**A transcript of content from *(Critical) Blindness Studies: Current Debates and Future Directions***

June 30 to July 5, 2023: Convened by Marion Chottin, Hannah Thompson, and Vanessa Warne

**Roundtable #1**

**The Language of Blindness: Naming, Defining, Depicting**

Chair: Hannah Thompson

Moderator: Marion Chottin

Speakers: Kishor Alam (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Selina Mills (Independent scholar)

**Hannah Thompson** 00:00

It's a really great pleasure to have two of my, two people that I know very well in this session. I'm going to very briefly introduce them, I'm sure you'll tell... They'll tell you more about them about themselves as they're talking. Kish Alam is a PhD student in creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London, writing a novel about well... another with a blind protagonist and looking at critical analysis of blindness. And Selina Mills is a journalist. I don't know what to say about Selina. She's a journalist. She's a writer. She's just written a libretto for an opera. She's full of ... She's doing all kinds of interesting things, very exciting, energetic, based in London. Both of them are based in London. I'm going to ask Kish to start. You're going to give us a five minute overview, please, of your of your research.

**Kishor Alam** 01:10

Hello, all, thank you for having me. When I got the information about doing this talk, it says at the beginning, introduce yourself and describe yourself before the five minutes starts. I could easily spend five minutes talking about myself. So very briefly, I'm in London, I'm tall, six foot; I'm brown, because I'm of Bangladeshi origin. And today I'm wearing my most comfortable flannel tartan shirt, because there are so many people at this conference, who I have referenced in my studies, it's very humbling. So, yes, to begin, I was blind for three years between the ages of 15 and 18. And though there have been three decades of non-blindness, when it came to writing, I knew my blindness was an important factor of my identity and so it would be an important aspect of my story. Luckily, for me, as Hannah points out, blind people are a source of fascination. This is important as on the first day of my creative writing course, we were told that to keep our stories believable, we should write about what we know, our experiences. And to keep the reader's attention, it would be best to write 'strange,' because strangeness fascinates too. But I remember how my identity changed in a day. I stopped being Kish when I became blind. And I became Dr. Alam's blind boy, Dr. Alam's blind son, or the blind lad. Years later studying for the critical part of my PhD, I understood that this instance, is what David Bolt describes as the metanarrative of blindness. The story in relation to which those that have visual impairments are defined. And where there exists an overriding narrative that displaces agency. My name that had been till then a designation of my identity was cut away, and was replaced with the prefix blind. And with it, I would carry all the conferences that come with that word. It is an example of nominal displacement. And giving me the prefix blind meant I would be understood as someone less than as, as my sight was less, everything else would be too.

**Audience Members** 04:13

Excuse me. No, there is no translation in French. So I don't know if they can hear in French, the others.

No, that is the same? Yeah, we can't hear it. Yeah. You can't hear it. No, the translation in French?

Ah, now you are back.

**Kishor Alam** 04:41

Right. Shall I continue?

**Audience Member** 04:48

Yes. Could you please repeat a little, a little bit.

**Kishor Alam** 04:54

Years later studying for the critical part of my PhD. I understood this incident is what David Bolt describes as the metanarrative of blindness, the story in relation to which those that have visual impairments are defined by. My name that had till then designated my identity was cut away and replaced with the word blind. And with it, I would carry all the encumbrances that come with that word. It is an example of nominal displacement and giving me the prefix blind meant I would be understood as someone less than. My understanding of disability studies is that disability is superimposed on blindness. It is a societal structural imposition upon the circumstance of being blind. And literature is one of the scaffolds that has supported this structure. In 1974, Kenneth Jernigan delivered a speech titled, "Blindness: is Literature against us?" In it, he described the tropes and stereotypes that have permeated and endured, so defining what for the most part, nonblind society believes blindness to be. His conclusion is that literature is against blind people. And he ends by issuing a rallying call to change that. And we can do this as there has been research conducted and careful analysis over the last two or three decades. There is understandings from psychology, linguistics, and literary theory of how narratives give rise to metanarratives and the formation of myths and meanings and how truths become established.

07:15

Understanding how that has happened in the past gives theoretical basis and a blueprint to create the narratives that are positive, where blind people have agency, the old tropes can be superseded. So literature will be for us. And linguistics provides a means of understanding the techniques that make language resonate. The creative part of my PhD is a novel and it's based on my real experiences. I aim to describe a story where the protagonist is, amongst other things blind; he is not less than, and he is not all that. He just is and is navigating unexpected circumstances. Another piece of fortune for me is that the tropes about blind people are so embedded into the social fabric, fabric that flipping and having a character who has agency, is strong willed, is non-castrated, is sexual is non-dependent and non-suicidal, is so different and so jarring, the strangeness I was searching for is built-in.

And a novel is not prescriptive. A reader picks up a novel to be entertained. It is unthreatening, a gift for the Trojans willingly embraced. The secreted within are the means to bring down long established rules.

In these evermore ocularcentric times, where sight is given so much privacy, the novel that still stands out to me is *1984*. But it's a love story. It's a romance between Winston and Julia. That's the plot. But we know that's not the narrative. We know there is a commentary that warns of the dangers of unbridled government power, its messages more relative relevant today than ever. And I believe that a huge part of its power emanates from Orwell's brilliant use of language.

**Kishor Alam** 09:24

"Big Brother is watching you": five words. It doesn't mean that an older male sibling is protecting by virtue of his benign and loving cares. Every single word carries an intertextual meaning beyond its definition. Big Brother is an organization. And it's not just big, it's likely vast. Orwell meant to state, that in contemporary times, it could mean any organization such as Facebook, or Amazon or Google, which has the capability of tracking and collecting data on the individual. Big brother is watching you is in this context means right now. And continuously. Watching means monitoring. It's sinister; you is personally directed not at an individual, but at all the individuals and the whole of society is being watched. Those five words are a statement, there is no threat, yet the hidden message is modify your behavior, or there will be consequences. 1984 for me is a template of how to get messages through that resonate. For seven decades, it has been a beacon of literature on how narrative transcends the story. So to conclude, it's a fairly straightforward task. All I have to do is come up with an enthralling story with a nuanced, compelling narrative, dispelling previous deeply embedded negative tropes with the literary skill, inventiveness, and dexterity of George Orwell. You better wish me luck. Thank you.

**Hannah Thompson** 11:13

Thank you so much Kish. I can't wait to read it... I can't wait to read your novel. And yeah, absolutely. Good luck with that. I've got lots and lots of questions for you and Selina. But before we before we dive into discussion, I'm going to ask Selina to give us her five minute overview as well.

