

# Blues Run the Game: A comparison of Annie Proulx's Brokeback Mountain and Tits-Up in a Ditch

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***Blues Run the Game: A comparison of Annie Proulx's Brokeback Mountain and Tits-Up in a Ditch***

*Annie Proulx's short stories "Tits-Up in a Ditch" and "Brokeback Mountain" offer an image of rural communities in Wyoming which function as a microcosm with their own social norms and a distinct way of life. In presenting the reader with characters whose lives do not fit the expectations and stereotypes of life in the American West, Proulx subverts the myth of the West as a place of stoic masculinity and reveals the underlying anxieties of such a society. The protagonists of "Brokeback Mountain" struggle to reconcile their discordant identities as gay cowboys, while the heroine of "Tits-Up in a Ditch" endeavors to overcome her rocky start in life and find a better future for herself and her child in the military. By displacing the suffering of her female protagonist from the sexist environment of rural Wyoming to an overseas warzone, she points to her shifting identities as she tries to redefine herself outside the bounds of the poor ranch where she grew up. Her inability to do so mirrors the tragic ending awaiting the male protagonist of "Brokeback Mountain".*

**Key words:** masculinity, rural communities, Wyoming, army, homosexuality, identity

## INTRODUCTION

“In the culture of modernity, identity was hard and impenetrable like borders with barbed wire. Crossing these borders, if even possible, brought with it mortal peril. Postmodernity made identity shadowy and open, like soft borders where no identification is required. However, invisible as they may be, the borders of identity are still not limitless. They are like one’s own skin – one cannot alter them without incurring risks.” (Oraić Tolić 2000: np)

This quote, taken from Oraić Tolić’s article “Male modernity and female postmodernity”, contains not only astute observations on the differences between these two literary modes, but also an insight into what makes fiction in general so engaging. For what is more thrilling than pondering the shifting lines of characters’ identities? What better way to point at the many complexities of the human condition, then by inspecting it at narrative crossroads which offer its protagonists great rewards, but also the threat of terrible mistakes? Both of the short stories analyzed in this paper point to the ways in which questioning, moving, and ultimately crossing borders of identity can prove dangerous to its protagonists. Moreover, they point to the particular practices of their author, Pulitzer Award-winning American novelist and short story writer Annie Proulx (Rood 2001: 1). Writing on the themes that preoccupy much of Proulx’s work, Asquith singles out “the buried sexual secret that eats at the heart of the protagonists; man’s relationship with both the landscape and society; the breakdown of rural communities; and the marginalization of women” (2009: 22). These assertions reflect with great precision the central conflicts of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Tits-Up in a Ditch* – the tragedy and heartbreak incurred in equal measure by holding on to the traditions of one’s community, and by reinventing oneself outside its bounds. Asquith quotes Proulx’s own description of this tension: “In many ways Proulx sees herself as the ‘historian’ of regions and ways of life that are under threat: ‘I try to define periods when regional society and culture, rooted in location and natural resources, start to experience the erosion of traditional ways, and attempt to master contemporary, large-world values’” (Asquith 2009: 15). These “large-world values” may be embodied in a variety of symbols – in the (homo)sexual liberation, unattainable for the protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain*, or in the post-9/11 US military engagement, life-altering for the characters in *Tits-Up in a Ditch*. Even though it could be stated that there is already connection between the two stories – the social environment of rural Wyoming, the strong

emphasis on the gendered nature of various characters' predicaments, the sexual awakenings and shifting of identities – what truly draws them together is the melancholy of an ideal, happier self that might have been, but never was. As Rood writes in *Understanding Annie Proulx*, “The world of Proulx’s fiction offers no certainty, for good or for ill. Yet regardless of the hardships her characters encounter, Proulx notes, they harbor ‘the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world.’ She reveals in her fiction ‘the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them.’” (2001: 11).

### ***BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN – HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SPACE AND CULTURE***

#### **Culture as a new regionalist tool kit**

*Brokeback Mountain* begins by situating its protagonists in a very particular geographical location: “They were raised on small, poor ranches in opposite corners of the state, Jack Twist in Lightning Flat, up on the Montana border, Ennis del Mar from around Sage, near the Utah line, both high-school drop-out country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life.” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). In this opening line, we are, however, not offered only a location, but also a mode of being which grew out of this space. Proulx’s work can be situated in the tradition of new regionalism, a subversion of the late 19th century genre of American regionalist fiction, also known as local color writing (“Local Colour”; Rood 2001:15). As Hunt states, “Proulx is a writer of regionalist fiction. Yet in contemporary American fiction there can be no simple return to local color, the realist’s fascination with quaint places, or the naturalist’s scientific determinism. Accordingly, Proulx’s fiction bears all the literary historical scars of its Modern and Postmodern heritage.” (2009: 1-2). This tension between the regional and the critical, the pre- and post- modern, is perhaps best encompassed in the way Proulx depicts, in Asquith’s words, “a landscape made fantastic by the immensity of its history and its oppressive influence upon those who scratch a living from its soil.” (Asquith 2009: 16). Proulx’s Wyoming, therefore, is not strange, beautiful and terrible for its starkness, its scarcity and its potential for violence – it is exceptional in the way it binds its people to the land: “For those whose economic class or lack of education prevent escape, and for those whose blood, Proulx seems to suggest, is too strongly tied to place to be denied,



geography shapes and limits characters' lives." (Hunt 2009: 4). From a sociological perspective, this can be read through Annie Swidler's notion of cultural tool kit, by which

