Queer Exposures: Anti-Gay Violence and the Landscapes of Wyoming

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Abstract: Given Beth Loffreda’s provocative suggestion that Wyoming is a site of struggle between Old West myth and queer permutations of its traditional regional identity, I draw on New West fiction and landscape theory to argue that through this struggle Wyoming’s landscape communicates the potential deadliness of exposure: to Wyoming’s harsh climate and topography, and the dangerous homophobic gaze. Figured paradoxically as an appealing bucolic refuge haunted by anti-gay murder, Wyoming’s landscape cultivates violent resistance to sexual diversity and attempts to foster sustainable communities, but it is also an effective site to examine the conditions that enable such violence.

In “Scheduling Idealism in Laramie, Wyoming,” Beth Loffreda considers the enduring imprint left on Wyoming’s landscape by Matthew Shepard’s brutal torture and murder. In the fall of 1998, Shepard, a twenty-one year-old openly gay University of Wyoming student, was tied to a fence and beaten to near-death by his assailants, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney; Shepard died in-hospital five days after the attack. The media coverage of the murder’s aftermath represented Wyoming with deep ambivalence: on the one hand, the state was seen as “just like everywhere else” in America, and on the other, Wyoming was described “as utterly different – qualitatively more homophobic, more primitive, more violent and hate-filled than the rest of the nation.”¹ The least populous state in America, Wyoming defies habitation through the extremity of its landscape, which combines the arid, desert-like High Plains with the treacherous ranges of the Eastern Rocky Mountains.² And as part of the American West, a region that Wallace Stegner once celebrated as America’s “‘geography of hope,’ the place where American dreams came true,” Wyoming – in its alluring, pastoral wilderness – is Old West myth incarnate: an ideal home for the rugged, masculine, maverick cowboy, and a refuge from the congestion and tedium of urban life in America’s effete east.³ Shepard’s grisly murder seemed to disrupt the tidiness of this pervasive narrative: as Krista Comer writes, “one man’s geography of hope was another man’s geography of the end of hope.”⁴ In addition to its harsh weather and treacherous topography, the landscape of Wyoming came to
further signify hostility through its representation as a feral place whose xenophobic socio-political climate fosters brutally violent anti-gay murder.

The conditions in Wyoming that potentially enabled Shepard’s murder had been eerily outlined a year prior in Annie Proulx’s short story “Brokeback Mountain,” which Christopher Pullen describes as a prelude to the “inevitable tragedy” in Laramie. Since Shepard’s death, Proulx’s story has taken on new meaning, and other authors have illustrated how Shepard’s ghost continues to haunt Wyoming’s landscape: Loffreda in *Losing Matt Shepard*, an account of life in Laramie following the murder, and Percival Everett in *Wounded*, the fictional story of a black horse trainer and his young gay ranch hand. Indeed, as Loffreda explains, Shepard’s death raised massive national awareness about homophobia and has since become a recurring narrative in discourse about queer rights.

Describing the cumulative effect of the film version of “Brokeback Mountain” and Shepard’s death on Wyoming’s regional identity, Loffreda writes:

> If regionalism traditionally has entailed a retreat from the differences and the complexities of the present into a mythic and monolithic past, then what we can see in Laramie is the inchoate beginnings of a new regionalism, a struggle between the nostalgic form of regional identity and a queer remaking of it.

In this paper, I will map this very struggle as manifested in “Brokeback Mountain,” *Losing Matt Shepard*, and *Wounded*, and consider how these texts compose and critique, in a complicated and contradictory fashion, Wyoming’s landscape as dangerously hostile to otherness and a site for queering regional identity and relationality. Departing from much of the critical attention given to “Brokeback Mountain” and its cinematic adaptation, which tends to focus on director Ang Lee’s interpretation of the incompatibility between the cowboy myth and homosexuality, I draw on New West fiction, history, and landscape theory to read Wyoming as a complex space where various frontier myths and ideologies collide to evoke fantasies of escape while seriously impeding many forms of adaptive habitation. Following Comer, who understands landscape as “discursive space” – a “sociological landscape” in lieu of a purely geographic one – I argue that through Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett’s texts Wyoming comes to communicate the potential deadliness of *exposure*. These authors depict Wyoming as a paradoxical landscape that is both refuge and danger for its queer inhabitants, a space that threatens not only through exposure to its harsh and violent climate but also to humans whose violent impulses seem issued from the land itself. In other words, the mythos of wilderness
associated with Wyoming seems to invite habitation but ultimately prevent it: instead of the wild and free open range the Old West seemingly offers, Wyoming’s brand of wildness cultivates violent resistance to sexual diversity and disturbs attempts to adapt to the landscape and foster sustainable communities. I argue that Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett ultimately work to compose Wyoming as a complex discursive and geographical landscape where, due to the mythologies that inform the state’s regional identity, a tragedy like Shepard’s murder could take place. These authors are further invested in interrogating these dangerously heteronormative and xenophobic ideologies of cowboy masculinity that persist as residue of the Old West and continue to shape our understanding of Wyoming’s regional identity.