**Selina Mills** 11:33

Hi, good afternoon. And thank you so much for including me. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Selina Mills, I'm quite tall, apparently, for a woman. I'm five foot nine, I have dark hair with slight dashes of gray. I have very jolly red glasses on with blue tinted lenses. And thank God I'm sitting down because you don't want to know what's it's all [unclear]. Anyway, my name is Selina Mills and by trade, I'm a journalist, a writer and a broadcaster. And I've been a journalist for over 25 years; I've been reviewing everything from books, art, and literature, and even audio description. The highlight of my life was being sent to look at the audio description of *50 Shades of Grey*. And I can only tell you, it's terrible, and don't do that. And the reason I'm here today is because I have just about to send, my publisher's just about to print, and it's coming out in February a book called *Life Unseen: A Few Stories of Blindness*. And it's very interesting that we had actually quite a big debate about what the book should be called, because I didn't want to write a history of blindness or the history of blindness because it seemed to me that there were many definitions of blindness. So I find this whole discussion about what is blindness, about how we perceive it. And I, first, I thought I'd just read you a tiny bit of what the first chapter grapples with and I've sent out, that's the piece I've shared. Because I think it really does show the issue even in academia, where, you know, well educated, thoughtful beasts, and you'd think would be starting to look at definitions. And yet, it seems that the word blindness and blind are often fixed in peoples’, and the idea of what it means. And I have sent Hannah and I will hopefully come back to the definition of the three questions that you guys asked at the end. So I do have my response to that. So I'll just read you a little bit just to give you a sense of the kind of questions that I've been grappling with in writing this book. So it's a history book, but it's mixed with ... and with a personal memoir. And one of the reasons I chose to mix personal memoir with history is, it seems to me that if you write history books, they are locked in the past. Whereas if you try and say, Well, look, this happened to me now this, this, an event something happened, whether it's you know, trying to get a train or I don't know, get into a school, get a job. And then you find out that some of the language and the interpretation of blindness has been around for centuries and centuries; it is almost possible to say it's nobody's fault that we think about blindness this way, because it's sort of entrenched. And I call it the palimpsest of blindness. It's just in every layer. So just, just a little bit to give you a sense of it. So there once was a blind Neanderthal called Nandy, and he led me on a quest that I'm sure will never be finished. At an alumni dinner at my old university, some of my tutors ask me how was my eyesight so they knew as I was losing my vision and my usual perky voice I reported I was a city reporter at *The Daily Telegraph* and that my eyesight was indeed getting worse. But I was still gadding about always want to entertain I regale them with tales such as my false eye. I was asking for an overdraft with a rather taciturn bank manager, my beautiful hand- painted, Perspex false eye fell out, bounced across the shiny marble floor of the bank. The manager speaking without a hint of irony said very sternly, you have to keep a better eye on your finances, Miss Mills. I put the eye back in without a word, he gave me an overdraft. As we returned to our college chops, however, the guest to my right asked me how much sight I really had. "You seem to be doing so well," she says, I mean, you can see something, can't you. And then from years of experience that few people understand the spectrum of sight loss, I politely said I did not.. I did have some sight. And sighted inwardly I've been asked, yet again, to talk about my blindness. So if I'm feeling forthcoming, and I don't know if other people at this conference feel the same, I can talk for hours about varying degrees on the spectrum. And if I'm being playful, I can talk about the *Shades of Grey* you can deal with. And part of me wanted to give her, because she was an academic and slightly what's the word formal, I wanted to give her like the numbers from the World Health Organization database, which shows that one in 1 billion, there are so 1,000,000,000 severely sight impaired people in the world, of which only a small fraction are completely blind. And I have a list actually here, which I will not bore you with. But anyway, it's a massive list of all the things that can cause blindness. Also, some of them I can't pronounce. So anyway, I found myself exhausted at explaining. And I asked her if she would mind if I showed her. So I actually had decided to physically show her. And by the way, Hannah, give me a one minute cut down because you know, I can talk. Anyway, she agreed. And she put down her knife and she followed my instructions. I said, cover your right eye completely with your right hand. And then I said take your left hand and turn it into a fist and put the fist in the center of your left hand vision. Now imagine that's all covered with Vaseline and it's blurry. And she did all of this. And then she nodded and agreed quite quickly that I couldn't see very much. So we discussed here the difficulties of sight and blindness. And she was interested why I wanted to describe my sight in such a practical way rather than just saying, Oh, I'm blind, or I'm sighted. [unclear] And I said well, because my eye doctors can only give me a very sort of scientific description of the sight that I have. And they'll say something like ten per cent vision left depending on the light. And I just found that percentages. Yeah, just saying to someone Oh, I've got 10% eyesight. What does that mean? You know, no one knows. How difficult it is, she said awkwardly smiling. [unclear audio] while explaining her field of academic interest: gynecological parts of pigs. I did not go further and I couldn't eat any more of my pork chop. As we moved on to dessert, however, amongst the nods and murmurings of all these academics who heard us, we heard a few convivial remarks. I don't know how I would cope, said one ... said one person, said one who had mentioned his late uncle who had a glass eye. Further down the table, a suggestion from a gruff voiced male historian who was a lovely person, said I was very lucky to lose my sight in the 21st century. In the 19th century, he said, you would have been consigned to an institution or workhouse or if you're fortunate left at home with the spinster of solitude. A fresh young postgraduate medical student, who was rather chirpy, said yes, blind people certainly would not have met the fitness criteria. Yes, you can imagine at this point I was really happy. Everyone squirmed. Oh, I don't know. This is what really, I find why we are here. “I don't know” said a warm round voice at the end of table beginning a warm, round [unclear] which belonged to a warm and round [unclear] archaeologist who I'd known for years. “If you'd been a Neanderthal, you might have been revered and treated with great honor, even outlived your sighted peers.” We all sat; she took a deep breath and explained: in 1961 in a cave at the Zagros Mountains, she said, on the borders of Turkey in Iraq, a group of archaeologists discovered the burial site of male skeletons dating [unclear]. One skeleton officially called Shanidar #1, who they described as Nandy showed signs of a crushing blow to his head and severe deformity in his ears and eye sockets. Modern methods of testing showed bone disease which means he would have more than likely been blind, a state that surely that would have rendered him immobile in a world of hunter gatherers. Yet remarkably, unlike his peers who died in their late 20s, a carbon dating of Nandy proved he'd died when he was 45. “Someone somehow,” the professor said, enjoying our incredulity, “had fed and cared for blind Nandy.” We nodded in respectful admiration and the company at the table diverged to chatting about other known archaeological digs in Africa and Wales. Soon we moved on to cheese and port, and drifted on to other matters. But despite my postprandial haze, what I found myself thinking is, even the smallest facet, facet, of new information can shift your perception of the past.

