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Disney and Disability:
Recasting the Normative Body in Immersive Media

We think it is important to examine how certain portrayals in Disney movies stress the need to conform to normalized, typical or even stereotypical expectations of intelligence and intellectual ability, by creating characters with intellectual disabilities who we both laugh at and distance ourselves from”

– excerpt from “Dopey’s Legacy: Stereotypical Portrayals of Intellectual Disability in the Classic Animated Films” p. 180

“Won’t You Please Join Us as We Explore the Wonders of the Pacific Ocean”: Intro

In 2013 scholar Johnson Cheu compiled several critical essays written by colleagues which explored race, gender, and ability in popular Disney films. Featured in his book, titled *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, there is an article co-authored by scholars Karen Schwartz, Zana Marie Lutfiyya, and Nancy Hansen in which Disney is heavily scrutinized for its ableist depictions of characters with intellectual disabilities in the classic films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Cinderella*. While the claims that Disney is perpetuating a greater divide between the able-bodied and disabled communities who enjoy their films is valid, I argue that in 2013, at the time this article was written, this is, to use relevant terminology, a ‘mute’ point.

I am not interested in rehashing the ways in which Disney has previously created laughing-stock caricatures of (dis)abled individuals and paraded them across the screen for cheap laughs. Instead, I am interested in exploring the side of Disney and disability which has remained mostly invisible despite growing traction in scholarly circles in both Disability Studies, which

explores disability in terms of its social relevancy, and Media Studies, which explores media, particularly mass media, in terms of its cultural relevancy; I aim to reevaluate both the classic and modern Disney productions of *The Little Mermaid*, as well as the 21st century top-grossers *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory*, in terms of the potential for *positive* cultural saturation of (dis)ability through the use of immersive media, which recasts the ‘normative’ body in relatable communities.

In 2008 Disney brought *The Little Mermaid* first to Broadway, before eventually making the production available to be performed at the community theater level. Although this was not in itself eventful, as Disney has saturated much of American media consumption, the recasting of the iconic mermaid Ariel as a fully-fleshed out, attractive, ‘disabled’, yet empowered princess complete with interiority and social commentary was a bold step toward redefining the normative body in mainstream culture. Likewise, *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory*, released in the early 21st century, reimagined communities in which disabilities were not only ‘normative,’ but actually desirable. Although extensive scholarship has been devoted to indicate that Disney has permeated American culture and has often been a negative influence on cultural perspectives surrounding race, gender, class, politics, and the environment, it is important to consider Disney’s ability to positively influence audiences as well, particularly in terms of the potential impact on disability awareness through creative depictions of disability in late 20th century and early 21st century films and musicals. Through the use of immersive environments, both through the crafting of under-water worlds and the reimagining of social structures, *The Little Mermaid: the Musical*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Finding Dory* exemplify concepts of progressive community-building to challenge ‘normative’ ideology through the embodiment of (dis)ability.

It is fair to raise the question of how a pop-culture phenomenon such as Disney could have the potential to dramatically change societies views on disability, but the answer lies in the

simplicity of exposure. According to the study “Children’s contact with people with disabilities and their attitudes towards disability: a cross-sectional study,” “Children who reported greater levels of contact with people with disabilities had more positive attitudes towards disability” (879). To put it simply, the more familiarized children become with seeing people with disabilities, the more likely they are to exhibit positive attitudes towards disability in general. Both *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory*, whose characters are predominantly (dis)abled, are still currently on the top ten list of highest grossing animated films of all time despite being released in 2003 and 2016 (“All Time Worldwide Animated Box Office”). This means that despite the release of new films in the animated world, these films continue to be culturally relevant and therefore continue to contribute to normalizing the image of disability.

Likewise, *The Little Mermaid*, which according to *Time* journalist Richard Corliss, “reclaims the movie house as a dream palace and the big screen as a window into enchantment,” has continued to mesmerize fans and retain cultural relevancy with the resurgence of its fanbase through the multitude of theater productions throughout the United States from 2008 to 2018. During its time on and off Broadway, *The Little Mermaid*, which ran from January 10, 2008 through August 30, 2009, was performed an astounding 685 times with an additional 50 previews (Menken et. all). Since the release of the production rights to community theaters it has been performed both in its full and junior rendition countless times in a multitude of communities within the United States. These performances, which feature progressive (dis)ability trends, continue to further expose audiences to (dis)ability, creating a rallying cry for (dis)abled characters to succeed and creating an immersive social framework in which their success is possible.

Disability Studies scholar Michelle Resene, of The University of Connecticut, recognizes Disney’s unique positionality and influence in their article “From Evil Queen to Disabled Teen:

Frozen Introduces Disney's First Disabled Princess” claiming, “Walt Disney Studios remains the front-runner in animated film making to this day, and as such they set the standard for other studios to follow.” But the question still remains, what sort of influence is Disney wielding and for whom? Although answering this question requires an extensive study, in this essay I focus on films *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016), as well as the 2008 Broadway Musical version of *The Little Mermaid*, to suggest a positive attempt to revert from previously ableist trends in Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Although, it is not possible to know Disney’s intent in producing media which embraces inclusion, understanding, and a rejection of the “other,” analyzing their artistic choices through a Disability Studies lens is fruitful and revealing. Just as Disney films have been scrutinized for their depictions of race, gender, class, politics, and the environment, the representation of disability in Disney productions likewise merits scholarly attention.

However, little scholarship has been devoted to studying Disney and disability, let alone the *Finding* films, which refers to both *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory* as a collective whole, in particular. As Resene points out, “There has been very little scholarly work done on disability representation in Disney films to date, and what there is focuses on their older films.” This is partially due to Disney having traditionally ableist views which have been ill-received in disabled communities. As Resene points out, “It is only in the last few years that the writers and animators at Disney have begun to change the way they view—and encourage others to view—disability.” However, this implied shift in ableist ideology gives scholars the opportunity to both reevaluate the way in which ability, and likewise disability, is portrayed in Disney and to reimagine the potential impact on 21st century audiences.

Shortly after *Finding Nemo* was released in 2004 a review by scholar Ann Millett-Gallant of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, the first journal

primarily focused on publishing articles within the field of Disability Studies. The review praised the film for embracing diversity, stating, “The creatures are not only strikingly heterogeneous in appearance, but also have international accents or dialects and personas that convey a variety of social styles” (Millett-Gallant). However, it is not just the personalities and appearances of the “creatures,” or characters, in the film which make this film appear as progressive; it is also the abilities of the characters which stand in stark contrast to previous ableist, or disability insensitive, Disney films such as the frequently discussed *The Little Mermaid*, which features a mute heroine, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which featured troubling depictions of dwarves as simpletons capable only of experiencing singular base emotions, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, whose title communicates the gross disfigurement of physical disability throughout the film.

In the *Finding* films, however, disability is not a deviation from the norm, but a staple of progressive community-building. As Millett-Gallant puts it, a disability scholar watching these films may find that they have “discovered sunken treasure—a multifaceted representation of disability” (Millett-Gallant). But is the representation of disability in this film simply multifaceted? Although it is true that disability, as well as ability, is portrayed in many shapes and forms throughout the plots of the *Finding* films, implying that disability not only as inescapable, but uneventful, I aim to argue that, in these films, the lack of established social construct for disability *itself* demonstrates a progressive framework for understanding and embracing a variety of different, though non-hierarchical, physical and intellectual abilities of value within 21st century communities. In the films, disability is not only a factor in each character’s personality and identity, but disability is also presented in many instances as an advantage, or individualized enhancement that allows characters to fully develop throughout the plot in often surprisingly efficient, though unexpected ways.

For instance, although Dory, the bluefin heroine of both films, suffers from short-term memory loss, she also “speaks whale” and has a heightened level of problem solving abilities catered around the ways in which her (dis)ability impacts her cognitive reasoning. Likewise, although Marlin, the secondary hero and father of the primary hero Nemo, suffers from an extreme anxiety disorder, he is able to easily identify potentially dangerous situations with ease; although, he does inevitably have to conquer them in order to both propel the plot and complete his character arch. These sort of enhanced abilities stemming from their so-called disabilities mirror the way in which people who suffer from a disability are often able to develop their other abilities to a higher degree; a well-known example of this chiasmus between disability and ability can be seen in the centuries long trend of blind musicians who develop advanced hearing abilities as a result of their lost sight (Ahissar 843-848).

In the *Finding* films, disability is neither romanticized, nor minimized; it is neither the defining factor of the character’s struggles, nor is it portrayed as the sole reason the character is capable of overcoming them. This realistic depiction of these characters with disabilities defies the traditional dichotomy of people with disabilities being depicted as inherently helpless or exceptionally heroic; as a result, the characters are neither pitied for their disability, nor exalted for their newfound abilities.

Surprisingly, there has been little to no further consideration to serious scholarship on the *Finding* films published between Millett-Gallant’s review in *Disability Studies Quarterly* and this essay. Regardless, this essay aims to establish a framework for which to view the *Finding* films through a Disability Studies lens with an emphasis on creative decisions regarding environment, dialogue, societal construction, and character development that combine to design a world where ableism is non-existent, because the normative nature of disability is evident

within the confines of the social constructs, within the films, which embrace diversity as an inevitable and unavoidable aspect of community.

Before this diversity can be further analyzed however, relevant terms must be defined that are essential to understanding the framework through which these works will be discussed. The term normative body will furthermore reference the body devoid of known or assumed disability. The disabled body, on the other hand, will refer to a non-normative body, or a body for which disability is known or assumed. However, it is important to note that in the *Finding* films, the normative body is the disabled body, as nearly all characters, both main and secondary, appear to have some form of disability as either implied by their physical appearance, speech, or actions.

Crucial to these films' representation of the body is the critical distinction between disability and (dis)ability. The term disability will be used when referencing the 'medical model' of disability, or a lack of normative ability in a given individual or group of individuals; whereas, the term (dis)ability will be used when referencing the 'social model' of (dis)ability, or to imply that an individual or group of individuals is differently-abled, and that their abilities are not inherently less desirable than, nor inferior to, normative abilities.

The 'medical model' for disability is can be defined as:

The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised. The medical model of disability says people are disabled by their impairments or differences. Under the medical model, these impairments or differences should be 'fixed' or changed by medical and other treatments, even when the impairment or difference does not cause pain or illness. The medical model looks at what is 'wrong' with the person and not what the person needs. It creates low expectations and leads to people losing independence, choice and control in their own lives (*Disability Nottinghamshire*).

Adversely, the 'social model' for (dis)ability can be defined as:

The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. It looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives. Disabled people developed the social model of disability because the traditional medical model did not explain their personal experience of

disability or help to develop more inclusive ways of living. (*Disability Nottinghamshire*).

Disability, traditionally, has a negative connotation in conjunction with the ‘medical model,’ as implied in the Oxford English Dictionary which defines disability as a “Lack of ability (to discharge any office or function); inability, incapacity; weakness.” (Dis)ability, although not universally used within Disability Studies, is a critical term more in conjunction with the ‘social model’ and is used by some scholars to showcase the multi-faceted nature of (dis)ability, as well as to acknowledge that an ability is both lost and gained by a change in the normative body and mind. This ideology is often referred to as being differently-abled for people who would be traditionally described as having a physical disability, or as being neuro-divergent for people who would be traditionally described as having a cognitive disability. However, for the sake of this essay, people/characters who are both differently-abled and neuro-divergent will be most often referred to as individuals/characters with “(dis)abilites,” as this essay will focus primarily on the ways in which the progressive ‘social model’ of (dis)ability is being used to upend the traditional ‘medical model’ of disability in the *Finding* films, effectively redefining the normative body through progressive community-building which emphasizes the positive impact of varied abilities within communities.

Before beginning analysis, it is important to note that this essay will analyze the two *Finding* films as a whole because although *Finding Nemo* was released first it portrays only the middle of the story for the main trio, Nemo, Marlin, and Dory. *Finding Dory*, on the other hand has Dory as a character focalizer and begins when Dory, not Nemo, is a child. *Finding Dory* depicts both the events of Dory’s childhood and the events of her young adulthood, which follow after Nemo’s hero-journey in *Finding Nemo* concludes.

Finding Dory orients viewers in the opening scene by establishing a framework not only for the projection of the plot, but also for the physical and sociological constructs of the film;

viewers are submerged in an alternative world without the constraints of able-bodied ideology, making the social model of (dis)ability a viable option within the reality of the film. Like *Finding Nemo*, *Finding Dory* is set in the underwater world of the ocean. Although, these films are not Disney's first foray into exploring the opportunities and limitations associated with a submerged existence, they differ from previous attempts to fully immerse viewers in the structure of the films' society. Unlike *The Little Mermaid*, which was released by Disney in 1989, *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory* challenge the concept that an underwater world, or any world presented as an alternative to normative living, requires physical transcendence into the world of able-bodied individuals.

“Part of Your World”: Exploring the Desire For and Against the ‘Normative’ Body

To fully grasp the gravity of this dramatic change in representation of experience we must first familiarize ourselves with the ableist nature of lead character Ariel's existence in *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel is a mermaid, which can be seen as a representation of a mutation of the normative body, who dreams of being “up where the people are” (“Part of Your World”). However, Ariel does not just want to be integrated into the society she reveres, but also desires a physical attribute which she lacks: legs. In the song, “Part of Your World,” Ariel expresses a desire to be “up where they walk / up where they run.” This illustrates a desire not only for Ariel to leave her home community and habitat to be with bi-pedal people, but also that she is envious of the abilities of others, and, in particular, their ability to move forward in a way that implies progression, and more importantly, mobility.

Mobility is an extremely important factor in Disability Studies and is closely tied with agency. As opposed to able-bodied individuals who do not obtain desirable results due to a lack of agency, (dis)abled individuals are often immobilized in a society that is not engineered to accommodate their unique requirements for the tools necessary to obtain agency; thus, leaving

(dis)abled individuals immobilized. However, through the use of prosthetics or wheelchairs, (dis)abled individuals who experience (dis)ability later in life can retain some of the agency they possessed before becoming (dis)abled. These devices, however, are often not viewed as life accessories, but extensions of the self. This concept of the extension of the self through physical means has scientific backing in the field of psychology. In the article, "The Wheelchair As a Full-Body Tool Extending the Peripersonal Space," a team of psychologists determined that, "the wheelchair, which does not expand the action space of the hand, but the action space of the whole body. Indeed, through manual, mechanic, or even passive manipulation, a wheelchair allows movements of the whole body in space." Therefore, when a person experiences a physical limitation which is solved, to some degree, by the administration of an artificial enhancement, this is not a replacement for a dysfunctional feature of the body, but instead an extension of the self that includes both the (dis)ability, and the physical method of aid.

