

Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012. ISBN-978-0-8070-2202-3. 216 pages.

As the official history of a nation inevitably becomes *his* story, perspectives and nuances are emphasized or diminished depending on how well they serve the interests of those in power. In the case of American history, the dominant narrative - i.e. the one taught in primary and secondary schools - is often told from a privileged position. Although scholarship throughout the last half century has made a valiant effort to change this, the perspectives and stories of those existing on the peripheral are often relegated to a subordinate position, or in some cases, forgotten. For this reason, a book like *A Disability History of the United States* is a welcomed addition to the great American historical narrative.

Historian and disability scholar Kim E. Nielsen's fascinating new intersectional study is the first to attempt a complete overview of American disability history, from pre-1492 to the present. Placing the experiences of people with disabilities at the center, *A Disability History of the United States* covers the entirety of US history in a compelling and lucid manner, always avoiding the tendency to create a grand narrative. As Nielsen makes clear throughout her book, the creation of a disability history is not to exclude other versions, but rather to examine mass movements and pivotal events through the lens of varied experiences. Using the pre-Columbus/Native American conception of disability as a backdrop, Nielsen shows how the American notion of disability developed over time to reflect an ever-changing array of cultural and historical influences; from ideas about race and gender, to scientific and religious approaches to the mind-body-spirit dichotomy. These factors, along with the intrusion of European capitalism, are shown to be the primary influences on how people with disabilities were viewed and treated in the post-Columbus America.

Chapter one, which focuses on the pre-Columbus understanding of disability, is perhaps Nielsen's most significant and interesting contribution to the field. Despite the fact that indigenous American cultures left very few written accounts behind, *A Disability History* manages to piece together enough primary-source documents to give a reliable account: Prior to European conquest, the Native American understanding of corporeality was completely devoid of the Cartesian Dualism that separates mind, body, and spirit. This allowed for more fluid definitions of bodily and mental norms, and fundamentally assumed that all had gifts to share with the community - and that for communities to exist in healthy balance, each individual needed to do so (11). As a result, everyone was seen as a valuable part of the community, regardless of their physical abilities. In some cases, what would be classified as a handicap or deformity today was seen as a divine gift, while being maimed or crippled in an accident would not result in stigmatization, as all bodies transform over time. In short, the Native American conception of disability had little

to do with one's physical body or its utility. Disability was defined rather as an imbalance between mind, body, spirit, and community.

Chapters two and three shift focus to how European colonization brought radically different perspectives to North America. Within the early capitalist systems beginning to dominate Europe, the primary definition of disability was an inability to perform labor (20). For this reason, early European settlers paid little attention to physical abnormalities, but substantial attention to one's mental and cognitive faculties. However, if one was physically injured on the job and unable to return to work, the lack of labor laws and workers' compensation could usher the entire family of the injured worker into poverty (36).

Throughout these early chapters, Nielsen makes intersectionality integral to the narrative. For example, in the chapters covering the early colonial period she talks about how wealth and poverty created different outcomes for people deemed idiots or "distracted" persons, and how negative notions of disability were used selectively against women who challenged gender norms. Nielsen also illustrates how early concepts of disability deeply shaped the cultural landscape of the new nation - from deciding who was allowed to immigrate there, to justifying slavery and gender discrimination.

As the book progresses, the intersectional thread wanes a bit, however, in chapter seven, Nielsen gives a compelling account of how issues such as class, race, disability and rights activism converged in wake of the 1916 polio epidemic. Believe it or not, Black and Asian Americans were rumored to be immune to polio, and were even excluded from treatment facilities such as President Roosevelt's Warm Springs rehabilitation center. Working class whites who could not afford this facility were also excluded, while the privileged ones who could established lifelong professional and economic ties (140). This intersection between class, race, and disability would eventually lead to what Nielsen describes as an "elite group of disabled," as well as a new generation of activists fighting for racial and economic reform.

Despite being a mere 187 pages, *A Disability History* manages to cover a wide range of experiences, from horrific accounts of blinded slaves being thrown overboard, to disabled miners successfully organizing strikes. Even in her final chapter covering 1968 to the present, Nielsen successfully shows how "disability" has always been an elastic term, while the experiences of disabled people continue to vary depending on a wide range factors. For this reason, *A Disability History of the United States* should appeal to students and scholars interested in American history, politics, feminism, post-structuralism, phenomenology, marxism, race studies and rights activism. In a relatively short amount of space, Nielsen manages to run the gamut, however, as she acknowledges in her introduction, *A Disability History* "poses more questions than answers" and that she hopes that it will "galvanize much needed additional scholarship" (xviii). More importantly, such a study shows the continued

importance of the Humanities, for without the contributions of its various schools of thought, such an intersectional approach would be impossible, thus keeping the making and maintaining of history in the hands of a privileged few.

*Wade A Bell Jr*