

# Journal of Visual Culture

<http://vcu.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Crippling Heterosexuality, Queering Able-Bodiedness: Murderball, Brokeback Mountain and the Contested Masculine Body**

Cynthia Barounis

*Journal of Visual Culture* 2009 8: 54

DOI: 10.1177/1470412908091938

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/8/1/54>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Journal of Visual Culture* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://vcu.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://vcu.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

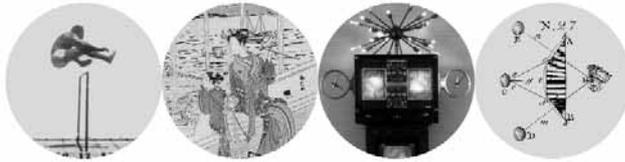
**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/8/1/54.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 31, 2009

[What is This?](#)

# journal of visual culture



## Crippling Heterosexuality, Queering Able-Bodiedness: *Murderball*, *Brokeback Mountain* and the Contested Masculine Body

Cynthia Barounis

### Abstract

Extending recent scholarship on the intersections between disability studies and queer theory, this article engages in a comparative reading of the films *Murderball* (dir. Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro) and *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee), both released in 2005. The popularity of these two particular films, the author suggests, demonstrates a powerful cultural backlash against those representational histories that have conflated feminization, male homosexuality, and disability. Both films successfully remasculinize their subjects, celebrating queerness and disability as the inevitable product of the hypermasculine body. But, ironically, the rhetoric of masculinity that these narratives share is also the source of their antagonism. The author argues that *Murderball's* 'crip' critique of able-bodiedness relies on repeated heteromale performances, while *Brokeback Mountain's* queer hypermasculinity is deeply invested in an ethic of able-bodiedness. Thus a close reading of both films exposes masculinity as the visual mechanism through which disability and homosexuality are beginning to discipline one another on the contemporary cultural stage.

### Keywords

cultural history • disability • film • masculinity • queer studies • technology

## Introduction

At the 2006 Academy Awards, *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005) took home three Oscars and the independent film *Murderball* (dir. Henry Alex

journal of visual culture [<http://vcu.sagepub.com>]

SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)

Copyright © The Author(s), 2009. Reprints and permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalspermissions.nav>

Vol 8(1): 54–75 DOI 10.1177/1470412908091938

Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro, 2005), which chronicled the lives of a group of quadriplegic rugby players, was nominated for best documentary feature. The aesthetic elevation of these two particular films reveals much about how contemporary cultural anxieties regarding queerness and physical disability are negotiated through visual culture. It is not uncommon, of course, to see films that deal with disability and homosexuality at the Oscars. What was out of the ordinary, however, was the extent to which *Murderball* and *Brokeback Mountain* each harnessed the normalizing powers of masculinity, presenting a narrative of gender that helped to generate mainstream appeal in the box office and, more importantly, mainstream approval of a stigmatized social identity. In these narratives, disability and queer sexuality are not just shown to be compatible with masculinity; they are, more fundamentally, celebrated as the logical extension of masculinity's excess. But the emphasis on masculinity that these two films share is also the source of their antagonism. Indeed, a close reading of these two films exposes masculinity as the visual mechanism through which disability and homosexuality distance themselves from one another, each identity to some extent disciplining the other. Such mutual regulation, however, is not arbitrary, and I will argue that it is precisely the various historical linkages between queerness and disability – their continual status as uneasy bedfellows – that bring us to this reactionary cultural moment where able-bodiedness is queered and heterosexuality is defiantly 'crippled'.

Recently, critics have begun to explore the ways in which a queer theoretical approach might deepen our engagement with disability studies.<sup>1</sup> Robert McRuer's recent book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006) opens up some exciting possibilities for this dialogue. McRuer examines queerness and disability as parallel sites of oppression; the homosexual body and the disabled body are each regulated by a system of compulsory identity that privileges, respectively, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Thus disability studies, McRuer suggests, has much to gain by borrowing from the vocabulary and framework of queer theory. 'Crippling' a text, for example, may begin to serve the same function for disability studies that 'queering' did for gay and lesbian studies. McRuer makes clear, however, that systems of heterosexual and able-bodied privilege share more than just a family resemblance; not merely parallel, they are deeply intertwined. Thus 'compulsory heterosexuality' and 'compulsory able-bodiedness' are often combined in a mutual effort to both conflate and regulate disability and homosexuality. McRuer's analyses proceed from this assumption and, through a set of diverse cultural readings, he locates the places where able-bodied and heterosexual privilege join forces. While McRuer details several rich sites of cultural resistance, most of his mainstream examples suggest that 'heteronormative epiphanies are repeatedly, and often necessarily, able-bodied ones' (p. 13).<sup>2</sup> What such epiphanic moments of able-bodied heteronormativity require, he suggests, are bodies that are flexible enough to make it through a crisis. And more often than not, it is the heterosexual and able body that is brought out of this crisis, usually at the expense of a disabled character who has been queered, or a queer character who has been 'crippled'.

In what follows, I will explore how the terms of this struggle have, in a short time, become radically reversed. In *Brokeback Mountain* and *Murderball*, systems of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness do not combine in order to produce a stigmatized disabled/queer subjectivity. Instead, these two films set up a world where the mainstreaming of homosexuality stigmatizes disability and where claiming an in-your-face crip subjectivity relies on successful heterosexual conquest. It is a universe where heteromale epiphanies are never able-bodied ones, and a queer male subjectivity forms in fundamental opposition to disability. Here, bodies are not flexible, but resolute and resistant to change. It is the very stubbornness of these bodies – their resistance to a traditional narrative arc of character growth – that enables the visual rhetoric of masculinity to do the work that it does in both films, carrying the characters through an apparent transition that turns out to be no transition at all.

If these films turn McRuer's formulation inside out, however, it is only because they are reacting against the representational history that he has so thoroughly exposed – one in which queerness and disability are made to appear as two components of the same identity. Cinematic history has been permeated with such figures: medicalized images of the homosexual who is either psychologically or physically diseased, spiritualized idealizations of the desexualized disabled person, and nightmares of the injured heterosexual man whose acquired disability castrates him. Thus it is films like *Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1989) and *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993) that constitute the cultural unconscious of both films. This is the representational history that both films attempt to disavow, even as they structure themselves around it. But there may be a folly in too quickly dismissing those histories in which queerness and disability were intertwined. Confronting and critically showcasing that past, I would like to propose, may ultimately be what offers us our most effective strategies for cultural critique.

