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EDSPE 304C

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### Miscast and Marginalized: Films Perpetuating Ableist Stereotypes

Before taking this class, I did not know much about disability or the problems that people with disabilities face in our society. The first exposure to these topics in an educational setting was the unit about disabilities in my ECFS 200 course last Winter quarter. As a class, we explored the basics of what ableism is and a few common real-life examples; one moment that stuck out to me was learning that the word “lame,” which was a common word in my vocabulary at the time, has ableist roots and perpetuates the idea that disability should be equated with bad. Truthfully, as a person without a disability, I did not give disability and ableism as much thought as I should have; having that brief introduction to these important ideas widened my perspective and urged me to learn more. Before taking this class, I wondered about why disability is not talked about enough and about the ableist stereotypes and ideas that exist in our society. I also wondered how I could better reframe my thoughts to recognize ableism in our society and what I could do to combat it.

In this class, in addition to starting to develop a better understanding of disability, ableism, and the experiences of people with disabilities in our society, I learned about some of the ableist stereotypes that I had wondered about previously. One that stood out to me most was the common incorrect, ableist stereotype of people with disabilities being unable to have or not desiring romantic and sexual relationships. My first exposure to this idea was in the Lesson 5 materials when Lateef McLeod performed “A Declaration of a Body of Love” in his “See Us. Hear Us.” Youtube video. Speaking over a theatrical performance of him undressing and a woman embracing his bare torso, Lateef expresses, “whose body cannot be loved, cannot be sexually desired, cannot provide a woman with her physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual needs... do you see my body as only acceptable if rehabilitated?” This visual poetry was so powerful and it made me question the assumptions prevalent in our society about what a romantic or sexual relationship is, and the messages about who deserves them. I further explored

these topics in the *Crip Camp* film and *Undoing Ableism* Chapter 9 of Lesson 8. In *Crip Camp*, the campers talk openly about their sexual experiences at Camp Jened and how that aspect contributed to how special the camp was to them. Making out and having sexual desires and experiences was something the teenagers got to experience at camp, outside of many of the ableist views of society. *Undoing Ableism* Chapter 9 also directly highlighted the problematic trope of characters with disabilities “being uninterested or unable to be in intimate, romantic, reciprocal, and/or sexual relationship.” These sources deepened my understanding of this problematic stereotype and made me consider how much accurate representation in media matters in combating these beliefs. Finally, although it does not directly relate to this specific stereotype, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s video “What is Intersectionality?” was foundational in my learning and thinking in this course. When weighing the importance of representation in combating negative and untrue stereotypes, one must also consider intersectionality. Identifying with multiple marginalized communities dramatically changes a person’s experience; the experience of a queer person of color with a disability would vary greatly from the experience of a white heterosexual person with a disability. It is imperative that the media recognizes this and diversifies. Exploring these resources, and listening to my classmates’ thoughts on these ideas in Critical Conversations discussions, broadened my understanding of this incorrect stereotype about the romantic and sexual desires and potential of people with disabilities, and kickstarted my thinking about ways to combat this through accurate representation.

For my creative project, I created an art piece to bring awareness to this stereotype and how many movies misrepresent characters with disabilities, especially as romantic leads. To do so, I edited movie posters and blacked out the characters with disabilities. This draws attention to how these ableist themes detract from the movie and disability community, and how all of the actors portraying these characters do not have disabilities, and are taking roles from actors with disabilities. The movie *Penelope* centers around a girl born with a pig nose, and she does not find love until she is “cured” and is conventionally attractive again. *Me Before You* focuses on a man with a non-fatal disability who has a romantic relationship, but ultimately commits suicide, reiterating the “death over disability” trope. *50 First Dates* is a romantic comedy about a woman who has amnesia with a resetting memory each day; although it ends

with her leading a fulfilling life with her disability, it is not an accurate representation of her disability or a sustainable romantic relationship, and the movie also makes fun of other characters with disabilities.

*Scent of a Woman* follows a young man who is a caregiver for an older blind man and the movie plays into the saviorism trope. Also following the saviorism trope, *As Good as It Gets* revolves around a man with OCD, who mellows out after finding a romantic partner. I showcased these edited movie posters and included the silhouette of a young child looking at them, and absorbing the ableist messages.

This project and topic helped me to reframe some of the ideas I previously had. Before this class, I do not think I gave much thought to whether people with disabilities desire romantic or sexual relationships, but I do not think any of the media I had previously consumed had much accurate representation of people with disabilities in those relationships. This is a problematic stereotype, which I am now aware of. Romantic and sexual relationships are heavily praised in our society and those relationships are often portrayed as the ideal, happiest ending; it is problematic and ableist to promote the idea that only certain types of people can achieve those relationships. In general, all of the eye-opening things I have learned in this class go against a lot of the common ableist messaging and beliefs in our society, demonstrating how much growth I need and our society needs. I plan to use this knowledge in my life as a reminder of how important diversity and inclusion are, both in the media and our communities, and to keep an open mind and always strive to grow my perspective.

Leaving this class, I know I still have a lot to learn and there is much more to explore in this topic. There are certainly ways to go against this ableist notion that people with disabilities cannot have or do not desire romantic or sexual relationships, especially through media representation. However, these topics of people desiring romantic or sexual relationships generally are not taught in schools. Other than increasing representation in the materials that children have access to, are there other ways to go against this idea in the context of education? The end of this class does not at all signify the end of my learning journey about disability, ableism, and our society; I will continue to ponder these ideas, talk to as many people with different perspectives and backgrounds as I can, and do my best to support the disability community.

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