However, Ariel does not enhance herself to join the humans, but replaces her tail with legs. Instead of extending her sense of self, Ariel severs her identity, eliminating her tail, which is the distinguishing factor of what makes a mermaid a mermaid. However, this choice actually disables Ariel in her natural habitat. It is not as though Ariel gains the ability to inhabit both the world of the humans and her own underwater home; when Ariel is 'transformed' into a human she can no longer survive in the water and nearly drowns before finally swimming ashore. However, Ariel seems to believe that she was limited in her underwater positionality, as is communicated in the song "Part of Your World." Ariel claims, "Flipping your fins you don't get too far," but isn't Ariel more capable as a mermaid, in her natural habitat, than stumbling through life as a human? She claims that she identifies with, "Bright young women, sick of swimming, ready to stand," but what does Ariel want to stand for? Even after Ariel gains her legs, which she believes will be the key to liberating her from her problems, she is continually presented as a

character that lacks the ability to literally, or metaphorically, stand her ground, which is again, not an element present in Ariel's underwater world.

Ariel's inability to stand up for herself throughout the plot is further emphasized by the price she must pay to gain legs, or the ability to progress societally: her voice. However, while emphasis is often put on the ableist nature of *The Little Mermaid* in terms of the way in which Ariel is presented as a mute after trading her voice to the sea-witch Ursula in exchange for the ability to become temporarily human, I would argue that the ableist rhetoric is apparent much earlier. Ariel is constantly on the outside looking in on the human world. When she is seen on the surface of the water she is half submerged, half enlightened above with her bright red hair shining above the water. With this positionality in mind, the portion of her body which defies physical norms is concealed below the water. This represents Ariel's liminal positionality as almost human, but just not quite all the way there. Ariel, in her form as a mermaid, represents many people of the (dis)abled community, especially those who have been paralyzed while still retaining upper-body mobility in an uncanny way; although, both Ariel and (dis)abled individuals are recognized as human, their startling bodily deviation from the norm often inspires discomfort due to their 'otherness.'

Like Ariel, who is depicted as 'other' and feels alien in the realm of humans, the (dis)abled community is sadly often 'othered.' A study conducted at Oxford University in the same year that *The Little Mermaid* was released (1989) explored the way in which able-bodied individuals in relationships with (dis)abled individuals view their intimate interactions with the disabled community through a multifaceted lens of appreciation, not acceptance, of the (dis)abilities their partners possess. The study reported, "The people we have been studying use perspectives toward their disabled others that define them as distinct, unique individuals with particular and specific characteristics that set them apart" (141). While this perspective on the

positive attributes of (dis)ability is reflected and explored later in this essay in reference to *Finding Nemo/Finding Dory*, this interpretation of the (dis)abled community is not the norm. The inherent ‘otherness’ of individuals within the (dis)abled community is often presented as a defining factor of identity which effectively removes these individuals from many social spheres, such as dating. Just as Ariel fears she will not have a chance with Prince Eric unless she obtains the normative body of a bi-pedal human, many people with (dis)abilities experience social exclusion due to the ‘other’ appearance of their body.

This clash between communities is foregrounded in *The Little Mermaid* between the able-bodied Prince Eric and (dis)abled Ariel. In her mermaid form, Ariel operates under the assumption that she can never have a happily-ever-after existence with Prince Eric, who she has fallen in love with when observing him from a position of obscurity in the water; the positionality scripted into this initial interaction also mirrors the way in which members of the disabled community are initially overlooked. Ironically, the only reason that Eric is able to love Ariel in any capacity is because she uses her abilities as a mermaid to save him when he is thrown overboard in the early scenes of the film. However, Ariel’s incessant desire to be human overruns the scene when her intimacy with the incapacitated Eric flourishes as she notices his body up-close on the beach shore. In this moment, Ariel realizes her passion to be with Eric as a human. Because the scene dramatically shifts to embrace the romantic aspect of Ariel falling for a handsome, helpless prince, the circumstances of her act of heroics is overlooked; Ariel’s true traits of strength and bravery are symbolized through her (dis)ability, in having fins and in being able to breathe underwater.

This scene in particular makes it quite clear that Ariel is not burdened by a disability but invigorated by being “differently-abled.” Although Ariel does not have legs, which are representative of the normative body in the film, she does have fins, which allow her to excel in

the water and therefore enable her to rescue the drowning Eric. By being differently-abled, Ariel is able to perform an underwater rescue that would be impossible for an able-bodied individual. Like Ariel, many members of the (dis)abled community become successful not in spite of their (dis)abilities, but because of them. The term differently-abled acknowledges that ability is not a static state of being, but one that varies based on the circumstance of the individual. However, despite this crucial detail of the foundation of their relationship, of which Eric is, of course, oblivious due to being unconscious at the time of his aquatic rescue, Ariel concludes that she must give up her unique (and useful) abilities to become “a part of [Eric’s] world.”

This is particularly problematic because Ariel does not even realize what she is giving up. Ariel is not aware of her own superiority in water until after she trades in her voice for legs to the sea witch Ursula. After finalizing the trade Ariel is seen grabbing her throat and struggling to kick awkwardly towards the surface of the water. Although this scene could be interpreted as Ariel’s surprise at no longer having a voice, I argue that her shock is not at her lack of voice, but at her lack of breath. Unlike other factors of Ursula’s contract, such as Ariel forfeiting her soul should she not get Prince Eric to kiss her within three days, there is no mention made that Ariel will lose her ability to breathe underwater once the contract is signed. Ariel’s shock is not because she has become vocally disabled, but because she no longer has the ability to breathe underwater; Ariel was so focused on what she would gain by becoming human, she never considered the abilities she would have to give up to do so. This is particularly ironic given that the reason Ariel must save Eric in the first place is because he, with his normative body, lacks the ability to breathe underwater. Likewise, Ariel is seen struggling to kick her way to the surface, whereas before she was able to swim through the water with confidence and ease. In her pining for legs and their abilities to do such trivialities as dancing, Ariel does not realize the limitations of the ‘normative’ body of the humans in the film.

This malicious mutilation of Ariel's sense of self is encouraged by Ursula, who takes advantage of Ariel's emotionally vulnerable state and exploits her uncertainty. Ursula's character is interesting because unlike many of Disney's villains who are inherently evil and unashamed, Ursula's character is presented primarily as misunderstood. She pitches herself as someone who wants to 'help' people and knows exactly what they need to realize their full potential. I would argue that, albeit more than likely unintentionally, Disney has crafted Ursula as a character that does not in fact exemplify a particularly malicious, exploitative, con artist, but as a member of the overly meddling general public who believe they know what is best for everyone, especially those that are different from them. That is not to say that Ursula is not malicious, exploitative and a con artist, she undeniably possesses all these traits; however, I believe that because her 'nasty nature' is so overt, the symbolism between Ursula and the general public posing as pseudo-experts on the human condition is entirely overlooked.

Perhaps it is time we explore this critical, but so often ignored aspect of Disability Studies: how able-bodied people 'cope' with people they come across in their lives 'burdened' with (dis)abilities. Ursula's response when Ariel questions whether or not Ursula actually has the ability to transform her is illuminating in light of public opinion - people with disabilities need to be 'fixed.' Ursula boldly claims, "That's what I do. It's what I live for. To help unfortunate merfolk like yourself. Poor souls with no one else to turn to" ("Poor Unfortunate Souls"). By casting Ursula as a pseudo-expert on transformations, who admittedly does have magical, unexplained powers that allow her to alter physical states, *The Little Mermaid* highlights the way in which modern society still embraces the 'medical model' of disability. Ursula adheres to the 'medical model' of disability and advocates for the school of thought that supports the misguided notion that people with disabilities need to be 'fixed' in order to be productive members of society; according to this misguided conception of the value of the disabled individual, many

people both within and outside of the medical profession make it their life mission to diagnose, treat, and cure the ailments of the (dis)abled community.

By associating Ursula, who is unanimously recognized as the villain and therefore in the wrong, with the 'medical model' of disability, the film satirizes the concept of 'fixing' people.

When considering the multitude of reasons that this 'fixing people' mindset is problematic, it is important to note that if the able-bodied population is operating under the belief that the

(dis)abled community is in need of 'fixing,' then that implies that (dis)abled cultures are inherently inferior (not alternative to) normative culture and its standards of quality of life.

However, operating under this assumption is not only oppressive, but also dehumanizes the

(dis)abled existence as a valid social experience. The 'well-meaning' ableist treatment of people

with (dis)abilities is no less backwards than the 'benevolent planters' ideology used by plantation

owners to justify slavery under the guise that people of African descent were too intellectually

inferior to know what was good for them. People with (dis)abilities regularly have unwanted aide

imposed upon them by a misguided, uneducated able-bodied people governed by a culturally

collective thought process that associates (dis)ability with inferiority.

Now, it could be argued that this statement does not apply to *The Little Mermaid* because

Ariel was 'asking for it.' While I do not deny that Ariel did, indeed, ask Ursula for help, I argue

that Ariel, like many oppressed people, made a decision to alter herself due to the influence of a

social ideology which favors the abled body. Ariel believed her current state of being was

inferior and therefore concluded that she was incapable of eliciting reciprocal love from Prince

Eric. While this decision may seem drastic, this concept of passing as 'normal' heavily impacts

the (dis)abled community, creating a sense of inferiority towards their body and a fear of being

discovered as an able-bodied fraud. At least temporarily, many (dis)abled individuals mistakenly

believe that their lives will improve if only they are not seen as disabled. Just as many (dis)abled

individuals are made to believe that there is a quick ‘fix’ for their systematic disadvantages that will give them access to the coveted advantages of the able-bodied community, Ariel shares the belief that everything in her life would be infinitely better if only she was “able” to be with Eric. Ursula reinforces this warped version of obtaining self-worth at the sacrifice of individual identity when she chillingly tells Ariel, “The only way to get what you want - is to become a human yourself.”

But isn’t Ariel human already?

Or perhaps the better question to ask, is what makes a human, a human? Defining humanity is a difficult task that is continually being reevaluated to be both more inclusive and accurate, which is not an easy feat. Psychologists Ralston, D. Christopher and Justin Ho grapple with the complexity of defining humanity in their article "Disability, Humanity, and Personhood: A Survey of Moral Concepts" and ultimately conclude the debate “is not merely a squabble about semantics; it is, rather, a debate that has profound implications for whether and how we proceed in our quest to reshape the human experience” (632). *The Little Mermaid*, reinforces ‘othering’ and a hierarchical construct of society which places normative ability over unique potentiality. Ariel ultimately triumphs over being mute by regaining her voice, being unable to walk by being bestowed with a permanent set of working legs and being trapped in a sub-normative existence under the sea by being accepted as a human woman worthy of making a princess.

The version of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid: The Musical*, first produced in 2008, also triumphs over the normative status-quo, but the musical takes a much more active stance on how the normative body should be viewed and valued by audiences. *The Little Mermaid: The Musical* self-consciously takes on the effort to “reshape the human experience,” moving beyond the satirical critique of disability that is anchored in the film version. The remake of *The Little Mermaid* for Broadway not only revitalized a beloved Disney classic for a new generation of

Disney enthusiasts, it also reimagined Ariel as an empowered character whose (dis)abilities are displayed in a positive and progressive light.

Of the new songs included in the musical, perhaps “Beyond My Wildest Dreams” best encompasses the interiority of Ariel’s character. In the film, viewers are not privy to the majority of Ariel’s interiority; there is no narrator to fill in the gaps between Ariel’s thoughts and actions, nor illuminate the gravity of Ariel’s sacrifices and triumphs. Although Ariel does frequently sing alone in the film, the lyrics are often utilized to voice Ariel’s fantasies of joining the human world; they do not depict her thought processes or relativity. “Beyond My Wildest Dreams,” on the other hand, is nothing but interiority. In a bold move, Disney introduces a song sung by the mute Ariel shortly after arriving in Prince Eric’s palace. There is absolutely no ambiguity in the song as to whether or not we are getting Ariel’s thoughts straight from the source, as we are privy to the thoughts that Ariel is physically incapable of expressing at the given time. This creates an intimacy between audiences and Ariel that is not possible given the confines of the film medium.

Furthermore, this intimacy is enhanced because although the choreography of this song includes servants trying to avoid the overly enthused Ariel as they go about their work, they cannot hear, and therefore not comprehend her actions. Unlike in the film where Ariel is frequently concerned that someone will overhear her longings for the human world and report her fantasies to her father, here Ariel is free to fully express herself without the fear of reproach. At the same time, this scene does dual work to remind viewers of the difficulties of the mute community to communicate with and be understood by others. It is obvious by the facial expressions and physical responses of the passing servants that they find Ariel’s behavior bizarre; however, the audience can perfectly relate to her enthusiasm. As a result, the audience is able to more clearly understand Ariel and experience the authenticity of her awe and excitement.

The scene illustrates to audiences that people in the mute community are not unresponsive or intellectually incapable of processing their environment, but instead fully

engaged and capable in their own right. If anything, Ariel comes off as ultra-observant and fully self-aware in this scene. As she follows the servants, fascinated by their various trays of commonplace items, she sings, “Gazing 'round, it's like, to die! / Just seeing it feels so good / I'd scream if I only could” (“Beyond My Wildest Dreams”)! Ariel’s claim that “it’s like, to die” may seem extreme, but not if we consider that in a way a part of Ariel’s identity (as a mermaid) had to die in order for her to walk amongst the humans in their form. Unlike in the film where Ariel comes off as awkward and unsure of herself in the palace, here we can see that Ariel is overjoyed by the results of her bargain at this point. She claims, “Just seeing it feels so good,” and goes as far to say, “I’d scream if only I could!” By highlighting the words “feels so good,” the audience is reminded that Ariel still fully feels all her experiences. A common misconception is that (dis)abled individuals do not have the ability to process both physical and emotional feelings to the same degree as individuals who are able-bodied. However, just after Ariel’s feelings are validated, the audience is reminded by the line “I’d scream if only I could!” that Ariel is limited in expressing her feelings to others by her (dis)ability.

However, that is not to say that Ariel is not given a new means by which to express herself in the musical version of *The Little Mermaid*. The song “One Step Closer,” sung by the far more sympathetically written version of the film’s Prince Eric, highlights Ariel’s abilities to express herself through body language. This concept is first introduced by Ursula in the song “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” which is sung in both versions, when Ariel is concerned about how she can attract Prince Eric without her voice. Ursula minimalizes Ariel giving up what she obviously considers to be her most powerful feature saying, “You'll have your looks. . . your pretty face. . . and don't underestimate the power of body language!” The implication by Ursula is sexual, although her words may go over the heads of younger audiences, adult viewers recognize that Ursula is implying that Ariel should seduce Prince Eric using her body. Although

this scene had obvious anti-feminist connotations, it is also ableist. Ursula is implying that with a nice pair of legs (in addition to her face), Eric will be unable to resist her. Furthermore, this specialized attention on Ariel's newly acquired physical attributes reiterates the ableist misconception that people with (dis)abled bodies are not attractive to the able-bodied, or normative, population and therefore not capable of sexuality or romance.