## Rehabilitating Heteromale

To suggest that *Murderball* (2005), a recent documentary chronicling the lives of a set of quadriplegic wheelchair rugby athletes, is invested in heteromale more than likely states the obvious to anyone who has seen the film. The key players featured throughout are rugged, athletic – and occasionally tattooed – trash-talking men whose ultimate goal is to crush the competition and come home from the Paralympics with a gold medal. The documentary eschews sentimentality in favor of a more hard-edged realism that foregrounds its subjects as ordinary specimens of a male sports world. When they're not giving (or getting) a beating on the court, they're drinking and having sex with women, or bragging about drinking and having sex with women. Indeed, the film's emphasis on the heterosexual potency of quadriplegic men is one of its most provocative features, and one that has received widespread praise from reviewers.<sup>3</sup>

On a basic level, then, the film's popularity can be considered a success for disability cultural activism. It is an authentic portrayal of a disabled subculture that avoids the traditional narrative traps of many mainstream disability films.<sup>4</sup> The viewer is immediately directed to check his or her well-intentioned sympathies at the door, along with any preconceived notions about the fragility of the disabled body. And disabled sexuality, a taboo and uncomfortable territory for many non-disabled viewers, is reclaimed with a vengeance.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one of the difficulties in analyzing *Murderball* is that its most radical features are simultaneously its most conventional. Thus, while non-disabled viewers may find their assumptions and stereotypes challenged by the masculine sexual bravado of *Murderball*'s quadriplegic rugby players, there may be a simultaneous sense of relief at the ironclad endurance of male heterosexual privilege. Heterosexuality no longer functions as evidence that a disabled masculinity has finally been 'cured'; instead, it is the masculinization of disability that holds the power to rehabilitate heteronormativity from its own gender trouble.

Far from the typical narrative arc of a heteromascularity lost through injury and reclaimed through rehabilitation, the documentary figures disability as not only reflecting but, in fact, amplifying a deeply constant heterosexual masculine selfhood. Revisiting the night of his injury, for example, Mark Zupan explains doing 'shots with the girls' at a local bar to celebrate a soccer win before passing out in the back of his best friend's truck; his friend, unaware of Zupan's presence in the vehicle, drove home drunk and had an accident in which Zupan was thrown into a nearby canal where he held onto a branch for 14 hours before anyone discovered him. It's a story that mixes ordinary masculinity with extraordinary toughness and endurance. Explaining the origins of their disabilities, the rugby players relate similar tales of risky behavior associated with conventions of 'tough guy', 'daredevil', or even just normative 'frat boy' modes of masculinity. Scott Hogsett was thrown off a balcony during a fistfight; Keith Cavill was injured while attempting a set of dangerous motorcycle stunts; and, while Bob Lubjano explains that his amputated limbs are the effect of a 'rare blood disease', the back of the DVD release puts on a slightly different spin, characterizing his impairment as the result of an encounter with 'rogue bacteria'. This act of anthropomorphosis endows the simple act of getting sick with a quality of combat, aggressivity, and risk and is characteristic of much of the rhetoric surrounding the film and the sport in general.<sup>6</sup>

This is not the first time that the language of combat has been used to redescribe disability through a lens of masculinity. In 'Fighting Polio Like a Man', Daniel Wilson (2004) analyzes a set of interviews that were done with male polio survivors during the Cold War era. Their narratives of rehabilitation were highly gendered:

Ironically, the very cultural values that initially emasculated the paralyzed polio survivor also provided the means by which a young male could construct a sense of masculinity consistent with society's values and expectations . . . Recovery from polio could be easily

construed as a battle or contest against the virus, against the doctors and therapists, even against one's damaged body and sense of self . . . This new sense of manhood was constructed, or reconstructed, not on school athletic fields or on fields of battle but in the rehabilitation facilities. (p. 121)

In this narrative, the illness provides the opportunity for the reassertion of masculinity, but only insofar as illness is made into the obstacle which the subject must overcome in order to access normative categories of gender and sexuality. But while these earlier accounts framed disability as the foe to be vanquished, *Murderball* in contrast claims disability as a weapon to be wielded *against* one's foe. While Wilson (2004) observes that the polio survivors' narratives 'perform masculinity by demonstrating how these men . . . became men by the way they fought polio' (p. 131), we find here that the *Murderball* athletes became men not by fighting their injuries but, to the contrary, by acquiring an injury that enabled them to fight.

Indeed, if honorable combat is positioned as that which put the players in the wheelchair, then it is the chair itself that opens up larger, more mythic opportunities to accumulate battle scars. One reviewer admires the fact the rugby chairs resemble 'chariots of war' – a point that is in no subtle way driven home by one interviewee who explains how the chairs are made: 'What we do is we take these wheelchairs and turn them into a gladiator, a battling machine, a *Mad Max* wheelchair that can stand knocking the living daylights out of each other.' In this respect, the film's opening sequence, characterized by Zupan himself as 'preparing for battle', is worth examining. As the film begins, an uncomfortable silence accompanies our only glimpse of Zupan's vulnerability as he slowly and painstakingly pulls his pants down and off his immobile legs. The camera sweeps erotically across his bare chest and limbs, eventually settling on the black tattoo that takes up the greater part of his shin. Zupan pulls on a pair of workout shorts, and wheels out of the room. In the DVD director commentary that accompanies this moment, Rubin and Shapiro discuss the 'Clark Kent' logic underlying the scene: 'He's about to transform into the rugby guy. There will be the phone booth moment coming – you'll see when the garage door opens.' But while Clark Kent's transformation always seemed to involve a stripping down – his nylon suit showing through his bourgeois dress shirt, his glasses always a discardable accessory – Zupan's transformation is shown as a welding on of new parts.<sup>7</sup>

The moment that the camera zooms in on Zupan's tattoo is the moment that the man becomes more than mere flesh. And it is precisely at that point that the intimacy and vulnerability of the scene's opening is eclipsed by a prosthetic remaking of the body – an elaborate new technology of gender.<sup>8</sup> We hear and see the rip of duct tape, the whirring of the wheel, and the clanging of metal. Later, we will watch an animated clip in which metal screws are incorporated into the skeletal drawing of a spine; the image gradually fades into a shot of the actual scars that mark one player's neck. Thus both man and chair are visually constructed as the product of

custom-built state-of-the-art manufacturing. If, according to the logic of the film, it was the amplification of ordinary masculinity that led to Zupan's injury, then this extraordinarily refashioned machinic masculinity is nothing less than mythic.

In a recent issue of *Narrative*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2007) has described the players featured in *Murderball* as 'cyborgs composed of steel fused with flesh', arguing that in the documentary, 'disability provides an unanticipated opportunity for boys to come into themselves as athletes and men' (p. 115).<sup>9</sup> Garland-Thomson generously concludes, however, that rather than reconstructing heteronormative masculinity, *Murderball* provides us with 'what Judith Halberstam calls an alternative masculinity', one that is 'non-phallic' (p. 116). But to redefine disability through masculinity, as the documentary certainly does, is not necessarily to redefine masculinity itself. Though the film does present us with multiple images of the male cyborg, these images seem to fall short of approximating Haraway's feminist technoscience or Halberstam's technotopic body.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Haraway's cyborg myth contests both the legitimacy of the masculinist cyborg and the overall male monopoly on technoculture. Repudiating narratives of origin, cyborgs and technotopic bodies are not aimed at helping 'boys to come into themselves as athletes and as men' but, rather, at creating alternative queer temporalities in which boys sometimes become something other than men, and girls sometimes become something other than women.