As I returned to Cambridge’s dull grey train station, tapping my cane across the platform, finding my seat with the help of a guard, I was thinking about Nandy. It was like receiving a faint wave from a distant relative. Nandy’s story was part of man's identity as much as hunting, gathering, eating, sleeping and loving. Just knowing Nandy as a blind being had lived and most likely functioned with 50,000, with blindness 50,000 years ago, gave me a sense of a shared human experience, connection that was entirely wholly cheering. But one thing puzzled me and this is where I'm going ... I'm going to come from ... One thing puzzled me, the warm round archaeologist told us there was no evidence to show how other Neanderthals had engaged with Nandy. We don't know if he had a special burial or if he had lived on the edges of the cave. There were no odes, images, graffiti on the cave walls. So how did the esteemed professor know or even imagine that Mandy was admired or revered, as she mentioned? Why did we, a bunch of very educated and well intentioned folks presume to go along with this idea? After all, maybe Nandy has simply been a greedy, grungy, boring grunter, who happened to live by a berry tree or a river that sustained him. What if he was fed and cared for maybe it was just simply people shared their bounty. Was Nandy so special simply because he was blind? And as the months and years passed, and my sight has has worsened, I have begun to wonder. What happens if you're not this superstar in blindness? And it seems, so I'm going to stop there. But what I want to say is that the book goes on to investigate why we have this otherness and this superstardom going on, which I think that Kish was talking about brilliantly. This this sense of static otherness when we've got buckets of history out there that no one seems to talk about. But it's, it's there, and I can give you millions of examples. So my job, I think, not just in my book, but in my life, is to make sure that we understand that blindness is a Moveable Feast. And it is something that changes with the era that it's in and how its meaning is perceived. And I would like to say that I have done this in other work I've done. So for example, I've done a whole history of disability on the BBC, I wrote an opera libretto, about a woman who, a woman we know who existed, who was a blind composer. And my idea is to say that history lives, it's not in the past and stuck. And I think specifically with blindness, it's a really interesting area to look at. Because you not only have to think about your own take from history, but also how other people have interpreted their own time. And that's how I'm going to stop.

**Hannah Thompson** 24:11

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Selina. I'm really excited by the overlaps between you and Kish and also Corine. And, in fact, things we're going to hear throughout the conference, and I would urge everyone to, to log on to the conference website and read the chapter that Selina has uploaded because it carries on the story of Nandy. What I was struck with is that both, both of you really emphasize that the way we think about blindness is, is deeply influenced by language, by history, by myth. And I think that's really interesting in relation to what Corine was saying about medical definition because I think you two have kind of given the other side of definitions of blindness. And you also just what you were alluding to at the end, Selina that blindness is often seen only in extremes with totally blind or totally sighted, blind people are heroes, superhumans, or suffering a fate worse than death. Blindness is either inspirational or tragic. And in your, in your writing, both of you have, have also evoked the figure of the blind seer. You know, this, this idea of seeing, seeing, equaling knowing Kish talks about that in his work. And Selina talks about how mystery is often associated with blindness in terms of Greek and Nordic myths, for example. So anyway, I've got a question we're going to come, we're going, I'm going to ask you for your thoughts on the three, three key questions in a minute. But before that, I've got a question for both of you. You've both-- how have you changed the way the language of blindness that you use since you've started reading and writing about it, and maybe Kish, we can start with your, with the language that you're using in your novel, perhaps,

**Kishor Alam** 26:25

This is going to embarrass my fellow PhD students, because one of the things that I like to do is invent language. I will invent new words. And my justification for doing that is Shakespeare does it, and Orwell does it. And I will get a slow hand clap from Mike and Tori for putting myself in that group. But I love the idea of blindness as a Moveable Feast, as something that is not fixed, that changes. Because if that's the case, and I believe it is, because we can change it. There's a fantastic Roald Dahl quote, where he says, “I write because I can plot the future.” And I love the idea that we are in charge of setting the narrative. And one of the ways that linguistics and psychology has helped us as we understand the derivation of words and where meaning comes from where it emanates from. But for me, what we have to do is go back into history, as you say, for 1000s of years, there have been blindness narratives, and they are so ingrained, they are so embedded into our social fabric, but you don't have to have stories about blind people to have a definition of blind people. We all think we know what blind people are. Even if there isn't a blind character. We know what blindness is, as you say, Hannah. It's either complete, dark, or complete darkness is one of the tropes, either sight or no sight at all, is another one of the tropes, like. There is no continuum of visual acuity. It's just, it's just either literally black or white. I remember when I was reading the novel *Blindness*, the fact that he thought that blindness was milky whiteness was interesting. I've been I've got an awful lot to say about that book, but we'll leave that

**Selina Mills**

Me too, me too!

**Kishor Alam**

Yeah, I’m sure! So my idea is to go and tell new narratives where blind people have agency, but they're not superheroes. They can ... they are not invalids, either. They are just people with stories to tell, who have to navigate the world as everybody does. And they happen to be blind. So, for example, I can give you two examples of words that I will, that I use in my, in my novel. For example, my, my protagonist, his name is Hari, his girlfriend is Tara, and she's an art history student. That's why I'm particularly interested in tomorrow, and to see the aspects of art in blindness. When she understands the way that Hari appreciates art, pictorial art, which is different from the way that she does from a much more purely aesthetic view. He is much more interested in using his imagination; he will go to the National Gallery, and he'll see *The Ambassadors* and he's not interested in brushstrokes and he's not interested in colors, but he's interested in the characters that are being described. He wants to know that they feel hot in their robes, and she loves the way and that that he experiences art and when she realizes there is a different way to view art than her traditional history of art John Berger way she feels endarkened. And another word that I use is blindless, where she feels that she doesn't have the joy that her boyfriend is experiencing because he has, because he has a different way of experiencing things. I want to, I want it to be an extra thing. I want it to be an additional way of experiencing the world, not an other way. And so this Moveable Feast where we can decide the future of how blindness is interpreted is very interesting.

**Hannah Thompson** 30:52

I love them. I love, I love the word blindless. I love both of them, actually. But I'm wondering how I can use blindless kind of in my, in my in my life. I just think that's that word needs to exist. Selina, have you have you done the same with, with language.

**Selina Mills** 31:10

And I have blindish, I've often used the word blindish, because I think I wanted people to get the sense that I could see colors and things like that. But I, I might adopt blindless too; I think it's fantastic. I have to say, what I'm really fascinated by is this idea that so... the inspirational versus burden trope has been around for a long, long time. But at the same time, and this is what historians are beginning to find out is there's also lots of normal people like me every day, I don't mean normal. But I mean, like lots of people have been living with blindness for all their lives and have in history. And I think what I didn't expect to find when I was doing research was how many people just live life and don't get pigeonholed is that-- they're just living their lives. And I feel that's in a way what we're really asking for now, which is to not people to go blind and go “oh my god,” either inspiration or burden. And even if you go into the middle ground of just wanting to be accepted as you are and in whatever framework you want, even though I just think the word blind in at the moment still is a button, it's a trigger, and it makes people whatever their reaction is, and it can be an extreme inspiration. It can be the extreme darkness, but it can also be mean sexual perversion, or it can be all sorts of things that... I don't understand well, I understand because I'm looking at history, and I can see how things get projected onto us. But I think... I'm so, I'm actually amazed, I think in the last five years, it is shifting again. And I think that's very exciting. Whether it's a blind advantage, whether it's blindless, which I please let us all adopt hashtag Kish. But I feel that it is shifting again. And I don't know if it's just because there are more people talking about it. Or maybe, maybe social media has allowed more people to, to be in the forefront. So you've got influencers like Lucy Edwards, who touches her hair and goes, “I see with my hands, I've got nice soft silky hair.” And it's all fine. And it makes people think about it as it like, we're just, you know, we everyone is in this together. And I'm hoping the last, the five of the changes, maybe since the Paralympics in 2012, maybe a lot sooner, has made a shift in our understanding in the ... don't forget that we are a select group of people who have chosen to come to a conference and we all know we are questioning and pulling apart and looking at definitions. But we're also talking about the rest of the world. And I think that's the... I think one of the things that I've been looking at is the gap between, you know, between really thoughtful, responsible people who totally get it and want to help get that out into the wider world.