Before I explore how themes of exposure, fear, and (mal)adaptation circulate in these texts, I would like to further elucidate my understanding of the term “landscape” in the context of New West criticism, and consider how these authors narrate Wyoming as a space that enables anti-gay violence. Following New West theorists like Comer and Rebecca Solnit, I see landscape in excess of mere geography: landscape is a useful critical trope for exploring the proliferation of discourses that collide, frequently messily and paradoxically, in the constitution of regional identity. “What we mean by place is a crossroads,” writes Solnit, “a particular point of intersection of forces coming from many directions and distances.”

Of interest in New Western landscape theory is not only the place itself, but how humans and landscape shape one another through their interactions; in Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett’s texts, it is the desire to inhabit a relentlessly uninhabitable space that affects both people and place. Landscape, Comer claims, is “social topography”:

To treat southwestern deserts or the mountainscapes of the Rockies or Sierra Nevada as historically evolving representations of western and American social relations, as symbolic projections of those social relations, and, finally, to consider them as actors on the western stage enables us not only to evaluate the ways that landscape embodies social conflicts over time but to be alerted to landscape itself as a social player, a protagonist, a dynamic form of cultural practice.

In the context of this paper, Wyoming’s landscape communicates a layering of systemic, institutionalized homophobia, entrenched and complex mythologies of the Old West, and the threat of exposure to a variety of violences, but it also becomes a space for queering and critiquing these ideologies. Wyoming emerges as an exceptional Western state because of this unique relationship to queerness: Wyoming shapes the way queer identities inhabit (or fail to inhabit) the land, while its
landscape becomes marked by the stories about queerness that accumulate through these attempts at habitation. By reworking these many layers of meaning that become sedimented inside Wyoming’s borders, Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett invite a nuanced approach to reading the spectre of anti-gay violence that haunts Wyoming’s landscape.

Two overlapping factors emerge from these texts as barriers to successful adaptation for gay Wyomingites like Matthew Shepard and as the conditions that partially enable their untimely deaths: 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. In Loffreda’s account, these conditions manifest themselves in Wyoming’s resistance to bias crime legislation and local attitudes towards otherness. In Proulx and Everett’s fictional narratives we see father/son relationships complicated by the son’s failure to conform to established masculine and sexual norms, and savage, caricatured characters that embody the landscape’s harshness. Prevailing Old West myths render paradoxical Wyoming’s landscape: it is on the one hand an appealing, bucolic refuge, and on the other a dangerous, potentially lethal site of untamed wilderness. With this paradox in mind, Solnit figures the West as both paradise and prison, a place where one can “enjoy the best of what the world is at this moment,” but also something that “severs and alienates.” Solnit further argues that “every landscape is a landscape of desire to some degree,” and it is indeed this desire for the West – spurred in part by the notion of the West as a pastoral haven – that brings about maladaptive relationships to the land as paradise occasionally reveals itself to be a prison. In other words, the desire to live in an ideal West does not entail a capacity to live there easily and without struggle.

In a few short sentences, Worster aptly sums up the Old West myths that feed into a “cult of self-reliant individualism” that endures in Wyoming. “The American West,” he writes, is that fabled land where the restless pioneer moves ever forward, settling one frontier after another; where the American character becomes self-reliant, democratic, and endlessly eager for the new; where we strip off the garments of civilization and don a rude buckskin shirt; where millions of dejected immigrants gather from around the world to be rejuvenated as Americans, sounding together a manly, wild, barbaric yawp of freedom.

The perpetuation of this myth clashes with the practical impossibility of its existence, and this is the primary source of tension in these three texts. While it would be easy to figure Wyoming as a vessel
for these potentially dangerous and oppressive narratives and claim, as did the media after Shepard’s murder, that the West is a more hostile and primordial environment than the rest of America, this explanation is far too simple. Loffreda and Everett in particular recognize the ambivalence that structures Wyoming’s relationship to sexuality, gender, and the rest of America: the state is like the country but also not; those responsible for brutal acts of anti-gay murder are violent, feral individuals, but also people who represent a capacity for violence innate to all humans. “Laramie is no thesis,” writes Loffreda in her preface to Losing Matt Shepard; “Laramie is no diagnosis, no explanation for murder. Laramie can’t offer the final answer for why Matt died. Laramie didn’t kill Matt, but Laramie didn’t make much room for him either, before he was murdered.”