Additionally, Garland-Thomson's claim that *Murderball* creates an 'innovative, non-phallic, alternative sexuality' (Garland-Thomson, 2007: 116) focuses on a single reference to cunnilingus while overlooking the dynamic staging that privileges heterosexual phallic penetration as the measurement of the players' masculinity. While Mark Zupan certainly mentions that most wheelchair athletes 'like to eat pussy', it is important to point out that this comment is embedded within a sentence that begins with Zupan gesturing downwards and reassuring the viewer, 'that still works'. In another scene, the ability to have an erection is somewhat taken for granted as an essential feature of quadriplegia. After reassuring an attractive able-bodied woman that the three players sitting at the table are all fully functional, Scott Hogsett relates the following story:

When I first got injured, I was in intensive care, and, uh, everyone was curious how I was gonna be, how much function I was gonna have when I came out of my coma that I was in, and I was about ready to wake up, and the nurses decided to give me a bed-bath in the bed, and the one nurse got so excited that I got a woody, she ran outside and got my mom and showed her my, uh, erection.

What is significant about this exchange is the swiftness with which the image of the impotent quadriplegic is replaced by the image of the quadriplegic whose erection is being celebrated by the community of women surrounding him. While the woman's question might well have opened up a conversation about alternative sexual practices that do not privilege phallic potency, the

response ultimately ends up both creating a heteronormatively functional elite among the disabled while simultaneously generalizing the situation of that elite to the entire quadriplegic community.

There is, however, at least one ‘alternative masculinity’ present in *Murderball*. Following an exchange in which an American player accuses former US coach Joe Soares of ‘betraying his country’ by leaving to coach the Canadian team, the camera cuts to an evening scene in the hotel room where all four of the featured US players, along with two or three others, play a game of modified poker. The circular movement of the camera and its various close-ups on individual players’ faces as they banter back and forth creates a tightly sealed homosocial space within which this ‘alternative masculinity’ is rigidly disciplined. Within the confusion of a lively dialogue, we witness a lanky, long-haired teammate named Sam defend Soares’s decision to coach the Canadian team. The dialogue runs as follows:

- Sam:* On a professional level, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it.
- Andy:* That’s number two on the list of most stupid things I’ve ever heard at this camp. I heard Sam say that he doesn’t like big tits and he’d dump a girl with big tits, if everything was perfect – but, if she has big tits, [imitating Sam] ‘it’s over, they get in the way.’
- Sam:* I like athletic girls. That’s what I said all along that night when they asked me.
- Zupan:* You knew you weren’t going to live that one down.
- Sam:* I’m okay with my sexuality. I can say that. I don’t like big tits.
- Zupan:* You like shoes though.
- Sam:* I do like shoes.

At this point, everyone laughs and the camera pans to the mechanical card shuffler that happens to be in motion. This is one of the most revealing scenes in the film because it invokes multiple vectors of the gender trouble that the film is careful to guard against. On the one hand, it immediately solidifies the link between heteromascularity and patriotism. As I have argued, physical disability has been positioned within the film as the manly consequence of both heteromascularity and honorable combat. This is why Sam’s moral defense of a known ‘traitor’ leads the players to move abruptly into an interrogation of Sam’s heteronormativity. Though there’s nothing homosexual about a man who ‘likes athletic girls’, there is something queer, according to the film’s logic, about a man who lacks desire for the appropriate object choice – in this case, ‘a girl with big tits’. ‘Big tits’ are, of course, functioning here as a metonym of idealized femininity, with all its attendant associations of passivity, nurturance and non-athleticism.<sup>11</sup> Sam’s interest in ‘athletic girls’ thus feminizes (and arguably queers) him to the extent that it is framed as a desire for masculinity (albeit a masculinity that is attached to a female body).<sup>12</sup> While this sequence opens up some fascinating tensions, the soft roar of the mechanical card shuffler has the last word, and

Sam – along with his anti-normative desires – are silenced for the remainder of the film.

I have thus far suggested that, in both the film and its reception, excessive heteromascularity is celebrated as the original condition out of which disability is generated as the inevitable consequence. But where does this leave disabled women, and the ideological status of femininity more generally? By coding disability as a property of heterosexual masculinity, *Murderball* simultaneously codes able-bodiedness as a property of heterosexual femininity. Within the logic of the film, it is the gender-normative able-bodied woman who reinforces heteromascularity potency.<sup>13</sup> Such women, in fact, are central to the film's network of associations, serving a specific and limited purpose – to humanize the disabled players by occupying their traditional role in the narrative of heterosexual conquest. Thus we see women in various contexts, but they are always feminine, always heterosexual, and always engaging in activities that support and reinforce the heterosexual masculinity of the players. They are featured as friendly nurses, cheering sections at games, concerned mothers and, most importantly, proof that whatever other effects the injury has had on their body, their ability to engage in heterosexual, penetrative sex is not compromised.<sup>14</sup>

But because the film has polarized disability as a property of athletic heteromascularity and able-bodiedness as a property of heterosexual, non-athletic femininity, there is no longer a viable space for the physically disabled athletic woman; her body is not only rendered unintelligible but becomes a palpable threat to the narrative glue that holds masculinity, disability, and heteronormativity firmly together. Wendy Seymour (1998) has suggested that the same logic that masculinizes the quadriplegic or paraplegic man also functions to both masculinize and desexualize the quadriplegic or paraplegic woman (p. 120). This brings up a set of thorny issues involving whether or not disabled women's exclusion from the structures of conventional heterosexual femininity can open up other liberatory possibilities, even as such exclusions simultaneously police and regulate their sexuality.<sup>15</sup> While a thorough negotiation of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, the fact remains that *Murderball* explores neither side of the debate. Disabled women, and particularly disabled female athletes, are not celebrated as having been liberated from oppressive conventions of gender. Nor are they given access to normative femininity; visually, they are never made into objects of the voyeuristic male gaze that, after Laura Mulvey's classic 1975 article, has become common currency in discussions of cinematic spectatorship. Neither, interestingly, are they victims of 'the stare', a visual dynamic coined by Garland-Thomson (1997) to encapsulate the revulsion of the able-bodied viewer whose lengthy hostile gaze at a 'freakishly' embodied other is emptied of sexual desire (p. 26). Indeed the few images of disabled women that the documentary presents function more as a set of fleeting and brief snapshots that, while easy to miss, do momentarily interrupt the temporal, and often verbal, logic through which these 'boys' become 'men'. These more or less static images haunt the film's perimeter, a subtle threat to the coherence of a narrative that

celebrates quadriplegia as the natural outcome of the hypermasculine male body.

Indeed, even the most attentive viewer might, on a first viewing, miss the few glimpses that are to be had of disabled female athletics. The first opportunity is not until just before the final dramatic showdown between the US and Canada at the 2004 Paralympics. In a brief montage that showcases a variety of Paralympic sports, there is a two-second clip of female leg amputees playing volleyball. Significantly, they are all low to the ground, and filmed (perhaps unavoidably) from above. Not only does the angle diminish their size and power, but they are also not using any type of prosthesis or equipment and none of them are using wheelchairs. Given that prosthetics and wheelchair technology have earlier in the film been powerfully deployed to signify and naturalize disabled masculinity, and given that this clip is sandwiched between clips of Paralympic male sports (all of them requiring varying levels of prosthesis), it may be plausible to argue that the framing of these female athletes functions to neutralize any threat to disabled masculinity that their presence might pose.