she offers "an image of culture as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views" (1986: 237). In other words, a culture and a particular individual's response to this culture stems from the behavioral mechanisms and the general outlook on the world one is exposed and accustomed to. Duncan expounds on this by stating that "it is not so much our values but what we know" (2000: 189) – all individuals are located within a certain social reality, and their personal preferences and beliefs ultimately always yield to what they intuitively know to be in accordance with their cultural tool kit. Such a reading seems particularly fitting for Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*, as the protagonists of the story are constantly struggling to re-negotiate their own identities. These "rough-mannered, rough-spoken" young men operate with an emotional and mental "tool kit" of people expecting to face physical and financial hardships of the ranch life. And as such, their performance of their role is initially beyond reproach – Ennis desires a ranch of his own, and Jack is "infatuated with the rodeo life" (Proulx 1997, n.p.). However, as they begin their romantic and sexual relationship which would span over the course of nearly twenty years, the two young men are suddenly faced with an emotional and existential conundrum. How do they reconcile their homosexuality with their self-image of Wyoming men?

### **Brokeback Mountain – Jack's and Ennis's Arcadia**

Their initial reaction is one of disavowal: "They never talked about the sex, let it happen, (...) saying not a goddamn word except once Ennis said, 'I'm not no queer,' and Jack jumped in with 'Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours.'" (Proulx 1997, n.p.). This immediate rejection of homosexual or queer identity is unsurprising, as, in Butler's words, "The words 'I am a homosexual' do not merely describe; they are figured as performing what they describe, not only in the sense that they constitute the speaker as a homosexual, but that they constitute the speech as homosexual conduct." (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 1997: 107). Although their ardent proclamations of their own heterosexuality may stem out of the fact that they are simply in denial, what is interesting to note is Jack's insistence that their relationship is nothing but a summer fling, "a one-shot thing". In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes: "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a

kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. *The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.*" (2012: 43, emphasis mine). For Jack and Ennis, it is easier to look at their relationship as something they *do*, rather than something that is a part of who they *are*, because to do so would mean risking a profound anxiety – "a hermaphroditism of the soul". They would be forced to begin questioning their very being, because to fully embrace their sexuality would also imply accepting the fact that they have morphed into something new, or rather *someone* who does not fit into the imagination of rural Wyoming. Instead, they base their outlook on their relationship on the fact that, "... identity, as it is typically understood today, accounts for remarkably little about what people actually do with their bodies and desires." (Johnson 2013: 17). Here, Brokeback Mountain plays a cathartic role, for it is the place where these potential identity crises can be put aside, exchanged for a "bucolic" atmosphere (Hekanako 2006: 12) and enjoyment of the moment. "There were only the two of them on the mountain, flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs and distant from tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours." (Proulx 1997, n.p.). Brokeback Mountain is the only place where their conflicting roles of lovers and Wyoming men do not lead to uneasiness – in other words, it is the single moment of epistemic clarity. The fact that all their later encounters also take place on fishing trips is not accidental. Through their long and often frustrating relationship (Hekanaho 2006: 5), they are on a continual quest to re-enact that original feeling of unadulterated freedom and happiness by constantly reverting to the same scenery. Hunt gives a succinct diagnosis of Proulx's writing by stating that she "demythologizes Western character while romanticizing Western landscapes" (2009: 7). In the context of *Brokeback Mountain* the relevance of such a statement is twofold, because it points not only to the writer's approach to the popular literary motive of Arcadia (Hekanaho 2006: 12), but also the characters' very personal response to what a particular locality represents. The climax of this emotional attachment to Brokeback Mountain (or rather the idea of Brokeback Mountain) is Jack's wish to have his ashes scattered there. Ennis's inability to fulfil his wish seems like the ultimate acknowledgement of the impossibility of reconciling the dream-like bliss and epistemic certainty of Brokeback Mountain with the social realities of their lives.

## Thinking outside the “Charmed Circle”

Their getaway in the nature protects Jack and Ennis from the preying eyes of society, but also from their own introspection. In their safe, pastoral bubble of Brokeback Mountain, they do not have to contemplate

what their budding relationship actually means, neither with regard to their individual sense of masculinity, sexuality and identity, nor when it comes to the societal roles they are expected to take up when they return into “the real world” – that of husbands and fathers. Pointon quotes from Gayle Rubin’s article *Thinking Sex: Notes for the radical theory of the politics of sexuality* and claims that since Jack’s and Ennis’s sexual and romantic attraction to each other falls out of the “Charmed Circle” of monogamous heterosexual relationships (deemed far more valuable than and infinitely preferable to any other sort of sexual behavior), they are “subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions” (Rubin qtd. in Pointon 2016: 3). Therefore, to reassert their own masculinity (which in the social climate of 1960s Wyoming presupposes heterosexuality) and get back inside the “Charmed Circle”, Jack and Ennis act on their feelings and desires only in the security of Brokeback Mountain, with full expectations of matrimonial bliss upon their return to society (Pointon 2016: 3). Even as they part after their fateful summer up on Brokeback Mountain, Ennis’s thoughts are firmly set on his future: “‘Like I said, Alma and me’s getting married in December.’” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). Since “popular ideology holds that families are not supposed to produce or harbor erotic non-conformity” (Rubin 2013: 116), in Ennis’s mind marrying Alma inevitably brings an end to any non-heterosexual feelings he may be harboring for Jack. It is interesting to note that it is precisely Alma who urges Ennis to abandon his life of migratory ranch labour and insists they live in a town. This double dichotomy – the urban versus the natural, the heteropatriarchal versus the illicit and homosexual – is perhaps indicative of how Ennis, perhaps unconsciously, views his options in life. Isolated ranches and nature may offer possibilities which are not even conceivable (and therefore, not open to censure) in the small town-life he begins to lead:

The very vastness that the term’s [rural] nonmetropolitan otherness suggests often seems to have the effect of rendering the territory that it describes completely irrelevant with respect to what might reasonably be considered American ‘society’ as a whole. As such, anything that happens ‘there’ – wherever ‘there’ may be – seems

either premature or belated, overly local or under-ly national, too banal, or so *in extremis* that it simply cannot, or ought not, bear the weight of social [...] generalization.” (Johnson 2013: 11-12)

Of course, other than evading their own true emotions, Jack and Ennis do engage (one could also say, have to engage) in eluding the rest of society. As Brokeback Mountain puts a natural barrier between themselves and most people, the only person they really have to worry about while enjoying in their pastoral bliss is Joe Aguirre, the foreman. However, “they believed themselves invisible” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). The fact that they had their guard down allowed Aguirre to watch them through his binoculars as they had sex one day. Even though he does not react with violence or threats, he uses what he saw that summer on Brokeback Mountain as grounds to refuse rehiring Jack when he comes back looking for work the following year. Pointon claims that by behaving in that manner, “Joe enforces discipline and punishment on men who choose to use their bodies outside of socially accepted normative behaviours” (2016: 4).

“Only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity. For instance, heterosexual encounters may be sublime or disgusting, free or forced, healing or destructive, romantic or mercenary. As long as it does not violate other rules, heterosexuality is acknowledged to exhibit the full range of human experience. In contrast, all sex acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of any emotional nuance.” (Rubin 2013 : 108, 110).

This passage, quoted from Rubin’s *Thinking Sex: Notes for the radical theory of the politics of sexuality* may provide an explanation to Aguirre’s reaction to witnessing Jack’s and Ennis’s encounter – from the predominant point of view of the 1960s rural Wyoming society, homosexuality cannot be linked to or excused by any kind of emotional attachment. The protagonists of Brokeback Mountain met and started their relationship in 1963, only six years before “the modern gay rights movement was born” in the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (VanGoethem 2010: 2). But throughout their nineteen-year-long relationship, the sexually liberated Greenwich Village might have been on another planet. This is not strange when we take into account that human sexuality is, as John D’Emilio emphasizes, inextricably linked to culture:

Central to this argument is a view of human sexuality as exceedingly malleable. Sex is more than a configuration of bodies in space; it takes

its definition from the values and structures of particular cultures, and from the consciousness of individuals within a society. Sexuality consists of acts with meanings. Although the acts may have a universal existence, the meanings may vary considerably. And it is through meaning, through an understanding of behavior which culture provides, that patterns of behavior take on social significance (1986: 916).

The one truly insurmountable problem for Jack and Ennis is the fact that in their “particular culture” (D’Emilio 1986: 916), the idea of a homosexual relationship successfully functioning in their community seems impossible. On the one hand, Ennis still has vivid memories of the tragic ending of two men’s attempt to live as a gay couple right in the heart of the American West. He has been exposed to what Rubin calls the “suppression of the marginal sexual world” (2013: 118). Moreover, this is not a form of fear and regret he can freely voice, as he inhabits a world in which “... certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable.” (Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* 2004: XIV). On the other hand, “information on how to find, occupy and live in” (Rubin 2013: 118) such a world is clearly at Jack’s disposal, as he unashamedly travels to Mexico, where he, as Ennis bitterly implies, has gone to pursue sexual encounters with other men. The fact that Jack physically has to cross borders (first to his new home in Texas, then while chasing sexual release with same-sex partners in Mexico) in order to practice his sexuality more freely shows to the fact that he, be it unconsciously, recognizes Wyoming as a repressive environment.

### **“Familiar tools people ‘like us’ use”**

If we go back to the theory of culture as a tool kit, it is interesting to note the ways in which Ennis and Jack negotiate (or fail to do so) the “familiar tools people ‘like us’ use when making a choice in life” (Duncan 2000: 189). When the lovers are first reunited four years after their trysts on Brokeback Mountain, we see that they are no longer completely unified in a sense of confusion and denial. Unlike Ennis, who is committed to the life of a ranch hand, Jack has left his rodeo days behind due to a series of injuries and married a Texan heiress to a “farm-machinery business” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). Furthermore, even though they both nominally still profess their heterosexuality (marred solely by the unaccountable passion they feel for each other), we learn that Jack is coming to terms with his sexual identity even to the point

of having intercourse with men other than Ennis: “‘You do it with other guys, Jack?’ ‘Shit no,’ said Jack, who had been riding more than bulls.” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). Finally, overcoming the “familiar tools people ‘like him’ use”, Jack makes the most radical possible departure from their “tool kit” by suggesting they start a life together: “‘Listen. I’m thinkin, tell you what. If you and me had a little ranch together, little cow-and-calf operation, your horses, it’d be some sweet life.” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). With this proposal of “queer domesticity”, he rejects the notion that their relationship is only possible within the social and geographical isolation of Brokeback Mountain, and essentially envisions the social sphere 1960s rural Wyoming changing so as to accommodate them (Johnson 2013: 84). He offers an alternative version of the idealized image of the West – a version where the fact that they are involved in a homosexual relationship does not automatically cancel out the fact that they are first and foremost Wyoming men who work hard and live off the land. Ennis, however, cannot accept this idea – when he was a child, his father took him and his brother to see the mauled corpse of a neighborhood rancher who had lived with another man, and this trauma had etched into his mind the impossibility of such a union ending in anything but bloodshed and tragedy. “‘I’m stuck with what I’ve got, caught in my own loop. I can’t get out of it, Jack.” (Proulx 1997, n.p.). This verbal expression of Ennis’s simultaneous hopelessness and stoicism is something that would characterize the rest of the narrative, and also signal the beginnings of corrosion in his long-distance relationship with Jack. After almost twenty years of “infrequent couplings” (Proulx 1997, n.p.), Jack and Ennis fall out over their different conceptions of the possible life they might have had: “‘Tell you what, we could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn’t do it, Ennis, *so what we’ve got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that.* It’s all we got boy, fuckin all, so I hope you know that if you don’t ever know the rest.” (Proulx 1997, n.p., emphasis mine). Jack’s bitterness and resentment point to the fact that even their “idyllic pastoral” haven (Hekanaho 2006: 12) has somehow been corrupted by Ennis’s inability to fathom the idea of their time on Brokeback Mountain being transplanted into their actual lives of Western ranchers. Even before Jack’s death (which for Ennis bears violent implications and is the ultimate sign of the impossibility of a love such as theirs in the spatial, temporal and cultural context of Wyoming), we see their relationship becoming “a pastoral elegy” (Hekanaho 2006: 12) – a mournful ode to a love that could not succeed without “the imagined power of Brokeback Mountain, of which nothing was left” (Proulx 1997, n.p.).

## ***TITS-UP IN A DITCH* – SUFFERING IN WYOMING AND IRAQ**

### **The Listers – living the ranch life**

“...A climate and geography conducive to alienation and isolation, and an oppressive socio-political landscape constituted in part by heterosexist Old Western myths of rugged individualism and hypermasculinity” (Mason 2011: 36).

Although this description of Annie Proulx's Wyoming is directed primarily at Brokeback Mountain, it is interesting to note how applicable it is for describing *Tits-Up in a Ditch*. It certainly pertains to the family dynamics of the Listers, a patched-up family made up of unwilling (one might also add, unloving) grandparents, a lonely child and the ghost of a runaway teenage mother. Each of the members of the family embodies a different facet of this “oppressive socio-political landscape” (Mason 2011: 36).

As the man of the family, but one who is unable to manage the ranch by himself due to injuries sustained during his youth because he had “rodeoed hard” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Verl's ability to perform his (hyper)masculine role is constantly brought into question. His neighbour refers to him as a “trash rancher” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), thus mocking his inability to live up to the “Old Western myth” of the “rugged individualism” of a successful, prosperous ranch-owner (Mason 2011: 36). Even more significantly, his wife explicitly brings his virility into question: “But a man, she though, was supposed to endure pain, cowboy up, and not bitch about it all day long. She, too, had arthritis in her left knee, but she suffered in silence.” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). This sentence is very telling because it juxtaposes Verl's failure to live up to the expected norms of hypermasculinity (as exhibited by his inability to demonstrate emotional restraint in times of stress (Scheff 2006: 3)), to Bonita's successful performance of her own role, that of “a Wyoming ranchwoman, a hard worker with a built-in capacity for endurance.” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). What is more, she harbors a passive-aggressive resentment for her husband, even to the point of considering poisoning him, only to reconsider because the impracticality of such a plan. One way to interpret this one-sided animosity is to take things at face value – Bonita despises her husband for failing to live up to the demands of their social reality, spending all his time complaining. But another way to look at the matter is to take into account the fact that, because of her husband's impaired physical health, much of what would typically be considered men's work fell on her shoulders, as “she worked spring branding with the men” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). However,

the sentence goes on to point out that “she still managed dinner for all the hands” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Johnson draws from Neth in positioning this marital tension into the broader social and historical context of gender relations in rural America:

‘Inefficient farmers were in important ways less than men, failures who were outside respectable manhood. For women the class dichotomy opposed the domestically efficient and cultured woman who had leisure because of technology to the drudge. Ideology bound this drudge image to negative class images of men. The drudge was overworked because she had married an oafish, and probably inefficient, man who did not respect his wife. A man’s respect for a woman, measured by her leisure, helped denote manhood and womanhood. Thus, the removal of women from production marked both the respectable woman and the professional farmer.’ (Neth in Johnson 2013: 168-9)

In order for their family to survive, if not thrive, Bonita is forced to take up both her own and her husband’s role in managing the ranch, for which she receives, and realistically expects, no recognition. Her bitterness is ironically contrasted by Verl’s praise of work as being “almost holy, good physical labor done cheerfully and for its own sake, the center of each day, the node of Wyoming life” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Bonita’s outlook on life can hardly be called cheerful, even though she is “used to *praising thankless work* as the right and good way” (Proulx 2008, n.p., emphasis mine) – it is, after all, “the node of Wyoming life” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Johnson points out this lack of regard for women’s contributions as another aspect of American rural culture:

Here, I want to reorient the reader’s attention in the direction of poor and working class rural white women because, in many ways, their experience was the exact opposite of poor white men’s during this period in U.S. history. If rural men were increasingly celebrated for their readiness to throw themselves headlong into the dirty, back-breaking physical labor characteristic of country life, rural women were openly castigated for their willingness to do so, even under circumstances where their physical labor made the difference between subsistence and starvation. (2013: 162)

A character who is not part of this Wyoming life, even though her absence shapes the lives of the people she left behind, is Shaina Lister, Bonita and Verl’s “bad-girl daughter” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). At fifteen, she gave birth to Dakotah and promptly “headed west for Los Angeles” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), leaving her infant to the grudging care of her



parents. It is interesting to note that the entire story, instead of instantly focusing on its protagonist, starts off with a description of Dakotah's mother: "Her mother had been knockout beautiful and no good, and Dakotah *had heard this from the time she could recognize words.*" (Proulx 2008, n.p., emphasis mine). In *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*, Duncan makes a seemingly self-explanatory statement: "As children our social world is our family, and we get our sense of who we are and who we can become from what our parents and other relatives tell us and show us." (2000: 190). However, if we put this assertion in the context of the short story, we see that "from the time she could recognize words" (Duncan 2000: 190), what Dakotah's relatives tell her is not who she is and who she can become. Rather, she is made aware of the fact that the very person who gave her life is "no good" (Proulx 2008, n.p.). The negative feelings the Listers harbour for their runaway daughter cannot, however, only be attributed to the fact that her premature and irresponsible sexual activity resulted in a child she was unwilling to look after. What her father in particular blames her for is not just her "wildness" (Proulx 2008, n.p.), but her "hatred of the ranch" (Proulx 2008, n.p.), a desire to escape which manifested in the most extreme way – trading the "silence amid vast space" (Proulx 2008, n.p.) of Wyoming for its antipode, the populous and diverse metropolis of Los Angeles. As Gilligan points out, "girls' resistance is more articulate and robust, more deeply voiced and therefore more resonant; it resonates with women's and men's desires for relationships, reopening old psychological wounds, raising new questions, new possibilities for relationships, new ways of living." (Gilligan 1982: XXIII). These new questions arise in the form of Shaina's daughter. Dakotah, eager to find out more about her mother, talks to her grandmother, who shares with her a story of how her daughter had once cooked rice and eaten it with raw fish. For Bonita, this anecdote represents just another instance of Shaina "doin some outlandish thing" (Proulx 2008, n.p.), thereby showing the extent to which even before she left she was different, alien, the Other to their rural Wyoming existence. For Dakotah, however, this snippet of information proves to be important. When she starts her military training and is persuaded by a friend to try sushi, she suddenly realises that "her mother had been exhibiting not craziness but curiosity about the outside world" (Proulx 2008, n.p.).

## Trying to break the mould

This dichotomy between their Wyoming life and “the outside world” (Proulx 2008, n.p.) is perhaps most apparent in the story’s protagonist. Raised by people who considered her upbringing a moral and social obligation, Dakotah receives acknowledgement and encouragement from her grandparents only after she decides to quit school and marry her high school sweetheart Sash. Her choice is greeted with enthusiasm, even though it means decreased chances of a good employment for Dakotah, because her act is perceived by her grandparents as the direct antithesis to that of her mother. Where Shaina had indulged in premarital sex and had run away from the responsibilities and hardships of their lives in rural Wyoming, Dakotah’s decision to start a family and get a job further ingrains her in the kind of life her grandparents live. At the onset of their marriage, it seems that Dakotah is indeed destined to replicate the life of her grandmother: working hard and getting no recognition for it. However, she does the unexpected by insisting on a better treatment from her husband, which ultimately leads to their separation. She attributes this bout of self-confidence to “her rebellious mother” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), but concedes to the fact that her refusal to be taken for granted may have had to do with the fact that she grew up witnessing Bonita’s discontent. In this, we can see the traces of the “hard woman” Dakotah has the potential to become, one created in the antithesis to the experiences of her grandmother:

Of course, the figure of the ‘hard woman’ is not unfamiliar, either to scholars who write about rural and working-class women’s experience or to those to write about gender and sexuality in the United States. This type of woman has been difficult to place, however, in part because she figures so prominently in two narratives that seem to pull conceptually in different directions. On one hand, she epitomizes the compression – or in some cases, merely the wearing away – of the female-bodied subject under conditions of extreme poverty, deprivation, and patriarchy. (...) On the other hand, and from a slightly different perspective, ‘hardness’ in women has also been associated in various contexts with a kind of expansion of the female subject, or at least an expansion in the number of ways in which the female body can be inhabited. (Johnson 2013: 164-5)

Dakotah’s “expansion” and departure from the kind of life led by her grandparents increases when she realizes she is pregnant. Refusing to “bring more shame on this family” (Proulx 2008, n.p.) by putting the baby up for adoption or risking their neighbours’ sneers by “Dakotah’s going on welfare or accepting social services” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), her

grandparents agree to take care of the baby while she goes out into the world in search of better opportunities for herself and her child. This decision marks a radical parting from the idea that their life in a “rural community which forms its own micro social world” (Duncan 2000: 192) is “fine just the way it is” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Suddenly Verl and Bonita, the living embodiments of “accepting one’s lot” (Misje 2014: 2), are the ones encouraging their granddaughter to embrace “the underlying influence of the American Dream, the idea that as long as you work hard you can do anything” (Misje 2014: 5). And for young people like Sash and Dakotah, the only option which seems like a viable gateway to achieving the American Dream is joining the army. The fact that

both Sash and Dakotah, incompatible in other aspects of their lives, agree on the benefits of going into the military is not coincidental. As Duncan explains it when discussing the tight-knit relations between neighbors in small, rural communities:

“Boom and bust cycles in the economy, acts of resistance and accommodation, are recorded not only in official historical records but also in people’s decisions about work, family or migration. Because new ideas and new resources rarely penetrate this environment (...), people form their cultural tool kit in the context of the relationships and norms they know. Their immediate social context shapes who they become and how they see their options, both as individuals and as a community.” (2000: 193)

Even though Verl and Bonita continue living their lives according to cultural tool kit which celebrates endurance, physical labour and tradition, they realize that such an existence is becoming untenable for the younger generations. Knowing that one possible response to the hardships of the ranch life is its outright rejection and formation of a completely different cultural tool kit (as represented by their daughter’s escape to the urban life of Los Angeles), the Listers actively encourage Dakotah to follow in her estranged husband’s footsteps.

By joining the army, Dakotah gets not only the chance to build a career, but also to experience a real connection with another person for the first time: “They had become close, closer than she had ever been to Sash. Dakotah, for the first time in her life, had someone to talk to, someone who understood everything, from rural ways to failing at tests. Marnie said they were in love. *They talked about setting up a house together with Baby Verl after they got out.*” (Proulx 2008, n.p., emphasis mine). Here we see an interesting parallelism between the relationships portrayed in *Tits-Up in a Ditch* and *Brokeback Mountain*. Like Ennis

and Jack, Dakotah and Marnie discuss living together, but unlike the case of *Brokeback Mountain*, in *Tits-Up in a Ditch* this is no longer a source of dramatic conflict. Dakotah and Marnie have moved past Ennis's apprehensions, but their love still results in tragedy. The fact that the short story ends the way it does – with Sash and Dakotah broken shells of people, Sash due to the brain damage he sustained in the service and Dakotah because of the loss of Marnie and her son – shows that there is no American Dream, at least not for them. Misje describes this as part of Proulx's poetics, concluding that "in her works it is not a given that if you work hard you will succeed" (2014: 5). Quite on the contrary, we see that the harder Dakotah tried to make a better, happier life for herself, the more devastating was the ultimate result of her efforts, in the end leaving her hopeless and convinced that "it didn't pay to love" (Proulx 2008, n.p.).

### **War on sexuality**

It may be that in *Tits-Up in a Ditch* Dakotah's sexuality is not a point of contention with the other characters or the society at large because it has lost its symbolic function. In *Thinking Sex: Notes for the radical theory of the politics of sexuality*, Rubin states that "sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection" (2001: 119), and we could certainly link this statement to the many anxieties plaguing the protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain*. But if we take a look at Dakotah's struggles, her sexuality or romantic attachment to Marnie is in no way related to them. It could be posited that the role of illicit sexuality as a cause of "personal and social apprehensions" (Rubin 201: 119) has been replaced by war. Of course, this is not to imply war and sexuality are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the fact that a person does not cease to be a sexual being upon enlisting has been quite problematic in the context of the American army. In the time period in which *Brokeback Mountain* takes place, there was "an outright ban on service by homosexuals in the United States military" (Correales 2007: 416). That changed, however, with the implementation of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" (commonly abbreviated as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell") in 1993, which was supposed to end discrimination in the army based on sexual orientation, but was more accurately described by Correales as "a compromise between full integration and complete exclusion" (2007: 417). He goes on to point out the fact that "the defacto gay ban represented by 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' resulted in

a significant increase in discharges based on sexual orientation in the first seven years under the policy, as compared to the previous ten years under the complete ban” (Correales 2007: 430). Proulx, on the other hand, casually mentions a budding relationship between the two female members of military police, without referring to the potentially detrimental consequences were they to be outed. This may be because they are especially discreet, or more likely, because the army simply could not afford to lose soldiers. For, as Correales explains, “(...) personnel shortages during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in a sharp reduction of gay discharges. Indeed, as a result of the severe personnel shortages, many openly gay military members have been allowed, or have even been required, to finish their terms.” (2007: 430).

### **Army as a happy ending for Dakotah?**

There is an intriguing correspondence in the fact that *Brokeback Mountain* and *Tits-Up in a Ditch* both contain the topics of queerness and of a war fought overseas, but where for Jack and Ennis “the draft” (Proulx 1997, n.p.) is just a vague possibility, for Dakotah enlistment is a very realistic (and even positive) prospect. The contrast of 1960s sexually repressed cowboys who go about their lives with Vietnam as an afterthought and a young mother who sees the Army her only chance of a successful future (and, as it later on turns out, same-sex relationship) is staggering. This complete shift in focus perhaps speaks to the changing times and society. Although the time frame for *Tits-Up in a Ditch* is never explicitly referenced as it is in *Brokeback Mountain*, one can deduce when Dakotah was born because her birth coincided with the day “the television evangelist Jim Bakker, an exposed and confessed adulterer, resigned from his Praise the Lord money mill” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), which was in the late 1980s. This would imply Dakotah enlisted somewhere around 2007, which is corroborated in the story by the fact that when she goes overseas, she is stationed in Iraq. The wars started in Iraq and Afghanistan (known also as Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Smith and True 201: 147)), following the massive panic and stress triggered by the 9/11 attacks (Schuster et al. 2001: 1507), brought a change to the structure and motivations of enlisted soldiers. As Smith and True state, “Unlike veterans of earlier U.S. conflicts, OIF/OEF veterans serve within the all-volunteer Armed Forces, none have been conscripted. Most join the military with enthusiasm for the prospect of improving themselves and/or contributing in some fashion to something larger than

themselves.” (Smith and True 2014: 149). Furthermore, a 2011 Pew Research Center report titled “War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era” provides some intriguing numbers on the perceived benefits of military service.

