

American Exceptionalism and Disability in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)

This paper examines the exclusionary nature of American exceptionalism, a concept Trevor B. McCrisken identifies as “a core element of American national identity and American nationalism,” through a critical study of Ron Kovic's bestselling autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July*. By tracing Kovic's life before, during, and after the Vietnam War, the paper foregrounds the fragility and vulnerability of the human body while simultaneously interrogating the ideological foundations of American exceptionalism that valorize strength, invincibility, and patriotic sacrifice. Kovic's narrative exposes the stark contrast between the national myth of heroic masculinity and the lived reality of physical injury, psychological trauma, and social abandonment.

The paper situates this critique within the cultural context of 1950s and 1960s America, where able-bodied ideals were deeply intertwined with what R. W. Connell conceptualizes as “hegemonic masculinity,” a dominant model of manhood sustained and reinforced through popular culture, particularly television and cinema. These media representations glorified violence, war, and heroic endurance, producing rigid standards of masculinity that left little room for bodily vulnerability or emotional fragility.

Through Kovic's autobiographical account, the paper explores how such ideals impose a profound psychological toll on individuals who fail—or are rendered unable—to conform to them. *Born on the Fourth of July* offers a powerful critique of the glorification of war and heroism, revealing how these narratives dehumanize individuals and obscure the long-term consequences of violence. Kovic's experiences at the Bronx VA Medical Center are especially revealing, as the medicalization and institutional neglect he endures expose a broader systemic attitude toward disabled bodies.

The treatment of injured veterans reflects an underlying social logic that devalues those no longer considered “useful” to the nation, thereby critiquing American society's narrow conception of “worthiness” and productivity. Despite his status as a war hero who sacrificed for his country, Kovic is subjected to inhuman, segregated, and indifferent treatment, underscoring the deeply entrenched able-bodied bias within American culture and institutions.

Ultimately, the paper argues that American exceptionalism, with its emphasis on able-bodiedness, productivity, and hegemonic masculinity, systematically fails to accommodate disabled individuals, a failure starkly illustrated through the neglect and marginalization of disabled war veterans like Kovic. The narrative reveals how national ideals that celebrate strength and heroism simultaneously erase those whose bodies bear the cost of sustaining such myths.

The paper concludes by examining Kovic's transformation from a disillusioned and marginalized disabled veteran into a committed anti-war activist and early supporter of the Disability Rights Movement. This transformation signifies his growing awareness of the invisibility and injustices faced by disabled people in American society and his determination to challenge these inequities. Kovic's life narrative thus emerges not only as a critique of war and nationalism but also as a powerful intervention in disability discourse, exposing the moral and ideological contradictions at the heart of American exceptionalism in 1970s America.