**Hannah Thompson** 34:24

Thank you. That's, that's fascinating. I've got just got one more. I guess I'm going to call it a provocation for both of you and and for the audience more generally, and then we'll come back to our three questions. So one of the, one of the things apart from both being brilliant writers, the other thing you've both got, and being really, you know, being really lovely people that I really like. The other thing you've got in common is that you both have lived experience of blindness. So my question is, do you think that we that we need to have lived experience of blindness in order to write about blindness? And should we, should we kind of be militant, be militant about non-blind people do not have the right to talk about blindness?

**Selina Mills** 35:20

That's a very good question. It's a current debate because they're casting for Helen Keller at the moment and they're trying to work out whether they should be casting just an actress they like and think will be a big seller or she's someone who's got lived experience. So I, I don't think militancy necessarily helps. But I think it's a great advantage if you can get someone who has a lived experience or can be an ally of that lived experience. I worry that being militant means that you exclude taking everyone on the journey. I think that's my view would be as I want to take everybody on the journey whether sighted or not. And if I can ... I worry that wagging my finger and going You can't do that or please say it differently is that you I will lose people on the journey and I... I think I've got a journo-brain, which is take as many people as you can on the journey. So that would be my view. Kish, what do you think?

**Kishor Alam** 36:18

When I look at all the tropes and stereotypes that abound in literature from day one from the Bible, in fact, before the Bible and as you say, Tiresias, and Socrates and Homer and Odysseus, etc, and all the Greek myth, it's, it really seems to me that there has been quite a lot of writing about blind people from non-blind people. That has meant that the narrative has changed this narrative from an English perspective. And umm, I agree with you, it's an advantage. I'm writing fiction. I'm not writing a straightforward description; I'm not writing nonfiction. I do want to push people's buttons. Having some experience of the realness which was my blindness, and exposing those, I find that advantageous because I think it'll jar. I never once ever wanted to feel somebody's face when I was blind.

**Selina Mills**

No, me neither [laughter}

**Kishor Alam**

And but it pops up all the time. It pops up all the time. I wasn't interested in that. I think it's, it just never occurred to me. And so in my novel, Hari does, in fact, touch people's faces because he gets to touch the girl he likes. He is manipulative, he is not an angel, because he's blind. He has got all the flaws that any teenage boy would have. And he is going to use any advantage to get in her affections. And if, if, if he can touch her face, when previously he couldn’t, he's going to use that because he's naughty. He's manipulative. He wants what he wants. And so for me, the real experiences will, I will hope, will be able to make my novel a bit more realistic and also jar the narrative so people think, okay, really, isn't that something that they do? I always felt that it's the first thing that I would do. No, doesn't actually ever happen to anybody

**Selina Mills** 38:34

I do know somebody who did, who, on purpose deliberately asked the head of the BBC, to if you could get in touch his face, and he could, just because he wanted to see if he could piss him off.

**Kishor Alam** 38:46

Rxactly

**Hannah Thompson** 38:48

I like the way that Hari sounds like he's, he's playing with non-blind people’s stereotypical conceptions, to get what he wants.

**Kishor Alam** 38:59

Absolutely. And he's going to use the fact that he is marginalized, the fact that he is invisible, these are all advantages that can be used, he doesn't get, we go through life, all of us, and we use the best that we have. And these are opportunities that have been afforded. And he's not going to say no, he's going to use them because that's part of his nature.

**Hannah Thompson** 39:24

So just I'm just bringing the ... this back a little bit to the to the focus of the conference, we're trying to kind of define the field of Critical Blindness Studies and position it a little bit in terms of Disability Studies. I don't... I mean, do either or you, or how does how do you understand your work in relation to disability studies? Do you have a sense of where it fits? Or do you or do you kind of reject that kind of label? Selina, do you want to go first?

**Selina Mills** 39:56

I didn't know what you meant by critical actually. So I did... I'm just looking up, I wrote myself an answer. Dear Selina. So I said how I think blindness studies is the investigation of not seeing physically and metaphorically across different disciplines, creating a synthesis of knowledge that can be shared and used in the public realm. It's what definitions of blindness does your research and lived experience lead you to adopt? and I was what I noticed was I have different ones for myself, whereas in order to write a history book, I had to come up with some sort of stable definition that could run all the way through the book, even though each era changes. So I did actually change I think my definitions of blindness changed depending on the era. So and also on the person using it. So the most regularly used is a term defining a physical state of not seeing or having no usable sight. But the other one I used was a term used to refer to a metaphorical or allegorical state of not, of not seeing or understanding. And I don't like that term, but it is regularly used. So I kind of used it as a template. What was the other question? So that was, those are the questions? Oh, and you said, where do you situate your work and Disability Studies? I think the thing I really think about is that we need to ask the questions and look at the questions we did not ask before and why not? Who do we give a platform to that we have not? And why? So that's, for example, what you know, do you have people with lived experience or not? Because it has been that in the past- nothing but. Why are certain voices left out of the past? And I suspect it's because they're not interesting. It might seem quite banal. Do you know a man who washes up? Who cares? But I would like... I think that's part of my historical knowledge. And I also would think, who cares about what this, this conference now and why? And I think the outcome of that will be, what kind of working definition we come up with at the end. I think that's very important. So those are my answers. I hope that makes sense.

**Hannah Thompson** 42:23

Yeah, brilliant. Thank you. What about you, Kish?