However, "One Step Closer" completely upends this exploitation of Ariel's body and reestablishes her agency as a (dis)abled individual. This song focuses on Prince Eric teaching Ariel to dance (he of course does not know that she's just barely begun to walk) and opens with him explaining the emphasis of dance to Ariel saying, "Who needs words? Dancing beats small talk any day. It's the way your feet smile. Or laugh. It lets you say so many things." In the musical, Eric is approachable; he doesn't struggle to connect with Ariel but meets her on her level and helps her to express herself physically in a non-sexual manner. While this scene could be interpreted as a reinforcer of the (dis)abled body as asexual, or removed from heteronormative sexuality, I argue that Eric's innocent intimacy with Ariel counteracts any assumption that he is not physically attracted to her. Unlike many able-bodied individuals who feel uncomfortable interacting with the (dis)abled body, Eric fully embraces Ariel, pulling her body to his and embodying for audiences the romantic nature of their chemistry through wholesome "body language," including moments of interlaced fingers and chest-to-chest intimacy, which is traditionally appropriate of the waltz.

Furthermore, Eric encourages the initially timid Ariel, not only with his body, but with words of support, singing, "Just let your emotions tell your body what to do/ See how much a single gesture can reveal!" He continues to encourage her, emphasizing that with "ev'ry little step/ Ev'ry single step" she is "Is one step closer/ To saying what [she] feel[s]/... to being

understood.” But does this analogy apply only to the specifics of Ariel’s dilemma or does this song speak to a bigger discourse on interactions with the (dis)abled?

I would argue that “One Step Closer” exemplifies Disney’s commitment and progress towards more accurately depicting (dis)ability in their productions whilst simultaneously challenging audience members to reevaluate their biases towards the (dis)abled community. As the song and dance clearly show, Prince Eric does not consider Ariel to be disabled, but differently-abled. This is emphasized in the line, “Soon as you surrender, what’s inside will sweep on through /As the boundaries between us disappear!” which has dual applications to both Ariel’s *and* Eric’s mentalities. On the surface level, Eric’s words seem to serve as reassurance to Ariel that it’s safe to “surrender” to the music and embrace the experience. However, these words could also reflect Eric’s thought-process behind finding a way to connect to Ariel. Could it not, also, be possible that Eric too had to surrender to a different way of thinking that was outside the norm? And that by doing so, the “boundaries between [them] disappear?”

The musical differs dramatically from the film in that Ariel is not the one giving up everything to achieve happiness with Prince Eric. Unlike the flat, and mostly unrememberable character of Eric from the film, the musical Eric is sensitive and conscious of his own positionality as an able-bodied man. He does not expect Ariel to change for him but falls in love with her as she is and is more than happy to not only accommodate her but realizes that their connection has the ability to become stronger than it would have been had her (dis)ability not been a factor. Although dancing and disability are not traditionally associated with one another, the musical conveys that Eric considers dancing to be an additional way to connect to Ariel because of the specifics of her (dis)ability, not a last-ditch effort to accommodate her because traditional means were not possible. Eric reassures Ariel that, “Dancing is a language that is felt instead of heard/ But it says much more than language ever could.” In the concluding stanza of

the song, Eric not only validates Ariel's means of expression, which is directly informed by her (dis)ability as a mute but emphasizes that there are inherent benefits to alternative means of communication.

As if this were not enough proof of the development of Prince Eric's character the scene directly following the song "The Contest" solidifies his appreciation of Ariel for her unique abilities. During the scene, six princesses sing to Eric and he is supposed to pick one to marry based on their voice. After the final princess sings, Eric is obviously dejected and looks expectantly for Ariel, who bursts in at the last moment to enter herself into the contest. As soon as she is spotted, Grimsby, who is Eric's legal guardian, cautions her, "For heaven's sake, child --- you mustn't." His ableist attitude reflects that of many members of the able-bodied community: Ariel "mustn't" even try to sing for Eric, but instead accept the fate resigned to her due to her disability which renders her mute. However, the audience, many of who are able-bodied, are unanimously rooting for Ariel. That is because of the established connection the audience has with Ariel. The audience has seen Ariel's sacrifices and struggles; they want her to triumph. They no longer identify Ariel as a "poor, lost child," a sentiment first attributed to her by Ursula and then echoed by Grimsby after Ariel dances for Eric; instead, the audience views Ariel as a strong, young, women who has the agency to pursue her dreams.

Prince Eric, likewise, recognizes Ariel's efforts *and* appreciates them. When Grimsby tries to silence Ariel, Eric silences him, "Shhh! Wait, Grimsby. Be quiet, and listen! Go ahead, Ariel!" By doing so, Eric uses his positionality as an able-bodied man in a position of power to empower Ariel and give her the opportunity to represent herself. After Ariel dances, it is Grimsby that feels dejected. He expresses remorse that Eric hasn't found someone to love. Eric replies, "Perhaps, I have. I've just been too blind to see it." It is interesting that Eric uses the word "blind." Although the phrase is a bit cliché, in this moment Eric gives the phrase new relevancy.

Although Grimsby has a normative body, his bias is what ‘blinds’ him and makes him incapable of seeing Ariel’s true value. While Grimsby stares at the couple in disbelief, Eric, on the other hand, is able to fully see, and accept, Ariel. Although Ariel believed she needed to alter her appearance to be accepted by Eric, it is her (dis)ability which allows Eric to finally see who she truly is. Unlike in the film, in the musical, Eric inevitably falls in love with Ariel because of her (dis)ability, not in spite of it. By referencing a (dis)ability here, and its metaphorical relevancy to impact his life, Eric normalizes (dis)ability and shows that no one is exempt from having moments when they are not ‘able’ to see clearly.

Grimsby, however, isn’t buying it. Aghast, he contests, “But that’s impossible, she didn’t utter a sound.” Grimsby, in actuality, is the one who is experiencing a moment of ‘blindness;’ he is unable to see past Ariel’s (dis)ability and to recognize her worth. Like ableist ideology, Grimsby is holding Ariel to a set of expectations that she cannot possibly meet, but that are also completely arbitrary. Many standards of society that are used to measure ‘ability’ are likewise arbitrary. Instead of gauging a person’s ability as a whole, they are predetermined standards that isolate abilities in the body and favor those that possess a standard norm. However, Prince Eric represents the portion of the able-bodied population that recognizes that ability cannot be measured by static methods; Eric’s interactions with Ariel invite audiences to embrace alternative conceptions of the body as valid and appreciate their communicative potential.

Prince Eric questions Grimsby’s closed-minded views of communicative connectivity saying, “No? Well, that’s funny. Because I heard every single note, as clear as a bell. That must mean something, old boy.” Eric not only shuts down Grimsby’s protests, but also diminishes it as something that is comical. He views his and Ariel’s connection to be so obvious that Grimsby’s inability to see her worth implies that Grimsby is the person who is lacking in ability to see the couple’s potential. Furthermore, when Eric tells Grimsby, “That must mean something,” the

audience is also being instructed to take note of the validity of their “clear as a bell” ability to connect despite her (dis)ability. By referring to Grimsby as “old boy,” Eric establishes that Grimsby’s ableist way of defining Ariel’s capabilities is itself a “disability,” which stops him from being capable of fully comprehending her merit as an individual regardless of having a (dis)ability. When Grimsby concedes that “perhaps it does” mean something after all, his decision to reconsider his evaluation of ability symbolizes a hope for the future where people are not marginalized and oppressed by their misunderstood and underrepresented (dis)abilities.

The conclusion of the play echoes these sentiments. Unlike in the film where Ariel is absorbed into Eric’s world and lives ‘happily-ever-after’ as a human, furthering the thought-process introduced by Ursula that Ariel would be better off if she traded her identity as a mermaid for the body of a human, in the musical Ariel and Eric compromise by redefining the normative body; their version of ‘happily ever after’ upends normative societal expectations of romantic intimacy. Although Ariel does keep her human form, she does not have to deny her identity as coming from and belonging in the ocean, which represents the alternative reality of social experience relegated to disabled individuals to alienate them from mainstream society; the couple decide they will live on a ship, not on land, which is something that they both realize they truly want. In essence, this decision marks not just a moment of validation for Ariel in terms of her mermaid origins, but for all merfolk, or people of non-normative bodies. Eric acknowledges the importance of Ariel’s unique subjectivity and longs, not to elevate her from her previous status, but to embrace her culture.

To further their unity, in the final song, titled “Finale,” the ensemble sings, “And now at last / Love has surpassed / Each tribulation / Mermaid and Man / Finally can/ Join and be one.” These added lyrics do not appear in the finale of the film version. By distinguishing that Prince Eric and Ariel are both different, but also one and the same, the musical concludes with a strong

emphasis on the theme explored throughout the second act as their romance develops; despite “each tribulation” imposed upon them by society and circumstance, their “love has surpassed” oppressive ableist expectations. When they sing to one another that they are, “part of your world,” the implication is not that Eric and Ariel now have the ability to move between each other’s worlds, but that they have eliminated the barrier between them; their unity represents a truly shared world, with equal access for all.

With the previously established framework of the ableist ideology at work in *The Little Mermaid* we can now explore the underwater world of *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory* with more transparency and evaluate the ways in which these works are representative of a conscious effort to actively amend the harmful misrepresentations of the (dis)abled person and community in Disney’s earlier ocean-oriented film. Even though the ocean environment plays a role in *The Little Mermaid* as a plot device by allowing Ariel to transcend from the water to the world of the humans, the lack of (dis)ability present amongst the merfolk implies that their underwater existence is not representative of a self-sustained community in which unique abilities are valued.

“Just Keep Swimming [Together]”: Reinforcing a Communal Concept of (Dis)Ability

In the *Finding* films, however, the oceanic environment is essential in crafting an alternative environment in which unique abilities, that would be impossible to replicate on land, flourish, creating a self-reliant community in which members are able to work together because their unusual abilities are assets. Although (dis)ability is certainly present in *The Little Mermaid*, it does not foreground the plot, nor directly impact the aquatic community within the film. While Ariel certainly does experience the effects of trying to achieve success as a (dis)abled individual, her struggle is primarily motivated by her desire to obtain Prince Eric’s love, not embrace the abilities she does have and prove her worth as a mermaid. However, in both *Finding Nemo* and

Finding Dory, the ability to achieve success in daily life is exemplified not only by the main characters in the films, but by supporting characters as well. The fact that virtually all characters in these films co-exist with one another effectively, despite (dis)ability, suggests that within the realm of the communities constructed within the films, normative ability is not a defining factor of social inclusion and personal success.

Unlike the examination of *The Little Mermaid*, which focused primarily on redefining the merits of the (dis)abled body within the confines of romantic relations, by examining the *Finding* films we are able to see the way in which the normative body and abilities of the (dis)abled body are being redefined in relationship to the community at large. Although the *Finding* films do not emphasize romantic relationships as many Disney films do, the lack of focus on the development of a couple allows the main characters to foster a variety of relationships within the community which challenge and redefine their beliefs of their own abilities and others. The remainder of this essay will explore the ways in which the *Finding* films explore the merits of the multi-faceted, (dis)abled Nemo and Dory who are not a burden to society, but an asset to their community, and whose strengths challenge, and ultimately reshape, their parents' and other community members' ableist ideologies.

Perhaps one of the most essential aspects of community-building begins with parent-child interactions, which are explored heavily throughout the plot of the *Finding* films. Although Nemo and Dory are the primary protagonists of the films, neither film begins solely with these characters. Both *Finding* films begin with Nemo's and Dory's parents interacting with their children. By presenting the parental figures from the start, both Nemo and Dory are immediately paired against the older generation, as they struggle to assert their capabilities and challenge outdated ableist ideologies that condemn them as (dis)abled, and, therefore, assumed as dysfunctional members of society in need of supervision, regulation, and protection.

During the opening scene of *Finding Dory* we delve into a very different alternative

experience than *The Little Mermaid*, which features a child version of Dory, the lovable, overly-helpful blue tang (first introduced to audiences in *Finding Nemo*) who suffers from short-term memory loss. She, and her parents, Jenny and Charlie, are practicing playing hide-and-go-seek in an attempt to teach Dory, through positive reinforcement, how to interact socially with peers.

While this scene is instantaneously endearing and may seem innocent enough in nature as it works to establish a familial intimacy between Dory and her parents, the underlying concept lays the groundwork for the theme of inclusion that is explored throughout the film.

Like many people who suffer from intellectual disabilities, it becomes apparent that Dory struggles with interacting socially with peers. The scene opens with complete blackness to accompany the high-pitched voice of young Dory introducing herself. The first image shown is a forward-facing angle which highlights Dory on a plain backdrop of sand and kelp, essentially drawing the audience's attention solely to her and giving her a sense of isolation. Dory then explains her condition to the best of her childish abilities, "I suffer from short-term memory loss." The camera then switches its focus to her parents, who represent the viewpoint of the audience. They are both clapping enthusiastically and uttering expressions of encouragement such as, "That's exactly what you say!," in an attempt to build Dory's self-esteem. Although the family is swimming in the same vicinity of one another, the backdrop behind Dory's parents is one of color and vibrancy. Additionally, a light, apparently shining down from the water's surface, is seen behind Dory's parents. In this opening scene the use of both dialogue and backdrop techniques create an environment where Dory's condition has already both isolated her and placed her in a position where she is forced to look out, along with the audience, on a vibrant world that she longs to be a part of.

After their initial praise, the parents initiate a game of hide-and-seek in which they will "pretend to be the other kids" and Dory has the opportunity to search for them. In her enthusiasm

to play, but her lack of understanding of what her parents are trying to accomplish in terms of role-playing a social scenario with Dory's peers, Dory swims forward saying, "Okay, Daddy." Her father quickly corrects her, putting up a fin to block her path and saying, "No, no. Not Daddy, I'm the nice fish that wants to be your friend, okay?" Although here Charlie is depicted as a loving father who is trying to help his daughter attain social skills, the visual cues in this simple scene, on the other hand, furthers the depiction of Dory's exclusion from society.

This exclusionary behavior leads to both the child and the parents of the child feeling stigmatized and therefore trying more desperately to assimilate to normative social culture. In this instance, Charlie wants has devised a version of acceptable behavior for Dory to be able to 'pass' as socially competent amongst her peers, which includes her adhering to a standard of roleplaying in which her father's identity is shifted to that of "the nice fish that wants to be [her] friend." However, Dory appears to not capable of making this mental leap due to her intellectual (dis)ability, which prevents her from being able to retain the necessary information long enough to allow her to participate in a roleplaying scenario in which she must 'forget' that her father is her father momentarily. However, I argue that it is because Dory is such a young child, not because of her (dis)ability, that she struggles to perform the rules of the game that her father insists must be maintained. Ironically, by Dory's father asking her to suspend her belief that he is her father, he is exacerbating her (dis)ability, not lending her the support needed to overcome the memory challenges that she faces.