The only other scene in which disabled women are presented in an athletic capacity is during the documentary's final scene, as the players teach a group of newly disabled Iraq War veterans how to play the game. Between clips, we see two young women, though very briefly and in a limited context. Early in the scene, the camera abruptly cuts to a young woman standing with a basketball under one arm – her other arm visibly absent. The shot – lasting for no more than two seconds – catches her from the neck down; in fact we are only able to identify her as female because her white sports bra is visible underneath her white t-shirt. Because she is decapitated by the frame, we are unable to establish any filmic identification with her. Simultaneously, her disability and her desexualized wardrobe prevent the viewer from establishing her as an object of desire via conventional modes of cinematic spectatorship. Unlike the able-bodied girlfriends of the quad rugby players, or even the Paralympic volleyball players, this female body becomes visually unintelligible within the logic of the film.<sup>16</sup>

Later in the scene, the camera pans upwards from the feet of an individual wearing one prosthetic leg. As the frame reaches her chest, and then her face, we realize that this is a young, female veteran. Her shirt showcases the American flag and her gaze is intently fixed on something that lies outside the frame. She is attractive and her demeanor exudes fortitude. In a sense, we have finally met the 'athletic girl' whose specter was both invoked and repressed during the earlier poker scene.<sup>17</sup> This one, however, is not quite so quickly dispelled. The camera quickly cuts to two male amputees who are wearing similar leg prostheses. While the purpose of this moment was no doubt to establish the effect that the Iraq War continues to have on American bodies, it serves simultaneously to establish a solid identification between the disabled woman and her male counterparts. The entire progression lasts only eight seconds, so it is easy to miss. But, I want to suggest, these eight seconds are what the rest of the documentary labors to repress. While most

of the documentary features women only in conventional, able-bodied roles that reify masculinity by performing its opposite, this moment confronts the viewer with an unapologetic assertion of another type of 'alternative masculinity', one that is attached to a female body.

But, although this moment lasts longer than any other depiction of a disabled woman in the film, it too is quickly redirected and contained by the dominant narrative of male heteromascularity at work in the film. From here, the film dives quickly into the central tension of the scene. Masculine athleticism has once more found its proper object as a young man in a wheelchair expresses doubt in his ability to throw the ball. This first throw fails to reach its intended target but, after some hearty encouragement from the old pros, his second attempt is a success. The girl we have just seen is cut sporadically into this narrative, and in these brief half-second clips she appears to be actively involved in (and indeed taking delight from) a game of quad rugby. However, interestingly, the chair that she is using, though present by implication, is rendered invisible in these clips – we see her only from the elbows up. If the logic of the film has transformed the rugby chair into a metonym for a heteronormative masculinity that is reserved only for male bodies, then her temporary use of it becomes an appropriation that cannot be accommodated by the documentary's visual economy. The deconstructive potential of her participation is ultimately contained as the scene's primary drama resumes. The young male veteran finally throws a successful pass, establishing that masculinity has ultimately been returned to a male body. But while most of the documentary functions to contain the presence of the disabled female athlete, the film's epilogue ultimately lays bare some of this tension when it features Bob Lubjano kissing (albeit chastely) his girlfriend, who is identified as a Paralympic swimmer. We would do well to take this moment, as well as the others that preceded it, as an opportunity to reflect on and draw out the gender trouble that complicates not only the film, but also the cultural past that has conflated queerness and disability.

### 'Gettin' Out While I Still Can Walk'

In some ways, the only thing that *Murderball* and *Brokeback Mountain* have in common is their release date. *Murderball* is about traveling the world to represent one's country; *Brokeback Mountain* is about spending a lifetime in the country. *Murderball* embraces the urban technologized body; *Brokeback Mountain*'s rural naturalism makes even the telephone look like technological excess. What the films do share, however, is a strategic deployment of masculinity that normalizes a historically marginalized population. But if *Murderball*'s celebration of quadriplegia is rooted in a narrative of heteronormative masculinity that disciplines and represses queerness, then *Brokeback Mountain* is conversely invested in particularly able-bodied masculinity that normalizes homosexuality by simultaneously disciplining disability.

It would be difficult to dispute the fact that Jack and Ennis emblemize a particular brand of frontier masculinity, one that until now has been historically off-limits in mainstream cinematic representations of homosexuality. Of course, the latent homoeroticism of the Western has been noted by several scholars, an undertone that was acknowledged, even, during the 2006 Academy Awards through a brief, comic film montage of easily queered clips from classic Westerns.<sup>18</sup> But what *Brokeback Mountain* did was more than simply suggest that cowboys can be gay too; it implied that cowboys are gay precisely *because* they're cowboys.<sup>19</sup> Gay male sexuality in the film seems to spring directly from an inborn aggression and competitive instinct. It is figured as a natural corollary to male horseplay – the violent, almost primitive, crashing together of two male bodies. And, above all else, it is organic.<sup>20</sup> Thus in the original story, we find Ennis in his first sexual encounter with Jack drawing upon what appears to be a physically innate drive: this was 'nothing he'd done before, but no instruction manual needed' (Proulx, 1999: 259). Unlike the machinic heteromascularity glorified in *Murderball*, this homosexual manliness is born directly out of the earth.

This organicism partially explains the able-bodied ideologies that underpin Jack's and Ennis's masculinity. The stubbornness of their genders becomes to some extent the stubbornness of their physical bodies themselves. The Darwinian logic of the traditional frontier narrative places the male body in harsh conditions; it is the fittest who survive, the ablest bodies that endure. Thus the same excessive masculinity that *Murderball* celebrates as the cause of disability becomes, in *Brokeback Mountain*, the skill for keeping one's spine intact. Upon their first trip back to the mountain, the first thing that Jack and Ennis do is strip off their clothes and jump from a peak into the stream below. But on *Brokeback Mountain*, the water is never too shallow and getting thrown from a horse leaves only some minor bruising.<sup>21</sup>

Part of Jack's and Ennis's talent for remaining able-bodied, however, is tied directly to gay male sexuality. In several scenes, Ennis is presented with what ultimately becomes a choice between either facing harsh (and potentially debilitating) natural conditions or putting himself in a position that could lead to a homosexual encounter. Indeed, on several occasions, the desire to remain able-bodied sends Ennis directly into Jack's arms. Thus the first sex scene unfolds out of Jack's concern for Ennis's health. Having had too much to drink, Ennis decides to sleep outdoors despite Jack's warning, 'Freeze your ass off when that fire dies down. Better off sleepin' in the tent.' But it is only when Jack's prediction comes true and Ennis seems on the verge of frostbite that he finally acquiesces; the two men share a blanket and their physical proximity quickly leads to their first sexual encounter. On another occasion, a storm breaks out, and Jack and Ennis can be observed shouting to one another in the entry flap of the tent. 'Them sheep will drift if I don't get back up there tonight!' yells Ennis. Jack replies, 'You'll get pitched off your mount in a storm like this. You'll wish you hadn't tried it! It's too cold! Close it up!' Thus Ennis's masculinity lies in his frontier brand of self-discipline, expressed through his avoidance of unnecessary risk and his knowledge of his own limitations in the face of nature. If his masculinity is of

the earth, then his respect for natural law is what causes him ultimately to listen to Jack's advice. Having decided to keep Ennis's body out of danger, the two men close the tent flap, and presumably spend the night having sex. Thus the rugged homosexual masculinity of the expansive outdoors appears to carry a sort of curative power that keeps male bodily integrity firmly intact.