**Kishor Alam** 42:25

Yeah, I too thought about Critical Blindness Studies. And there, there's a lot of, of definitions out there. And also Critical Disability Studies. And one that I thought about was, I'll read this to you: blindness studies investigate the circumstances, physical and psychological, that people find themselves in as a result of their varying degrees of visual acuity. You know, that's kind of a, I'm not, I'm not overwhelmed by the definitions of blindness that you find out there, especially as in the metanarrative of blindness. David Bolt has 13 definitions. There's one that is about the continuum of sight that people find themselves on. And all of the rest are metaphorical. Or they're all about character. And so the vast majority of definitions are, are moral. They have been there ... they're from the stories of blindness. When it comes to disability studies, so I've got a friend who is a wheelchair user. And I was thinking about structuralism as part of my, as part of my critical concerns. And he was talking about the refectory at his university. At the moment, it's been refurbished so they have a portacabin. And they have built him a ramp, so that they he can go down the three stairs and go into the refectory, except that once he is down on the refectory his wheelchair doesn't fit underneath any of the tables and the tables are stuck down to the floor. [Selina Mills: laughter; sorry]. He said that's when he feels disabled it's when the, the structural concerns and the structural effects of society affect him otherwise it's... it's... it's something you just get on with, you just get on with that so for me Disability Studies is a structural imposition on, on the predicament, on his circumstance, and where my work, I suppose situates is that's a, that's a negative story about how society has treated my person who my friend who's a person in a wheelchair and now we know that there is a negative outlook on disability, I can set about redressing that, because I'm in charge of the narrative. I can also do that by talking about that story and making Selina laugh. And that's powerful because we get to set the agenda. So that's where, my that's where I situate myself, which is Blindness Critical Studies and Disability Studies are academic, and in both senses of the word, but they are a platform to progress on from and, and hopefully that will change some minds.

**Hannah Thompson** 45:48

So by analogy, then do you think that Blindness Studies could be the study of sociey’s ocularcentrism?

**Kishor Alam** 45:58

Absolutely. I mean, I have thoughts on ocularcentrism. How we have imagined how ocularcentric our world has become? There is, for example, in London, if you're in London, you are caught on camera 500 times a day. If people have cameras on their phones, people have cameras and in their cars, we have private cameras in our houses. Sometimes, this could never ever have been imagined. And I actually think that, that we're moving to such an ocularcentric society that we won't care, that we won't care. I think that it's going to become so pervasive, that it's all, it's, it's going to become meaningless. I think that there's me, it's like, I know, we've got lots of people from France, if we had a Michelin star breakfast every single day for a month, we would crave a croissant and coffee by the by the thirtieth day.

**Selina Mills** 47:09

Can I disagree with you a little well, or maybe just the question, what Hannah said, So the problem is Ocularcentricity sounds I don’t know if everybody thinks that it is a negative term, because I've always thought of it as quite, I didn't find it a descriptive, rather than I found it sort of quite damning in a way. But maybe that's just because I think the world is so bloody ocularcentric that, therefore, I will read it as negative. But I think there's another parallel here, which is whether you want blindness, whether we accept blindness as a state. And one of the things I worry about is, you know, I've got my lovely phone, and it's got all the tricks and gadgets and everything on it. Well, number one, it's smooth and lovely so it's definitely ocularcentric. I mean, there's no buttons, you have to learn everything by haptic buzzing and everything. But the second thing is, will we get to a point where it so... we've, we've had this notion of burden versus inspirational trope. And we have wanted to get rid of the burden, right? So in the 19th century, we put people in houses, in workhouses; in the 20th century, is it going to be ... and also we have this notion of fixing. We have medical notion and the medical trope, you’ve got to fix blindness. We've got to get rid of it. So do we, by the same token, feel that once we... Why haven't you got the app? Why haven't you got Be my eyes? Why haven't you? Why can't we just have blindness as a state? Why can't it as you were saying, be different? Why? Why do you have to get rid of it? You know, I'm not saying that everyone should be blind and H.G Wells and all the rest of it. I'm just saying, it seems to me it's a different state. And yet everything in our society, it's not just ocularcentricity. But it's also... there's a moral push to be fixed. There's a moral push to have an app. There's a moral push to have a dog, quite a lot of time. I'm, you know, I love dogs, but maybe not my thing. You know, it's, I feel like there's a moral underlay here, which is not just about ocularcentricity.

**Hannah Thompson** 49:19

That's such a good point. Selina, I think, I think you're right, I think, let's, let's, yeah, let's celebrate blindness and, and not try—yeah, not try and fix it, not try to solve it. Absolutely.

**Selina Mills** 49:36

I think it sort of comes, it sort of comes back to your three question, which is, what is the definition of blindness? That is, it could be... I didn't want it to be a negative. I don't want it just to be against something. I want it to be a for something so for the study of and... that's why I think some sort of neutral space where you can say it's the study of all... even saying not seeing is negative. So I'm trying to think of a phrase. But what I'm saying is it takes both; it can be looking at ocularcentricity, but it can also be looking at the most amazing... you know, what, what do blind people do that is not inspirational, but it's just living. I don’t know if you can see, Hannah, there's lots of hands up.

**Hannah Thompson** 50:24

I know. I'm just, I just ... Well, I think it's probably about time to pass over to Marion, who's the, who's moderating so that she can open the questions to the floor. Marion, are you ready to take over now? Can I can I pass over to you?

**Marion Chottin** 50:40

Merci beaucoup, Hannah. Thank you very much. Thank you, Selinaa. Thank you. Actually, lots of hands being raised. So I will give the floor to the different people who have raised their hand. Susan, Susan, your Susan, are you can you please unmute? And ask your question; unmute your mic and ask your question.

**Audience Member** 51:08

I wanted to ask the question to Kish because you've mentioned two people that I'm currently researching as a Ph.D. student and I'm using in my argument, David Bolt and Kenneth Jernigan. And I'm actually looking at misrepresentation of blindness in literature, which I'm using Kenneth Jernigan’s argument that literature is against us. I just wanted to ask you, with this ocularcentrism: Do you think it goes a bit further than Bolt is suggesting? You mentioned the cameras in the street? But is it also an attitudinal thing? Because I'm looking at basically it is, and I want it to go and I'm just wondering whether you think the same?

**Kishor Alam** 51:56

Yes, I think that it is an attitudinal thing. And I think that I want it to change. I don't know if I want it to go. For example, as you say, there are cameras in the street. And the reason why is because in every any evidentiary hearing that we have in, for example, our legal system, the most important thing that we'll have is an eyewitness. It's not any other kind of witness. It's an eyewitness, somebody who saw something. And yet, we all know that, that there are circumstances where witnessing something doesn't mean that you know the truth from that circumstance. I absolutely agree with that; it certainly has to be changed, I don't think it's ever going to go. So I think we have to have additional ways of making sure that ocularcentrism is distilled, is that it's not the only way to, for example, view the spectrum of sightedness, or non sightedness. I think that we have to consider all the other senses and we have to consider the whole of the senses and not just worry about what we can see. But that, as I say, that's not the way that the world is going. But I think the over proliferation already makes it a circumstance where, for example, we may look at photographs of, as we have done, Iraqi prisoners being tortured. And just because we have the photographs, we don't necessarily believe it is the truth. I saw *Jurassic Park* the other day, and there are dinosaurs. Does that answer your question at all?

**Audience member** 53:48

Yeah, but just another point, I want you to ask, because I'm a blind person, right? I've always been blind, well, from a medical blunder, too much oxygen. Because the other issue that we're discussing before, and I don't tend to put my blindness before myself. And I'm trying to encourage that sort of attitude and that kind of stance. Do you think that's well, it’s not right or wrong? But do you think that's a good thing? Or do you think that you should put your blindness first?