Unfortunately, Charlie's desire to help his daughter to assimilate further widens the gap between Dory and her peers. However, Charlie's desire to integrate Dory effectively into society is not inherently his own; many parents of children with (dis)abilities likewise feel pressure to have their children be accepted socially. This is a direct result of what sociologist Erving Goffman coined 'courtesy stigma' in 1963. Courtesy stigma is loosely defined as the process in

which the social stigma of disability, which includes the ‘othering’ of disabled individuals, is transferred to the able-bodied individuals who closely associate with the disabled person (Goffman). More recently, research published in the *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, suggests that courtesy stigma has special relevancy to parents, who do not associate with children with (dis)ability by choice, but instead by means of fulfilling the social obligation of parenting. The article "Understanding the Experience of Stigma for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Role Stigma Plays in Families' Lives" details how “parent–child relationships in the context of disability stigma” in terms of “noting that parents struggle to both embrace a connection with their child and at the same time wish to detach themselves from a “spoiled social identity” as a result of their child’s diagnosis” (Kinnear, Sydney, et al. 943). In this instance, the term ‘spoiled’ is not used to describe an individual who has gotten more than they deserved, but instead implies that these parents’ social identities have been ruined due to the stigma they experience through their close association with their (dis)abled children. The article suggests in an effort to ‘detach themselves,’ parents, like Charlie, force socialization on their children due to their own discomfort at being stigmatized and that their efforts to assimilate are communicated in a way that not only hinders their children’s actual progress into the ‘normative’ social experience, but isolates their children further, both from peers and their own family.

This concept can be seen in the way in which the tension between Dory and her parents is shot. The camera angle during this scene is set behind Dory, so that we are looking through her viewpoint as she approaches the vibrant world of her parents and is abruptly halted from entering. In this case, the rules of her parents’ particular version of hide-and-go-seek (calling her parents by the right terms) must be met before Dory can enter into their sphere and begin to search for them. This interaction reflects the way in which society often ostracizes people with disabilities from social inclusion, even when attempting to accommodate them by better

preparing them for the experience. In many instances, children with disabilities are barred from interacting socially due to an inability to interact within the governing guidelines or rules of appropriate social behavior. For example, many children with developmental disabilities, like Dory, struggle to understand the social differences in interactions between peers and teachers, versus family members.

However, despite her confusion, Dory is ever compliant and eager to please. She turns back to her sparse environment and shuts her eyes to begin counting. The longer Dory's eyes are closed the more difficult it becomes for her to count. After only having four digits successfully counted, she becomes distracted, and forgets the task at hand. Although this scene can easily be read as Dory's short-term memory loss causing her to forget the game and thus establishes a basis for just how easy it is for Dory to forget interactions, it also works to illustrate how when Dory is forced to turn away from society and into herself she becomes less capable of mastering the task at hand.

With many intellectual impairments socialization is key, and yet it is often very difficult for children with disabilities to gain inclusion due to being unable to 'perform' social prerequisites. Unfortunately, often people with intellectual impairments are regularly expected to perform certain social tasks before being allowed access to the resources that can actually help them – particularly, in terms of social development at an early age, when socialization is most crucial for all children. For example, many children with Autism struggle socially as a result of sensory processing disorders which leave them feeling overwhelmed due to overstimulation of the brain (Perez Repetto, et. all) In the case of Dory, although her father aimed to help her learn how to interact socially, his actions both overwhelmed her and isolated her from support; thus, exposed her to an environment of isolation in which she could not hope to socially thrive. Like Dory, many children with intellectual (dis)abilities are often excluded for simple breaches of

social norms, such as the inability to count the required number to participate in the fundamentally group-oriented, iconic childhood game of hide-and-seek.

In the case of Dory, as well as many children with intellectual disabilities, the task of counting and adhering to other social norms of the game becomes outside of her grasp; thus, she reorients her focus and begins to process external factors of her environment. Once Dory ‘forgets’ the task at hand, she becomes fixated on her environment. The first element of her environment she notices is the sand below her. Her focalization on the sand is important for several reasons.

For one, it is important to note that when Dory becomes disoriented her first reaction is to look down. The fact that she looks down, as opposed to around, is significant for three reasons. According to mental health researcher Paul Gilbert in his article “The Relationship of Shame, Social Anxiety and Depression: The Role of the Evaluation of Social Rank,” which applies social rank theory to people suffering from mental disorders, “emotions and moods are significantly influenced by the perceptions of one’s social status/rank; that is the degree to which one feels inferior to others and looked down on” (174). Therefore, in the case of Dory, although she is a child, she would still feel influenced to feel shame due to peers, or even her parents, inadvertently ‘looking down on’ her. The concept of ‘looking down’ is interesting because when one is judged by society they are ‘looked down on;’ additionally, when people feel ashamed, they have a natural inclination to look down, just as Dory does. In doing so, Dory physically embodies for the audience the metaphorical expression of ‘looking down’ which has been projected on her.

Finally, it is also important to note that the term ‘looking down on’ also refers to the religious image of a guardian angel, usually a deceased relative, watching over a person, protecting and guiding them. It is important to acknowledge that, although, Dory is not embodying an angel who is looking down upon anything, the act of her looking down demands

an exploration of all associations of the imagery. The idea of Dory, herself, having someone to 'look down on' her is twofold in relationship to her parents. Because of Dory's (dis)ability her parents look down on her abilities even as they attempt to support her, and simultaneously express concern, which is later explored through fear-riddled dialogue, that Dory could not survive if they died and assumed the metaphorical position of 'looking down on her,' which does not have realistic benefits in terms of providing actual protection nor guidance from the afterlife.

Although Dory is too young at this point in her life to fully comprehend the implications of 'looking down,' nor the emotion of shame, it is obvious that she feels guilty and blames herself for the consequences of her condition, which she cannot help, throughout the duration of the film. In *Finding Dory* alone, Dory says, "Sorry," a record number of times. The word "sorry" is scripted in 39 times, with only eight of those lines *not* being spoken by Dory (although, one time Marlin, Nemo's father, apologizes *for* Dory, indicating that he is ashamed of her actions). Dory also apologizes multiple times throughout *Finding Nemo*, but as she is not the central character of that plot she has less screen time.

Guilt and shame are commonly felt emotions in people who suffer from disabilities, even amongst individuals who know that rationally, they are not intentionally causing discomfort or inconvenience to others. This shame is particularly amplified in children who feel ashamed as a result of being socially isolated due to their disability (Kinnear, Sydney, et al. 943). The study "Understanding the Experience of Stigma for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Role Stigma Plays in Families' Lives" found that "emotions of shame, embarrassment, and belittlement are experienced by [people with disabilities]... people use stereotypes and act on emotions to discriminate against individuals in the labeled group excluding them and denying them access to goods and services the society offers to others" (Kinnear, Sydney, et al.). This is to say that although Dory has nothing to be ashamed of, she

experiences shame due to being a product of her environment. Furthermore, because of this, Dory is excluded from the services ‘society offers others,’ which in this case, is the right to engage socially with peers.

However, due to Dory’s downward gaze, she is able to notice the sand below her. The focalization of sand, in particular, is also important because in addition to illustrating a return to the familiar, this is also the audiences’ first exposure during the film into the way in which their world is conveyed as a primarily haptic environment. The haptic environment is an environment in which the sensation of touch is prevalent. In terms of film, a haptic sensation is one which the audience feels upon their skin based on a previous association they have with a sight or sound that is triggered by the visuals or audios of the film. The haptic is primarily used in horror films and has been explored predominantly by scholars who study the way in which the brain is able to allow the body to “feel” sensations on the skin based on visual and auditory cues. To better explain this, scholar Steven Connor poses the question, “Why do we say that things give us the creeps, or that they make our skin crawl, unless it is that we sense a commingling, a commensality, a mimetic charming or fascination of the skin by the movement that it finds so aversive?” in the book *The Book of Skin* which details “the history of skin,” in terms of how humans interact with and process the world through their skin (Connor 247). He answers this puzzling sensory inconsistency by explaining that, “Sensing the crawling taking place over it, the skin itself begins to crawl: it squirms into the shape of an insect or the worm—or rather, the multiple form of the insect or worm—in order to escape the touch of insect or worm” (Connor 247). This concept of ‘being touched’ by film is furthered by scholar Tarja Laine in her article “Cinema as a Second Skin,” in which she argues that the fascination with skin in horror films goes beyond visual fear tactics but aims to make the audience literally ‘feel’ uncomfortable. She claims, “Skin structures our perception beyond the inside/outside division, locating us as

touching and being touched in the cinematic experience” (Laine, 96). To relate this back to *Finding Dory*, although the intent is not to make the audience uncomfortable, the use of the haptic does trigger the audience to ‘feel’ something. The audience is able to more closely relate to Dory, to ‘feel for her’ on a sensual level because the use of the haptic allows them to experience her interactions with the environment on their own bodies.

Dory’s focalization on the sand is worth noting in haptic terms because of how she describes the sand. She says, “I like sand. Sand is squishy.” Although this is just a tiny snippet of characterization that can be easily overlooked, it provides a basis of accuracy and attentiveness to detail in terms of character development. Often people with intellectual (dis)abilities will become texture focused when they feel anxious. In many cases people with Autism will exhibit signs of ‘stimming,’ which is a term that refers to a variety of methods of self-stimulating behavior to help with external processing of factors in their environment. Many common forms of ‘stimming’ including responding to audio stimuli such as music. In fact, later in life it is Dory’s repeated singing of the verse taught to her by her parents, “Just keep swimming,” which serves as an anchor to ground her in the present. However, touching textured objects is also recognized as an expression of ‘stimming,’ as the sense of touch is often heightened in people with disability as other faculties of the body are impaired (Bakan). Dory’s inclination towards the texture, as opposed per say to the visuality of sand, indicates obvious and careful consideration given to the accurate depiction of people with (dis)abilities in this film, even down to minute details of environmental interaction within the film.

Throughout the film we see Dory continually look downwards towards the sand to help stabilize herself. Early on it becomes established that Dory is fond of sea-shells. Part of what works most effectively with people with intellectually disabilities is discovering what does and does not work with an individual in terms of helping them to access and process information. In

Dory's case, her parents realized she was particularly partial to sea-shells, which lay upon the sand, and therefore laid them out as a pathway to help guide her home. In this way, sea-shells are also used as a metaphor for problem solving, in Dory's own special way. Throughout the films, Dory often calms herself by asking, "What would Dory do?" For Dory, thinking in a typical pattern leads to panic and confusion, but when she thinks in a way specific to how her own brain functions, she is able to implement problem solving skills that are effective for her. Just as Dory is able to develop methods which work for her, many people with (dis)abilities likewise develop problem solving methods over time which allow them to integrate into society more easily and, ultimately, make responsible decisions that positively impact their lives.

A 2016 study titled "Role of Anxiety as a Trait and State in Youth with Mild Intellectual Disability: Coping with Difficult Situations" was conducted by mental disorder research Pawel Kurtek and found that, "A higher intensity of anxiety stimulated... defensive activity, especially in the context of ambivalent conflicts, whereas a decrease in state anxiety led to their employing task-focused strategies" (236). This is significant to Dory's character development throughout the film as she becomes increasingly more inclined to employ task-focused strategies to solve her problems, which involve thinking aloud and trusting her instincts, as opposed to defensive responses, such as those she employed in *Finding Nemo*. For example, when we are first introduced to Dory in *Finding Nemo*, she offers to help Marlin find his son, but then tries to evade him before rudely accusing him of stalking her when she forgets that she told him to follow her. However, in *Finding Dory*, she more easily recognizes when she may have forgotten something and seems overall less aggressive as a character when trying to address a difficult or unknown situation by thinking calmly about what she does know and making a decision based off of that information.

It is also important to note this atypical version of thinking is not a lesser form of

processing than normative processing methods and therefore should not inspire shame, but an appreciation of ingenuity. In *Finding Dory* the use of sea-shells works to reimagine Dory's atypical reasoning patterns as positive, by upending the idea that shame is debilitating. Through the use of sea-shells, which are inherently on the sea-floor and thus will always require downward focus in order to view, the dialogue is changed regarding shame. The 'happy ending' of *Finding Dory* is largely in part of Dory's connection with the sea-shells. In her instance, looking down became something that was empowering. As an adult, it allowed her to focus on the task at hand and commit to moving forward, to "just keep swimming" in her own, unique way.

However, Dory's brief mediation on the sand is quickly adverted by a more pressing sensory detail: the playful laughter of other children. This abrupt shift in focus from the personal sensory space to the greater awareness of the community allows the audience to also reorient their focus on Dory's interactions with the human elements of her world. As soon as Dory spots the other children, she begins to move blindly forward as she asks her parents if she "can go play with them." Her parents immediately express concern, calling her name as she moves swiftly forward to join the other children. When we see the children from Dory's point of view they seem happy and carefree. They are chasing one another around in circles. A bright light shines over them, much like the lighting effect on her parents as earlier described. From this perspective, Dory's parents' fear seems excessive. However, as the camera switches angles to show Dory and her parents' faces as they all rush forward, we see the beginnings of a fierce current spiral up the screen. Oblivious to the danger of proceeding, Dory continues to move forward, focused on joining her peers.

Thankfully, Dory's father catches her just before she reaches the current. A close up of the family's faces shows both Charlie and Jenny looking down in terror at the current, while

Dory is still looking longing up at her playful peers. Charlie has Dory's body cradled to him whilst Jenny has one fin outstretched to her daughter, and the other fin is placed between her and the current as a sort of shield. This pose reflects the theme of fear explored throughout the film in terms of parents of children with (dis)abilities being concerned that their children will not be able to survive the harsh environment of the world without their, often physical, protection.

Overwhelmingly, adults with (dis)abilities, even those who have only physical, not mental, impairments, live with their parents long into their adulthood (Braddock, 115-121). Although much research claims this is due to practicality purposes, such as the convenience of having family members provide care, as well as, financial support, alternative research on the psychology of disability suggests that many parents of children with (dis)abilities instill a deep-rooted, though unsupported, fear in their children that they cannot survive outside the protection of their family unit, which is tailored to providing intimate, individualized care (Braddock, 115-121).

It is interesting to note as well that when Dory becomes interested in the other children, she does not ask if she 'may' go and play with them, but if she 'can' play with them. Although this can easily be overlooked as a young child not knowing the difference between the word 'may,' which implies that the person is asking for permission to do something, and the word 'can,' which implies that the person is asking if they are capable of doing something, I argue that the use of 'can' in the place of 'may' is intentional. The fact that Dory is asking if she 'can' play indicates that she does not know if she is capable of playing, or interacting socially, as other children do. Therefore, her parents' overreaction is even more detrimental to her sense of self as it reaffirms that her parents do not believe she is capable of social interaction with her peers.

