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Book Review

A Disability History of the United States By Kim E. Nielsen



Reviewed by: Jack Trammell*

Nielsen, Kim E. *A Disability History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2012, 272 pp., \$26.95 hardback.

Paul Longmore wrote in 2001 that “the new disability history must provide. . .a usable past” (Longmore and Umansky 2001). Scholars in disability studies have been energetically seeking tools to access that usable past for several decades or more, and a recent effort of note in that quest is Kim E. Nielsen’s *A Disability History of the United States*. Nielsen (2012:xvii) sets out to do what “no one has attempted,” that is, to create a chronological and inclusive narrative of the American experience of disability. This is, indeed, an ambitious undertaking, one that might be perceived as being even more difficult to accomplish in the space of less than two-hundred pages (a relatively short space for a scholarly treatment).

Disability rights advocates have long complained about the difficulty of forging common cause amongst individuals with extremely diverse bodies, minds and physical conditions (Fleischer and Zames 2001), and in a similar fashion, historians of disability have faced the double challenge of constructing an overall notion of disability that encompasses most individual experiences, while at the same time practicing an archeology of historiography that suffers from

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an extreme dearth of primary source evidence to sift through. The result, in this case, is a book that asks relevant questions, but that also inevitably reaches beyond its scope and format.

For example, Nielsen (2012:27) states that “disability [in the colonial era] remained a central organizing principle,” but supplies little evidence to support this potentially transforming premise. Contemporary disability scholars, such as Lennard Davis, have argued convincingly that disability as an organizing principal has transformed the postmodern landscape (Davis 2002), but very few of them have suggested, nor have historians, that disability as a common term or as a widely viewed concept existed in colonial times in any modern sense. Yet Nielsen asserts similar arguments numerous times (ex. p. 50) often failing to cite any direct evidence, and just as importantly, failing to choreograph disability status with the accepted identity markers of the times in any detailed fashion (free vs. not free, Christian vs. non-Christian, etc.).

Nielsen brings together diverse narrative threads, ranging from Native American treatments of the disabled, to the disability experiences of some of the Founding Fathers, and although these threads highlight little known aspects of a missing story, they also serve to highlight another weakness of the book, which is that Nielsen often makes inferences from a lack of documentary evidence to the contrary. In logical terms, as well as historiographical terms, this is more speculation than empirical exercise, and potentially misleading. In pre-modern times, the majority of surviving documentary evidence was authored by a very select literary intelligentsia, making broader generalizations very difficult.

Still, while viewed holistically in the current disability literature landscape, such efforts at bringing order to the chaos and hidden aspects of disability history are commendable, even with shortcomings. Neilsen’s work should inspire other talented historians and social scientists to continue what Longmore issued as a challenge many years earlier: “we [must] examine what

we think we know" (italics reviewer's) (Longmore 2003:14). Neilsen challenges what we think we know.

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