But while Jack and Ennis constantly encounter and avoid threats from the wilderness they spend the summer inhabiting, the real threat of sickness, contamination, and disability comes from the world of heterosexual domesticity that lies below the mountain. Thus Joe Aguirre travels up the mountain to deliver news of Jack's sick uncle down below, on his deathbed as a result of pneumonia. 'Bad news', Jack replies, 'There ain't nothin' I can do about it up here, I guess.' Aguirre responds, 'There's not much you can do about it down there, neither. Not unless you can cure pneumonia.' Aguirre's reply is no doubt designed to emphasize Aguirre's position as an unsympathetic boss and foreground Jack's exploitation as a working-class laborer. But it simultaneously emphasizes the contagion that spreads 'down there' in the realm of rural domesticity, and the exposure to illness that Jack and Ennis avoid in the able-bodied 'up here' of male homosexual freedom.

Thus the progression that sets off Jack and Ennis's descent from the mountain evokes multiple images of their newly vulnerable bodies. Jack mentions the possibility that the draft will prevent him from working on the mountain the following summer. The expansive sky that seemed unlimited on the mountain peak is claustrophobically framed by the walls of the alley where Ennis doubles over, retching in grief at his separation from Jack. Ennis's married life consists of a domestic routine that involves caring for his daughters' runny noses and coughs. In an effort to convince Ennis to move the family to a more densely populated area of the town, Ennis's wife Alma argues: 'I'm scared for Jenny, scared if she has another one of 'em bad asthma spells.' To top it off, Ennis's coworker delivers a monologue in which he explains, 'My old lady's tryin' to get me to quit this job. She says I'm gettin' too old to be breakin' my back shovelin' asphalt.' Thus the 'up here' that Jack refers to in his conversation with Aguirre is the place where stubborn gay male bodies contend with the elements and, thanks to the balm of same-sex desire, emerge from this face-off intact. 'Down there' is the heterosexual domestic space where male bodies are subject to pneumonia, vulnerable to the Vietnam draft, stricken with attacks of debilitating grief, responsible for asthmatic children, and exposed to literally 'back-breaking' labor. Indeed, it becomes impossible to find an able-bodied domesticity anywhere in the film.<sup>22</sup> While domesticity is certainly framed as heterosexual, it is also a site that is implicated in the production of both disability and femininity (Ennis and his wife produce only daughters) and is thus no place for the able body of the hypermasculine gay cowboy.<sup>23</sup>

It should, of course, be pointed out that the acts of caring for asthmatic children, hearing about sick uncles, and working in physically taxing occupations never actually threaten to render Ennis literally disabled, and neither would any of the women who inhabit Ennis's heteronormative

working-class household identify themselves as a person with a disability. Indeed, by invoking these images of sickness and injury, I am gesturing less towards the presence of a concrete disabled identity within the film and more towards Jack and Ennis's construction as able-bodied subjects who are haunted by specters of corporeal fragility, specters that originate from the outside – and in their case, the heterosexual landscape. In this sense, I am actively following McRuer's (2006) suggestion that we 'attempt to crip disability studies, which entails taking seriously the critique of identity that has animated other progressive theoretical projects, notably queer theory' (p. 35). McRuer suggests that, like the 'gender trouble' that underlies heterosexuality, we might similarly understand 'ability trouble' as 'not so much the problem of disability but the inevitable impossibility, even as it is made compulsory, of an able-bodied identity' (p. 10). Just as my previous reading of *Murderball* suggested that it was not homosexuality but rather the heterosexual Sam and the disabled female athlete who held the power to queer the film's heteromale narrative, so too in *Brokeback Mountain* it is not disability per se but a set of failed performances of health and physical integrity that mark the hetero-domestic sphere as a threatening site of 'ability trouble'.

The threat that heterosexual domesticity levels against masculine able-bodiedness is perhaps most explicit in Jack and Ennis's first conversation after having reunited following a four-year separation. After having sex at a motel, they discuss their new roles as husbands and fathers. Jack explains, 'Went down to Texas for rodeoin'. That's how I met Lureen.' When Ennis asks, 'Army didn't get you?' Jack replies 'No, too busted up. And rodeoin' ain't what it was in my daddy's day. Got out while I could still walk.' This process of getting 'busted up' receives an even more elaborate treatment in the original story. In the same scene, when Ennis asks if the 'army got [Jack]', Proulx (1999) has Jack reply:

They can't get no use out a me. Got some crushed vertebrates. And a stress fracture, the arm bone here, you know how bullridin you're always levern it off your thigh? – she give a little ever time you do it. Even if you tape it good you break it a little goddamn bit at a time. Tell you what, hurts like a bitch afterwards. Had a busted leg. Busted in three places . . . Bunch a other things, fuckin busted ribs, sprains and pains, torn ligaments . . . I'm gettin out while I still can walk. (p. 266)

When making an argument about a film, it can be risky to draw evidence from the literary text upon which the film is based. However, because of the film's uncommon faithfulness to the short story – almost all of the dialogue in the film is taken word-for-word from the story and there's barely a single scene left out – such analysis seems justified. In a film that runs over two hours, it makes sense that the screenwriters might have cut some of the dialogue that merely extends a point that could be made more concisely. Thus, what becomes clear when we trace this conversation back to the original source is the extreme threat that heterosexual domesticity poses to the able body of

the gay cowboy. The rodeo to some extent functions as an extension of heterosexuality. It is where Jack met his wife, and it is, at the beginning at least, the way he has been financially supporting his family. But it also might break his back. The stakes are raised when Jack, explaining that he ‘don’t got the bones a keep getting wrecked’, proposes that he and Ennis settle down ‘in a little ranch together’ (p. 268). Indeed, this is where the short story sets up an ultimatum much like the ones I outlined earlier; a choice must be made between a future of disabled heterosexuality or a future of able-bodied homosexuality.

But what Jack proposes seems to carry its own bodily risks and Ennis responds by recalling a visceral childhood memory in which his father took him to see the mutilated corpses of two gay male cohabiters. Thus, on one level, the film’s ethic of able-bodied gay masculinity is haunted by the threat of hate crime violence. Indeed, few reviewers of the film miss the irony of Matthew Shepherd’s murder, which occurred in a small Wyoming town about a year after Proulx’s short story was published in the *New Yorker* and about a year before her full-length collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999) was released. Near the end of the film, when Lureen rehearses the story of Jack’s death, it is unclear whether an exploded flat tire really killed Jack, or whether his death was the result of a gay bashing – motivated, potentially, by an attempt to cruise the wrong man. It is unclear, in other words, whether it was the closeted life of heterosexual domesticity or the perils of outness (and the process of ‘gettin out’ of heterosexuality) that posed the greatest threat of damage to Jack’s formerly able body. Thus, for all of the film’s labor to construct an able-bodied queer masculinity, the ending explodes at least one socio-historical tension that the film has repressed. While Ennis endures as the able-bodied archetype of queer desire and stubborn masculinity, the ambiguity of Jack’s death reminds us of the historical intersections between queerness and disability.