Although many parents of children with (dis)abilities do not intend to become overbearing moderators in their adult-children's lives, it is the interactions with their children in

the early years of development that impair their children from developing the skills necessary to acclimate to society as self-sustaining adults. Sometimes, it is parents' over-protective natures that cause children with (dis)abilities to become incapable of developing skills that they need to become independent. For instance, Nemo, the young clown fish of *Finding Nemo* who has a physical disability due to injury during fetal development, whom I would argue is representative of a child with the physical symptoms of Cerebral Palsy – a condition in which the brain experiences a trauma during fetal development that often impacts areas such as speech, mobility, and fine-motor skills – also struggles because he is a “weak swimmer” and his father never allowed him to build his strength using his “lucky fin.” It is not until Nemo is in an environment where a fish who has been paralyzed forces him to “swim harder” that Nemo gains confidence in himself and his abilities.

To return to the case of Dory's parents' intervention regarding the overpowering current they fear will sweep her away, after sparing Dory from the fate of the current, her parents attempt to remind Dory, who as we know suffers from short-term memory loss, about the dangers of the current. “Remember, honey,” Jenny says in earnest, “We have to stay away from the undertow.” As these lines are delivered the camera pans out, showing both a foreground and background of kelp, with the family sheltered between them. “Okay, sweetheart,” Charlie chimes in affectionately, “What about the rhyme that we learned?” Although implementing rhyming in both classrooms and families is common practice due to the fun and repetitive nature of rhyming, which helps the memory to retain information through repeated association, this does not seem to be effective in Dory's case (van Goch, Merel M., et al).

In response to her father's rhyme, “We see the undertow; and we say...” Dory enthusiastically blurts out, “Let's go.” Her father corrects her, “No, no. It's: ‘Heck no!’” Dory appears to be actively listening, but when her father suggests she tries again to repeat the rhyme

Dory responds, again enthusiastically, with “There’s the undertow!” She repeats these words as she turns in a circle. When she again faces her parents, and sees the concern etched in their faces, she asks if she has forgotten again. Although they are quick to comfort her, they ultimately dismiss her concern at having forgotten. The dialogue quickly changes to reflect Dory’s fear, which works on a literary level as a premonition or foreshadowing, that she will one day forget her parents and in turn be forgotten by them. Although the fear of not leaving a legacy behind is common amongst people of all cultures, it is particularly prevalent within the (dis)abled community, as the (dis)abled community faces significantly more struggles in terms of obtaining typical benchmarks, such as establishing oneself in an affluent career, marrying, and having children, which imply longevity and success of legacy beyond individual death.

While the audience is ushered on to the next scene, it is important as a literary critic to linger on the duality of the above-mentioned danger of the ‘undertow,’ which presents not only a physical, but also social danger. Although the word undertow traditionally refers to, “A sea-current below the surface of the water, moving in a contrary direction to that of the surface current” (Oxford English Dictionary) and this is undeniably how Charlie uses it when referring to the current he is concerned will sweep his daughter way, the more modern figurative definition of the word also merits discussion. A modern figurative definition of ‘undertow’ can be described as, “An implicit quality, emotion, or influence underlying the superficial aspects of something and leaving a particular impression” (Oxford *Living* Dictionaries). When we consider the connotations of the word “undertow” in this figurative context, what Charlie actually fears as a danger to Dory is the idea that she will be subjected to the emotionally charged environment of ableist ideology; Dory, like viewers, must fight to “just keep swimming.”

Although the character development of both Nemo and Dory as children is crucial to the understanding of the way in which (dis)ability is being presented and overcome in accordance

with personal growth within the community, it is important to first address the way in which the parents, who seem to suffer primarily from anxiety disorders, in the *Finding* films respond to challenges related to their children's (dis)abilities as the plot progresses. Just as with *Finding Dory*, in *Finding Nemo* the audience is first oriented with Nemo through a focus on parenting, although, in this case, the tone is far more sinister. In the opening scenes of *Finding Nemo*, Nemo's father Marlin experiences a horrific, though admittedly traditionally Disney style, tragedy in the form of the death of his wife and offspring when a swordfish attacks their home. Before the attack occurs, Marlin and his wife appear to be infatuated with one another as they observe their offspring and joke about what they should name the multitude of eggs carefully tucked in their underwater home. Marlin, playfully boasts of his ability to provide for his wife, Coral, and their offspring saying, "So, Coral, when you said you wanted an ocean view, you didn't think that we we're gonna get the whole ocean, did you? Huh? [sighs] Oh yeah. A fish can breathe out here. Did your man deliver or did he deliver?" In the moment, Marlin, like many parents who never dream they will have a child with a (dis)ability, is full of confidence as he looks ahead at a promising future he has worked hard to provide for his family.

As their dialogue continues, Marlin, who later in the plot refrains from demonstrating any degree of humor, jokes, "You wanna name all of 'em, right now? All right, we'll name this half Marlin Jr. and then this half Coral Jr. Okay, we're done." His carefree attitude communicates that not only is he is not prepared for tragedy, but completely oblivious of the possibility. He claims, "[Our kids] deserve the best. Look, look, look. They'll wake up, poke their little heads out and they'll see a whale!" However, it is not a whale that passes by their "awesome neighborhood" "with the great schools and the amazing view and all" that "a lot of other clownfish had their eyes on," but a swordfish, an unsuspected predator which dramatically changes Marlin's views on himself, his family, and the environment which he lives.

First, Marlin's ability to parent and provide for his household is called into question before his offspring has even hatched. As the swordfish approaches, he cautions his wife to "get inside the house," insisting that the kids will "be fine." However, Coral refuses to abandon her offspring and charges towards them. The swordfish lunges at her, and his tail knocks Marlin out as he attempts to protect his wife and family. When he comes to, Marlin discovers that his family has been eaten, except for one single egg, which appears cracked. This crack in the egg due to the trauma of the swordfish attack, works to mirror the effects of damage done to the fetus mid-development that impacts people with conditions such as Cerebral Palsy. Just like parents who had no way of knowing their child would experience trauma during development, Marlin is traumatized by the reality of the situation and responds by making the unrealistic, though heartfelt promise "to never let anything happen to" his (dis)abled son, Nemo.

However, this promise is extremely problematic. The plot immediately jumps to Nemo as a young child with a "lucky," underdeveloped fin that makes him a "weak-swimmer," beginning to enter school. His father, who now appears to suffer from symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including extreme anxiety and paranoia, is shown to struggle with the thought of allowing Nemo to attend school. In his enthusiasm, Nemo ends up getting stuck inside of a plant as he swims furiously back and forth to get his father to wake up for school. In response to this, Marlin immediately panics and rushes to Nemo's aide, gasping, "Nemo, don't move! Don't move! You'll never get out of there yourself. I'll do it. All right, where's the break? You feel a break?" Although Marlin is eager to help and protect his son, his response to the situation is troubling. Like many parents of children with (dis)abilities, Marlin's overpowering urge to protect Nemo from himself is debilitating. Instead of Marlin encouraging Nemo to struggle his way out of his predicament, as is generally expected of able-bodied children, he instinctively steps in, insisting Nemo will "never get out of there" himself, without ever giving him the

opportunity to try. The way in which Marlin reaffirms Nemo's lack of ability reinforces the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy placed upon Nemo's abilities; Nemo is told he can't do things for himself so consistently, he is afraid to try.

It is also worth noting that although Nemo's accident is minor, Marlin jumps to the conclusion that he must have broken something. Instead of asking Nemo how he feels, or if he is okay, Marlin asks, "Where's the break?" It is only after Nemo does not respond to that question that Marlin concedes there might not actually be a break and asks, "You feel a break?" Like many parents of children with (dis)abilities, Marlin's first instinct is to assume that his child's condition has worsened. This is problematic because it overemphasizes minor injuries and communicates to Nemo that he is viewed as frail, or easily breakable.

After a thorough inspection of Nemo, Marlin concludes he isn't injured, yet uses the incident as an excuse to imply that perhaps Nemo isn't ready for school. Marlin prods, "Are you sure you wanna go to school this year? 'Cause there's no problem if you don't. You can wait 5 or 6 years." Given that 5 or 6 years is an excessive amount of time to wait for anything, Marlin's extreme hesitation implies that he does not believe Nemo will truly ever be ready to be acclimated into mainstream society and be capable of interacting with his peers. This attitude is very similar to that of Dory's parents in their opening scene in which they are struggling to teach Dory how to interact with her peers.

Both Dory's parents and Nemo's father communicate a fear for how their children will cope with the realities of social life without them in the opening scenes of the films. Although Dory's and Nemo's (dis)abilities are vastly different, both parents seem eager to protect their children whom they fear will not only not be accepted, but also will be incapable of fending for themselves. Much like Dory's parents caution her against the "undertow," Marlin drives home his belief the fact that the outside world is a place to be feared. He asks Nemo before leaving home, "Now, what's the one thing we have to remember about the ocean?," to which Nemo

replies, “It’s not safe.” The fact that Nemo replies promptly and directly implies that this is a topic frequently discussed and overly emphasized by his father; instead of empowering Nemo, his father repeatedly reinforces ableist ideology by indoctrinating Nemo to believe that he is perpetually vulnerable due to his physical disability.

However, as the scene continues it seems as though Disney is satirizing the way in which parents raise their (dis)abled children with excessive caution. Before Marlin swims Nemo to school, he insists they perform a ritual of obsessively checking to make sure the coast is clear. He instructs Nemo much in the same vein of a parent cautioning their child to check both ways before crossing the street, “So, first we check to see that the coast is clear. We go out and back in. And then we go out, and back in. And then one more time--out and back in. And sometimes, if you wanna do it four times--.” This obsessive checking and rechecking resonates with the audience as Marlin coping with the effects of PTSD while also indicating that he is extremely paranoid about something happening to Nemo.

This hyper-vigilance about keeping Nemo safe is further emphasized when they approach the school and encounter traffic. Marlin switches from having a casual conversation to panicking and blocking Nemo’s path shouting, “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on, hold on, wait to cross. Hold my fin, hold my fin.” Although Nemo does stop at his dad’s request, he also questions, “Dad, you’re not gonna freak out like you did at the petting zoo, are you?” Marlin defends himself saying, “Hey, that snail was about to charge.” Although this scene provides humor on a surface level, it also works to establish just how extremely concerned Marlin is for Nemo’s safety. The fact that Marlin “freak[ed] out” about a snail, that he thought was “about to charge,” implies that Marlin, like many parents of children with (dis)abilities, sees danger in every scenario, even when the threat is completely irrational or entirely imagined. However, it is important to remember that Marlin’s misguided fantasies of being Nemo’s fierce protector are exemplified

because Marlin is himself suffering from PTSD and does not appear to be acknowledging that his fears are grounded in his own skewed perspective of the world, not Nemo's inability to cope with real-world situations due to his 'lucky' fin making him such a weak swimmer he couldn't even out-swim a snail.

This sort of projection of (dis)ability is very different from Jenny and Charlie's parenting; although, they too experience intense bouts of fear about Dory's ability to fend for herself. This fear is in part generated by the desire and struggle to conform to a 'normative' family structure in which children are raised to adulthood, at which point they are capable of fending for themselves. However, this is not, and in many cases cannot be, the case for many families in which there is a child with an intellectual (dis)ability. For example, many parents of autistic children fear that their children may not be able to survive without them. These, often legitimate fears, compound with the parents' need to conform to societal expectations and put significant strain on the family dynamics. In the article, "Perceptions of stigma: the parents of autistic children," sociologist David E. Gray claims, "The stress of living with [an autistic child] can affect the psychological well-being of family members as well as generate conflicts among them" (103). To apply this to the *Finding* films, it is easy to see that the stress, or in Marlin's case the anxiety, of raising a child with a (dis)ability takes both a mental and physical toll on the parents, which does indeed generate conflict in terms of the parents projecting their fears onto their children.

While Jenny and Charlie are more justified in their fears for Dory as she grows older, they too allow their fear to dictate their parenting in negative ways that are detrimental to the development of their child. On the night that Dory inevitably does get caught in the undertow and swept away, she overhears her parents discussing her future when they think she's asleep. Her mother voices a common concern amongst parents of children with (dis)abilities, asking,

“What's going to happen to her? ... Do you think she's... that she can make it on her own?”

Although her fears are valid fears that every parent has at some point, these fears are often amplified to enormous proportions in parents of children with (dis)abilities. Jenny, like Marlin, does not believe that her child “can make it on her own.” Also, like Nemo, this attitude is absorbed by Dory, who feels ashamed of the pain she is causing her mother, which she cannot fully comprehend.

In both the cases of Dory and Nemo, it is their reaction to their parents’ lack of belief in their abilities to not only cope, but succeed at life, which spurs them to make decisions that spiral their lives out of control and force them to prove that they can, in fact, “make it on their own.” In Dory’s case, after overhearing her mother voicing her fears, she struggles to process her mother’s emotions, saying, “Mommy... Oh no, don't cry, Mommy. Don't cry.” In her desire, like the desire of many children with (dis)abilities to please their parents by performing feats of ability, Dory decides to make her mother feel better by bringing her a purple shell, which is her mother’s favorite. Using the method that her father taught her of flipping the shell upside down with her tailfin, Dory attempts to free the shell from the sand. However, in doing so she ventures dangerously close to the undertow and is tragically swept away. Dory’s actions exemplify the way in which a lack of belief in the actual abilities of children with (dis)abilities often leads to heartbreak. As these children struggle to assert themselves beyond their underdefined abilities, they sometimes overextend and suffer serious consequences as a result due to being overly sheltered and unaware of their own capabilities and limitations. Although Dory’s parents only want to make sure that she will be able to survive in the world, it is their fear which spurs Dory to try and prove herself, thus propelling her prematurely into a world that she will be lucky to survive.

Nemo faces a similar decision which propels him into the unknown and away from his overprotective father. In his case, however, he is not trying to reassure his parent of his capabilities, but to openly defy him. After Marlin cautions Nemo multiple times to stay away from “the drop off,” which was ironically one of the selling points for Marlin and Coral selecting their home in the first place, Nemo openly defies him by taking a bet to swim into the open water, beyond the drop off, and touch the “butt,” which is in reality a boat. In the scene leading up to Nemo’s first act of open defiance against his overprotective father, it is important to note that Nemo does not, in fact, actually indicate that he has any intention to venture beyond the drop off. Although he does stray from his instructor with some classmates, Nemo does not play into their peer pressure to venture into the “open ocean.” As the other children dare one another to get closer to the “butt,” Nemo remembers his father’s warning of the dangers of the ocean and hangs back. However, just as he is explaining to his peers, “My dad says it's not safe,” Marlin flies into the scene and effectively stops Nemo from not only making the right choice, but potentially also influencing his new-found peers to likewise make responsible decisions regarding their personal safety.