**Kishor Alam** 54:19

I am certain that, well, I knew that when I was blind, that my blindness was just one aspect of my character. It wasn't that which defined me at all. And also, the problem with going back to what Hannah was talking about, and the medical definition of blindness, is that if you think of it as an affliction, then you have to think of it as something to be cured. And it's not. It's something that you can embrace. And even when I was blind, after about six months, I wasn't waiting to be nonblind again, I was just getting on. I mean, I... I'd slept a lot. And I didn't know the difference between day and night, unless my brother woke me up, but I was just getting through. And it didn't occur to me that I was going to now just be this blind person. That's what other people thought; it was just one aspect of my character. I still wanted to do all the other things. And, and I think the absolutely, you being a blind person, it's up to you whether you want to put it front and center, or it's up to you to have it as one of I'm sure many other of your attributes.

**Audience Member** 55:31

I mean, I have it was one of my attributes rather than dwelling on it. And I hope that carries me forth in my research, because I was going to ask Selina too whether she thought the same way or do you think that sometimes you have to, for the purposes of critical study, you have to look at your blindness first, then your personality second, or do you think it's a bit of both?

**Selina Mills** 55:57

I think it's definitely a bit of both. I often... I read a really good book by this, well, it's badly written, but interestingly thought by an ophthalmologist called Hugh Trevor Roper. And he was a brother of a very famous historian, and he was a, an ophthalmologist. And he was saying, how often how people who lost their sight or regain their sight changed their personality and Kish, I'll send you a link if you want, you might, you might find it really interesting. One of the things he was saying that is sometimes some blind people who become blind become more gregarious, because they're using their voices to echolocate, find a way around and also know who's in the room. And other people went the other way, and became very intr-, introspective. I have to say, I've been using my sight over 20 years, and it's now down to 10%, but I define myself, I actually think I define myself depending on who I'm talking to. So if I'm in in a medical room, I will certainly talk about it. I think, as a journalist, I would probably say something at some point but I wouldn't make it the starting point. Maybe that's the thing. It's for me, but I absolutely think everyone has to do it for themselves, you have to define yourself through your own terms and your own definitions. And I wouldn't even suggest it's good or bad. I think you have to find what's right, and what fits, what sits comfortably with you. That would be my gut feeling without any, any references and definitions.

**Kishor Alam** 57:24

How are you finding the David Bolt?

**Selina Mills** 57:27

Me or everyone?

**Audience Member**

I'm sort of agreeing and disagreeing with him sort of simultaneously. So in some parts, I agree; in some parts, I disagree.

**Kishor Alam** 57:41

I mean, I think it's a great book. But I find it hard to read.

**Selina Mills** 57:47

It's quite densely written. But the problem I have and I have this, so I went to a UN conference recently, and I, some of the language is so scientific, or techno-cratical, or technical, that I feel like it's far removed from me. So you can go to someone on it, and this is amazing woman at the UN and she's going blah blah blah blah, and then she says, you know, something like, in the intersectionality of, of non-seeing with something else and something else. And I know it's all current parlance, but you know, on the ground, when you're living your life, it's quite different. And I think that's for me, what is about definitions: Is it what, what works, as a walking, talking human being like, how do I... how do I fit into this world, when I'm not a technical thing, and I'm not a scientific thing. I'm a me. I'm a human. So I like, I like that you choose. I think it's your choice. I think the point is, it's your choice.

**Marion Chottin**

Thank you, thank you. David, the floor is yours now. You can unmute and ask your question.

**Audience Members** 59:02

Hello. Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Yep. Thank you. Yeah. Which, which David? Oh, sorry.

**Audience Member** 59:14

Yeah. I'm David Anderson.

**Audience Members** 59:19

So switching off; I'm sorry.

**Hannah Thompson** 59:21

I think I think it was David. David Anderson first.

**Audience Member** 59:26

Oh, okay. Thank you very much. Sorry. Thank you, both of you for such an excellent presentation and telling us about your work; super fascinating. It made me think of a lot of things. For example, Helen Keller, the trend of her being called ‘the frog’ on tiktok came to mind. When you mentioned that there was the film I'd love to know what the movie is going to be called. But I have two basic questions with an overarching theme of this question of morality, which I was really fascinated by. The first one is, both of you can answer, but the first one is mostly for Kish, you know, speaking of feeling hot and speaking of sexual perversion, you mentioned earlier about, you know, the idea of castration or male blind sexuality and made me think of Georgina Kleege’s work in *Sight Unseen* about the hyper sexualization of women. And I was just wondering, yeah, through the characterization, through the narrative and plot, like, what have you come across as a, as a scholar who uses queer theory, I'd be super fascinated to hear some more about that. And for both of you the question of like language and stereotypes and narratives- with some colleagues, several years ago, we made this joke at a party about the blind conspiracy, because some of us were pretty much totally blind. Some of us were only partially sighted; some of us were always born that way, some of us were progressive. And it seems to me that there's always this opportunity and risk when we play with what we know about how so few of us are totally blind. And like, perhaps then we need a more non binary mode of thinking blindness, like how do we get outside of this idea of inspiration versus trope, the conspiracy that we all are hip to that for many of us, we have some partial vision we can use in certain situations to see. And we might not be honest about it all the time, that sort of thing. Which I wanted just to connect that to the idea of narratives, just Ursula K LeGuin’s carrier bag theory, LeGuin. You know, these narratives of ocularcentrism, per se, I feel like they're also very much connected to the enlightenment, to colonization, to patriarchy. And so what are the ways in which when we think blindness as a critical project? What are the things are we including this that, because not every blind person is going to necessarily like, I like what Kish said, not every blind person is going to be moral or ethical, they're not always going to be a nice person. We're all different, even though we might share this, like, wanting to find a way to talk together about blindness. So I'm not sure if all those questions landed; I'm sorry, if they did not. But yeah, I guess overall, this question of if the if it is often skewed as moral, is that so bad if we can use it to our advantage? Particularly again, around violence, like, you know, the blinding by police violence during the Black Lives Matter protests, there was hundreds of people, and in Chile, how do we bring nuance to the question of an embrace or celebration of blindness when, you know, for a majority of us too, and in places where ecological pollution is a thing? You know, blindness isn't something that, like, we might not ever embrace it. But also we didn't have we had no choice. And it wasn't just genetics, it wasn't just a quote unquote, disease, which has a different morality than if you were physically pummeled into blindness. So that was too much and a lot, and I'm sorry, but super inspired by both of you. And thank you very much.

**Marion Chottin** 1:02:57

I will let you answer. Can you please shorten your questions and remarks and shorten your answers? So please, Kish, could you answer David now?