Indeed, in many ways, Jack emblemizes a certain counternarrative to the discourse of able-bodied queer masculinity that the film attempts to naturalize. Not only does Jack long for gay domesticity; he also demonstrates, in one scene, a versatility with queer sex cultures when he engages in what one might consider ‘risky’ anonymous sex with a male prostitute south of the border.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting here that AIDS has been culturally constructed as a disease originating not only from homosexual men, but also from outside of US national borders. In her essay ‘The Immigrant Infection: Images of Race, Nation and Contagion in Public Debates on AIDS and Immigration’, for example, Jennifer Brier (2001) details legislation enacted during the Reagan administration that required immigrants to undergo mandatory HIV testing in order to screen out potential contamination to the US population. This racialization of the disease, Brier argues, externalized the threat of HIV infection, deflecting attention away from the more important domestic issues of prevention, treatment and anti-discrimination (pp. 253–70). While Jack’s illicit encounter with the Mexican prostitute takes place before the start of the AIDS epidemic and, while the prostitute himself is not attempting to emigrate to the USA, our contemporary gaze at this sexual encounter may

very well retrospectively invest it with those cultural meanings that have conflated the tightly sealed national body with the healthy body – a seal that Jack breaks when he crosses back and forth over the border. We might consider this moment alongside the scene that occurs directly after Jack convinces Ennis to spend the night with him in the tent during the hailstorm. What appears to be a decision on the side of able-bodied homosexuality turns out to result in another racial contamination – without Ennis there to shepherd them, Aguirre's flock has gotten mixed together with a flock of South American sheep. If we are to read both of these encounters with racial otherness as metaphoric of the infected or contaminated national body, then this moment evokes a set of cultural anxieties regarding both racial purity as well as the representational linkage between male homosexuality and AIDS – a linkage, in other words, between queerness and disability.

In this context, it is worth noting that *Brokeback Mountain* has been repeatedly hailed as the first 'mainstream gay movie from Hollywood' since Brian De Palma's 1992 film *Philadelphia* and, in numerous reviews, the film's detachment from AIDS discourse is celebrated (Ehrenstein, 2006: 41). Andrew Holleran (2006) suggests that *Brokeback* 'provides gay characters [with] what only AIDS has given them till now: dignity – in part because they've been inserted into the heart of American masculinity (the western cowboy)' (p. 12). Alan Poul additionally notes that 'if the taint is gone from the male-male kiss because of *Brokeback* then that's a big breakthrough' (Ehrenstein, 2006: 41). Thus *Philadelphia* is to some extent the older brother whose visual legacy *Brokeback* cannot avoid, even as it rebels against the expectations that the older film has set up. While in *Philadelphia*'s most triumphant moment Tom Hanks's character removes his shirt before the jury to reveal the Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion that made his body readable as both queer and diseased, *Brokeback*'s dominant narrative of able-bodied masculinity quite literally ensures that the 'taint is gone' from gay male sexuality.

Thus *Brokeback* emerges from a queer filmic tradition in which the associations between homosexuality and AIDS have been largely figured and can, in this context, be read as participating in a representational backlash against homosexuality's place in the AIDS narrative.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the narrative ends just before the AIDS outbreak in the United States. In the only penetrative sex that the viewer witnesses, it is clear that no condoms are being used – a fact that earned the film the derogatory nickname 'Bareback Mountain'. While barebacking has often been conflated with 'bug chasing' in a rhetoric that has sought to stigmatize homosexuality as an anti-social behavior motivated by the Freudian death drive, the film escapes these associations ultimately by a feat of geographical and temporal dislocation.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the film, barebacking loses its contemporary urban stigma and its association with threats to public health; it is instead transformed into a life-affirming practice structured around a principle of rural able-bodied masculinity. Thus there may be a certain kind of cultural fantasy at work in the film: one in which private love supplants public sex and where an able-bodied gay masculinity supplants the historical connections between queerness and disability. But because *Brokeback* seems

so powerfully invested in disavowing the political legacy of AIDS activism, along with the historical process by which the epidemic has imprinted the queer community with the stigma of disability, some of those repressed elements do surface from time to time within the narrative, particularly through Jack in the moments I have just discussed.

I would like to conclude this section by tentatively pointing to a verbal/visual divide similar to the one that I referenced in my discussion of *Murderball's* narrative performances of heteromascularity and the static images of the disabled female body that momentarily stall those narratives. Though I have largely relied on verbal examples to describe the strategies through which the film constructs its ethos of able-bodiedness, the moments that most powerfully 'crip' that narrative are generally mute, relying instead on the transmission of visual cues. When Jack visits Mexico, his encounter with the prostitute is markedly silent; and while Lureen's monotone rehearsal of the official narrative of Jack's death accompanies Ennis's entirely different visual reconstruction of the scene, the images of hate crime violence that confront the viewer in this clip are entirely absent of sound, and differently filmed, playing like a grainy home video without audio. The intrusion of these brief images gestures toward a queer-crip cultural past that cannot, ultimately, be spoken.

But why not take such moments as opportunities to critically consider, and perhaps occasionally even claim, those histories, both representational and material, in which queerness and disability are brought into uneasy proximity? What, ultimately, is to be gained by the current cultural impulse to dissolve this complicated, though albeit troubled, partnership? While critics of both films are certainly justified in celebrating the strategies through which newer films are defiantly cutting the ties that have historically bound queerness to disability, I want to suggest that we remain wary of accepting discourses that celebrate one marginal identity at the expense of another, and that we continue to ask who gets left out of this framework completely. While male homosexuality and male disability may be regulating one another in these films, what is perhaps most perplexing is that it is not the able-bodied gay man whose existence is disavowed in *Murderball* but the physically disabled woman. And it is not only the heterosexual man who is linked to a disabling domesticity in *Brokeback Mountain*, but primarily the heterosexual woman. Transgender identity is meanwhile rendered unthinkable and race is dealt with problematically, at best. Of course, there is undoubtedly something productive happening when mainstream films begin to challenge the stereotype of the feminized or asexual male quadriplegic, or acknowledge that male homosexuality is not intrinsically bound up in illness. But these liberatory representations are accompanied by a set of political limitations that demand greater scrutiny. Rather than replace one regime of normalcy with another, we would do well to transform this uncomfortable representational history into an opportunity for continuing the difficult work of coalition building. Only then can we really achieve the cyborg myth of breaking with our origins to fashion new and unthinkable futures.

## Acknowledgement

My thanks to Lennard Davis for his support and feedback on this article.