The camera angle at this moment also reflects the way in which Marlin is isolating Nemo and creating a physical barrier between both the perceived danger of the open ocean and Nemo’s new friends. The camera focuses on Marlin as he cuts between Nemo and his peers and body-checks Nemo away from the edge of the drop off. Nemo’s face shows that he is obviously taken aback by his father’s actions and accusations as Marlin screams in his face, “Nemo, no! You were about to swim into open water! It was a good thing I was here. If I hadn't showed up, I don't know... You can't swim well.” Marlin’s language clearly indicates that he believes Nemo is ‘incapable’ of making the right choices, in addition to being a less than capable swimmer. Furthermore, he also displays his self-appointed hero role as he speculates on what could have

happened if he hadn't "shown up." This is particularly problematic because by appointing himself as the hero, Marlin is able to quickly justify his stalker behavior towards his son. Nemo appears stunned by his father being there at all given that he was on a school fieldtrip which excluded parents; however, his surprise quickly turns to frustration as he attempts to explain that he was not going to follow his friends into the open water. His frustration turns to indignation as a peer explains to his father that Nemo was "too afraid." Although his peers, who at this point have formed a semi-circle around Nemo to demonstrate support, seem to be trying to deescalate the situation, their assumption that Nemo would only refuse to engage in dangerous, potentially self-harmful behavior out of fear pushes him to assert his status as capable in a way that their peer pressure did not.

The scene continues to escalate as Marlin reasserts himself as knowing Nemo's abilities and lack thereof better than Nemo himself. He tells Nemo, "You shouldn't be anywhere near here. Okay, I was right. You'll start school in a year or two." Although school is supposed to be a place for Nemo to grow and develop, his father is unwilling to allow him to do so out of fear and returns to his argument as posed earlier in the film that Nemo simply isn't ready yet to become a part of his community. Furthermore, by telling Nemo he "shouldn't be anywhere near here," he effectively 'others' Nemo from children of his age who do belong in school.

Marlin's fear for Nemo's safety due to his misguided belief that Nemo is incapable of fending for himself is reiterated to the audience when echoed by Nemo himself. Nemo attempts to orient the problem as being situated in his father's psyche, not his physicality by arguing, "No, dad! Just because you're scared of the ocean...." The satirizing of over-protective parenting is reiterated here as Nemo is cut off by his father who disregards the very obvious truth of his own fear being projected onto his son. Instead, Marlin insists what is clear is that, "Clearly, [Nemo is] not ready. And [he's] not coming back until [he is]." He goes even as far as to humiliate Nemo

and crush his self-esteem in front of his peers by telling him publicly, “You think you can do these things but you just can't, Nemo!” Nemo, hurt and angry, tells his father he hates him. Although it may be seen as typical child-ridden angst, Nemo’s complete lack of respect and disdain for his father in this scene indicate the moment in which Nemo stops allowing his father’s ableist assumptions about him to dictate his actions. Because Nemo feels the need to assert his abilities to his peers and openly defy his father, he puts himself in a position where he too is acting, ignorantly, outside of his realm of ability as a result of not knowing where his actual abilities lie due to being continually sheltered by his well-meaning, but ultimately overbearing, neurotic father who is overly obsessed with ensuring his well-being to the point of pushing him to desperation.

Ironically, Nemo’s actual swim to the boat is not captured on film, despite it being an open act of defiance, in open water. This is because the focal point of the scene shifts to being about Marlin and his problems, further satirizing the way in which parents’ concerns often trump the actual needs of their children. After overhearing the argument between Nemo and his father, Mr. Ray, the sting-ray instructor for Nemo’s ‘school,’ asserts himself as an authority figure inquiring, “Excuse me, is there anything I can do? I am a scientist, sir. Is there any problem?” His interruption between father and son and assertion as a scientist is also ironic. In this scene, Mr. Ray represents the sect of society that aligns with the ‘medical model’ of disability and views Nemo’s ‘lack of ability’ as a problem that needs intervention. He asserts himself as a “scientist” and offers to help solve the problem, as though there is some sort of scientific cure for a parent’s ableist ideology projected on their child.

Instead of addressing the actual problem and asking for perspective, Marlin simply acts as though the social disconnect between his son is not relevant to the current situation. He apologizes for the interruption and then justifies the scene he has caused by claiming Nemo “isn't

a good swimmer” and suggesting “it's a little too soon for him to be out here unsupervised.” Mr. Ray responds to Marlin’s concern of Nemo not being properly supervised by insisting, “Well, I can assure you, he's quite safe with me,” to which Marlin replies, “Look, I'm sure he is. But you have a large class and he can get lost from sight if you're not looking. I'm not saying you're not looking....” What is particularly ironic about this scene is that as the two adults ‘responsible’ for Nemo argue about who is or isn’t qualified to watch him, Nemo is venturing into the open ocean without either of them noticing. This set of dialogue satirizes the way in which parents of children with (dis)abilities often overlook truly relevant information regarding their child while obsessing over their care. It also makes a social commentary on the way in which school systems are not adequately staffed to properly care for (dis)abled children due to their large class size and lack of individual attention to students.

In both of the *Finding* films, Disney satirizes the way in which well-meaning parents impose ablest ideology on their (dis)abled children. Unfortunately, it is this repeated narrative of the fear of inability which leads to the children finding themselves in tragic situations and left to face the world alone. Ironically, both Nemo and Dory struggle not because they are (dis)abled, but because they are children and are underprepared to face the world due to their age and inexperience. However, it is because of their (dis)ability, which has always forced them to ‘think-outside-the-box’ to be successful, that they are both able to ultimately fend for themselves for the duration of time they are separated from their parents.

When Dory is first separated from her parents, she is spun through the pipe-lines of the Jewel of Morro Bay, Marine Life Institute in California, and is spit out into the unfamiliar ocean. Although she is frightened, she calls out for help and is approached by a fish couple. Dory introduces herself and asks for help very calmly. Her demeanor indicates that her parents have probably taught her how to ask for help if she is ever lost. She appears concerned, but not frantic.

However, her demeanor shifts when the fish ask her if she knows where her parents are. Dory appears confused, then concerned and admits, “Um, I can't remember.” The fish, who appear concerned for her behalf, are encouraging saying, “We'll look around... uh, are any of these fish your parents?” Dory circles around, an action which mirrors her playing hide-and-seek with her parents in the opening scene. When she looks at the fish again, her face lights up and she says, “Hi, I'm Dory. Can you please help me?” The couple share a concerned look and inform her that she just said that. Dory's facial expression completely changes and she begins to express deep worry and confusion as she stutters, “I did? I'm sorry. I suffer from short-term memory loss.” The fish are confused by her statement; instead of trying to console her by telling her it's not her fault and that she has nothing to be sorry for, they literally turn their backs on her.

By turning their back on the young (dis)abled Dory, the couple exemplifies the us vs. them dichotomy in which when Dory's (dis)ability is made apparent; the couple turns away from her, thus alienating her, whilst also claiming they want to help her if she'll just wait a minute and let them do it on their own time. Although obviously distressed, the female fish says to Dory in a comforting tone, “Well, you just wait here one second, okay sweet-pie?” However, as she begins to turn away from Dory, her panic at the situation becomes apparent as she whisper-shouts, “Stan, Stan!” He replies likewise irritated saying, “What, what?” The female fish exclaims, “What do we do? The poor thing is lost!” By asking, “What do we do,” the fish automatically assumes responsibility for Dory after learning about her (dis)ability. This fish exemplifies one side of the extreme in which when an able-bodied person sees a person with a (dis)ability in ‘crisis’ and they believe that they are personally responsible for ‘solving their problems’ or ‘doing something about it.’ This sort of thought process is dangerous because it implies that the able-bodied population is inherently responsible for their (dis)abled counterparts, and likewise

implies that the (dis)abled population is incapable of solving their own problems. This ideology establishes the (dis)abled individual as a burden and thus furthers the us vs. them dichotomy.

The second part of her statement is also problematic because of the way in which she decides to classify Dory during her time of crisis. When she's emphasizing to her partner that they need to help Dory, she exclaims, "The poor thing is lost!" By calling Dory a 'poor thing,' the fish completely others her and paints her as a person who needs to be pitied. Although this statement is fairly common, it is extremely demeaning. By referring to Dory as a "thing," she strips her of her humanity; Dory is no longer a person in her eyes, but a "thing," a problem that she now feels obligated to address. Furthermore, by describing her as "poor," the fish implies that Dory is not only in need of pity, but also in need of charity as "poor" is also an indicator of having little resources. Although, many people within the (dis)abled community live self-supporting lives, the (dis)abled community as a whole is often criticized for being too needy and therefore burdening able-bodied members of society.

According to the study, "Caring for disabled older adults with musculoskeletal conditions: A transactional model of caregiver burden, coping strategies, and depressive symptoms," "When [people] perceive that the demands of the person–environment relationship exceed their supportive resources, they tend to feel stress or burden in multiple domains of their daily lives, including exhaustion with playing social roles, physical health problems, emotional burnout, lack of personal development, and limited free time" (Lu, Nan, et al). Although Dory is neither an adult, nor does she suffer from a physical impairment, Stan seems to immediately view Dory as a burden and, particularly, one that is taxing on his "limited free time." He seems irritated and as if he cannot be bothered with Dory, nor her dilemma. He replies to his partner questioning what they should do with an unconvincing, "I don't know, well I mean, eh," which

clearly implies that Stan does not want to be burdened with helping Dory, despite her being a young child who has lost her parents.

Furthermore, Stan gives Dory, a leery, side-ways glance, which further communicates to the audience that he is not viewing Dory in a favorable light. All his body language indicates that he sees Dory, despite being a young child, as an outsider and possibly dangerous. This is a drastic change from when he first approached her and wanted to help her before her (dis)ability became visible. As a response to his stand-offish response, his partner becomes even more insistent, shouting, “Well, we have to do something! She can't remember a thing!” Although the female fish does want to help Dory whilst Stan does not, her reasons are clearly misguided. In these lines she re-emphasizes the word “thing” two more times, further establishing Dory’s connection to being something, as opposed to someone, in her eyes. She also reiterates that they “have to do something,” which shows how the pressure of her self-appointed responsibility is already beginning to cause her stress. Although, the path to helping a small child find an authority member that can take her back to her parents should be obvious, instead of actually taking action, she continues to fret about feeling obligated to take the action. Likewise, often in the (dis)abled community many people do not receive the help they need because the people who could provide it assume that they need too much and psych themselves out from offering any assistance at all (Lu, Nan, et al).

In the female fish’s following line, she expresses this sort of tendency to exaggerate the symptoms of a particular (dis)ability. She exclaims, “She can’t remember a thing,” but how does she know what Dory does or doesn’t remember? The only thing that Dory has been asked that she doesn’t remember is where her parents are, therefore it is impossible for the fish to know “she can’t remember a thing.” However, this sort of over-exaggeration is common and extremely detrimental. Because the fish assumes Dory’s (dis)ability is worse than it actually is, she also

makes her circumstances seem more extreme than they are, which also enlarges her self-appointed responsibility to “do something” about it. In many instances, even doctors, like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, are guilty of making assumptions of just how severe a person’s (dis)ability is and insisting on treatment that is not necessarily needed.

Furthermore, by claiming Dory “can’t remember a thing,” the fish implies that Dory is a foreigner to the area who doesn’t have any idea how she got there or what she is doing. This ‘othering’ is echoed by Stan who responds with, “She could come from anywhere.” While this seems like an odd comment to make regarding a young child in need of help who is obviously lost, it shows just how strongly Stan believes her to be ‘other,’ or foreign, because of her (dis)ability. Stan shows obvious bias after her (dis)ability is revealed. He no longer feels comfortable around her and begins to question her origins, implying that she is perhaps untrustworthy or dangerous due to being potentially ‘from a bad neighborhood.’ However, his partner does not directly respond to this comment and instead redirects the conversation to be about them and their relationship saying, “Wow. You are... you are no help today.” This comment implies that they have been having issues prior to Dory’s appearance and now they are using Dory as a device to discuss their own problems. This interaction is eerily reminiscent of the way in which issues outside of medical needs are often projected onto people with (dis)abilities due to the fears, concerns, and preoccupations of their caregivers or family members.

When the couple’s attention finally returns to Dory, they discover she has disappeared. While the female fish appears worried, Stan’s immediate response is to make a condescending comment which implies what could they have expected from a fish like that. Stan says, “And she’s gone,” with virtually no remorse. He does not seem to be upset that his exclusionary actions have caused a young, lost fish to swim off into the ocean alone to seek help elsewhere. Although the couple do ‘snap to’ and begin to call Dory’s name and search for her, Stan makes one last

troubling comment, saying, "That's not good." Although this line could be read simply as Stan stating the obvious, his attitude continues to mirror the judgements that have been made consistently throughout this short scene regarding Dory's person, circumstance, and (dis)ability. Stan's comment reminds the audience of the couple's social distance from Dory and their inability to actually help her; instead of helping, they simply turn their backs on the child and make judgmental commentary based on a fleeting first impression, inspired by the discovery of her (dis)ability.

This scene, however, also serves a dual function to illustrate to audiences the resilient nature of Dory's personality, despite, or perhaps because of, her (dis)ability. As her narrative continues, we see Dory grow up from a young child to a young woman as she travels the ocean both searching for and slowly forgetting her parents. Throughout her travels, Dory encounters a variety of individuals within the community who have varied reactions to her (dis)ability, mirroring the ways in which different individuals within a society respond to interacting with a person with (dis)abilities. For example, in the following scene we see Dory approach a much larger, older fish and try to stutter through her narrative, only to be completely ignored. She then attempts to talk to a collection of sea urchins, who listen to her story until she begins to explain that she has short term memory loss, at which point they fold in on themselves, effectively shutting her out. This is followed by Dory going through a phase where she is completely disconnected from society. First, she is seen huddling under a rock, crying through her family's mantra of 'just keep swimming,' and then she is seen coming to the water's surface and looking up into the abyss of the universe, utterly alone.

We then quickly change to seeing Dory interact with a slightly more optimistic side of humanity; however, she is now a teenager and her memory loss regarding her parents is more fixed in her mind. As she swims alongside a large fish who indicates he's willing to help her find

her parents, she has to admit she has ‘forgotten’ where she saw them last. The next community member we see her approach is a sword-fish swimming alongside peers who offers to let Dory swim with them. Dory replies that it is the “nicest offer” she’s gotten “all day,” but declines because she is looking for “someone.” Next, we see her swimming alongside a school of dolphins, holding her head and saying, “Can’t remember, can’t remember,” over and over again. As Dory interacts with these various individuals, she seems increasingly more and more stressed as she continues to forget her parents. The community members, however, seem to take a ‘it’s not my problem’ approach and although they sometimes give her an audience to voice her concerns, they do not seem particularly invested in helping her.

The next time we see Dory, she is a young adult and seems to have entirely forgotten her parents. Ironically, she appears much happier, although overly enthusiastic. Her cheerful attitude as she approaches schools of fish tends to scare them away despite her friendly demeanor. Her change in attitude from intense worry to lighthearted and carefree indicates that as Dory’s memory worsened, she actually became happier. This phenomenon of being increasingly happier with the less information and memories you are able to retain is actually fairly common amongst intellectual (dis)abilities such as Autism, Angelman Syndrome, and Alzheimer’s. In fact, some of the symptoms of people ‘suffering’ from Angelman Syndrome are “any combination of frequent laughter/smiling; apparent happy demeanor; [and an] easily excitable personality” (Williams). Dory, likewise, appears to be overly enthusiastic, happy, and eager to please during the time in which she has forgotten her parents. This depiction of Dory begs the questions of whether or not people with (dis)abilities in society would be happier if there was a way in which they forget their ‘problems?’

