...) He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu” (CR, 22). He never reaches the old family ranch because his car is caught in a blizzard in the vicinity of his family home. He gets out of the car and starts walking, but he realizes he will not be able to get to his destination as he becomes overwhelmed by hallucination that he is followed by a ghastly “half-skinned steer” from the past.

The story contains a parallel tale-within-a-tale narrative about the rancher named Tin Head for the metal plate installed in his head and his inhumane skinning of a live steer told by the girlfriend of Mero’s father. The morbid subject of this story and the excessive language echoes the western tall tale. Mero’s mind wanders as he travels home, and he remembers that his fear of women began when he was a young boy watching Indian paintings in the western caves. The tall tale about the half-skinned steer recounted by his father’s girlfriend proves an ominous sign and it prefigures Mero’s death. According to Kenneth Millard, “this fear [of women] is part of Mero’s western legacy,” which brings about his downfall as he interprets the story as “a curse of death on him that has come true,”

even though the girl is described as skillful at spinning yarns (CR, 91). Mero's western code of manhood emphasizing his self-reliance, physical prowess, even in old age, distrust of women and nature proves detrimental.

Another story included in *Close Range*, "The Mud Below," which was first published in *The New Yorker* and won the O. Henry Prize for the year's best short story in 1988, also features the iconic western male. Diamond Felts is a short young man, who is not popular with girls, and decides to make up for his short height by old-style western bull-riding. The rodeo gives him a supreme excitement and the feeling of empowerment when he identifies with the bull: "The shock of the violent motion, the lightning shifts of balance, the feeling of power as though he were the bull and not the rider, even the fright, fulfilled some greedy physical hunger in him he hadn't known was there" (CR, 52). Although he was not raised on a ranch, Diamond's attraction for the rodeo is connected with a childhood memory of his lost father: "He was five years old and they took a trip somewhere, he and his mother and, in those lost days, his father who was still his father, brought him in the afternoons to a county fair with a merry-go-round" (CR, 53). He remembers his exhilaration of riding a toy bull with his father's protective arms preventing him from falling down.

In Diamond's case the western code of hypermasculinity seems to be a compensation not only for slight stature and inability to form a lasting relationship with women, but also for the trauma of being rejected by his father. For Diamond, sexual act amounts to "half-an-hour-painkiller" (CR, 73). The scene of Diamond's rape of his friend's wife is immediately followed by a recollection of the traumatic episode from Diamond's past when his father leaves the family after a quarrel with his wife and rejects Diamond's pleas for a promised hunt: "'Dad (...) the elk hunt -' with the brutal statement 'Don't never call me that again. Not your father and never was (...) you little bastard'" (CR, 72). Such placement of these scenes contextualizes Diamond's rape within the father's destructive inheritance.

Diamond's mother, who dislikes ranching because of her childhood first-hand experience of it, represents the New West with her position of the manager in a tourist chain store *High West* located in Denver. His mother is frustrated when she learns that Diamond does not intend to study and take a position in her store after college: "I worked like a fool to bring you boys up in town, get you out of the mud, give you a chance to make something out of yourselves. You're just going to throw everything away to be a rodeo bum?" (CR, 54). In a desperate attempt to discourage Diamond from the rodeo, his mother takes him to see a disfigured and deaf old time rodeo performer who cannot communicate with people and lives a desolate life after a rodeo accident. A similar scene closes the story as Diamond experiences an unexpected downfall in his career caused by a major injury. Like Mero from "The Half-Skinned Steer," Diamond insists on his cowboy resilience and on driving long distance to the next rodeo circuit despite his poor physical condition and similarly to Mero's, Diamond's story ends in a blackout signaling

the destructive influence of the western *macho* values, which he sums up as follows: “It was all a hard fast ride that ended in the mud” (CR, 87).

Diamond’s desperate struggle to prove himself capable of western toughness seems to be an unsuccessful attempt to cover up a deep insecurity about his masculinity. Abandoned by the only meaningful father figure and unable to elicit information from his mother who his real father was, Diamond desperately contests the image of absent unknown father or “nobody” which threatens to disintegrate his fragile masculine identity. In his discussion of the factors influencing construction of American manhood, Kimmel claims that “American men define their personality, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other (...) Much of men’s relentless effort to prove their manhood contains this core element of homosociality” (Kimmel 1996: 7). Thus Diamond chooses to enact the fantasy of sturdy masculinity in all-male world of itinerant rodeo performers rather than attend college or help his mother with her commercial enterprise in a more complexly gendered social environment of the city.

The collection *Close Range* ends with “Brokeback Mountain,” which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1997 and awarded the O. Henry Prize for the year’s best short story a year later (1988) and adapted for a film script by Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry. The fact that the story about homosexual love is set in the poor rural West in the 1960s and not in the metropolitan area constitutes a major breakthrough in representing social life of the American West in fiction.