The unanswerable questions posed and explored by these three authors are: Can Wyoming, in a sense, kill? Or enable killing? Or perhaps: does Wyoming’s landscape prevent adaptation and the cultivation of community to such a degree that death is a likely consequence? Loffreda continues: “While Wyoming is neither particularly worse nor particularly better than the rest of America when it comes to anti-gay sentiments, gay life here nevertheless has a uniqueness that shouldn’t be overlooked.”

The uniqueness of these conditions – the manifestations of Old West myth in the harshest of western landscapes, and the simultaneous appeal to/rejection of queer identities – is precisely what distinguishes Wyoming, albeit problematically, from the rest of America, and what plays a critical role in Loffreda, Proulx, and Everett’s texts.

Loffreda waxes poetic at the beginning of Losing Matt Shepard, paying tribute to the beauty of an almost Edenic landscape scarred by Shepard’s death. “Perhaps the first thing to know about Laramie, Wyoming, is that it is beautiful,” she writes; “on most days the high-altitude light is so precise and clear that Laramie appears some rarefied place without need of an atmosphere.”

Loffreda composes Wyoming’s landscape in a manner that reflects Solnit’s trope of paradise/prison: it is desirable and alluring, sometimes for ineffable reasons, but also a source of alienation, especially for its gay residents. Larz, an openly gay man, attempts to articulate his reasons for living in Wyoming: “I think our family has some awful, recessive gene that forces us to choose a difficult life. The frontier gene – I’ve got the frontier gene. I’ve chosen to live in Wyoming. It’s not easy to be gay here, it really isn’t… but that frontier gene is active in Wyoming and dies in San Francisco.”

It is a similarly indescribable force that attracts John Hunt, Wounded’s horse trainer, to a life on the range. “It was dramatic land, dry, remote, wild,” says John about Wyoming’s landscape; “it was why
I loved the West. I had no affection necessarily for the history of the people and certainly none for the mythic West, the West that never existed. It was the land for me. And maybe what the land did to some who lived on it. Although John disavows purchase in Old West sentiment, it is precisely the mythical pursuit of a wild paradise that keeps him in Wyoming. His relationship to the land, one constituted by desire, fear, and an impulse to master this fear is what motivates him: John’s profession, after all, is dedicated to harnessing animals’ fear by taming them, to conquering the wildness inherent to nature. Later in the novel, when gazing upon the vast expanse of Wyoming’s Red Desert, John explains to David, his young gay ranch hand: “This is why I live here. … Every time I come up here and look at that I know my place in the world. It’s okay to love something bigger than yourself without fearing it. Anything worth loving is bigger than we are anyway.” Here, Wyoming’s landscape is figured as a paradise, something in excess of the humans who would dwell within it, and a space that partially constitutes John’s sense of self – his “place in the world.”

It is significant that Loffreda begins the second chapter of Losing Matt Shepard, wherein she outlines the legal and ideological conditions that perhaps facilitated Shepard’s murder, with a description of Wyoming’s physical landscape. Regarding the fence to which Shepard was tied, Loffreda writes:

The low-angle shots of the fence that appeared in most magazines and newspapers that fall made it look as if Matt, and the town itself, were abandoned hard on the edge of nowhere. And the high prairie can feel that way. It’s a landscape whose vast scope and extremity make everything on it seem fugitive: the uprooted sagebrush skittering across it, the antelope herds fading into its bleached tones, the prefab ranch houses laid low against the obstreperous wind.

Here, Loffreda’s description speaks not only to how a physically beautiful landscape can evoke feelings of abandonment, but also illustrates how the land seems to render “fugitive” that which is upon it – including, evidently, Henderson and McKinney. It is from a description of the land that Loffreda’s chapter on Wyoming’s culture springs, and the potential dangers of Wyoming’s culture take the shape of the land. Physical landscape is positioned as a primary factor in the shaping of Wyoming’s cultural climate: the two are inextricably connected. For many of Wyoming’s gay residents, Loffreda writes, an isolated paradise can rapidly become prison-like. She explains that she conversed with over a dozen gay men before writing her book, and each claimed that the difficulty – if not impossibility – of finding “friendship, companionship, and community” is directly connected
to “the intensities of isolation, the widespread hiddenness, of gay life in the rural landscape of Wyoming.” The same gay Wyomingites who are attracted to the landscape’s ruggedness, harshness, and remoteness also find themselves isolated by its physical space, homophobic attitudes that surface in legal discourse, and ideas of masculinity that have their roots in cowboy mythology: their relationship to Wyoming is one of ambivalent (un)desirability.