This question becomes further complicated when Dory actually does remember her parents. In the beginning of this scene, Dory is assisting Mr. Ray on a field trip when one of the

children asks Dory where she grew up. She begins to become increasingly more and more confused as she attempts to answer the question saying, “Me? Um, I don't know. My family. Where are they?” At this point, Dory begins to turn away from the class, notices them again and asks, “Can I help you? I'm sorry. Did I forget again? You see, I suffer from...” The class cuts her off, playfully finishing, “Short-term memory loss.” Although this scene is endearing and shows that Dory has a positive established relationship with the children, it also illustrates how when Dory does not remember that she does not remember her family she appears to be in the state most commonly described as ‘ignorance is bliss.’ However, when she begins to try and think about her family she becomes distressed. Another child furthers the inquiry, asking, “How can you remember your family if you have short-term memory loss?” Dory collects herself by acknowledging and attempting to answer the child’s inquiry saying, “Good question. See, I can remember some things because well...uh, they make sense. Like, um, I have a family. I know because I've--I must have come from somewhere. Right? Everyone has a family. I may not remember their names and what they look like. And I may not even be able to ever find them again, but, um...what were we talking about?” As this section of dialogue indicates, as Dory begins to think more critically to her association with her family, as opposed to the concept of family, her thought process strays.

However, it is important to note that although Dory does not remember people, she does remember facts. She continues, trying to regain her train of thought and saying, “Mommies and daddies. Right. Why are we talking about mommies and daddies? Oh. Oh! That class. Uh-oh. Why me? Okay. You guys seem a little young, but, um, okay. You see, kids, when two fish love each other...” Although this dialogue is good for a laugh, it also works to better define Dory’s ability to process information. Although Dory struggles to remember people, her memory of facts is a strength that time and time again allows her to be an asset to members of her

community. For example, aside from apparently having the knowledge to explain reproduction, Dory also has retained her ability to speak whale and read, which she learned in childhood. Both of these skills are not possessed by the majority of fish, as indicated by Marlin's shock when he discovers Dory has these capabilities. Therefore, although Dory lacks the ability to remember information that would personally benefit her, she also possesses knowledge which benefits the community as a whole.

To return to the debate on whether or not Dory would be happier being 'ignorant' of what she is missing, after Dory is sucked into the undertow, which mirrors her getting separated from her parents, she remembers where she is from. Once she remembers that her family is out there, she flies into a panic and bolts for the open ocean saying, "MY FAMILY! I remember my family! They're out there somewhere, I have to find them! Guys, you gotta help me, guys! Guys? Hello? Guys, where are you?" Only once she is part way into the open ocean does she realize Nemo and Marlin are not with her. As she turns back to them, Marlin grabs her and pulls her back into the safety of the reef, mirroring his over-protective action of Nemo a year earlier in the same exact location. The two scuffle for a bit as Marlin attempts to convince the frantic Dory that searching for a family she has just come to remember even exists is "crazy." However, Dory is eventually able to convince him by appealing to his sense of empathy asking both Marlin, and the audience, "Please. All I know is that I miss them. I really, really miss them. I didn't know what that felt like. Do you know what that feels like?" The camera cuts from Marlin to Nemo as they look one another in the eye and a look of revelation comes over them. Just as Dory has remembered her family, as Marlin answers on behalf of the audience, "Yes, I know what that feels like;" therefore, the audience is moved to remember their own family and what family and community mean to them, establishing a deep sense of empathy for Dory's loss.

The answer to the question of whether or not Dory is better off being in the state of

‘ignorance is bliss’ is definitively answered when she boldly states, “I don't want to forget this.” This phrase is one that is commonly uttered at a peak moment of awe in a person’s life. It communicates a revelation so great, so life changing, that it deserves to be forever instilled in their memory. Likewise, this dialogue also instructs the audience that this scene, this moment of empathy is something that they too shouldn’t “want to forget.” It is a moment devoid of emphasis on the characters’ (dis)abilities and instead deeply grounded in a common need to love and belong in a community.

Nemo is faced with a similar dilemma during his own journey of having to decide just how much pain and struggle living with his (dis)ability is really worth. After he is abducted and placed in a fish tank in the dentist’s office in Sydney, Australia, Nemo gets himself into a situation that he, and fellow community members believe he cannot get out of. After being frightened by the neurotic, but also snobbish pet-store-bought, dentistry expert fishes, who inspect and clean him after hearing he is from the ocean, Nemo ends up becoming wedged in the tube of the filtration system of the tank. He screams for help, and his new community, rushes to his aide. However, they are stopped by Gill, an ocean outsider himself, instructs them not to touch Nemo. Instead, he crosses to Nemo and gives him instructions on how to get himself out saying, “You got yourself in there. You can get yourself out.” Instead of trying, Nemo tells Gill that he can’t get out due to his “bad fin.” It is important to note, this is the first and only time that Nemo actively voices his “lucky” fin as a negative attribute to himself. However, Gill, who is an (dis)abled himself due to an accident, shows Nemo his battle scars and shredded fin to illustrate that being (dis)abled never stopped him. Nemo follows Gill’s advice and is effectively able to free himself.

According to sociologist David Farrugia, “Resistance to stigma is performative and discursive, enabled as it is produced by power/knowledge” (1014). Therefore, in Nemo’s case, in

order for him to be able to overcome the stigma projected on him by his father and peers of him being physically incapable due to his lucky fin, he must become enabled through knowledge, which will lend itself to power. It is Gill's words which inspire and empower Nemo to believe in himself and his own abilities. By gaining the knowledge that Gill, who also has a physical (dis)ability, does not ever allow his (dis)ability to stop him, Nemo harnesses the power to face his own fears of failure.

This is an important moment for Nemo because, unlike his father who is constantly telling him what he can't do, Gill's belief in his ability is what allows him to likewise believe in his own abilities. It is an important moment in the film as well because it clearly illustrates the way in which, through mentorship, not coddling, Nemo is able to become a capable member of the community. The following night they initiate them into their tank "club," giving him the inclusive pet-name of "Sharkbait" and empowering him to brave the "ring of fire," which is a stream of bubbles from an underwater volcano that he easily masters. However, Nemo has a setback to his newfound confidence at being "able" when an attempt to stop the tank's filtration system goes awry and ends with him having to be rescued by the community before being shredded. Nemo is understandably traumatized by this, but also feels guilt at having let Gill and the rest of the community down. Without the filtration system being stopped by Nemo, who is the only fish with the proper size and ability to wedge a pebble in the gears, Gill's plan for everyone to escape into the ocean cannot be set in motion. However, despite his guilt from failing, Nemo does not have the courage to brave the filtration system again until Nigel, a pelican who brings news of the outside world, tells Nemo of the heroic journey his father has been on to save him. Inspired by his anxiety-ridden father's fearless pursuit, Nemo faces his own fears and attempts to stop the filtration system for a second time.

However, although Nemo believes in himself, his newfound community no longer does.

It appears that they, too, have been traumatized by Nemo's near-death experience and assume because he has failed once, he is fully incapable of succeeding. They immediately rush to his rescue, uprooting a fake plant as they did the first time and shoving it in the tube as a lifeline to Nemo. However, Nemo is not in need of their rescue. He stops the filtration system with determination and pops up behind them, after appearing to exit off screen the way that he entered into the filtration system. Although it is not a focal point in the film, it is important to note that not only did Nemo successfully face his fears and accomplish his part in saving the community, he also learned to adapt to his environment and make better choices to ensure his own safety. The first time he was in the filtration system, he blocked the blades with a rock, then swam up the filtration tube, past the blades. This route was very dangerous because when the rock came loose, the pressure from the blades nearly pulled Nemo into them. However, after Nemo stopped the filtration system the second time, he jumped back out of the filtration system the way he entered into it, which was a much safer route. This implies that unlike Marlin's belief that Nemo isn't careful and "isn't ready" to take care of himself, in actuality Nemo learns from his mistakes and becomes more capable of taking care of himself with every new experience.

The true strength of Nemo's ability and value to the community comes later, after he is reunited with his father in the ocean. After escaping from the dentist's office by playing dead and getting help from the tank community, Nemo is found by Dory and finally reunited with his father. However, their reunion is short lived as immediately after they embrace, a whole school of fish are caught up in a fishing net. Although, Nemo and Marlin escape the net, Dory is stuck and begins screaming for help. Nemo rushes to her aid, shouting, "Dad! I know what to do!" and, due to his size, is able to squeeze between the holes in the net. However, Marlin, afraid for Nemo grabs him by his fin and holds him back screaming, "Nemo! No!... Get out of there, now!... No, I am not gonna lose you again!" Nemo, however, is adamant that he is the only one who can save

the community of fish and refuses to abandon Dory. He insists, “We have to tell all the fish to swim down together!... Dad, there's no time! It's the only way we can save Dory! I can do this!” Nemo uses his quick thinking to devise a plan to apply enough pressure to the net to free the fish, a concept which he learned from Gill who saved him in this way with the other members of the tank community when the dentist first attempted to scoop Nemo from the tank.

Although Marlin is not privy to this knowledge, he finally realizes that he has to let Nemo go. He finally validates Nemo’s abilities, saying, “You're right. I know you can.” This moment mirrors the scene in which Nemo and his father face-off at the drop off in the beginning of the film. Instead of Marlin insisting he is right, he believes in Nemo’s ability. This empowers Nemo to use his new knowledge and ability to rescue the community of ocean fish, just as the community of tank fish rescued him. However, before he goes, Nemo makes sure to ‘high-five’ his dad with his deformed fin, saying, “Lucky fin!” This moment is not just endearing but reminds the audience that Nemo is still (dis)abled, but he no longer allows his “bad” fin to define what he is and isn’t capable of accomplishing.

This moment is also important from Marlin’s perspective as a parent because it is the first time that he has ‘let Nemo go.’ This decision to trust in Nemo and his abilities is particularly gut-wrenching because the father and son have just been reunited after a perilous journey and are being separated yet again. The stakes of this situation resonate with the audience, many of whom are parents, and instructs them to believe in their children and allow them to do what they need to do to contribute. This sort of ‘letting go’ is especially difficult for parents of children with (dis)abilities and particularly those with intellectual (dis)abilities, as is also shown by Dory’s parents’ unwillingness to ‘let her go’ after finally being reunited with her after years of searching in *Finding Dory*.

In Dory’s case, she has been reunited with her parents after traveling across the ocean from Australia to The Jewel of Morro Bay, the marine-life institute in California in which she

was raised. Like Nemo, her faith in her own abilities likewise develops as she encounters and overcomes struggles along the way. Also, like Nemo she is abducted by a human and put in a tank within the institute where she meets a self-serving, seven-tentacled octopus by the name of Hank, who serves as a pessimistic counterpart to Nemo's Gill. Hank, who is terrified of the ocean and wants nothing more than to live forever in an exhibit, decides to help Dory find her parents within the institute in exchange for her tag on a truck destined to his ocean-free paradise. The two unite as an unlikely pair and through their commitment to finding an end to their own means, they ultimately support one another as they overcome mental hang-ups.

Dory's first major obstacle while in the institute with Hank is when she makes a gut impulse decision to follow her 'destiny' by getting into a bucket of dead fish that are fed to the nearsighted whale shark named Destiny. When Dory meets Destiny, she realizes that they were actually "pipe-pals" as a child. Through her interaction with Destiny, Dory learns the name of the exhibit where she lived with her parents. However, when Destiny tells her that the only way to the exhibit is through the pipes that sucked Dory out to the ocean as a child, she completely shuts down. When Hank insists there's "no other way," Dory has a flashback to childhood in which she remembers her father teaching her how to move a large shell and telling her that "there's always another way." Inspired by her father, much like Nemo is during his dental escape scene, Dory insists there must be another way. It is important to note that although both children were often subjected to ableist ideology with their parents in which their own abilities were questioned, they both draw inspiration from the accomplishments of their parents. The social commentary in these moments seems to satirize the catchphrase "do as I say, not as I do" and turn it on its head.

Although both children defy their parents, they are inspired by their parents' actions.

On her way to the "Open Ocean" exhibit with Hank, Dory becomes distracted when she is supposed to be giving Hank directions as he pushes her around in a baby stroller. This leads

them to eventually ending up in the kiddie tide pools, which is more or less a war zone for children to poke the fish in the shallow pool. Although Hank and Dory are both terrified, she musters the strength to pull Hank through it by forcing him to “just keep swimming.” After the ordeal is survived, Hank validates Dory’s abilities, saying, “Wow. You got us out of there,” to which she replies, “Huh. I did. I got us out of there.” Although Dory seems almost confused as to how she did, in fact, manage to get them out of there, the seed of self-confidence is planted in her that maybe she just is really capable of taking action. This confidence is channeled later when circumstance forces her to have to take the pipes after all to attempt to reach her parents.

After successfully navigating her way to the “Open Ocean” exhibit with Hank, Dory learns that all the blue tang fish have been moved to quarantine to be relocated to another facility and the only way to reach them is through the pipes. Dory musters her courage to go through the pipes, but although she tries to maintain focus, she ultimately becomes lost and begins to panic. Dory then realizes that she has friends in the Jewel of Morro Bay community who can help her. She uses her ability to speak whale to contact Destiny through the pipes as she did as a child. Destiny then encourages her friend Bailey, a beluga, to use his echolocation, which he has convinced himself he is no longer capable. By working together and believing in one another’s strengths, Dory and her friends are able to ultimately achieve their goals through uniting as a community which embraces different abilities as equally beneficial to the whole.

However, their efforts appear to be in vain. When Dory reaches the blue-fin tank, now accompanied by Nemo and Marlin, she learns that the other blue tangs believe her parents to be dead. Like Marlin who believes Nemo to actually be dead when he is playing-dead in the dentist’s office, Dory goes into shock and is ultimately separated from her friends and flushed back into the ocean through a storm drain. Although this experience mirrors her initial separation from her parents, Dory has learned from her travels to be self-reliant. When she first enters the

ocean, she panics, calling out, “Mommy? Daddy? Help. No. No. No. Help. Help. Help me. Help. Help me. Please. Somebody help me! Hey, can... help me? Can you help me? I've lost them!” However, all the fish she encounters seem very aloof and uninterested in helping her, just as the fish responded when she was a child. They say things like, “Ah, sorry, honey. I can't help you if you don't remember,” and, “Can you be more specific?” It quickly becomes apparent that Dory will have to face this challenge alone.