As Dee Garceau shows in the article “Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work,” the real cowboys were not solitary figures but often worked in a group. The work of open-range herding required cooperation of the other ranch hands and, in addition to that, sleeping arrangements were often based on the concept of a sleeping partner or “bunkie” because of cold nights on the range or due to cutting cost of sharing a bunk bed in a single-sex housing (Garceau 2001: 154). Although cowboys’ songs and narratives do not record explicit references to homosexual relationships, some describe, what Dee Garceau terms, “homeroetic sentiments” (2001: 156). These stories and songs sometimes involve situations featuring gender ambiguity or examples of cross-dressing, and they may be viewed as a testimony to the fact that as nomads and social outcasts “cowboys pioneered alternative patterns for human relationships outside the boundaries of middle-class Victorian society,” but they may be also interpreted just as a playful parody of Victorian gender norms (Garceau 2001: 159). Similarly, Hine and Faragher note in *The American West: A New Interpretive History* that cowboys songs reflecting masculinized subculture of cowboys featured references to “stag dances” when some cowboys impersonated females and conclude that “it is unclear how much of this reassigning of sex roles spilled over into overt homosexuality” (Hine and Faragher 2000: 314). Contrary to mythic construction of the West as the proving ground of heterosexual American masculinity, the social and historical studies show that experiments

with gender-bending and same-sex relationships were part of the western social reality.

In “Brokeback Mountain,” just as in “The Mud Below,” hypermasculine embodiment of western manhood is set against the background of emotional deprivation and incidents of child abuse. As Jane Rose and Joanne Urschel point out in their article “Understanding the Complexity of Love in *Brokeback Mountain*: An Analysis of the Film and Short Story”: “Both Ennis and Jack suffer emotional scars, which impede the establishment of an authentic self and the ability to communicate and express their feelings openly” (CR, 248). As a young boy (9 years old), Ennis was compelled by his father to look at the dead body of a battered and castrated gay man. This shocking experience was further intensified by Ennis’s lonely youth when his parents died and he was abandoned by his siblings; Ennis had to learn early that reliance on his own resources is essential to his survival. A similar traumatic event psychologically wounded Jack as he experienced his father’s devastating rage (his father beat him and urinated on his son) caused by a minor incident of three-year-old Jack accidentally wetting himself. The destructive legacy of the western overly masculine fathers and homophobic atmosphere of the rural West eventually result in Ennis’s and Jack’s inability to develop a fulfilling relationship.

Even though Jack and Ennis seem to enjoy western freedom when they take job as sheep herders on Brokeback Mountain, it turns out that they were seen having sex and hence cannot get the same job next year. Thus they are as if expelled from the western garden of Eden where they enjoyed short period of intimacy. This expulsion also exposes illusory character of western outdoor independence. After many years they are still prevented from living on a ranch together because of the fear of being persecuted for homosexuality. Thus the myth of western freedom exposes its limitations as it does not permit the western men to exhibit their emotional and homosexual relationships even though the American western narratives are often permeated with suggestions of homosocial desire. In “Brokeback Mountain” scenes of typical western male bonding (such as in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*) of sharing a supper, drink and herder’s stories during cold Wyoming nights become a turning point in Ennis’s and Jack’s relationship: “They were respectful of each other’s opinions, each glad to have a companion where none had been expected (...) And in a little while they deepened their intimacy considerably” (CR, 289–290). Their sense of freedom “There were only two of them on the mountain flying in the euphoric, bitter air (...) suspended above the ordinary affairs” is soon curtailed by a god-like supervisor of their work (CR, 291).

In his article “Shame in *Brokeback Mountain* and *Capote*” Tomasz Basiuk discusses the role of shame which prevents Ennis from accepting his same-sex desire for Jack and prevents him from settling down with Jack on a ranch: “I’m not no queer” says Ennis even as he performs homoerotic actions (CR, 291). Basiuk points out the influence of the sympathetic witness, such as Ennis’s daughter or his

ex-wife Alma which finally help Ennis to overcome shame and express his love and grief after the death of Jack. The feeling of shame is presented in “Brokeback Mountain” as a powerful instrument of social control limiting Ennis’s and Jack’s autonomy in this mythical land of freedom.

But limitations do not only come from shame. Ennis’s ambivalence between his right to pursue his emotional happiness with Jack is severely limited by what he considers his duty to his daughter. Ennis recognizes and expresses a self-imposed restriction on the time devoted to their relationship in his confrontation with Jack’s desire for more frequent meetings, because he feels responsible for raising and supporting his daughter: “Jack, I got to work. Them earlier days I used to quit the jobs. You got a wife with money, a good job. You forget how it is bein broke all the time. You ever had a child to support? I been paying out for years and got more to go. Let me tell you, I can’t quit this one” (CR, 308). As a result, both Ennis and Jack experience ambivalence connected with their social roles of husbands/fathers and desperately long for more accommodating yet also potentially ominous (as its name suggests the danger of back-breaking) space of Brokeback Mountain. Ennis’s proverbial cowboy stoicism helps him to endure the prolonged frustration of his desire: “if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it” (CR, 318).

