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3. The quotes are from a self-identified gay male and a self-identified straight female in conversation with the author, *Brokeback Mountain* premiere, New York, 7 Dec. 2005.
4. For more on the activities of cyber vigilante groups, see Guisnel and McLure.
5. For an analysis of the ways in which the mythologies of the western U.S. frontier have been used to explain the ever-expanding Internet, see McLure 457–76.
6. For a further commentary on the complexity of the closet, see Benshoff.

## 17 } Making Sense of the *Brokeback Paraphenomenon*

DAVID WEISS

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* was the surprise of the 2005–6 movie season, offering neither typical high concept film fare nor a recipe for box-office success. Of course, as we all know now, *Brokeback* challenged Hollywood's received wisdom concerning the viability of a movie about the romantic and erotic bonds between two men.

But the warm embrace offered by the moviegoing and movie-reviewing communities to the so-called gay cowboy film was not the only *Brokeback Mountain* surprise. During the first three months of the film's release, what might be called the *Brokeback* paraphenomenon—reactions that took place alongside the film and went beyond merely viewing or praising it—took on a life of its own. Devoted fans organized *Brokeback* clubs, launched *Brokeback* Web sites and logs, took out an unprecedented ad in *Variety* to publicly thank the filmmakers (Ultimate Brokeback Forum), and even conducted a search in the state of Vermont for a mountain to officially name "Brokeback." As *USA Today* columnist Susan Wloszczyzna gushed in January 2006, "[A]gainst all odds, a Western romance about two men . . . corralled the cultural zeitgeist" (1D).

Mountain-renaming campaigns aside, ardent displays of fandom are not, in the scheme of things, all that unusual. Since cinema's earliest days, certain films have been able to strike a particularly deep chord with the more passionate members of their audience. A select few even inspire behaviors sometimes referred to as "cultural poaching," which happens when a film's devotees make a movie so integral to their own lives that they figuratively wrest its ownership away from its creators.<sup>1</sup>

*Brokeback Mountain* is without question such a movie, resonating with casual admirers, devotees, and more than a few poachers.

The fact that the film so powerfully and positively moved so many of its fans is attested to eloquently throughout this book and need not be further elaborated here. Rather, what I explore are the ways that the movie catalyzed a *separate* set of public responses that might be characterized as “counterpoaching.” These behaviors—widespread, mass-mediated, extremely high-profile, and usually comedic—are undeniably reactions to *Brokeback Mountain* but, paradoxically, are *not* manifestations of fandom (and in some cases do not even reflect direct experience with *Brokeback Mountain* itself).

What’s most striking about these responses—the seemingly endless deluge of *Brokeback* parodies, jokes, and slang terms that filled the airwaves and glutted our e-mail inboxes during the 2006 awards season—is that they require only casual awareness of (or ungrounded assumptions about) the film’s key themes, basic familiarity with elements of *Brokeback*’s marketing campaign, or in some cases simple hostility toward any movie that would dare to depict same-sex attraction. In stark contrast to the Web sites, blogs, and campaigns launched by the movie’s fans, many of these counterreactions to the *Brokeback* phenomenon were produced by the film’s most vocal detractors, including people who defiantly vowed they would never see the film. As John Powers notes in *LA Weekly*: “The media have been filled with pieces . . . either saying ‘I don’t want to see *Brokeback Mountain*’ or asking whether the refusal to go makes you homophobic. I don’t know about you, but I can’t remember an op-ed piece about not wanting to see any other movie.” Yet at the same time, like “real” poachers, the counterpoachers in their way also claimed creative control over a mass-mediated phenomenon that they had no hand in originating—and, more oddly, had no interest in promoting.

The fervor, the diversity of form and content, the inventiveness, and the ubiquity (or, depending on your perspective, the relentlessness) of the *Brokeback* jokes, spoofs, and slang are breathtaking. For these reasons alone, these nonfan and antifan reactions to the film would be worth investigating, but their significance goes deeper than their breadth or even their intensity. Plunging into their various and contradictory

forms, messages, meanings, and motivations casts additional light not only on *Brokeback Mountain* itself but also on the culture into which the film was thrust and, as a result, helped to construct—a culture that was, and remains, partially receptive to, partially skeptical of, and partially hostile to a surprisingly popular film about two men in love.