When this realization first dawns on Dory, she begins to lament her situation saying, “I've lost... I've lost everyone. There's nothing I can do.” As if initiating a self-fulfilling prophecy, Dory limits her own abilities and actually begins to forget saying, “Shoot, I can't forget. What was I forgetting? Something. Something important. What was it? I... What was it? It's going away. It's going away.” This phase is followed by Dory chastising herself, “It's going because all I can do is forget. I just forget. And I forget. That's what I do best. That's what I do. What do I do? What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?” Like many people with (dis)abilities, Dory begins to blame herself for events outside of her control, just as she blames herself for losing her parents in the first place. Although she has no control over how her memory works, she condemns herself for forgetting people and discounts the truly strong elements of her memory that have gotten her as far as they have.

However, her chastisements turn to self-encouragements as she begins to calm down. Dory answers her own questions of what would she do, “What would Dory do? I would look around. And there's just water over there. And a lot of kelp over here. Kelp is better.” By turning her guilt and shame, as embodied by looking down, into something positive by building associations, Dory is able to begin to problem solve her way out of her situation. She continues saying, “Okay. Okay. Now what? Lots of kelp. It looks the same. It all looks the same, except there's a rock... Over there. And some sand this way. I like sand. Sand is squishy.” By looking at

her surrounding and orienting herself, Dory actively grounds herself in memory. However, she doesn't initially recognize it as memory. The audience, on the other hand, should again have the haptic sensation of the sand feeling "squishy," drawing them back to the opening scenes with Dory and furthering the audience's ability to feel for Dory in this final scene of anguish.

However, despite her efforts, Dory becomes frustrated again and exclaims, "Oh this isn't going anywhere. There's nothing here. Nothing but kelp. Lots of kelp." She looks around and the audience looks with her for any sort of reference point. Eventually her eyes and the camera settle on a shell in the sand. Dory gravitates towards the shell almost instinctively, and before long, she has followed the shells to her parents' house. As she is standing in awe, her parents approach, throwing aside the shells in their arms that they have obviously been laying out as 'bread-crumbs' on the ocean floor for Dory to be able to find and follow home for years. In a flashback scene of Dory's childhood, she remembers a time in which her father and mother taught her to follow the shells to her childhood home inside the exhibit. Although the circumstances are different, Dory is able to still find her own way home using a modified version of this coping method from childhood. This indicates to the audience that Dory "remembered in [her] own, amazing, Dory way," that is ultimately as effective as the normative memory cognition of her peers.

Dory's abilities are further emphasized when she courageously saves Nemo and Marlin, who are stuck in transit to the new facility on a delivery truck. In her own special Dory way, she comes up with a plan to save Nemo and Marlin by being flipped off the tail of Destiny and onto to freeway in order to stop traffic accompanied by hugging otters. However, her parents mirror Marlin's angst when he is finally reunited with Nemo, only to have to let him go again. Jenny tries to tell her that she can't leave them, saying, "Dory. Honey, you're not leaving us again." Charlie backs his wife up, insisting, "Your mother's right. You have to stay with us." This language mirrors Marlin's control over Nemo by knowing what's 'right' and his doubt in his

abilities. Jenny continues by projecting her own fears of Dory's inabilities, like Marlin does, pleading, "Dory, what happens if...You know, if you're gone for too long. And what if you get confused and that makes you distracted. And what if..." However, Dory, like Nemo, takes control of the situation and exudes confidence, calming her mother saying, "Mom. Mom. I lose you again? Mom, Dad, it's gonna be okay because...I know that even if I forget I can find you again." The camera focuses on Dory's smiling, confident face, and as it pans out, the audience sees that Jenny and Charlie are also smiling, finally recognizing their daughter's abilities.

However, their smiles mean more than an acknowledgement that Dory is capable. They are also a cue to the audience that Dory's, like Nemo's, abilities, not their (dis)abilities, are the focal points of the *Finding* films. They instruct the audience to look at Dory, at Nemo, and to let go of all their preconceived notions of who gets to exemplify ability, of who gets to be the hero, of who is capable of being a productive part of the community. The audience no longer sees a young woman with a memory disorder, or a boy with a deformed fin, but heroic individuals who are willing to put their own lives on the line to save others, and who are fully capable of doing so. Their (dis)abilities are no longer represented as challenges to overcome or to learn to cope with, but as essential elements of their characters, which play into their unique strengths.

"Suck it, bipeds": Questioning the Perspectives of Able-Bodied Humans

In films where sharks consider fish "friends, not food," it begs the question who are the monsters to be feared in the deep? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the antagonists of the *Finding* films are none other than humans. However, what makes these humans so different from traditional Disney villains is that unlike *The Little Mermaid's* human-esque villainess Ursula, who has a deep-seated grudge against Ariel and actively tries to bring about her demise, the humans in the *Finding* films are depicted as incompetent, clueless, and 'just trying to help.'

The first time the audience becomes aware of the human presence is in *Finding Nemo* when a diver, who later turns out to be a very incompetent dentist, “saves” Nemo when he mistakenly assumes he is “struggling for life out on the reef.” Nemo, who has swum off the drop off and into the open ocean to prove the point that he is, in fact, a capable swimmer to his father and peers, is captured by the dentist in a very dramatic scene in which both Nemo and Marlin are panicking and screaming for one another. In Marlin’s attempt to go after Nemo he is confronted with a second diver who appears directly in front of him. The audience sees Marlin’s terror reflected in the scuba goggles of the diver before he snaps a photograph which captures Marlin’s panic, and further stuns and disorients him.

This is an interesting moment in the film because it is the only moment in which there is a photograph taken. While producing a photograph is not inherently impactful, it has the effect of freezing Marlin’s grief for the audience. They are able to identify with him and his plight. As he stares into the camera, the audience stares as well. Instead of seeing through the eyes of the diver who is attempting to capture the perspective of an underwater world that is inaccessible to him, the audience identifies with the perspective of Marlin, who is terrified of the flash of the photograph. This scene allows the audience to feel as though they too have been captured in the moment, along with Marlin visually and Nemo physically. The intimacy created in this moment firmly solidifies the audience on the side of the forcefully estranged father and son – and sets in motion the identification with the (dis)abled heroes who the audience is avidly rooting for.

After this ordeal in the water, Nemo is then put in the dentist’s boat to be taken to his dentist office where he will be put in a tank with fish, mostly from pet stores, until he is to be given to the dentist’s niece, Darla, as a present for her eighth birthday. This is significant because Darla has killed her previous birthday present, which was also a fish, by shaking the bag in which the fish was given to her profusely. However, this action is completely contradictory to

what the dentist claims when he first arrives with Nemo. He points him out to his patient, who is about to have a procedure, saying, “I found that guy struggling for life out on the reef and I saved him.” But how can he claim to have “saved him” when he plans to give him to his niece who has previously killed a fish? This comment indicates that not only is the dentist uneducated on fish, in which case he would know that Nemo had not actually been “struggling for his life,” but he also has an unchecked hero complex. He believes that because he saw a (dis)abled individual, he was obligated to step in and help. However, once the immediate threat, which was entirely self-imagined, has passed, he no longer feels socially obligated for the well-being of Nemo. The dentist goes on to ask his patient, “So, has that Novocain kicked in yet?” Although this may appear to just be idle dentistry talk, I argue that this line is a reflection on the dentist’s own interiority; he is the one who is emotionally numbed, or desensitized, to the needs of the ‘othered’ community of fish with which he coexists.

Furthermore, one of the fish named Gurgle makes the comment after watching one of the dentist’s procedures that, “Ugh! The human mouth is a disgusting place.” But is he really talking about it being physically dirty? It is possible that this moment provides a larger social commentary that the words that come out of the mouths of humans are often disgusting in the ways in which they depict people with (dis)abilities through an ableist, ‘othering’ lens. Perhaps “the human mouth is a disgusting place” because it is the breeding ground for ignorant, hateful misconceptions of (dis)abled individuals, and, also, the device by which these individual feelings are projected onto society at large.

We see a similar instance occur in *Finding Dory* when Dory is captured by two aquarists who notice her swimming with a plastic coke can packaging ring around her that is worth discussing in terms of commentary made. The male aquarist exclaims, “Oh, look at this!” and then the female aquarist replies, “No respect for ocean life.” The two remove her from the ocean

and decide to take her to the infirmary. Although the aquarists may at first seem as though they are being eco-friendly by helping Dory who is caught in trash which litters the ocean, a close reading of their comments lends itself to different analysis. When the man exclaims, “Oh, look at this!” he seems almost gleeful, as though he has finally found some act of human injustice that he can ‘right.’ The female aquarist also does not seem particularly concerned for Dory herself, but more about judging other human behavior. However, doesn’t she also have “no respect for ocean life?” Instead of simply removing the plastic and releasing Dory, she insists on taking her to the infirmary, saying “Let’s take her inside and see how she does.” It’s as though she does not have any idea how to actually help Dory but is insistent on ‘doing the right thing’ as a sort of default social protocol for the Marine Life Institute’s policy of “rescue, rehabilitation, and release.”

However, even the name of the “Institute,” as well as their motto, is socially troubling. The full name of the tourist attraction is “The Jewel of Morro Bay, California: Marine Life Institute.” By referring to the facility as the “jewel,” it implies that the version of the ocean that is landlocked and run by able-bodied humans is somehow inherently more valuable than the natural state of the open ocean. Furthermore, by calling the facility the “Marine Life Institute” a direct parallel is drawn between this place in which they force (dis)abled fish into being rehabilitated and mental and physical health institutions, in which the (dis)abled often have their freedom stripped from them.

Their motto, “rescue, rehabilitation, and release,” is likewise telling of the blind ignorance of the humans’ assumed superiority. The motto implies that virtually all sea creatures, or ‘others,’ are in need of ‘rescuing’ from the ruling class. Furthermore, it implies that these individuals need rehabilitation, which can be seen as indoctrination of the ‘normative’ state of being as imposed by the able-bodied perspective. However, in many cases, the fish are fine, and

it is rumored that fish “don’t come back from quarantine,” which implies that the fish do not believe that this program actually works for their benefit and instead is so detrimental to their health that they cannot survive it. Finally, the program also implies that all fish should be released; however, as can be seen by the example of Hank, the sept-opus, some of the sea creatures do not actually want to be released back into the open ocean. In his case, instead of actually helping him, his prolonged stay at the institute made him terrified to return to the open ocean to the point that he actively schemed to be able to stay in captivity inevitably.

Hank’s unwillingness can be interpreted as him being so brainwashed by the human’s normative way of thinking that he can no longer relate to or identify strongly with his true oceanic self. Like Nemo, he has adopted some of the ableist ideologies imposed on him due to the limitations caused by his missing leg. However, it is Dory, not a human who ultimately helps Hank to realize that he can, in fact, survive. When Dory and Hank begin arguing over directions they end up in an area called “Poker’s Cove.” Although other sea creatures warn them to turn back, it is necessary for Hank’s character arc that he is physically assaulted by the humans. While in the cove, children continually jab their fingers into the water. However, the two eventually survive with a combination of Dory’s “just keep swimming” attitude and Hank’s instinctual response to ink when finally poked. Although at first Hank seems embarrassed that he inked, it is this act which makes the children flee the tide pool and allows the two to escape. Because of this experience, Hank realizes that he does still have defense mechanisms despite his (dis)ability. When he tells Dory that she “saved him,” he does not mean that she literally saved him from the poking fingers, but that she “saved him” from the dark place that he was in, in which he did not see himself as having any viable ability left to survive.

Perhaps ironically, it is interesting to note that it is children who are literally ‘poking fun’ at Hank and Dory; however, the audience does not find this amusing. Since we have come to side

with the pair, we do not find the children's antics to be appropriate. It is particularly interesting that the choice of action of poking was used in this scene because so often people with (dis)abilities either have fun 'poked' at them or are literally touched by able-bodied individuals who seem to feel the need to touch them either out of curiosity or assume necessity to offer aide. Later, while Hank is helping Dory to liberate all the fish by stealing a truck bound for another facility and driving it into the ocean, Hank yells, "Suck it, bipeds!" This simple, comical comment can be taken as perhaps the strongest evidence throughout the film that the normative body of the humans and their way of life has been found to be inferior and is, therefore, rejected.

In the final scene of *Finding Dory* this point is driven further home in a more eloquent and meta way. In the scene, Dory has just successfully completed counting the proper number of digits for a game of hide-and-seek and then has decided to head off to the drop off alone. Ever nervous, Marlin tags along without her noticing, but decides to approach when he sees her simply swimming still by the drop off, enjoying the view. Side-by-side they look out into the open ocean which they now know holds substantial danger, but also endless hope and possibility. Unprompted, Dory says, "Yeah. I did it," to which Marlin replies, "Hmm. This really is quite a view." Dory agrees, "Yep. Unforgettable." While this could be considered a simple closing to their journeys for the sake of wrapping up the film, a closer analysis shows that these lines are directed to the humans who actually matter: the ones sitting in the audience.

The camera angle during this dialogue focuses directly on the pair, making it appear as though they are speaking directly to the audience, breaking the forth-wall. When Dory says, "Yeah. I did it," one possible explanation is that like Nemo, she 'found' herself. Although, in the first film the title *Finding Nemo* could be interpreted from Marlin's perspective of finding his son, that logic does not make sense with *Finding Dory*. Although an argument could be made that Marlin is looking for Dory at some points as well, it is not the driving factor of the film. I

would argue that in both these films the titles reflect a journey of self-discovery; they had to be on their own, lost, to discover who they really were and what they were capable of.

With that concept in mind, when Marlin says the line, “This really is quite a view,” he is referring not only to the view of the open ocean, which can be a stand in for being open to possibility, but also the word “view” is a shortened version of the word ‘viewpoint.’ Therefore, Marlin is telling the audience that this, the film, everything that they have just experienced, the empathy and solidarity that they felt with the (dis)abled heroes and heroine, is “quite a view.” This line resonates with the audience. It is a blatant call to have the right perspective and to appreciate it; it is a call to see everyone, (dis)abled or not, as they truly are, both personally and socially capable.

Finally, when Dory replies, “Yep. Unforgettable,” this is a final rallying cry to the audience. It is a plea for them to remember when they leave their seats and go out into their real lives that (dis)ability is only forgettable, only invisible, if they choose to look away. Dory’s final line appeals to the audience’s sense of memory; despite her own short-term memory loss, a (dis)ability which both hindered and strengthened her, she will never be able to forget her experience. Therefore, the audience, who has come to identify with her, should likewise never forget their own immersive experience of being accepted in a world that does not define worth by perceived ability.

“It Really is Quite a View”: Conclusion

In both *The Little Mermaid* and the *Finding* films traditional relations within the community are challenged and, ultimately, overcome. These Disney productions refuse to accept a society in which (dis)ability is invisible and dismissed. Instead, they forefront the positive aspects of (dis)ability, which cater to unique individual strengths, due not only to the overcoming of adversity, but also the inclusive nature of the appreciation of diversity. They draw attention to

the normative body and then dismiss it; these productions effectively recast the (dis)abled body and mind in the spotlight and illuminate its efficiency for all to see.

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