**Kishor Alam** 1:03:18

First of all, David, I think it's great that you're a queer theory scholar. I've been looking at queer theory over the last year, especially. And there's a great book called *Word Slut* by Amanda Montel; she's brilliant feminist writer. And one of the things that I'm looking into in terms of language is the way that the actual word “queer” has been retaken. And it has been, has been re-owned. It used to be a term of insult. And now we're happily talking about queer theory as something brilliant, and that's what I, what I would hope happens to the word blind. And we've talked about all the moral encumbrances that come with that word. Because of all the narratives that have been told about blind people. Now, the issue for me about the morality is: so much of the morality that describes blindness is negative, for example, Samson, and the blindness as punishment. Those are the ones that have resonated throughout history. And those are the ones that will... psychologists will tell you, this is something else that I've been looking at, which is we like to find meaning in things. And there has been an overarching aim to think: Hold on; If this person is blind, that must have been for a reason. And it's often a moral reason. It's because they have behaved in some way that isn't acceptable. Those are the stories that were told. Whether they're real or not, it doesn't matter, because [unclear]. So I think that, as a writer, I do want to embrace the morality but then again, flip it, flip it. So actually, a person isn't straightforwardly immoral because obviously they're blind, which is the previous narrative, but nor are they moral. It's a choice. It's something that we all are but blind people aren’t one or the other. Because they are people and people are not one or the other. And I think that the hierarchies you talked about, about blindness, and whether it's been whether it's from birth, or whether it's been a consequence is really interesting. When I was blind, I was in a blind support group. And I remember being at the bottom of the hierarchy because there was nothing wrong with my eyes. I had a condition called optic neuritis, where my, my nerves were inflamed, and therefore the messages from my eyes wasn't getting to my brain. And chances were, as happened, the inflammation after a few years did subside. And I knew that I was at the bottom of the blind food chain. There was a morality even in that structure, because there's, there is hierarchies in every aspect of society. So I don't think we can ignore it. I think that for me as a writer, it's something that I want to investigate. And I think it's also ripe low hanging fruit. So it's because it's interesting. Does that help?

**Marion Chottin** 1:06:39

Yes, thank you.

**Audience Member** 1:06:45

Absolutely, thank you.

**Marion Chottin** 1:06:47

I am now handing over to Charlotte Makepeace. It is over to you Charlotte.

**Audience Member** 1:07:06

Hi, thank you for such an interesting talk. I always love kind of hearing people using their kind of lived experience so positively. I'm also a blind academic trying to work out how to put lived experience into my PhD. And obviously, I know the kind of writing you both do is different between you’re fictional, kind of history and memoir that are you finding there's something quite empowering about being able to flip the intrusion, I guess, because I think I can imagine everyone here, who is a blind person, the level of intrusive questions, as Selina demonstrated in her paragraphs, or, you know, being forced to touch someone's face or anything like that, or like, when I was pregnant, I had a woman come and put her hand straight on my belly and asked me how I was going to cope as a blind woman. So it was just like, most ridiculously intrusive thing. So I just wondered, do you feel that kind of empowerment from being able to take something that's a spectacle or curiosity or strangeness, as Kish said, and make it positive?

**Selina Mills** 1:08:15

May I just quickly say that I just rushed from another event that I had a horrible experience trying to get out of the building, and no one would help you. And I couldn't see. And I sat down here. And I just literally, I started feeling better because I, I was in this room with all these people who get it and understand it from the sticking a table too low for wheelchair to mocking, to how do you define, how exhausting so just, just from being here, I have a feeling better today than I had about two hours ago. But in general, I have to say, I was just sending my manuscript in and I actually got really happy because it's the first time I thought I had been honest about myself in a public space, because I don't mean to fake it, in any shape or form. I'm quite happy with my stick. And I do spend a lot of time bumping into stuff. But sometimes I'm just exhausted. And from having to explain and I think you're right, it is intrusive even though people don't mean it to be, whether it's “Have you been to this” or “my granny had it lasered” to “I'll pray for you.” And I mean, the spectrum of, of offers I've had is quite astonishing. That I feel like being able to write in my own terms in my own language, and also to say, I'm confused, that it's not binary, is really helpful. So the answer to your question is absolutely empowered. Yes, yes, yes.

**Kishor Alam** 1:09:50

And I agree. I... I feel lucky that I have had those experiences. And I can write about ... I have a nuanced understanding that I've, I've looked at the literature and as I say, nonblind people writing about blind people isn't very, isn't always very accurate and isn't always very good. Going back to Jose Saramago. He's a Nobel Laureate for writing the novel *Blindness*. And without, again, trying to sound arrogant, I really think that, that's that even though it's there are lots of great things, There are a lot of things I just cannot abide also, and perhaps there's something lost in the translation, because I've only ever read it in English. But, the fact is, that it's, I still think it's a very ableist book. And the fact that I'm able to write from the memories that I had, and thank God for an older brother who made me write and take notes and look at my scrawls, as I felt things, and now I can read them. I feel lucky, I feel empowered, and I feel that I have something that nonblind people don't have. So that makes it interesting. That makes it real, and that for therefore, it's easier for my reader to suspend their disbelief.

**Selina Mills** 1:11:36

I think Kish, I think you and I should go and have a play out room or whatever they call it on Zoom and you and I can have some them Saramago bashing and possibly Borges bashing only because I totally agree. It's like, How can this be a Nobel Prize winning novel when it's basically saying that being blind is the worst thing that could ever happen to you, and you need a sighted wife to rescue you? I mean, I just always blows my brain. However, having said that, because we have, a Hannah Thompson, it was turned into an audio book play. And actually, it was brilliant. So I would highly... I sort of only changed my experience of that book because Hannah was part of a team that took it to a London stage, and the whole thing was audio. And that gave me the advantage again, so it gave me my power back. So I was on the same place as everyone else in the room, which is none of us could see. And so again, back to the question, which was does, does writing about it empower you? Yes. What disempowers us is what sighted people presuming, and the list is quite gigantic, it's Charles Dickens, Jane Eyre, André Gide. I mean, some of the greatest novelists of the last 200 years have used the blindness stereotype. And I'm sure Hannah can give us a whole lecture on the French stereotype, in novels and literature, so Kish, get your book out there, mate.

**Kishor Alam** 1:13:14

Absolutely, I agree. Yes. I mean, even the writers who have become blind, as you say, like Borges, and Milton, and Shakespeare, and Lear, and all of those things: they are not the greatest. They are fantastic writers, but they're not the greatest expositions of, of a real blind lived life. And because those stories are so good, and they've permeated, what's happened is that society has taken those on board. So yes, I think we've all got a duty. One of the thing about Hannah's play, I saw it in Oxford, and obviously, I've read the book a few times, and I've read it and I've seen the film. So I took a few friends of mine who weren't familiar with it. And I was very much interested in, in the method of that experience, because I knew the story and I knew the narrative, I knew exactly what was going to happen. I forgot how emotionally jarring and how effective it is and how it can just screw with your feelings. And my poor PhD fellow students were like Kish what have you taken us to, we’re like emotionally just completely corrupt. It's, it's, as you say, that that the whole story of blind people having the most terrible affliction and the only way that they're ever going to survive is if because there are sighted people around them to guide them and save the situation. It it it was just... it's such a blunt instrument.