“Veterans who served on active duty in the post-9/11 era are proud of their service (96%), and most (74%) say their military experience has helped them get ahead in life. The vast majority say their time in the military has helped them mature (93%), taught them how to work with others (90%) and helped to build self-confidence (90%). More than eight-in-ten (82%) say they would advise a young person close to them to join the military.” (n.p.)

With opinions such as these, it is no wonder both Sash and Dakotah see the military as their gold ticket out of Wyoming. As Rubin succinctly states, “For poorer kids, the military is often the easiest way to get the hell out of wherever they are.” (2013: 117). What is striking, though, is the fact that these self-reported benefits of being in the army are directly opposed to the number of casualties and injuries suffered in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. In a study conducted comparing the scope of physical trauma among soldiers in 2003 and 2004 versus 2006, Kelly et al. found that „injuries sustained in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom have increased not only in severity, but in number, making it more of a challenge to care for the severely wounded.” (2008: S25). It is perhaps telling that Proulx chose to leave her veteran protagonist with an amputated arm, a dead lover and an ex-husband with severe brain damage and “both legs blown off at mid-thigh, the left side of his face a mass of shiny scar tissue, the left ear and eye gone” (Proulx 2008, n.p). By giving the reader three different, but equally terrible fates to contemplate, she negates the optimistic notion (expressed by grandpa Verl) that joining the military does not take its toll.

### **“Warring identities”**

Smith and True talk about „the intense identity transformation – starting with basic training – that occurs within individuals who enlist in the US army” (2014: 148). Seeing as they are primarily referring to the cohesiveness of units and obedience to the chain of command, it is curious to note that their assertion about soldiers’ shifting identity applies to the protagonist of *Tits-Up in a Ditch* in a rather different way. For Dakotah, military training and service give her a chance to grow as a person – to develop meaningful relationships with people outside the

narrow social circle of the poor Wyoming ranch she grew up on. Even through mundane tasks such as studying for her tests, she evolves as an individual and starts developing an identity which is, for the first time, setting her apart from her home. “How can it be that you feel homesick for the place you hate?” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), wonders Dakotah when she is faced with a feeling of unrelenting longing for a place where she has experienced nothing but bitterness and disappointment. It may be that the root of Dakotah’s homesickness lies not in missing the people she left behind, as her friends speculate, but in missing a part of her identity she can never regain. This notion is only deepened by the intense physical and emotional trauma she experiences while deployed overseas. On returning home, she (like so many veterans), suffers from “emotional and social withdrawal as a response to exposures to violence and trauma” (Smith and True 2014: 148). The fact that the loss of her son in Wyoming mirrors the loss of her lover Marnie in Iraq in a way annuls the inner struggle of a veteran’s “warring identities” (Smith and True 2014: 147), because for Dakotah the same suffering and heartbreak is to be found on home front as in the war zone. Even the story’s title phrase, “tits-up in a ditch”, serves to underline the way Dakotah cannot escape the humdrum desperation of her upbringing. Early on in the story, her grandfather uses it to describe the situation where “a cow who had tried to climb a steep, wet slope that apparently slid out from under her had landed on her back in the ditch” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). This description of an animal’s suffering after trying to raise itself from the gutter eerily foreshadows Dakotah’s own struggles. By attempting to find a better life for herself and her child through the army, the reader soon finds out that Dakotah had unwittingly chosen to climb the steepest, wettest slope, and the one which would ultimately send her back into her personal Wyoming ditch. The moment the metaphorical slope slid out from under her is even marked by a direct reference to the original context of the story’s title. As a combat medic patches her up after the blast in which she lost her lover and an arm, in the adrenaline filled daze her first instinct is to laugh it off: “‘Moooo,’ she said, trying to make a cow joke for the veterinarian’s son” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Even before she was aware of what had happened and what she has lost, for some reason the first imagery that her shocked mind supplied was that of an overturned cow. Could it be that even before became fully aware of the terrible tragedy that had occurred, she somehow intuitively sensed that she was “tits-up in a ditch”? In the words of Judith Butler, the story shows us how Proulx “institutes the temporality of tragic belatedness” – “all that happens has already happened, will come to appear as the always already happening, a word

and a deed entangled and extended through time through the force of repetition.” (*Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* 2000: 64).

### **What is in a name?**

Without a doubt, Dakotah Lister’s life is characterized and shaped by her grandparents fluctuating views towards her abilities and merits. This curious contradiction extends even to Dakotah’s very name, a discrepancy which in a way points to a larger paradox, one that permeates the whole community. As it is made clear early on in the story, it would have been preferable if Dakotah had been born a boy, because according to grandpa Verl that way “he could have helped with the chores when he got to size” (Proulx 2208, n.p.). The fact that gender has little to do with the amount (if not the kind) of physical and mental exertion expected of people living the life of poor ranchers seems to have

momentarily escaped Verl. However, he decides to name her after his great-grandmother, an almost mythical figure in his family’s history.