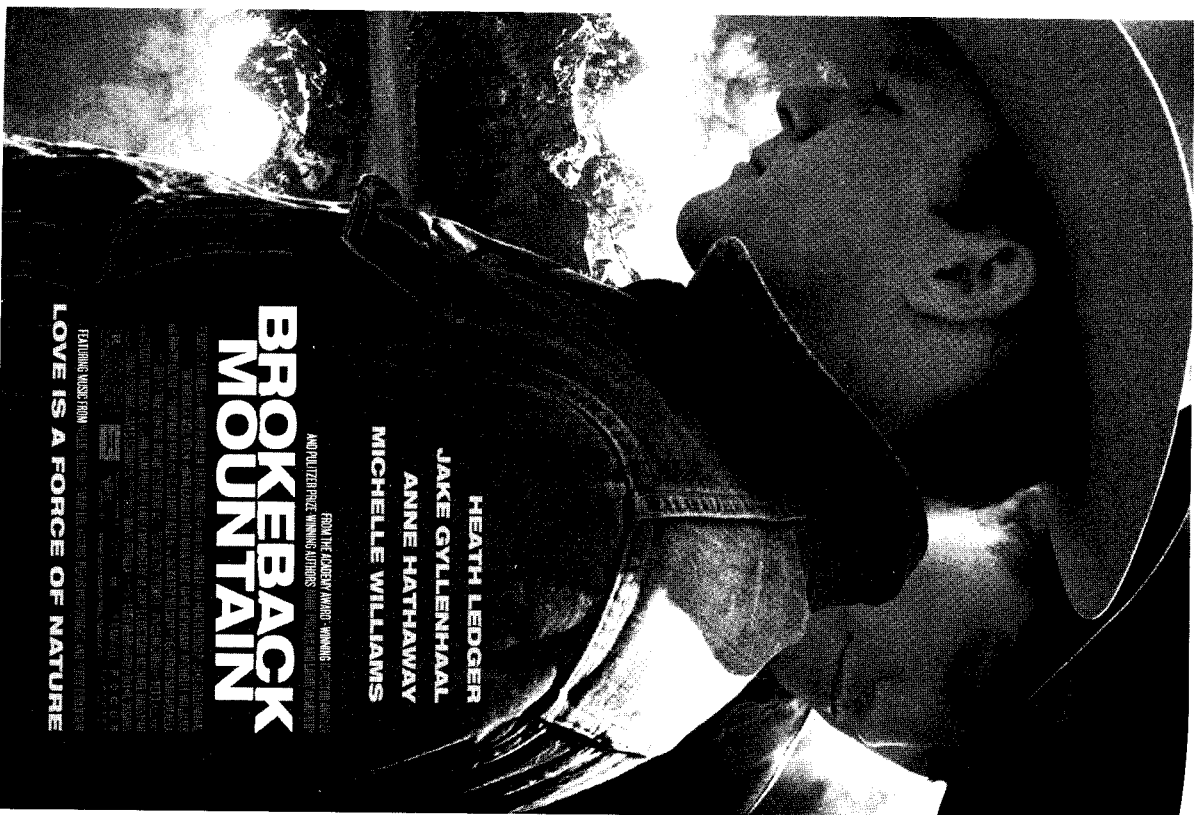
### Visual Parodies

The most visible of the reactions to *Brokeback Mountain* takes a number of parodic forms: televised skits, posters, and movie-trailer “mashups,” online videos that juxtapose elements of *Brokeback*’s trailer with scenes swiped from other films. As a whole, these parodies are generally the most good-humored—or, put another way, the least hostile or homophobic—of the *Brokeback* paraphenomenon. If *parody* can be defined (as it is in the tenth edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*) as a literary or musical form “in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule,” then there were two particularly striking tendencies of the many *Brokeback* parodies that surfaced in early 2006: (1) their emphasis on comic effect rather than ridicule and (2) the fact that, when ridicule actually was the overriding objective, its target was almost always something or someone other than *Brokeback Mountain* itself.

#### Posters

Perhaps the most accessible parodic form is, for both parodists and their audiences, the poster. Even for those who never saw the movie, the advertising for *Brokeback Mountain*—display ads in newspapers, magazines, and bus shelters; banners online; posters inside and outside movie theaters—was practically inescapable during the winter of 2005–6.

While the Focus Features promotional campaign for *Brokeback* included a number of print executions, one in particular immediately took on iconic status and, almost as quickly, inspired a raft of parodic responses. The original poster shows Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in medium close-up, clad in denim jackets and cowboy hats, seemingly nuzzling—Gyllenhaal’s chin may or may not be resting on Ledger’s right shoulder—yet looking away from, or past, each other. The two actors



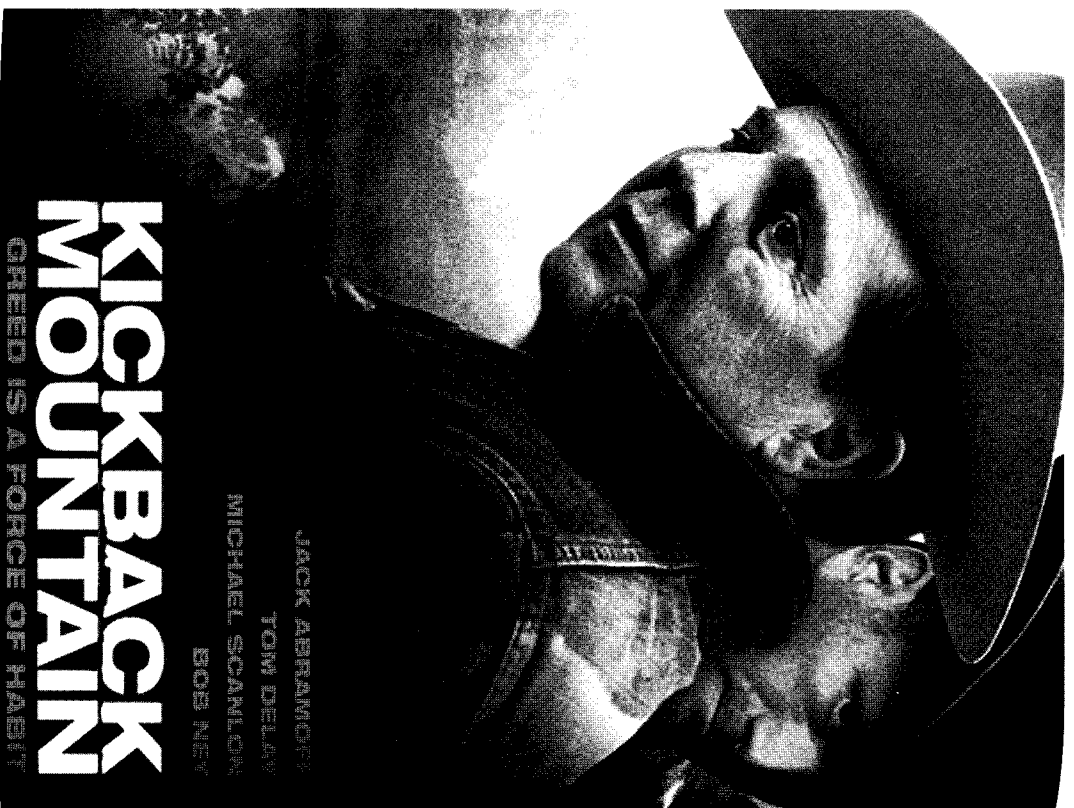
10. The film's iconic one sheet, with *Titanic* overtones. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLP.

stand before a backdrop of snow-covered peaks and a mountain lake. Superimposed across Ledger's left arm are the film's title, the names of its four leads (Ledger, Gyllenhaal, Anne Hathaway, and Michelle Williams), and the tagline "Love is a Force of Nature" (see figure 10).

The parody posters, which for the most part circulated online, took elements of the original's layout but used them to comment on topics far removed from the thematic components of *Brokeback Mountain*. "Kickback Mountain" (see figure 11), created by Web designer Corey Anderson, digitally inserts former House Majority Leader Tom Delay and felonious lobbyist Jack Abramoff into the Ledger/Gyllenhaal poses and outfits, places the names of Michael Scanlon and Bob Ney below Delay's and Abramoff's, and includes the tagline "Greed is a Force of Habit." An illustrated *New Yorker* magazine cover appearing shortly after Vice President Dick Cheney's widely publicized (and presumably accidental) shooting of his hunting buddy Harry Whittington shows a rifle-touting Cheney and a nervous-looking George W. Bush striking the Ennis-and-Jack poses; its title is "Watch Your Back Mountain" (see figure 12). A similar although less politically sophisticated online execution, "Dumbfuck Mountain," features digitally modified photos of Bush and Cheney rather than illustrations ("Towleroad").

These parodies clearly would not have been created had *Brokeback Mountain* and its iconic poster not been so visible and ubiquitous. Yet they have nothing—or, at least, nothing substantial—actually to say about *Brokeback*, its themes, its stars, or its fans. Rather, the posters serve as twenty-first-century updates on the time-honored tradition of the political cartoon as social commentary; the objects of their parodies are not Jack and Ennis, but rather the public figures who were drawn or digitally inserted into the Jack-and-Ennis positions and wardrobe.

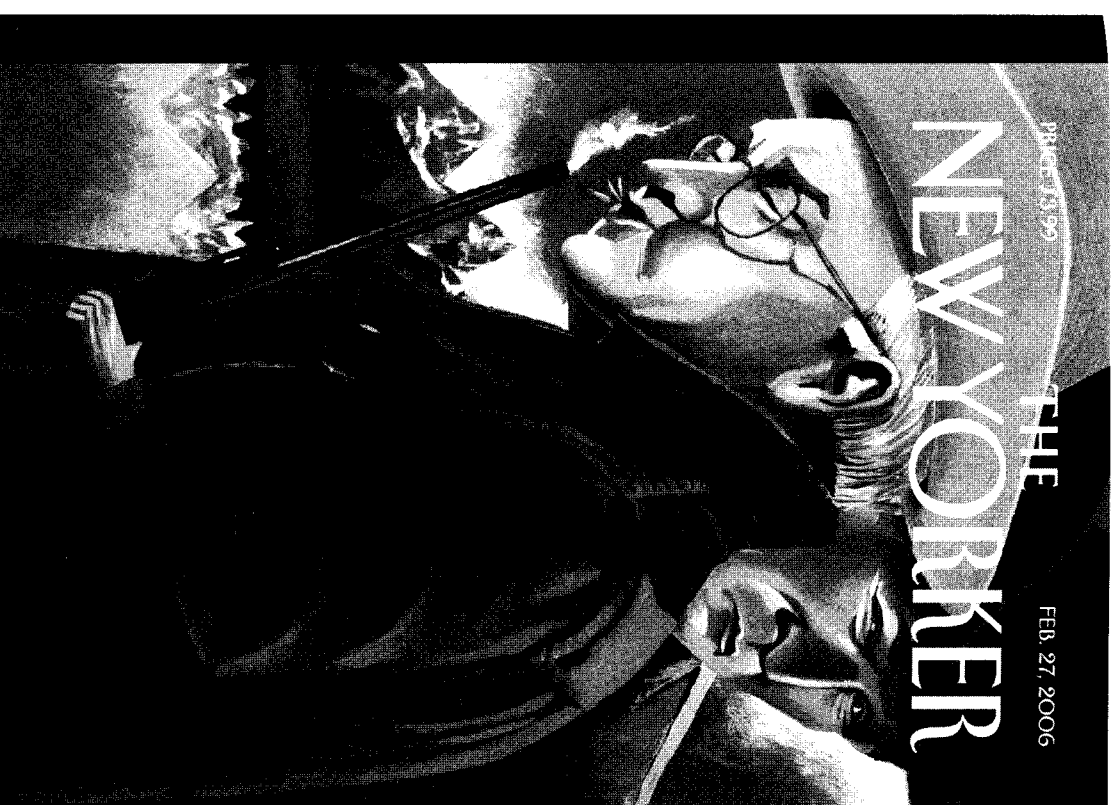
What, then, did these posters parody? All of them can be read as criticisms of the careless cowboy machismo that characterized the Bush administration's policies and their execution. Beyond that, the Bush-Cheney poster(s) mock the Connecticut-born U.S. president who refashioned himself as a Texas rancher and his "pardner," his all-too-trigger-happy vice president from Wyoming, the real-life state that, not incidentally, is the setting for the fictional *Brokeback Mountain*. Even more pointedly, the Abramoff-Delay "Kickback Mountain" parody offers



11. Political bedfellows Tom Delay and Jack Abramoff star in "Kickback Mountain." Corey Anderson/[coreyanderson.net](http://coreyanderson.net).

a critical comment on the issue of lobbyists and congress representatives being "in bed together" in the figurative sense, a political jab sharpened by the visual reference to two characters who did, in fact, sleep together.

Paradoxically, it is one of the more innocent looking and least



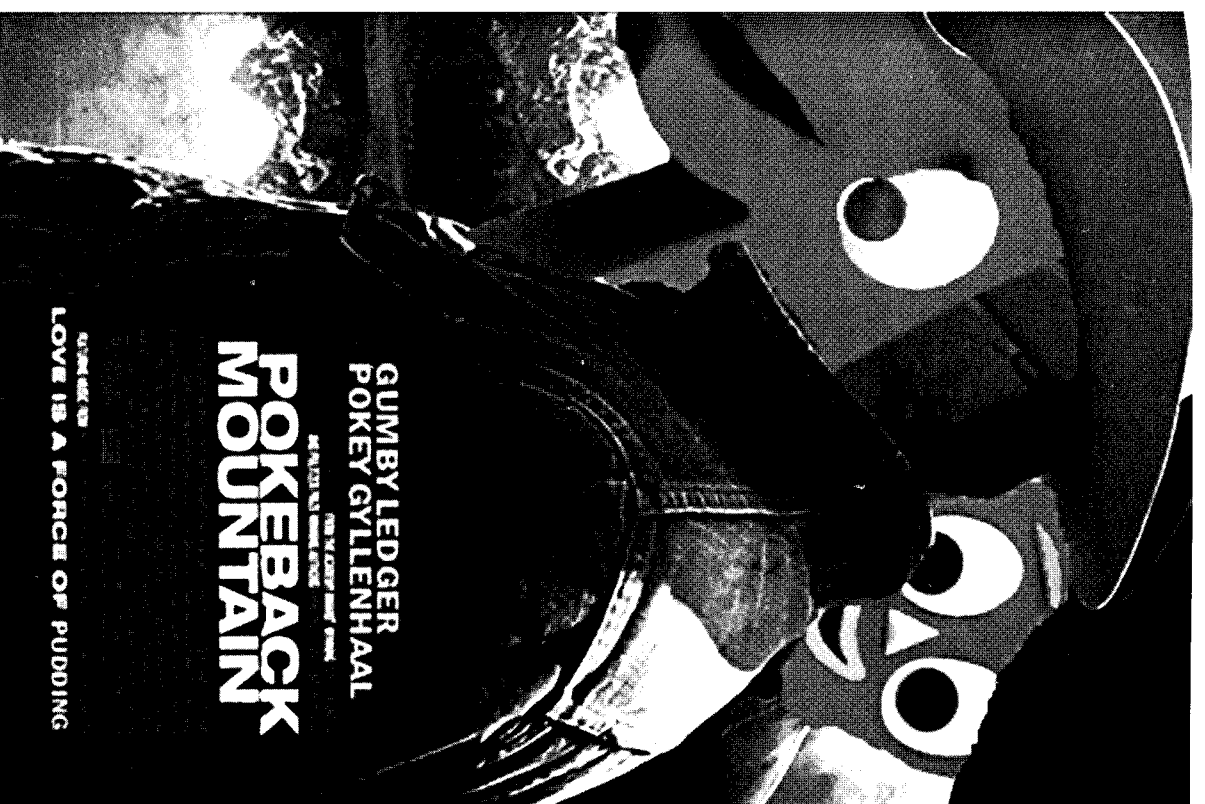
12. Secrets on a national scale. "Watch Your Back Mountain," cover of *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2006. Drawing by Mark Urickson. © Condé Nast Publications.

politically motivated of the posters that may have had something to say that actually relates to a theme of *Brokeback Mountain*. The widely acclaimed “Pokeback Mountain” parody positions cartoon stars Gumby and Pokey in Jack’s and Ennis’s cowboy garb above the tagline “Love is a Force of Pudding” (see figure 13). Unlike Bush-Cheney or Abramoff-Delay, “Gumby Ledger” and “Pokey Gyllenhaal,” as the clay characters are renamed in the “Pokeback Mountain” poster, seem to offer meager fodder for political commentary—and, in fact, the virtually criticism-proof Gumby and Pokey are not the targets of “Pokeback.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, this parody poster may suggest that the two beloved clay creatures are themselves secretly gay, a fantastically hypothetical (and often accusatory) assumption made for decades about *Sesame Street*’s Bert and Ernie (who themselves appear in yet another *Brokeback* parody poster [“Towleroad”]) and, more recently, about both Spongebob Squarepants and the Telenovelas character Tinky-Winky. The suggestion made by the Pokeback poster, whether intended to be taken seriously or facetiously, visually links children’s characters with the adult protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain*. In doing so, the Pokeback parody serves to infantilize, and even make a plaything of, gay love itself.

Of course, I may be reading much more into the undeniably gentle Pokeback Mountain parody than was ever intended. It is entirely possible that its creators hoped to evoke little more than a smile from their audience. Still, they and the others discussed here chose to make their sociopolitical comments by using *Brokeback Mountain*’s omnipresent imagery as their springboard. After all, as blogger Andy Towle observed in the *New York Times* in January 2006, “*Brokeback* has become a cultural touchstone. People have seized on the movie poster as a subversive vehicle to parody other relationships in our culture” (Ryzik).

#### Televised Skits

*Brokeback Mountain* was also parodied in a relatively small number of TV skits. The two that generated the most media attention were “*Brokeback Goldmine*,” a piece on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*, and “*Brokeback Mountain: The Musical*,” a segment on CBS’s *Late Show with David Letterman*. Neither of these televised offerings, both still visible on YouTube.com, offer the creativity or even the satirical bite of the best of the posters



13. Gumby plus Pokey makes pudding. Posted anonymously at towleroad.com.

or the mashup trailers. If anything, the *Brokeback* musical, originated by and starring formerly closeted gay performer Nathan Lane, is at the low end of the taste and wit scale. Ostensibly developed to poke fun at *Brokeback*, the campy revue feels like a retreat of the most deflated of *Carol Burnett Show* sketches (although its pantomimed male-male bum humping would never have been hinted at so broadly by Harvey Korman and Tim Conway). Featuring a quartet of young men in western garb prancing to songs sung by Lane, the spoof tosses a blunt and poorly aimed skewer in the general direction of Broadway show tunes, America's cowboy myth, gay men in general, and Lane himself in particular; ultimately, more tired gay jokes are relished than satirized. Similarly, *Saturday Night Live's* spoof, featuring Alec Baldwin and Will Forte as aging prospectors in love, has little more to say than "being gay is funny." Still, these and other made-for-TV parodies offer further evidence of *Brokeback Mountain's* ability to transcend its art-house roots and find itself entrenched as a powerful, if not necessarily universally beloved, presence in the most mainstream of popular culture outlets.

#### *Video Parodies: Movie-Trailer Mashups, TV Spoofs, and Advertising Send-Ups*

The most numerous and, often, most creative of the *Brokeback* parody forms is that of the "mashup" movie trailer. The best of these parody trailers for imagined hybrid or mashup movies marry captions (e.g., "It was a friendship . . . that became a secret" and "There are lies we have to tell") and music from the actual *Brokeback* trailer with selected scenes from other films, their actual targets. What resulted is a set of trailers for revisioned, retitled, and newly homoerotic movies such as "*Brokeback Penguins*," "*Brokeback Fiction*," "*Brokeback Stooges*," the computer-animated *Toy Story* spoof "*Toyback Mountain*," the *City Slickers* parody "*Brokeback Palance*," and even the sapphic "*Brokeback Angels*."

The sources of the mashup trailers are as diverse as their motivations. As *New York Times* film critic Virginia Heffernan observed in March 2006, "They're made anonymously or by comedy troupes or design shops, like Chocolate Cake City and Robot Rumpus, both of which give their web addresses at the end of their parody videos. . . . If they're well made, the parodies can presumably serve as a calling card for those who

sign their work [as] some of them are viewed hundreds of thousands of times." The parodies typically use Gustavo Santaolalla's sexy, mournful theme from *Brokeback Mountain*, together with the title cards from that movie's trailer, to reframe clips from another movie. It works almost every time: a gay movie seems to emerge when scenes between male leads, or a male lead and a supporting actor, are slowed down, set to make-out music, and bumpered by portentous cards that say things like, "A truth they couldn't deny." All that these parodies need to do to set up the relationship is show one man's face in protracted detail and cut to the other man, who seems to watch with the same rapt attention that the viewer has been compelled to give by the slow-mo. A gay subtext suddenly seems plain as day. At times, as many as fifty different parody trailers were available online. Not surprisingly, their technical and comedic quality varied wildly. As Heffernan notes, "Some of them are stupid. Some are droll and great. But as commentary on the forms and ceremonies of proto-gay relationships, they're surprisingly sharp, and worth taking seriously."

While most of the trailers parody well-known and often male-bonding-driven movies, television programs have also been spoofed à la *Brokeback*. On DailySixer.com alone, a visitor to the "*Brokeback Spoofs*" page could find, alongside more than twenty-five movie trailers, mashups of the TV crime drama *Walker: Texas Ranger*, of situation comedies such as *Scrubs*, *The Office*, and *Arrested Development*, and even of cartoons including *He-Man* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, as well as the more predictable targets of *The Muppets* and *Spongebob Squarepants*.

DailySixer.com and YouTube.com also posted *Brokeback*-themed advertising parodies. The "*Brokeback Happy Meal*" spot takes the form of an overly long McDonald's commercial in which three college-age men try the special new Happy Meal, complete with a set of Lego toys (cowboys, sheep, horses, and tents) that let them recreate key scenes from the eponymous movie. At the end of the commercial, the young trio appear in bed together naked, exulting over the meal's semen-like condiment, predictably called "*Brokeback sauce*." Much less graphic is the parodic commercial "*Broke Mac Mountain*," in which a frustrated Macintosh user, uttering lines from the actual *Brokeback Mountain* script (most pointedly, "I wish I knew how to quit you," directed toward his



uncooperative computer), solicits help from a tech-savvy buddy. The friend solves the hero's computer problems *and* makes out with him, all to the strains of *Brokeback*'s plaintive score.

What lies beneath these various video parodies? While most of the advertising spoofs have little to say, the "*Brokeback* Happy Meal" commercial, crudely homophobic as it is, seems to have real targets, skewering as it does the artificiality of the glee exhibited by the actors in actual McDonald's commercials as well as the crass commercialization of movie tie-ins in general. Some of the movie and TV show mashups also offer meaningful commentary, bringing to the surface aspects of genuine, if covert, homoeroticism in the original productions.

The most well-aimed parody is that of *Top Gun* ("*Top Gun 2: Brokeback Squadron*"), a film that since its release has been accused of flirting with its audiences' fears of or titillation by same-sex attraction in the military. (That *Top Gun*'s uniformly handsome and well-muscled male cast is shown in locker room and shower scenes more often than strictly necessary to advance the plot certainly doesn't support a "family values" reading of the film.) Like the *Top Gun* mashup, the parody of *Goodfellas* is also effective at lampooning, or at least questioning, the nature of the male-male relationships so important to unit cohesion in the Mob, a machismo-driven subculture not entirely unlike that of the military. A similar comment is made by the *Lord of the Rings* mashup ("*Brokeback Mount Doom*"), whose target film makes much of the intense bond between two male hobbits.

Yet most of the parody trailers, TV spoofs, and advertising send-ups neither exhibit genuine homophobia nor offer serious criticisms of same-sex relationships. Mashups such as "*Brokeback* Heat," "*Brokeback* to the Future," "The Empire Strikes *Brokeback*," and so many others comment wittily on the latent (or, in most cases, nonexistent) homoerotic nature of the bonds between the characters in their target films—but do not demonize gay relationships in general or the one at the heart of *Brokeback Mountain* in particular. As Heffernan suggests, for the most part, the mashups are "nothing but labors of love, or gay panic, or both." She may have a point. At the same time, of course, these labors of love and/or gay panic do something more: They wrest creative control of *Brokeback Mountain*—its footage, its dialogue, its music, its

marketing tools—from its rightful owners, a process of twenty-first-century cultural poaching that digital technology has made easier than ever to accomplish and that curatorial Web sites such as YouTube and iFilm have invested with social cachet.

## Jokes

While the best and most elaborate of the online *Brokeback* parodies took time and technology to prepare, the onslaught of jokes inspired by the movie began almost as soon as the movie opened—and for four months, refused to let up. Even before the film's premiere in early December 2005, and continuing for some weeks after the March 2006 Academy Awards telecast, *Brokeback Mountain* jokes were staples on late-night television, talk radio, and the Internet. As a result of their broadcast and online ubiquity, they were told, retold, revised, and rehashed in one-on-one and group settings; collected on fan and antifan Web sites and blogs; and before long, anthologized, criticized, and even satirized in the press.

That *Brokeback Mountain* should be the inspiration for, or the butt of, humor should not be surprising or even necessarily troubling. Any political or cultural happening that is new, unusual, or "hot"—and *Brokeback* is certainly all of these—is fair game for public scrutiny, both positive and negative, both serious and humorous. As Jennifer Buckendorf observes in the *Seattle Times*, "*Brokeback* is big. Its story is sweeping. It's triumphant and tragic. It's the first film of its kind. And whenever you're a pioneer, you've got to be ready for potshots."

One noteworthy aspect of the potshots hurled at *Brokeback* is their relentlessness, something many pundits commented on. Authorities journalistic, psychiatric, and sociopolitical weighed in, in outlets as diverse as *USA Today*, *The Nation*, MSNBC.com, and *The Advocate*, with sound-bite analyses and other instant explanations of what lies behind the wave of *Brokeback* humor. Few if any of these journalists, however, notice or comment on what, to me, is the more striking and ultimately more revealing characteristic of the *Brokeback* quips making the rounds on the air, online, and around the water cooler: their diversity.

*Brokeback* jokes vary wildly in terms of their objectives, targets, political standpoints, attitudes, the sources of their humor, and their relevance

to the film itself. For that reason, the typical journalistic framing of “*Brokeback humor*” as a monolithic genre sheds little light on the multifaceted and often contradictory messages of the jokes or the motivations underlying their creation and dissemination. Delineating and investigating the variety of the humorous forms and messages is important if we are to make sense of the different ways in which people react to *Brokeback Mountain* and, in many cases, attempt to discipline it.

While *Brokeback Mountain* humor—as evidenced at least on late-night tv and talk radio, the most powerful and accessible of its sources—takes many forms and has many targets, one of its most noteworthy characteristics is the fact that only very rarely does it truly concern *Brokeback Mountain*. Indeed, perhaps the most one can say about the majority of *Brokeback* jokes is that they are inspired by, at best, the film and, at worst, simply homophobia.

Consider, for example, one of the most widely circulated of the comedy bits to surface in the wake of *Brokeback Mountain*’s debut: the Top Ten list read on David Letterman’s December 13, 2005, broadcast of *The Late Show*. Among the “Top Ten Signs You’re a Gay Cowboy” are:

10. Your saddle is Versace. . . .
8. You enjoy ridin’, ropin’, and redecoration. . . .
6. After watching reruns of *Gunsnake*, you have to take a cold shower. . . .
2. Instead of a saloon, you prefer a salon.

This routine serves as a handy microcosm of so-called *Brokeback* humor: it appeared on the scene shortly (in this case, a mere four days) after the film opened; perpetuates tired gay cultural stereotypes; expresses facetious discomfort about gay sexual practices; pokes fun at gay lifestyle issues; winkingly refers to other allegedly gay-associated pop-culture products; dances around the supposedly oxymoronic notion of “gay cowboys”—and says absolutely nothing about *Brokeback Mountain*.

Much of the *Brokeback*-inspired humor on other Letterman broadcasts and those of his chief late-night rivals is similar, recycling old clichés while offering no commentary on *Brokeback* itself. On December 9, 2005, for example, NBC’s Conan O’Brien announced, “Today,

the controversial new movie *Brokeback Mountain* opens, about two gay cowboys. Apparently, you can tell the characters are gay because they’re dressed like cowboys.” On January 25, 2006, O’Brien included this gag in his monologue: “At a press conference in Kansas the other day, President Bush was asked if he had seen *Brokeback Mountain*. He said, no, he doesn’t like Westerns where the cowboys go into town for a day spa.”

Other *Brokeback*-inspired quips offered by tv and radio hosts, however, point their skewers not at gay men’s supposed interests in fashion, grooming, interior design, or Broadway musicals, but instead at gay sex or male-male sexual attraction, topics that are actually central to the movie. Michael Savage and Don Imus, talk-radio personalities known for their antigay humor, renamed the film by incorporating into its title punning references to homoerotic acts, referring to *Brokeback* variously as “Bareback Mounting” and “Fudgepack Mountain” (“Matthews”).

Although less overtly hostile, NBC tv host Jay Leno—who managed to work at least one *Brokeback* or gay cowboy reference into almost every *Tonight Show* between December 2005 and March 2006—had no shortage of his own jokes in this vein:

The president said we must continue to find new sources of oil. The only place he doesn’t want any drilling: *Brokeback Mountain*. (6 Feb. 2006)

Ninety percent of men say their lover is also their best friend—which has got to be a big surprise to their wives. “Hey, hon, I’m going over to Bob’s. We’re catching the ten o’clock showing of *Brokeback Mountain*. Don’t wait up.” (“Ridin”)

Interestingly, not all of Leno’s *Brokeback* cracks perpetuate gay stereotypes or otherwise put down gay people. Indeed, in a fascinating twist, two of his *Tonight Show* jokes actually reference the homoerotic content of *Brokeback Mountain* as a way of poking fun at leaders of the Religious Right:

The cold weather continues to spread across the United States. In fact, down south, it was so cold people were shaking like Jerry Falwell watching *Brokeback Mountain*. (“Did You Hear?”)

The Golden Globes were last night. It was the biggest gathering of Hollywood celebrities that wasn't an anti-Bush rally. . . . The big winners were *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, and *Transamerica*—all movies with gay themes. I think this is God's way of punishing Pat Robertson. (17 Jan. 2006)

While not necessarily progay, jokes like these are at least not overtly anti-gay. They humorously acknowledge and even gently ridicule homophobia in general and cultural ambivalence about *Brokeback Mountain*'s content in particular.

Other comics went to still greater lengths in their humorous explorations of the squeamishness *Brokeback* engendered, particularly among otherwise open-minded straight males. Gay film critic Dave White published a tongue-in-cheek editorial on msnbc.com titled "The Straight Dude's Guide to *Brokeback*," which offers "sage advice" for gay-friendly heterosexual men whose wives or girlfriends had demanded that *Brokeback Mountain* be their next date-night movie. Speaking to men who would describe themselves as "liberal" and "no homophobe," White addresses the dilemma they face when looking to please their girlfriends while watching men make out on the big screen:

You're going to see it whether you like it or not. . . . So I have some viewing tips for you, my straight brothers. . . . You have to shut up. Being silent marks you as too cool to care about how other men see you. . . . The good news: there's less than one minute of making out. It's about 130 minutes long and 129 of them are about Men Not Having Sex. So yes, maybe it will be the longest almost-60 seconds of your life, but there it is. Less than one minute.

As consolation, White promised his hetero readers, Anne Hathaway removes her blouse.

In a similar vein is the guest editorial that tv producer/star Larry David wrote for the *New York Times*. David's piece, titled "Cowboys Are My Weakness" (after Pam Houston's story collection of that name), offers a facetious retort to Dave White's "Straight Dude's Guide," while lambasting the sentiments underlying on-air comments about *Brokeback*

*Mountain* made by syndicated radio host Don Imus ("No, I haven't seen it. Why would I want to see that?") and similar dismissals offered by Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly and msnbc's Chris Matthews on their own programs ("Matthews"; "Conservatives"). Taking direct aim at the notion that if a straight man were to see *Brokeback Mountain* he would become gay—the ungrounded fear that seems to be at the core of much of heterosexual male America's resistance to the film—David offers the following mock apology: "I haven't seen *Brokeback Mountain*, nor do I have any intention of seeing it [much as] I love gay people. . . . If two cowboys, male icons who are 100 percent all-man, can succumb, what chance do I have, half to a quarter of a man, depending on whom I'm with at the time? Who's to say I won't become enamored with the whole gay business?" (9).

David's *Times* column may have skewered the repressed fears motivating many of the *Brokeback Mountain* jokes that flooded the airwaves, but it certainly didn't put an end to them. Indeed, for the most part, *Brokeback*-inspired humor, even after the January 1, 2006, publication of David's piece, reflected, perpetuated, and gave increasingly public voice to the prejudices and phobias mocked by David and White, rather than refuting, ridiculing, or in any other way fixing a critical lens on those feelings.

It is time now, then, to ask a number of questions that have been to this point deferred. Why, to begin with, were there so many *Brokeback* jokes, told for so many months, and with so many different targets? Why did they last as long as they did and have the ubiquity that they had?

It doesn't seem far-fetched to suggest that one of the motivators of *Brokeback* humor may well also have been a motivator of *Brokeback* resistance—something geneticist Dean Hamer calls the "ick factor." As Hamer (perhaps most famous for his claim that a "gay gene" is what predisposes some people to homosexuality) comments in a January 2006 *San Francisco Chronicle* article, "It does seem to be almost culturally universal that heterosexual men can have a deep repulsion to overt homosexuality" (Seton). During the time of *Brokeback Mountain*'s theatrical run, some straight men, it would appear, expressed this repulsion through humor, while others did so through their rejection of *Brokeback Mountain* as a Saturday night movie pick; many, of course, likely did

both. In any case, the intensity of the “ick factor,” combined with the surprisingly strong critical and commercial success of *Brokeback*—which itself translated to a surprisingly long stay in cinemas, long list of awards and nominations, and intense media fascination with the film—may at least partially explain the remarkable persistence of jokes about or, more often inspired by, the movie.

The jokes themselves have a variety of targets: gay cultural stereotypes, gay men, gay sex, gay cowboys, the movie’s title, and in rare cases, selected narrative or thematic elements of the movie itself. What, then, is missing from the *Brokeback*-inspired jokes? For the most part, any reference to those aspects of the film that made it more than and other than merely the gay cowboy movie is absent. Specifically, nowhere in the pages and pages of tv and online jokes do we see references to the tragic nature of the film’s narrative or the more troubling of its themes.

Yes, *Brokeback Mountain* is about two men who fall in love, a fact that many *Brokeback* jokes do reference. But more specifically, the movie is about two men who fall in *doomed* love, men whose lives are made miserable by what they perceive to be the impossibility of their situation and whose marriages are destroyed by the lies they live. One of those men dies, possibly the victim of a gay bashing. The film, which ends on a note of heartbreak, is not a celebration of same-sex love but a wrenching exploration of the consequences of denying oneself the happiness that such love might bring.

In light of all this, two additional and interrelated questions come to mind: How did such a tragic film become the inspiration and/or butt of humor? And how is it that none of the film’s *tragic* thematic elements are anywhere to be found in the many jokes that were made? The answer to the first question hinges on the sad fact that while jokes about racial or religious minorities (and about films featuring them and the tragedies that may befall them) have become stigmatized, jokes about gay people remain socially acceptable. This might explain why *Brokeback Mountain* inspired months of late-night comedy routines while *Hotel Rwanda*, *Mississippi Burning*, and *Schindler’s List* inspired none.

Still, if antigay humor lacks the stigma that racist and anti-Semitic jokes carry, how was it that *Brokeback*’s tragic elements are not evidenced in the jokes that the movie inspired? As is the case with many of the

poster and trailer parodies, it is more than likely that many of the jokes were made by people who never saw the actual film—or who, like Don Imus and Bill O’Reilly, publicly proclaimed that they never *would* see it. All that is needed to craft a *Brokeback* joke is the awareness that the film has *something* to do with homos, those time-honored targets of humor and ridicule, and that its lead characters wear ten-gallon hats. Even the ubiquitous descriptor “gay cowboy movie” reflects a lack of familiarity with the actual film; as any real *Brokeback* fan knows, Jack and Ennis are sheep wranglers, not cowboys.

People who actually *had* seen the film and were therefore familiar with its tragic content would have been *less* likely to make the sort of jokes that epitomized *Brokeback* humor during the winter of 2005–6, jokes that were for the most part simply updated versions of gay cultural clichés and had little or nothing to do with the film itself. If anything, it was probably easier to make *Brokeback* jokes (read, gay jokes or gay cowboy jokes) for those not burdened with firsthand knowledge of the actual movie. Such an excuse, however, is clearly not available for any joke writer or joke teller who had seen the film; indeed, it is unlikely that show-business insiders such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O’Brien—or their writing staffs—would be able to find a valid excuse to miss such an important movie, even if they are personally uncomfortable with its content.

With all this said, is *Brokeback* humor all bad? Is it merely harmless fun, or has any actual damage been done to gay people? In an article exploring these questions, Associated Press writer Jocelyn Noveck argues that “most gay groups find it fairly benign, and note that in any case, the movie’s overwhelming publicity can only be a good thing.” To that end, Noveck quotes Susanne Salkind, managing director of the Human Rights Campaign gay lobbying group: “some of the humor may be insensitive, but even that has spurred positive conversation.” Similarly, Neil Giuliano, president of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation told a *USA Today* columnist that “when a person or a piece of artistic work reaches a certain level of acceptability, it’s OK to joke about it. The whole buzz is this is a great movie” (Wloszczyna). In short, it might appear that the pros outweigh the cons. Voicing a contrary opinion, however, is Matt Foreman, executive director of the

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, who notes that “it may be funny, but there is a real element of homophobia. It’s making jabs about sex between gay men” (Noveck).

Much of the humor, however, has little if anything to do with sex. The appearance of *Brokeback Mountain*, a movie whose two lead characters are men in love with each other—and, yes, who have sex with each other—more often serves as simply the most recent, and thus most convenient, most topical, and even most hip, catalyst for the perpetuation of stereotypes many of us had hoped were heading toward extinction.

## Notes

1. Anyone who has observed the clothing and behavior of hard-core fans at a *Star Trek* convention or in a multiplex ticket line on the opening day of any Harry Potter sequel has witnessed cultural poaching par excellence.
2. The “last names” given to the “Pokeback Mountain” characters reflect a slip up on the parodist’s part: Pokey is placed in Ennis’s position and wears his white hat and thus would logically be “Pokey Ledger.” Gummy, who occupies Jack’s spot and wears his black hat, should be “Gummy Gyllenhaal.”

## 18 } Alberta, Authenticity, and Queer Erasure

JON DAVIES

“Nothing can keep them apart. . . . Yet nothing can get them together, to help them over the pre-Stonewall hump of shame in a part of the American landscape that suffers from mythological overload: a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, but the thing he could not do is what Wilde said three-quarters of a century earlier in London couldn’t be named anywhere anyway, much less in Wyoming.”

HARLAN JACOBSON, “*Brokeback Mountain*.”

“‘Brokeback’ Opens Up Alberta’s Sweeping Wilderness,” crowns the lead headline on the Web site for Travel Alberta, “Canada’s Rocky Mountain Playground” (Cumplings, “‘Brokeback’ Opens Up”);<sup>1</sup> And while the agency’s particular choice of verb might conjure Ennis del Mar “opening up” Jack Twist on their first cold and lusty night tenting together, travelers would be hard-pressed to find any hint of homoeroticism—or any queer body politics for that matter—in the Canadian province’s tie-in tourism campaign. Travel Alberta’s substitution of *Brokeback Mountain*’s gay subject matter with the western landscape is a fascinating manifestation of the tension between artifice and authenticity that the film and the discourse surrounding it consistently draw out. Ultimately the tourism campaign serves to deauthenticate and theatricalize the very mythic rural West that it seeks to protect from contamination by the artifice and urbanity that queerness traditionally represents.

First, I would like to briefly draw some connections between the