## Notes

1. While the relationship between disability and gender has often been theorized, many of these accounts have grown out of a feminist concern for the representation of disabled women and the linkages between femininity and illness. Indeed, many of the early canonical texts of feminist literary criticism focus on the relationship between femininity, authorship and mental health, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) being perhaps the most well-known example. More recently, however, scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) have prioritized physical disability, as opposed to mental illness, in their analysis as well and brought race to bear on these issues in important ways.
2. McRuer (2006) does, however, provide a notable counterexample in his observations regarding ableist rhetoric in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Explaining some of the normalizing processes embedded in popular culture, McRuer notes that the 'seemingly marginal flashes of disability in the show [*Queer Eye*] . . . attest to those [normalizing] processes. 'That's so mental-institution chic!' (or, more directly, 'He's so retarded!'), one of the Fab Five will readily say, either when they first arrive at the straight guy's home or at the end, when they are watching – stout cocktails in hand – his final performance on closed-circuit television' (p. 176).
3. Matthew Leyland (2005), for example, offers the following praise in *Sight and Sound*:  

Dispelling misconceptions in an unfussy fashion, Shapiro and Rubin . . . venture into taboo territory with an X-rated debate about quad sex. As well as answering questions most disability movies are afraid to ask, the sequence is very funny. 'The more pitiful I am, the more [women] like me,' one wheelchair user chirps unapologetically. (p. 70)
4. In *The Cinema of Isolation*, Martin Norden (1994: 2) identifies one such narrative trap as the tendency for Hollywood to put well-known, able-bodied actors in disabled roles. Like a straight-identified actor playing a gay role, the casting of able-bodied stars in disabled roles becomes an opportunity for the able-bodied actor to demonstrate superior Oscar-quality acting skills by successfully impersonating what the public would view as extreme difference or otherness.
5. In his comparative reading of the armless Venus de Milo and a quadriplegic woman, Pam Herbert, Lennard Davis (1995) draws our attention to the able-bodied assumptions underlying Western standards of physical beauty. Thus Davis explores 'how people with disabilities are seen and why, by and large, they are de-eroticized' (p. 128). The film's intense eroticization of quadriplegic men can then be read as a radical reclaiming of that which has long been denied to disabled people; that this is accomplished through heteronormative masculinization and at the expense of the disabled woman who is further 'queered' by the logic of the film, however, is a tension that this section explores in greater detail.
6. In her magazine piece 'Seat of Power', Melissa Davis Haller (2005) quotes James Gumbert (the coach for Team USA) as pointing out: 'Most of these guys didn't get into their chairs because they were timid . . . They were daredevils.' The

- player featured in the piece agrees: “We’re true athletes”, he says. “We have the same rivalries and passion about our sport as anyone” (p. 22).
7. The celebration of the prosthetic dimensions of Zupan’s masculinity also constitutes a subversive reclaiming of previous stereotypes. Norden (1994) points out the common villainization of disabled male figures who are ‘aided by . . . high tech prostheses’ and ‘whose many battle injuries have transformed [them] into a walking wonderland of bionic effects . . . more machine than man’ (p. 293).
  8. Perhaps picking up on the prosthetic dimensions of the sport equipment, one reviewer has remarked upon a quad rugby player who ‘handles the ball as if it were a part of his body’ (Bennett, 2000: 60).
  9. My thanks to Megan V. Davis for this reference.
  10. Examining the work of three different visual artists, Halberstam (2005) defines this technotopic body as ‘a body situated in an immediate and visceral relation to technologies – guns, scalpel, cars, paintbrushes – that have marked, hurt, changed, imprinted, and brutally reconstructed it’, and notes that ‘in all three instances, the impact of technological intervention is to disrupt gender stability . . . [suggesting that] we should locate femaleness not as the material with which we begin nor as the end product of medical engineering but as a stage and indeed as fleshly place of production’ (pp. 116–17). The men of *Murderball* are certainly ‘situated in an immediate and visceral relation to technologies that have marked’ each of them. But while for Halberstam the technotopic body ‘disrupts gender stability’ and showcases anatomical sex as neither the ‘material with which we begin nor as the end product of medical engineering’, the technologized masculinity of the quad rugby athletes is visually framed within a narrative of continuity that privileges the anatomical origin of maleness and the technologically enhanced final product of heteronormative masculinity. What might have become a radical celebration of technology’s roles in producing alternative or queer modes of embodiment here collapses into a reification of gender difference.
  11. In *The Gender of Desire*, Michael Kimmel (2005) has argued that hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally rooted in a homophobic impulse to simultaneously deny and desire the feminine. If a boy is to access patriarchy, his successful identification with his father must be accompanied by a disavowal of the feminine within himself, a punishment of effeminacy in other men, and a willingness to turn his mother into an object of desire (p. 34). If *Murderball* follows the traditional narrative of masculinity that Kimmel has outlined, the player’s masculinity ultimately depends on the sexual acquisition of the girl whose ‘big tits’ prove that she’s everything that he’s not.
  12. Interestingly, the player commentary not only conflates Sam’s queer object choice with feminization but also with a lack of sexual potency, and a general inability to engage in phallogentric penetrative sex. While watching the poker scene with the commentary function turned on, one hears the players add: ‘We tried to get Sammy laid the whole year, but he’s just not a closer. He’s had some opportunities but Sammy cuddles.’ Sam’s decision to not be a ‘closer’ simultaneously resists the narrative *closure* that protectively bounds heteromale sexuality in the film.
  13. This argument is not an entirely new one; in the context of disabled veteran films, Martin Norden (1994) argues that: ‘Movies continue to depend heavily on the idea of women acting as remasculinizing agents to facilitate the protagonists’ Oedipal adventures, particularly those featuring embittered veterans’ (p. 322). Other films did not necessarily rely on women per se, but

resolved similar tensions by situating the character among 'advancements in science and technology in the form of highly potent prostheses' (p. 322). Both features, however, appear to be at play in *Murderball*.

14. To this effect, one reviewer celebrates the 'lusty montage' which illuminates the 'intriguing reasons why some women are particularly attracted to quadriplegic men.' In another scene, the viewer is able to appreciate – and perhaps envy – Zupan's ability to attract an able-bodied, conventionally feminine woman who is featured in a black bikini on the side of a pool. Her interview portions in the film mainly function to emphasize the ways in which partnership with a quadriplegic man brings out the 'mothering instinct' in women, a quality that she suggests could be what 'attracts a lot of girls to quadriplegics'. Cut alongside a clip that features her tying Zupan's shoes, the implication is clear.
15. For a more thorough analysis of these issues, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory' (2004).
16. One analysis that I am omitting here, which is beyond the scope of this article, is the similarly problematic image of the disabled black man who shares the frame with this woman. While the frame catches her from the neck down, it simultaneously catches only the top right quadrant of his face in the bottom left corner of the frame. The only other exposure that the viewer has to African-American disabled masculinity are two entirely out-of-context interviews in which a disabled black man (whose name, team affiliation, and general relationship to the sport we never learn) describes some of the tensions he encounters when trying to pick up girls and elaborates upon the 'modified doggy-style' that he has perfected during sex. The relative absence of African-American male quadriplegics from the film suggests that the players' disabled masculinity is not only invested in heterosexuality but in whiteness. The brief airtime given to African-American masculinity functions only to rhetorically infuse the sexuality of the featured (white) quadriplegic men with the primitive potency stereotypically projected onto African-American masculinity. That this particular African-American man happens to be describing the 'doggy-style' position only exaggerates and exploits the dangerous cultural stereotypes that link African-American sexuality to animalism and aggressivity. Thus, while this moment might be read as a sensitive inclusion of a non-white voice in dialogue about male quadriplegia and sexuality, I would argue that it ultimately collapses into merely another rhetorical building block in the construction and maintenance of white heteromascularity.
17. To this effect, it is striking how quickly the players, while appearing on Larry King Live, pass over the related inquiry of a female caller. While all of the other calls lasted several minutes, this particular one seemed over as soon as it began. The entire dialogue runs as follows:
 

*Woman:* Being from Alaska, where is [sic] the closest teams and how many are there, and is [sic] there any female teams?  
*Bob:* There are women that play rugby, it's a co-ed sport.  
*Larry King:* And so women can be on *your* team?  
*Mark:* Yeah, it's a co-ed sport.  
*Larry King:* Any in Alaska?  
*Scott:* No, the closest team I'd say is in Seattle.  
*Larry King:* So you have to go to Seattle.
18. For more on homoeroticism in the Western, see Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996) and Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992).