At the end of the story Jack dies unexpectedly in, what is ambiguously referred to, a car accident or in what appears in Ennis’s mind to be an outcome of a hate crime against a homosexual. Strangely enough, this fictional description captures real homophobic atmosphere of such rural areas as Mathew Shepard’s brutal murder in 1998 (a year after the story had been written) in Laramie, Wyoming would show. The story is framed with the description of Ennis’s dreams about Jack at the beginning and the end of the narrative as if sustaining their relationship in the space beyond time and hostile social context.

Referring to the film adaptation of Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain” story, Colin Johnson captures in “Rural Space: Queer America’s Final Frontier” the cultural work that this film has achieved: “Rural America may be queer America’s last frontier, and Lee’s film, will almost certainly be remembered as doing for queer country folk what Philadelphia did for HIV positive” (2006: 1). Unlike Leo Herlihy’s novel “The Midnight Cowboy” and the eponymous film, *Brokeback Mountain* contains few scenes of explicit sexual activity. Instead, similarly to the A. Proulx’s story, the emphasis is placed on intimacy, longing and attachment. Surprisingly, for a film often hastily classified as “gay western,” *Brokeback Mountain* is more about affirmation of intimacy in general and not so much about heterosexual or homosexual relationship. Both Proulx’s story and the film portray anguish of unfulfilled love kept secret from formal partners for many years, and they evoke the common longing for emotional closeness more than any specific homosexual activity: “What Jack remembered and craved in a way he could neither help nor understand was the time that distant summer on Brokeback when Ennis had come close, the silent embrace satisfying some shared sexless hunger” (CR, 310).

Similarly, one of the most moving scenes of the *Brokeback Mountain* is again focused on Ennis's emotions during the visit he pays after Jack's death to his parents. Although Jack's father does nothing to hide his anger when recalling Jack's dreams of buying a ranch with Ennis, Jack's mother shows more understanding and lets Ennis enter Jack's bedroom. In the closet Ennis finds "Jack's old shirt from Brokeback days" (CR, 315). Significantly enough, the shirt is stained with blood from their fight on the last day on the mountain. Inside the unusually heavy shirt Ennis finds his own shirt "the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one" (CR, 316). In his longing to relive the Brokeback moments of closeness, Ennis tries to recall the familiar smells by pressing his face in two old shirts "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" (CR, 316).

Annie Proulx's *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories* portrays the rural West where poor people struggle for survival in a hostile environment. The numerous scenes of physical and emotional violence in Proulx's *Close Range* collection of stories substitute the conventional pastoral vision of the American West with a bleak picture of the environment dominated by the New Western macho and economic constraints. Excessive violence prevalent in the USA is often considered an enduring western legacy. In *Close Range* the heritage of western violence manifests itself in many stories (motifs of skinning of a live steer in "Half-skinned Steer," rape in "The Mud Below," pedophile in "Governors of Wyoming," hate crime involving homosexuals in "Brokeback Mountain").

The western outdoors had often been represented as stimulating virile manliness:

Riding the range, breathing the fresh country air, and exerting the body and resting the mind were curative for men, and in the last two decades of the century, large numbers of weak and puny eastern city men – like Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Frederic Remington, and Thomas Eakins – all came west to find a cure for their insufficient manhood. That each returned a dedicated convert, trumpeting the curative value of the strenuous life, is part of the story of how America was won over to the West.

(Kimmel 1996: 135)

Despite the mythic regenerative power associated with the West, in Proulx's Wyoming stories journey west often proves perilous and sometimes even ends in death as in Mero's and Diamond's case.

Western narratives of American hypermasculinity frequently idealized western freedom and independence. However, the short fiction in the Proulx's collection *Close Range* exposes the costs of competitive western individualism in the form of broken families, predominance of coercion in intimate relationships or even inability to sustain relationships, as Kenneth Millard (2000: 93) describes Diamond's predicament: "Here then, the legendary self-sufficiency of the cowboy is revealed to be a function of the broken past, and Diamond's isolation is a consequence of his failure to form a relationship that last for more than 'two hours'" (CR, 53).

The recurring images of violence and destruction may also be interpreted as the echoes of the historical inheritance of Mexican “vaqueros,” the first cowboys who roamed the Southwest and were eventually dominated by the hegemonic masculinity of the American West. Proulx’s collection of Wyoming short stories reconfigures the concepts of iconic American hypermasculinity and exposes the margins of the conventional western narratives filled with the dense grotesque shadows, which these seemingly superhuman western male figures often cast.

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Abbreviation

CR – *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories*