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ANTIPROPHYLACTIC CITIZENSHIP

Ian Funk

A Review of *Vulnerable Constitutions: Queerness, Disability, and the Remaking of American Manhood* by Cynthia Barounis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019. Pp. 209. \$39.95 paper, \$99.50 hardback, \$39.95 ebook.

A new subfield that situates itself at the often uncomfortable intersection of disability and masculinity studies has been taking shape for some time. The discomfort that this intersection can cause sometimes arises because the two fields take seemingly antithetical figures as their objects of study; on the one hand, disability studies and crip theory seek, in part, to analyze and theorize the discourses around the disabled body and the material lives of disabled people while, on the other hand, masculinity studies has consistently concerned itself with the able-bodied man and male psyche. Cynthia Barounis's *Vulnerable Constitutions* attempts to occupy this intersection, to find common cause between the two fields. She does this through nuanced readings of a range of American authors who, throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, engaged with contemporary scientific, medical, sociopolitical, and cultural investments of both masculinity and disability to envision alternative, sometimes radical, new possibilities. Barounis not only commits to working in and through the tensions and contradictions at the intersection of disability and masculinity studies, *Vulnerable Constitutions* is also a deft, imaginative exploration of radical forms of democratic community and biosociality brought about by taking seriously the vulnerability, the

“generative receptivity to the other” (28), of crip/queer forms of embodiment and identity that take shape in and against hegemonic regimes of masculine able-bodiedness and American citizenship.

Barounis disrupts what might be considered traditional understandings of the masculine body as something that guards against potential disability through an ethos of impermeability. While the text is somewhat organized around an historical trajectory of medical sciences, Barounis rejects narratives of teleology and progress. Instead, she follows changes in medical sciences as they, themselves, gradually, discursively, and materially produce disabled populations of American men with queer masculine embodiments: early sexology’s invention of the invert; the eugenic mission of regulating some women’s fertility; midcentury psychiatry’s explanations of male homosexuality; the post-AIDS era’s contagious gay man; and today’s medicalization of low sexual desire and trans-masculine gender identities and embodiments.

Barounis understands these historical moments as discursive flash points that reveal the machinations of normative, prophylactic citizenship, which is a form of citizenship that insists upon and rewards able-bodiedness in American men and, in turn, the nation-state itself. In addressing this, Barounis theorizes what she calls “antiprophyllactic

citizenship,” or instances of adamantly permeable crip/queer masculinities that are receptive to, even inviting of, potential contamination from the outside world. Antiprophyllactic citizenship, in its categorical receptivity to potential contagion, functions as a crip refusal of the scientific and medical regimes of diagnosis and treatment, as well as an analytic lens through which to view radical crip/queer paradigms of embodiment and gender identity that are often misread or overlooked in discussions of biopolitics and American citizenship.

Barounis provides a handful of antiprophyllactic citizenship’s central features, which arise and take shape throughout the text. On the most basic level, *Vulnerable Constitutions* assumes from the start the centrality of antiprophyllactic citizenship’s continual engagement with both queerness and disability, particularly as they are historically constituted by, and contingent upon, official scientific and medical epistemologies from the turn of the twentieth century to the present. Her eclectic choice of texts demonstrates the extent to which modern and postmodern masculinities were intimately bound up in these discourses and material practices.

For instance, Barounis shows how Jack London’s work sifts through the tensions between the growing foothold of scientific authority’s regulatory “prophyllactic power of diagnosis” and a

crip/queer, antiprophyllactic “ethics of corporeal vulnerability” (4). London, she argues, uses an antiprophyllactic worldview, not only to imagine alternative, working-class, crip/queer masculine embodiments and identities that celebrate the potential of some physical impairments, but also to wage powerful critiques of what was then seen as the feminized, ineffectual bourgeoisie.

Additionally, Barounis’s treatment of James Baldwin’s work, which she situates within the context of Cold War psychoanalysis, shows how negative, often deadly, views of queer sexuality and gender nonconformity significantly influenced “certain American fantasies of belonging and embodiment” (3). Barounis demonstrates how Baldwin used these views to raise questions about, and levy critiques of, America’s investment in an able-bodied white masculinity that did not align with the nation’s professed democratic ideals.

Barounis also argues that antiprophyllactic citizenship’s willingness to be open, receptive, vulnerable, and physically susceptible to potential outside contamination necessarily generates an ambivalence that blurs the lines between various forms and instances of complicity and resistance, reliance, and rejection. While this contention is certainly apparent throughout her analyses, her chapter on Samuel Delany presents his work as

theorizing sites at which crip/queer forms of democratic community might materialize through an embrace of the potential pleasures of antiprophyllactic penetrability.

However, as she notes, it is important to acknowledge the ways that these forms of community are often built around an able-bodiedness that is assumed to be biologically male. With this in mind, she urges readers to remember the important ways in which a focus on masculinity tends to obscure how able-bodiedness comes with assumptions that disability is a feminized embodiment. In other words, antiprophyllactic citizenship can and, possibly, should produce ambivalence when we consider, for instance, that the radical resistance of these new crip/queer communities might actually function through a tacit complicity with discriminatory, marginalizing policies and practices.

To this end, Barounis makes clear that, despite the text’s focus on masculinity and male embodiment, prophylactic citizenship need not be restricted to cisgender men. This is made apparent, in part, through her readings of William Faulkner’s and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s depictions of disability, young motherhood, and the crip child. But this argument is really taken up when Barounis shifts her attention to asexual, female, and transmasculine embodiments through readings of Eli Clare and medical discourses of

the ostensibly capacitating nature of active sexual desire.

“Antiprophyllactic citizenship” allows Barounis to bring disability and masculinity studies together as *Vulnerable Constitutions* occupies their often uncomfortable intersection. Barounis’s crip/queer methodology facilitates successful critiques of the work of some masculinity scholars who, like Michael Kimmel and Dana Nelson, have theorized gendered feelings of national belonging or sexual identity through a psychoanalytic lens. She does this by incorporating and building upon the works of more contemporary gender theorists, such as Tim Dean and Tan Hoang Nguyen, who engage with non-normative forms of masculinity, as well as many disability and crip theorists who, like Robert McRuer or Alison Kafer, stress the materiality and lived experiences of disabled people under neoliberal, biopolitical regimes. This shift allows her to avoid abstracted understandings of the gendered self that can be overly prescriptive and universalizing in their able-bodiedness.

Vulnerable Constitutions is also an important contribution to disability studies insofar as it, among other things, reminds us that what is often taken for granted as the “normate”—a white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, and able-bodied man—in work on marginalized populations also potentially becomes overly prescriptive, universalizing, and abstracted when reduced to the body. Far from suggesting that this figure somehow suffers, Barounis instead pushes us to bring a crip/queer lens to our critical analyses of him. Ultimately, *Vulnerable Constitutions* is a versatile text that will prove important to both masculinity and disability studies, and essential to any discussion of disabled masculinities in twentieth and early twenty-first century America.

Ian Funk is a PhD candidate in English at The George Washington University. He teaches classes in Queer, Disability, and American Studies, in addition to American literature and culture. He is currently working on his dissertation that tracks iterations of crip/queer masculinity and desire in the United States through the long twentieth century.