Verl had named Dakotah after his homesteading great-grandmother, born in the territory, married and widowed and married again only after she had proved up on her land and the deed was in her name and in her hand. At a time when the mourning period for a husband was two or three years, and for a wife three months, she had worn black for her first husband an insulting six weeks before taking up a homestead claim. Verl treasured a photograph showing her with the deed, standing in front of her neat clapboard house, a frowsy white dog leaning against her checkered skirt. She held one hand behind her back, and Verl said this was because she smoked a pipe. Dakotah was almost sure she could see a wisp of smoke curling up, but Bonita said it was just dust raised by the wind. (Proulx 2008, n.p.)

Despite Verl’s deep-rooted belief that it is the boys who can contribute more to the running of the ranch, it is a woman who had secured his family the ranch in the first place. Moreover, the level of respect (bordering on reverence) he has for her memory is completely incongruous with his total lack of awareness of Bonita’s contributions to their family life. Dakotah’s life almost seems to be shaped by her grandfather’s simultaneous sexism and respect for women who build their lives from the ground up. It is clear from her very birth that for Verl she is the second best – she is better than her mother, “the high-school slut” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), but not nearly as cherished as her son,



Baby Verl, will one day be. On the other hand, it is precisely Verl who encourages her to seek a new, better life for herself and her child:

“I checked around,” he said, winking his pinpoint aquamarine eyes, which, as he aged, had almost disappeared under colorless eyebrows and hanging folds of flesh. “E.M.T.s make good money. You could get to be a medic, and when you come back, why, there’s your career, just waiting.” *The word “career” sounded strange coming out of his mouth. For years, he had ranted against women who worked out of the home.* (Proulx 2008 n.p., emphasis mine)

Encouraged by his speech on “duty, responsibility, the necessity of signing the papers so child support could come to them” (Proulx 2008, n.p.), she enlists, but she finds “that it was still a man’s army and that women were decidedly inferior in all ways” (Proulx 2008, n.p.). Even though she has spent her entire life in a sexist environment, the continuation of such a social order in the military at least comes with some benefits – a chance to learn, experience, grow and love. And, as she returns from her time overseas to find her own personal “Billy the Kid” (Proulx 2008, n.p.) barely alive, and her son killed in a tragic accident, she comes to the realization that maybe Wyoming women were in some ways better off.

She realized that every ranch she passed had lost a boy, lost boys early and late, boys smiling, sure in their risks, healthy, tipped out of the current of life by liquor and acceleration, rodeo smashups, bad horses, deep irrigation ditches, high trestles, tractor rollovers, and unsecured truck doors. Her boy, too. This was the waiting darkness that surrounded ranch boys, the dangerous growing up that cancelled out their favored status. (Proulx 2008, n.p.)

This “dangerous growing up” (Proulx 2008, n.p.) is in a way almost taken as a given, the underlying tragedy of the inevitable misfortune that is to come. Be it “unsecured truck doors” (Proulx 2008, n.p.) that brought upon the death of her son, or enemy fire overseas, Dakotah is painfully aware that sorrows and loss are always somewhere around the corner, in “the waiting darkness” (Proulx 2008, n.p.).

## CONCLUSION

Writing on her work in *Annie Proulx’s Brokeback Mountain and Postcards*, Mark Asquith asserted that she is “interested in the incongruity between the sublime environment and the difficult lives of

ordinary people.” (2009: 14). Rood goes even further, referring to her particular perspective as a new regionalist author, “Readers who approach the work of these new regionalist out of a turn-of-the-century nostalgia for getting back to their country roots quickly have their notions of pastoral serenity replaced by pictures of rural poverty and varying degrees of violence.” (2001: 15). This departure from the idyllic, utopian image of the rural wilderness of the American West is, however, expressed differently in *Brokeback Mountain* than in *Tits-Up in a Ditch*. Where *Brokeback Mountain* depicted the small-scale, intimate disruption of the stereotypical image of western masculinity and the toll this disruption takes on the protagonists, *Tits-Up in a Ditch* begins in the same contained environment of Wyoming ranches, but transposes the suffering of the protagonist into an overseas war zone. What is interesting to note, however, is that the reactions of the characters are remarkably similar – they go through their respective tragedies despite their efforts to take charge of their lives (for instance, Dakotah and Jack) or make their peace with the inherent unfairness of their situation (in the case of Bonita and Ennis). Through her rendition of rural Wyoming, Proulx

offers a deconstruction of the myth of the West as “the purest expression of American idealism” (Hine and Mack Faranger 2000: 531), in turn showing the reader the outcome of being just enough Wyoming to be determined by the social reality of one’s rural existence, but not Wyoming enough to be able to accomplish the western version of the American Dream. By shifting the focus from impermissible sexuality (in *Brokeback Mountain*) to the struggle to emotionally cope with living through a loveless childhood and a war (in *Tits-Up in a Ditch*), Proulx indicates that, however different their particular struggles may be, what unites her protagonists is the futile attempt to remodel one’s identity outside of the bounds of the society and geography that ultimately determines them. The fact that Jack Twist moves away to Texas and finds sexual release in Mexico, and Dakotah Lister seeks a better life in an overseas combat zone, points to the characters’ implicit knowledge that new identities and opportunities are to be sought outside Wyoming. Jack’s death, along with the injuries Dakotah survives overseas, however, point to the fact that there is no guarantee of success, or even survival, after escaping their rural communities. Moreover, Proulx wraps *Tits-Up in a Ditch* up in a way that clearly illustrates prosperity and wellbeing are even less attainable upon returning home. This again brings *Tits-Up in a Ditch* close to *Brokeback Mountain*, showing the reader that if chances of happiness were scarce and fleeting in a war zone, they are truly nonexistent in her Wyoming.

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