

Multimedia

A Review of *Vulnerable Constitutions: Queerness, Disability and the Remaking of American Manhood* (2019)

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Abstract

Invited Review by Maria Teresa Houar

Vulnerable Constitutions: Queerness, Disability and the Remaking of American Manhood

By Cynthia Barounis

Philadelphia, PA. Temple University Press. 2019

Keywords: queerness, biopolitics, disability, masculinity, immunity, pathology

Vulnerable Constitutions: Queerness, Disability and the Remaking of American Manhood is a timely analysis of how the biopolitics surrounding both queer and disabled identities have been leveraged toward constructing an ideal of American Manhood and likewise, American citizenship, as a kind of “prophylactic” body. Cynthia Barounis picks up from a widely accepted critique of the social construction of disability in order to further look at how these social constructions are produced in part by a layering of nascent medical knowledge in sexual science, pathology and psychology during the 20th Century upon idealized models of “masculinity”. Eugenic and ableist visions of national identity circulated images of bodies as fit, immune, and homogeneous throughout popular culture such, and eventually came to define the model American citizen.

Barounis offers a compelling reading of how these narratives appear in the work of male American authors Jack London, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Baldwin, Samuel Delany, and Eli Clare, giving theoretical framing to the political potentiality of models of “antiprophylactic citizenry” to challenge normative masculinities. Through the reappearance of legible forms of queer-crip masculine expressions within these authors’ respective works, Barounis offers an imagining of how the strength of both individual and national bodies might be understood as contingent upon their capacity for vulnerability, exchange, and debility, rather than ability. For scholars working in the field of disability studies, this text brings together conversations in the lineage of queer-crip theory following McRuer (2006) and Garland-Thomson (1997) and applies them not only to American Literature, but also to contemporary global politics, offering rigorous if not challenging critique of events like the imprisonment of Chelsea Manning, discussions of immigration reform, cultures of “trigger-warnings” and safe-spaces, and the failure of so-called white American neo-liberalism. Barounis neatly unpacks appearances of the medical gaze and the power of its regulatory authority and cultural influence in each chapter,

revealing how narratives around the stigmatization of formerly pathologized “deviant” sexualities such as homosexuality, hypersexuality and “frigidity” or asexuality, as well as gender dysphoria, are used within American literature as a potent allegorical site for the interrogation of relationships between men, and between citizen and state.

While queer and disabled identities are centered in their productive futurity, Barounis’s argument for the ways in which defense and prophylaxis are in fact dangerous to nations is most persuasive when attending to racial politics within the work of Baldwin. If we contextualize Baldwin’s writing within a larger context of the role he also played as a key theorist of democratic reconstitution, his argument linked the stigmatizing of homosexual intimacies to racial discrimination, as a political tool which shifts attention away from recognizing the real threat to citizens- our continued faith in a failed model of representative democracy adopted by our founding fathers. Baldwin “marshals love as the glue of a just society” (Barounis, 2019, p. 128), and through erotic metaphor he argues for a union between races, classes, genders, sexualities and abilities, suggesting that such unions have the power to disrupt binaries of American independence and dependence, but only if white liberal allies are willing to “relinquish those defenses- physical, psychological, and political- whose danger lies in the promise of safety.” (Barounis, 2019, p. 131) Similarly, Barounis argues that able-bodied, cisgender and heterosexual allies might best express commitments to equity and social reform by abandoning “normative” cultural privilege in favor of a lived, embodied ethics of antiprophyllactic citizenry.

Vulnerable Constitutions is a dense but accessible work and oscillates between both challenging and entertaining the audience. It is highly recommended reading not only for scholars in disability studies but also for those in the field of gender and sexuality studies, as well as those interested in American literature. Barounis leads readers through a challenging territory at the intersection of these fields, examining how interrogating our notions of safety and precarity might mobilize the next generation in the endeavor of remaking America.

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Reference

Barounis, C. (2019). *Vulnerable constitutions: Queerness, disability, and the remaking of American manhood*. Temple University Press.



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