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HLTH304: Critical Disability Studies

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Final reflection

Over the course of this semester, I think one of the biggest things I learned is that disability is not just a medical category or an individual condition. Again and again, our readings, discussions, and work with CCW made me think about disability as something shaped by environments, institutions, expectations, and relationships. I came into this course with a much narrower understanding of accessibility, mostly thinking about accommodations or physical access. Now I find myself paying attention to structures that determine who belongs comfortably in a space and who has to constantly adapt themselves in order to participate.

My favorite readings were both Kim Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States* and Susan Nussbaum's *Good Kings, Bad Kings*. In *A Disability History of the United States*, I learned how disability not as something inherently tragic or incomplete, but as part of a person's relationship to community and purpose. That perspective helped me better understand why identity-first language can feel empowering for many disabled people. Also, disability is not always something separate from identity, but instead part of how someone experiences and contributes to the world. Nielsen's book also made me think more broadly about how disability is shaped historically and politically. I became especially interested in how events like war create disability on a massive scale, and how that connects to the creation of prosthetics and changing ideas of rehabilitation, labor, and citizenship. It is definitely something I would like to explore more in the future.

I also really loved *Good Kings, Bad Kings* because it was one of the few works of fiction I have read that centers disabled characters so fully. Their disabilities shape the story and their experiences, but do not suffocate the story or reduce the characters into symbols. Instead, the novel lets them exist as fully human people. I also found it compelling to see so many of the disability justice principles we discussed in class reflected through the characters' relationships and survival. Teddy especially stayed with me because of how much care and emotional depth he brings to the people around him despite the violence and neglect of the institution. The novel made institutional harm feel deeply personal while still showing moments of humor, friendship, intimacy, and resistance. It taught me that disability stories do not need to revolve solely around suffering in order to be politically powerful. I'd definitely like to read more stories like that one!

Outside of readings and discussion, I also learned a lot through my engagement with CCW and the exhibition process. Working on the audio descriptions especially changed how I think about accessibility. Before this class, I mostly understood audio description as a technical accommodation, but actually writing descriptions forced me to slow down and notice details I normally would have overlooked. I also started using audio descriptions when multi-tasking in lab while trying to also listen to a TV show, and I did not realize how helpful it is in better understanding what's going on when you can't see the screen. I also appreciated being able to contribute to the CDS/CCW exhibition after attending previous exhibitions during my time at Haverford. It made me feel connected not just to the artwork, but also to the process of helping others experience it.

Moving forward, I think this course will stay with me because it fundamentally changed how I notice systems around me. As someone pursuing a career in science, I now think much more critically about who scientific institutions are built for, whose bodies are assumed in research and education, and how accessibility can be integrated into environments from the beginning rather than added reactively later. I also think this course reminded me that

accessibility is deeply human. It is about recognizing variation as normal rather than exceptional. Whether through audio descriptions, flexible learning structures, or simply rethinking assumptions about productivity and independence, disability studies asks us to imagine communities that are built around interdependence and care rather than competition and exclusion.

More than anything, I think this course taught me to slow down and pay attention to language, to systems, to bodies, to art, and to the ways people move through the world differently. That feels like something I will carry not only into future courses and my career, but also into how I relate to other people moving forward!