Loffreda considers the hostile ideologies that Wyoming’s alienating landscape seems to emit through an explication of the state’s resistance to bias crime laws that would recognize attacks on the basis of sexual identity. “Wyoming … just doesn’t like passing laws,” Loffreda explains; “it wouldn’t be entirely fanciful to call that a cowboy thing; more technically, it’s a libertarian thing, but whatever you call it, it runs deep here. … Laws, most any laws, feel like an infringement of personal freedom to many here.” Loffreda further suggests that the failure of these laws to pass stems from “Wyoming’s traditional, even cherished, hostility to outsiders.” Here, Loffreda is describing an attitude directed towards tourists and visitors to Wyoming, and also Wyomingites who fail to conform to prevailing ideas about gender and sexuality: those, in other words, who refuse to perform identities that fit with Old West convention. While Loffreda critiques the ideologies of mandatory heteronormative masculinity that pervade Wyoming, she is quick to point out that making totalizing claims about the state’s regional identity fail to provide a complete picture of the context surrounding Shepard’s murder. In her book, Loffreda coherently articulates a connection between physical landscape and Old West ideology, but the fictional genre permits Proulx and Everett to make these links even more visible and render explicit the potentially lethal consequences of endeavouring to forge paradise from a dangerous and wild landscape. Loffreda is cautious to avoid stereotype, but Proulx and Everett seem to embrace it as a literary strategy, painting some characters in broad strokes to create figures whose harshness seems a manifestation of the land itself.

In the first chapter of *Wounded*, John Hunt learns of the murder of a gay college student who was found “strung up like an elk with his throat slit.” This killing haunts the narrative, a constant reminder of an invisible danger that threatens the novel’s characters, many of whom are racial and sexual outsiders. Suspense increases as cattle are slaughtered on John’s aboriginal neighbour’s property – “red nigger” spelled on the snow in cow’s blood – and local law enforcement seems uninterested in locating the perpetrators. David, the gay son of John’s friend from college, comes to work on the ranch, and he is eventually abducted and murdered by a group of neo-Nazis who had
been living at the edge of a native reservation in “a narrow, rugged canyon … dry enough that no one cared to go there.” The novel is bookended by anti-gay violence committed by murderers who are decidedly less complex and far more stereotypical than the representation of Shepard’s killers in Loffreda’s text: for Everett, the neo-Nazis function as geomorphs, savage and cruel personifications of a harsh and wild landscape, a space that continually disrupts John and David’s attempts at survival and adaptation. The neo-Nazis are the cowboy myth taken to the extreme of caricature: utterly and lethally hostile to all forms of otherness, living in the most extreme part of an already extreme setting, and embodying the most dangerous and feral aspects of Wyoming’s landscape. Still, like Loffreda, Everett remains ambivalent about the specificity of such brutal violence to Wyoming: “This is the frontier,” a character advises John on the novel’s final page; “everyplace is the frontier.” Here, we once again encounter the paradoxical exceptionalism of Wyoming: it is both different from and similar to the rest of America: it is harsher, particularly on queers, yet its harshness smacks of a mythos of the Old West that occasionally stands in for an American “everyplace.”

Although John is drawn to Wyoming for its Edenic qualities, the very wildness he desires continually and fatally disturbs those who live with him: early in the novel, we learn that John’s wife was killed by a horse he had not yet domesticated, and while David seeks refuge from his own relationship issues on John’s ranch, his attempt to live in Wyoming results in his death at the hands of brutal murderers. As in Loffreda’s text, Everett’s version of Wyoming’s landscape threatens survival through the physical land itself and ideology that is hostile to otherness. David’s uneasy fit with heteronormative masculinity is illustrated through his relationship to his father, who openly condemns David’s homosexuality. Attracted to John, his way of life on the ranch, and the opportunities for solitude the landscape presents, David moves to Wyoming as a refuge from his father’s disapproval and his boyfriend’s rejection, but ends up merely fleeing one type of oppression for another. When David’s father visits him at John’s ranch, they get into a fight over David’s sexuality, which sees David run from the ranch into the freezing cold: his father’s rejection pushes him into a landscape whose physical qualities are as hostile as its ideological ones. In this text and in “Brokeback Mountain,” as I will illustrate, these father/son relationships personify the discomfort between Wyoming and non-traditional masculinity.
Proulx puts the notion of Wyoming as paradise and prison to work in “Brokeback Mountain,” using fiction with a strategy similar to Everett’s: to make landscape itself into an active character and create geomorphic figures who bear the rough textures of the landscape upon which they live. O. Alan Weltzien remarks that landscape is the principal character in Proulx’s *Wyoming Stories*, which repeatedly explore “how characters fit, or how badly they fit, within a given physical terrain that is never background.” Wyoming’s remoteness is precisely what enables the queer sexual coupling of Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, the star-crossed lovers of Proulx’s short story, which begins in the 1960s and spans two decades. Ennis and Jack first meet on Brokeback Mountain in their late teens when they are hired as sheep herders and camp tenders. They become fast friends and lovers in a seemingly isolated Eden, an ostensible refuge from domestic life and an oppressively heteronormative society. “There were only 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 writes, emphasizing the distance Wyoming’s landscape provides Jack and Ennis from “ordinary” life, contrasting the wild and the domestic, the mountain and the car lights, the hawk and the “tame” ranch dogs, and implicitly, the queer with the straight. After their first summer together, Jack and Ennis are separated for four years, during which time they each get married – Ennis to Alma and Jack to Lureen, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Ennis and Jack meet sporadically, always in the wilderness and away from potential prying eyes, but never in the same location: like *Wounded*’s John, Ennis (del Mar – of the sea, i.e. always shifting, moving) in particular is drawn to the wild. Ennis spends the short story avoiding a domestic life with his wife and children but also refusing to settle with Jack on a ranch. And as in *Wounded*, an anti-gay murder haunts both Wyoming’s landscape and the narrative, motivating Ennis to stay in the wilderness and avoid domesticity. After their first post-Brokeback tryst, Ennis tells Jack about how in his childhood he saw the mutilated corpse of a suspected gay man, and cites this experience as the reason why he refuses to live with Jack:

Jack, I don’t want a be like them guys you see around sometimes. And I don’t want a be dead. There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich – Dad would pass a remark when he seen them. They was a joke even though they were pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch.
They'd took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp. What the tire iron done looked like pieces a burned tomatoes all over him, nose tore down from skiddin on gravel.6

While the potential for isolation in Wyoming’s landscape enables Ennis and Jack to be together, the way it is simultaneously marked by anti-gay torture and murder shapes the way Ennis limits the visibility of their relationship: a fear of violence, a refusal of domestic life, and a desire for wilderness all inform Ennis’ behaviour and his choice to remain “at sea” instead of staying put.

While Ennis and Jack are not the rough-hewn caricatures that appear in many of Proulx’s other short stories, we do see a father/son relationship like the one in Wounded, albeit defined by a much more disturbing brand of violence: Jack’s father is sketched as a callous patriarch, the vicious personification of a broader disapproval of sexual difference in Wyoming. After Ennis learns of Jack’s death (whose cause remains ambiguous – we are uncertain if it was accidental or if, as Ennis believes, “it had been the tire iron”) he visits Jack’s family home and meets Jack’s parents.37 The presence of Jack’s father, who speaks resentfully about his son but never discloses the reasons for his distaste (we are left wondering if Jack’s father was aware of his son’s sexuality), enables Ennis to remember a story Jack had told him about his father. “[Jack] had been about three or four,” Ennis recalls, “always late getting to the toilet, struggling with the buttons, the seat … and often as not left the surroundings sprinkled down.”38 Once, upon discovering the mess, Jack’s father whipped the child with his belt, then exclaimed “you want a know what it’s like with piss all over the place?” before urinating on his battered son and forcing him to clean up the mess.39 In that moment, Jack noticed that his father was circumcised while he was not: this moment of sexual difference, although not related to sexuality, is what ultimately destroys the relationship between Jack and his father. In Ennis’ mind, this hyperbolic caricature of hypermasculine discipline and control – where the father literally uses his phallus to punish his son – comes to signify, for Ennis, the impossibility of his relationship with Jack in the context of Wyoming’s equally homophobic and harsh landscape. Like Everett’s neo-Nazis, Jack’s father is a geomorphic character, a figure whose brutality is akin to the land’s. Ennis feels just as marked as Jack by sexual difference: Ennis, however, avoids death/punishment at the hands of the father – whose aggression is inscribed upon Wyoming’s landscape – by avoiding potential moments of sexual exposure and finding refuge in the wilderness.

Loffreda, Proulx, and Everett mould Wyoming’s landscape into a space where exposure is rendered fearful and potentially lethal. Here, I mean exposure in two senses: exposure to the
elements, Wyoming’s harsh climate and topography, which can harm or kill; and exposure of the queer subject to the dangerous homophobic gaze, which threatens death through anti-gay violence. The looming threat of exposure results in attempts at adaptation met with varying degrees of success and failure. While Jack and Ennis “believed themselves invisible” on Brokeback Mountain, we learn that the lovers’ employer, Joe Aguirre, “had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes one day,” observing them in their lovemaking. As a result, Jack is refused employment when he returns to Brokeback the following year. Eric Patterson explains: “Aguirre’s surveillance of Jack and Ennis reminds us that the mountain and any other wild areas the men may retreat to are surrounded on all sides by a social landscape in which members of the majority are vigilant, and will condemn and attack any men they perceive as sexually different.” Indeed, Jack and Ennis are threatened throughout the story by a homophobic gaze that would expose their queerness. Later in the story, Alma observes Jack and Ennis in a moment of passion during their first reunion after Brokeback, and she later confronts Ennis about what she had seen. Expressing his fear of exposure, Ennis says to Jack: “You and me can’t hardly be decent together if what happened back there – he jerked his head in the direction of the apartment – ‘grabs hold on us like that. We do that in the wrong place we’ll be dead. There’s no reins on this one. It scares the piss out a me.’” Ennis’ fears are confirmed when he visits Jack’s house and deduces from Jack’s father’s comments that Jack’s sexuality had been exposed. Jack’s father explains to Ennis that Jack had planned to bring a man back to the ranch to help fix things up, and Ennis concludes: “So now he knew it had been the tire iron.”

Fear similarly permeates Wounded, a novel haunted by homophobic murder, the senseless slaughter of animals, and the threat of violence at the hands of barbaric vigilantes. Although David seems most vulnerable to various forms of exposure, John is also exposed to potential harm by his racial difference, which makes him a target for the band of neo-Nazis. John’s relationship to Wyoming’s landscape is represented by the cave, a location that symbolizes both fear (John’s deceased wife would always refuse to enter) and desire (the cave is the site of John and his second wife Morgan’s first sexual coupling, and the place where David kisses John). Like Brokeback Mountain, the cave’s isolation enables queerness and queer survival while simultaneously signifying the fear of death that looms over Everett’s characters throughout the novel. John and David’s relationship (which is queered by their kiss in the cave) is shaped by privacy the cave permits, while
John’s experiences in the cave reciprocally shape the way the cave signifies. Described by John as a “small church,” the cave is safely beyond visibility, but also a part of the landscape that haunts and disturbs John: a site for his simultaneous escape from and confrontation with fear. 44 “What I liked about the cave, and perhaps any cave, the idea of a cave, was the place where light from the outside ceased to have any influence,” John narrates: “that was why I liked being in it at night.” 45 When David flees into a blizzard after arguing with his father, John brings David into the cave and prevents his death by exposure. Ultimately, however, David’s visibility as an openly gay man is what leads to his demise: the neo-Nazis abduct and murder him, targeting David after witnessing him holding hands with his boyfriend. On Wyoming’s landscape, visible and away from the cave’s shelter (like Proulx’s Jack when he decides to stop meeting Ennis in the wild and settle down with a male companion), David’s otherness is exposed, observed, and marked for destruction.

“Brokeback Mountain,” Wounded, and Losing Matt Shepard share notable similarities in the way they represent Wyoming’s landscape: the state becomes a space where exposure can be dangerous, especially when one is marked as an other or outsider. Yet, it is also a place where exposure is almost inevitable due to a physical openness and harshness unique to Wyoming, and the presence of ideologies that maintain distinctions between those who ostensibly belong in the landscape and those who do not. It is visibility that the characters in Wounded and “Brokeback Mountain” fear, and Loffreda interviews many people who speculate that a similar visibility contributed to Shepard’s death. “If you don’t admit that Matthew made a mistake in [the bar where he met Henderson and McKinney] that night, you can’t understand the big picture of being gay in Wyoming,” a gay man from Cheyenne tells Loffreda: “there was no place for Matt to go and be gay, be out, be comfortable.” 46 Another Laramie resident expresses similar anxiety about queer visibility and the violence it may invite: “I don’t think that Matthew Shepard kept the way he was hidden, which I think, for Laramie, took an awful lot more guts than I ever had. I know that bar, I wouldn’t have gone in there.” 47 Wyoming’s landscape is marked as heterosexual space, and the visibility of queer sexualities is regulated and disciplined by the threat of exposure and subsequent violence: the figure of Joe Aguirre looms invisibly and perpetually in the background, silently observing Ennis and Jack through his binoculars. Ennis and Jack falsely believe themselves to be isolated and invisible on Brokeback Mountain, and the cave provides David with a limited amount of shelter: Wyoming’s landscape never seems to fully permit the camouflage of queer sexuality or enable a perfect escape.
from forms of exposure. Loffreda writes: “As Joe, a member of the United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming told me, the wonderful thing about cities is that ‘you can get lost in the crowd, but you can also find yourself in the crowd.’ In Wyoming, where crowds are an unlikely phenomenon, finding yourself as a gay person can be tricky indeed.” Paradoxically, Wyoming’s landscape invites and enables queerness while simultaneously making queer invisibility impossible (there are no busy cities in which one can “get lost”) and violently silencing exposed queer sexualities, making communal belonging a near-impossibility. “You’d lose something of the texture of [gay] lives if you failed to acknowledge the background hum of calculation, the daily quick math that accompanies gay life,” writes Loffreda, “where each act of openness must be weighed against the potential friends, acquaintances, jobs, happiness lost.” Indeed, in these three texts, we get the sense that the potential risks of visibility are always being measured, while the violent consequences of exposure loom perpetually in the landscape itself.

As I move towards a conclusion, I would like to take up Loffreda’s suggestion that, in Wyoming, we can observe both “the nostalgic form of regional identity” – the Old West mythos and heteronormative ideology that these texts indicate persists as part of Wyoming’s landscape – and potential queer re-workings of this identity. I will suggest that, in these texts, the fear of exposure does indeed lead to adaptation – or a queering of relationality – but the texts differ regarding its ultimate outcome. In Losing Matt Shepard, following Shepard’s death, we see the emergence of new political configurations and activist groups that fight to make unthreatened queer visibility possible. For example, when Fred Phelps, leader of the Kansas Westboro Baptist Church and creator of the website GodHatesFags.com, arrived with his church members to picket the first day of Henderson’s murder trial, they were obstructed by an alliance of activists dressed as angels with seven-foot-high wings: “The angels – heads wreathed in halos, white-sheeted wings draped over PVC pipe frames – were counterprotestors: several students from the [Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association] and a few Denver activists.” Loffreda also details the hard-fought battle to pass a city bias crimes ordinance, a motion supported by another affiliation of groups including the LGBTQA, the United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming, and the Wyoming Anti-Violence Project. In addition to the political alliances that formed following Shepard’s death, Loffreda explores how Wyoming’s queers struggle with visibility and the risks of exposure in their day-to-day lives, adapting with resilience to their situation; she interviews a number of men who use the internet to transcend Wyoming’s
landscape and find community and relationships online. Still, while the internet permits a certain amount of freedom, gay Wyomingites seem limited by their physical environment. As an entrepreneur named Mark explains to Loffreda, “you don’t have to deny who you are [in Wyoming] … I think you just have to be really careful. You have to choose who you’re going to be around, you’re going to have to choose, if you’re going to act in that capacity, where you do it and how you do it a little better than you would in a major metropolitan area.” Wyoming’s landscape continues to limit the visibility of its gay residents, Loffreda admits, “but the life still exists, even flourishes … the routes to gay identity and companionship in Wyoming are blazed every day, in ways many and unexpected.”

In Everett’s novel, we witness a queer reconfiguration of the family as a strategy for inhabiting Wyoming’s landscape. In place of the heteronormative nuclear family, Everett presents us with an alliance of individuals who have all been, in various ways, wounded: John and Morgan, an interracial couple who marry after John’s wife is killed and Morgan’s mother passes away; Gus, John’s uncle, who is dying of cancer and spent time in prison for murdering a man who was raping his wife; David, the gay son of John’s friend; and a three-legged coyote who fell victim to the cruel torture of the neo-Nazis. These individuals find themselves united because of wounds obtained in resistance to a landscape that would continue to expose and harm them: the nuclear family is problematized and seen to have failed (John’s wife is killed by a wild horse, and David’s relationship with his father disintegrates because of David’s sexuality), and a queer familial permutation is presented as a means of enduring in spite of these obstacles. Relationships between members of this queer family are blurry and shifting: David, when called “son” by John, replies: “You know what’s funny. When you call me son, I almost believe it. At least, it sounds like it makes sense. My own father only called me son when he was angry and even then it sounded strange in his mouth.” Yet, this is a queer father/son relationship that bleeds beyond the platonic: David kisses John in the cave, and John spends the rest of the novel wondering if “maybe the kiss had felt in some way good.” For Everett, Wyoming’s landscape paradoxically enables and demands the same queerness—and forms of queer adaptation—that it would violently eliminate.

“Brokeback Mountain” provides the fewest possibilities for adaptation and survival, indicating the persistent danger of Old West mythos and the un-inhabitability it breeds in Wyoming’s landscape. Ennis spends his life fleeing domesticity and resisting a more permanent life with Jack, a
form of adaptation that would have nonetheless left both Jack and Ennis exposed and vulnerable to violence. Jack dies, perhaps as a result of his own exposure, and Ennis is left alone to dream about Jack with both desire and fear—“sometimes in grief, sometimes with the old sense of joy and release; the pillow sometimes wet, sometimes the sheets”—and the tire iron continues to appear in his dreams, an omnipresent threat and permanent part of his version of Wyoming’s landscape.57 “There was some open space between what [Ennis] knew and what he tried to believe,” the story concludes, “but nothing could be done about it, and if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it.”58 In other words, since adaptation is not a possibility, then sheer endurance is Ennis’ only option, and this form of endurance demands silence and invisibility as the strategies for avoiding exposure. While “Brokeback Mountain” does present us with a critical queering or re-storying of the cowboy myth, this new myth seems fundamentally incompatible with Wyoming’s landscape. If Loffreda is partly suggesting that a queer hope trope can now be located in Wyoming, Proulx seems decidedly unconvinced.

There are shades of Proulx’s pessimism in Wounded and Loffreda’s work as well: all three authors are ambivalent about the potential of a queer reworking of Wyoming’s landscape in the face of persistent Old West mythologies. Everett’s queer, reconfigured New West family ultimately fails to protect David from his murderers, and the novel culminates in a bloody Old West-style showdown between John, Gus, and the neo-Nazis. “Everyplace is the frontier” is the novel’s final thesis, in response to which John nods and the story concludes.59 While adaptation in Wounded succeeds to some extent, it also fails dramatically, putting into serious question the agency of these characters to successfully inhabit Wyoming’s landscape. Loffreda, in spite of her earlier observations about the emergence of successful political alliances, notes that in the years following Shepard’s murder “the university has seen little systematic or comprehensive effort emerge in response to [the killing]; instead, we now live in a mundanely, fitfully contradictory place, a place where forgetfulness and remembrance, othering and embrace, commingle. ... Which is another way of saying it’s a western place.”60 In addition to Old West mythos a deep ambivalence persists, and like Loffreda we are left searching for paradise, while fearing exposure and visibility on Wyoming’s landscape. “I am still looking for the language to characterize it properly,” writes Loffreda about Wyoming, implying that the proper words may never be found.61
In her articulation of New West landscape theory, Comer suggests that “if dominant spaces arbitrate, discipline, and contrive difference, they nonetheless also remain contingent, and therefore open to challenge.” Indeed, Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett’s versions of Wyoming work to expose and critique the myths that persist in the West, while contributing to the composition of its landscape by layering new narratives upon it. In this New West, Wyoming’s landscape is haunted by tragic anti-gay murder and the threat of future violence, but it also becomes an effective site to examine the conditions that would enable such violence. Through her non-fiction work, Loffreda explores the very real and tragic death of Matthew Shepard, and critiques how his murder shaped and was shaped by Wyoming’s landscape. And Everett and Proulx, using the tools of fiction, give vibrant and disturbing form to the quality of Wyoming’s landscape, imagining characters that must struggle and adapt using various strategies to inhabit a seemingly uninhabitable space. These authors further invite us to think about how Wyoming also simultaneously cultivates queerness: through John and David, Ennis and Jack, and the gay men Loffreda interviews who describe Wyoming as a refuge, we see a queerness whose existence is both fostered and threatened by exposure to the landscape. Wyoming’s uniqueness as a Western state, then, lies in the way it signifies so paradoxically. The extremity of the landscape and the Old West myth it represents attracts and generates myriad fugitives (sexual and otherwise), yet Wyoming is hostile to these same individuals. Through these fictional works and Shepard’s very real torture and murder, Wyoming – which seems to foster a climate of heteronormative hypermasculinity and homophobia – also becomes particularly marked by the queerness it both cultivates and resists. While posing questions about the possibility of queer adaptations to such a harsh and brutal landscape, Proulx, Loffreda, and Everett bring the pervasiveness and persistence of Old West myth under heavy and productive scrutiny.

“For those with imagination to find it, there is plenty of thick history to be written about this region,” suggests Worster about the American West, “[and] given enough time and effort, it may also someday offer a story of careful, lasting adaptation of people to the land.” The unnerving story of queer exposures in Wyoming is indeed being told, but questions about the feasibility of lasting adaptation remain unanswered.

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Notes
2 O. Alan Weltzein aptly describes Wyoming’s landscape as a “mixed topography of mountain and high desert landscapes, of canyons and buttes and eroded outcroppings or hoodoos” (100).
3 Krista Comer, Landscapes of the New West (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 40.
4 Ibid, 45.
6 Loffreda, “Scheduling Idealism,” 159.
7 Ibid, 170.
8 In this paper, I use queer to describe non-heterosexual sexual identities, non-traditional versions of gender identity, and modes of relationality that lie outside heteronormative conceptions of the nuclear family.
9 See Patterson and Stacy for further reading on Brokeback Mountain, the film and the short story.
10 Comer, Landscapes, 21.
12 Comer, Landscapes, 13.
13 As Donald Worster writes: “The history of a region is first and foremost one of an evolving human ecology. A region emerges as people try to make a living from a particular part of the earth, as they adapt themselves to its limits and possibilities” (27).
14 Solnit, Storming the Gates, 6-8.
15 Ibid, 9.
16 Worster, Under Western Skies, 29.
17 Ibid, 19.
19 Ibid, xiv.
20 Ibid, 1.
21 Ibid, 2.
22 Percival Everett, Wounded (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005), 45.
23 Ibid, 134.
24 Loffreda, Losing Matt Shepard, 34.
25 Ibid, 70.
26 Ibid, 54.
27 Ibid, 59.
28 “The expectations of conventional manhood are clearly felt,” Loffreda asserts, prior to her interview with a young man who readily admits his disdain for gays (67).
29 Ibid, 67.
30 Everett, Wounded, 12.
31 Ibid, 111.
32 Ibid, 198.
33 Ibid, 207.
36 Ibid, 270.
37 Ibid, 282.
38 Ibid, 282.
39 Ibid, 282.
40 Ibid, 262.
Bibliography