19. In this article, my use of the term 'gay' should be read as a shorthand for male same-sex desire and homosexual erotic expression. By employing it in this context, I am by no means making an identity claim about Jack and Ennis – indeed, in both the film and the short story, both men make it clear that they do not self-identify as either 'queer' or 'gay'. It is important, however, to acknowledge the impact that this film has had on members of the gay community, many of whom have identified with and claimed the characters, as well as the effect it has had on mainstream understandings of the gay community. Thus, by referring to 'gay' masculinity or 'gay' sexuality, I am referring to the representation of a behavior that has had a significant impact on the cultural understandings of a constructed identity category and the communities that have been formed around that category.
20. If *Murderball* follows a Freudian narrative in which a disavowal of the feminine in the self entails the transformation of women into objects of desire, then in *Brokeback Mountain*, the disavowal of the feminine in the self involves no such transformation; in *Brokeback Mountain*, to embody frontier masculinity is to disavow the feminine, period. Reviewer Constantine Hoffman (2006) puts it well when he points out that '*Brokeback* forced us to face the fact that the more "manly" a man is the more he will enjoy the company of other manly men' (p. 26). Indeed, if, 25 years ago, Adrienne Rich argued that lesbianism was the natural feminine state – a state from which women were coercively exiled by a system of 'compulsory heterosexuality' – then *Brokeback Mountain* applies the same logic to male same-sex desire. For a feminist disability critique of Rich's article, see Alison Kafer's 'Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-Bodiedness' (2003).
21. While the rodeo, which I will later discuss in more depth, is linked to both heterosexuality and disability, the scene where Ennis is thrown from his horse functions as its able-bodied queer counterpoint: Ennis is barely injured by the incident, able even to immediately chase the horse and mules who have run off. Additionally, upon their first trip back to the mountain after their long separation, the first thing we see Jack and Ennis do is strip off their clothes and jump from a tall cliff into the water below. We might productively compare this scene to the Spanish film *The Sea Inside* (dir. Alejandro Amenabar, 2004) where a similar jump-off from a similar cliff results in extreme quadriplegic impairment.
22. Robert McRuer's (2006) arguments about heterosexuality and able-bodied domesticity seem worth addressing in this context. McRuer argues that 'the ideological reconsolidation of the home as a site of intimacy and heterosexuality was also the reconsolidation of the home as a site for the redevelopment of able-bodied identities, practices, and relations.' Thus an 'inability to imagine a queer domesticity' becomes also the 'inability to imagine a disabled domesticity' (p. 89). While McRuer's argument is entirely valid within the context of his examples, *Brokeback Mountain* appears to signal a drastic resignification of these concepts, forcefully undoing the associational link between heterosexual domesticity and able-bodied ideologies.
23. Interestingly, in this respect, Jack emblemizes both the 'cult of ability' that McRuer (2006) has identified as 'the Good Gays who are capable of sustaining a marriage, who are not stigmatized by AIDS, and who went to Washington in 2000 for the Millennium March' and the 'cultures of disability' that are made up of participants in 'AIDS activism and the lesbian feminist traditions of health care activism that preceded it' (p. 86).
24. It is not at all my intention here to conflate Mexico and South America.

However, their geographical proximity and their relationship to Hispanic racial identity do function to link them within the logic of the film.

25. Ironically, these associations were often accompanied by a different understanding of queer masculinity, one that, according to Tim Edwards (1994), saw gay public sex cultures not only as a site of contamination but also as the outgrowth of an aggressive and 'unnatural' hypermasculine sex drive. If the urban manifestations of gay sexuality appeared to many to link hypermasculinity to sexual excess, indulgence, and disease, then Ennis's rural brand of stoic masculinity, founded on an ethic of discipline and restraint, invests his homosexuality with the virtues of health, organicism, and able-bodiedness.
26. For a thorough treatment of cultural understandings of barebacking, see Gregory Tomso's 'Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risks of Care' (2004). Of course, on another level, the film might be said to constitute the realistic portrait of queer rural masculinities between 1960 and 1980. By no means is it my intention to consolidate a grand narrative that privileges urban queer cultures at the exclusion of rural queer manifestations. The film does indeed help us to revise our assumptions about the proper 'time and place' for queer sexualities (Halberstam, 2005). I would suggest, however, that in its intense disavowal of all things urban and disabled, *Brokeback Mountain* in fact lends remarkable authority to those representational histories that tied queerness to urban sex cultures and disability.

## References

- Bennett, R. (2000) 'Rugby', *WeMedia* 4(5): 60.
- Brier, J. (2001) 'The Immigrant Infection: Images of Race, Nation and Contagion in Public Debates on AIDS and Immigration', *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005) Universal Studios.
- Davis, L.J. (1995) *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. New York: Verso Books.
- Edwards, T. (1994) *Erotics & Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity, and Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Ehrenstein, D. (2006) 'Fun with Harv and George?', *Advocate*, February: 41.
- Fiedler, L.A. (1966) *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Stein and Day.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (1997) *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2004) 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory', in B.G. Smith and B. Hutchison (eds) *Gendering Disability*, pp. 73–104. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2007) 'Shape Structures Story: Fresh and Feisty Stories about Disability', *Narrative* 15(1): 113–23.
- Gilbert, S. and Gubar, S. (1979) *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2005) *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Haller, M.D. (2005) 'Seat of Power', *Cincinnati Magazine*, October, 39(1): 20, 22.
- Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoffman, C. (2006) 'Memo from the Front: It's Just a Manly Thing', *Brandweek*, May, 47(18): 26.

- Holleran, A. (2006) 'The Magic Mountain', *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, March/April, 13(2): 12.
- Kafer, A. (2003) 'Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-Bodiedness', *Journal of Women's History* 15(3): 77–89.
- Kimmel, M.S. (2005) *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Leyland, M. (2005) 'Murderball', *Sight and Sound* 15(11): 70–1.
- McRuer, R. (2006) *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mitchell, L.C. (1996) *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16(3): 6–18.
- Murderball* (dir. D.A. Shapiro and H.A. Rubin, 2005) THINKFilm and MTV Films.
- Norden, M.F. (1994) *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Proulx, A. (1999) *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. New York: Scribners.
- Seymour, W. (1998) *Remaking the Body: Rehabilitation and Change*. London: Routledge.
- Tompkins, J. (1992) *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tomso, G. (2004) 'Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risks of Care', *Literature and Medicine* 23(1): 88–111.
- Wilson, D.J. (2004) 'Fighting Polio Like a Man: Intersections of Masculinity, Disability and Aging', in B.G. Smith and B. Hutchison (eds) *Gendering Disability*, pp. 119–33. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Cynthia Barounis is a candidate PhD student in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests include 20th-century American literature, queer theory, disability studies and visual culture.

Address: Department of English (MC 162), University of Illinois at Chicago, 601 S. Morgan Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7120, USA. [email: cbarou1@uic.edu]