**Selina Mills** 1:14:54

There is a short story by H.G Wells. I would highly encourage anyone to read and I'd love to have a whole seminar on that one day, called the Country of the Blind and it's left unclear. Some people would read it as sighed being better. But quite a lot of it, it’s about whether, if you live in a country of blind people, and no one really has a problem, and everyone gets on with it, they're all fine, would you, would you... He has the hero has to choose between his sight and his, his loved one. And I, I always find that an interesting the fact that that was even posited as a debate is interesting. So I think we need to have a whole other conference, Hannah.

**Marion Chottin** 1:15:36

Thank you. Yes, there are three people still have questions to ask. So please be really quick. It's fascinating. But you really you need to be, you need to answer shortly so that everybody can ... you talked about Jose Saramago’s novel translated as *Blindness*. I think that's such an interesting point of literature where he describes this community of people who become blind as an epidemic. It's an echo of what we have lived through. And it's a horrible metaphor, and the drop into bestiality, we don't know it can be worse. So, Betrand, it is up to you. Now. Over to you.

**Audience Member**

Do you hear me? Yes. Do you hear me? Hello, and thank you. I am blind and I'm a linguist. I would like to thank the two writers who have spoken so eloquently of their work. You have spoken about inventing words, you have spoken of the importance of the viewpoint that is, for me, absolutely essential; the viewpoint, you have talked about situation, but I would have liked to know if you are thinking about also the choice of words, either to invent metaphors, tropes, or alternative metaphors about vision, or even the figurative sense of meaning of words. When I speak, I have seen, I've seen a film, I... when I speak, I use words like I've seen a film, even though I haven't seen it. When I write some words, some seeing some words of, of seeing, of sight, are very difficult for me. And I would like to, I want to make this obvious with my hands, but can't do it with my eyes when something is clear. Clear, even if everybody doesn't know it clear is, is sound before it is sight, before it is visual. Are these questions that you are dealing with, and how do you treat them?

**Kishor Alam** 1:18:07

Um, so I've split my novel into two parts. And in the first part of the novel, there is lots of the normal ocularcentric language that we all use: the fact that when we understand something we don't say, I understand we say, Oh, I see. And all of those tropes that we've talked about, which is, for example, the Enlightenment was a time where we've moved out of the dark ages and we are now humanists and we are scientists, etc. Words like enlighten and highlight and perspective and point of view and aspect, etc, etc. these are all ocularcentric words. I don't have a problem with them, because I don't think they're negative in their connotation. And they're just already out there. If we develop stories, if we develop new tropes, where there is a positive angle, on the fact that you might not, you might be on a different level of visual acuity. For example, in, in my novel, the girlfriend appreciates that in order to best smell a rose, she has to close her eyes. In order to hear a piece of music, she'll close her eyes. In order to get the best feeling from kissing her boyfriend, she will close her eyes. What she's doing is taking away this sense which she thinks is, is not, does not enhance it. In fact, it detracts away from, from the feeling that she's trying to get that's why she finds that state as, as I mentioned before, endarkened rather than the word enlightened; so I’m flipping the word. So, for example, another word that I'll use is, rather than insight, I'll talk about insense... that's another word that happens in the second part of my novel. I wanted the first part of my novel, to just be the normal language that we use. And then I want there to be a change, where I introduce more words, which are not so ocularcentric but depend on sense and depend on feelings from our other attributes. And not not just physical ones, like hearing and touch and smell, but also perhaps imagination. Does that answer your question?

**Marion Chottin** 1:20:46

Thank you to both of you. So now, Michelle, gets, you get to speak now.

**Audience Member** 1:20:59

Hi, thanks so much, for this really interesting conversation. I am also a blind academic, I'm coming to you from Cape Town, South Africa. And I guess what I've been grappling with, while you have been speaking, particularly around these issues of these tropes of burdensome versus, you know, inspirational, super, superhero and trying to find this middle ground of, of regular, you know, regular life, I guess what I'm, what I'm thinking about is, can we escape the way that blindness is imagined? In society by the sighted? Can we escape the fact that when we are living life, in, in regular ways... a friend of mine said to me, a fellow blind friend said to me the other day, you know, we will be remembered for the mundane, because, you know, I [unclear] and my family practically, you know, hoist me on their shoulders and parade me through the streets rejoicing. And so, I guess what I'm grappling with is can we escape that? Can we escape those imaginings? Or will we always be interpreted as ... [unclear].

**Marion Chottin**

Michelle, could you repeat what you just said at the end? For the interpreter?

**Audience Member** 1:22:31

Oh, sure, of course. So my question was, can we, can we escape the way that blindness is imagined in our society? Or will, will our actions always be interpreted as miraculous because of the negative? I suppose, negative imaginings of blindness as, as terrible as, as difficult, as insurmountable? Are we able to find that middle ground between those extreme tropes? Or will we always be interpreted as, as, as miraculous? Or as superheroes? That's, that's my question.

**Selina Mills** 1:23:13

I think the word always would, if you took out the word always, I think there will be an undercurrent of that. And if you think about it, in the way the binaries set up and vary from creation myths... So I looked this up, the majority of creation myths, not many of them use sound, the majority ...then the creators, whoever it, he or she is, is light, and then the world became, so you always had the binary of darkness and light. So I think the binary is there; I think what's changed and is changing and the more we we have, think about it, and write about it, and do whether it's opera, plays, films, whatever, everything in the public domain, we can shift the, the, what I would call fixed and static notion of it. So you're going to have more people going, Oh, I met this girl who did this. And I met this bloke, well, there is this novelist you wrote about this, or, you know, there's I saw an opera about this. And so I think it was, I think that is a binary but I don't think it's necessarily to do with blindness. I think it's to do with how we, we are as a, as a language, linguistic group of animals that we do have, you know, sky, earth, good, bad. You know, we have these binaries embedded in our language. And often it's shorthand. Often it's really, you know, we never have the time to explain how complicated so many things are. So I would say it's “and and” not “and but” so it's sort of and blindness as binary blindness as something mainstream, part of but it's happening at the same time in parallel. I think the only time it will totally disappear is when blindness itself is not seen as other as disability as yeah as other. The moment you have an other it puts a binary label on it. Would you would you agree, Kish?

**Kishor Alam** 1:25:13

I think the De- othering ...

**Marion Chottin** 1:25:19

Excuse me. Sorry, Kish. I have to ask someone else. To David Johnson for the last question. I'm terribly sorry. I'm really sorry. David is over to you, David Johnson.

**Audience Member** 1:25:30

Hello, can you hear me? Can you hear me? Yes, yes. Thank you so much. It's been a really inspiring talk. Thank you. And Selina, thank you for the, the word blindish. I think that's wonderful. I'm going to use that myself, if I may. And thank you for also for pointing out the complexity of what we're talking about. I think it's the nuance-ness of the whole subject that needs to be put to the fore. I just want to cycle back to I think the very first question, I think it was Susan, who raised the question of whether it's, she's right, I think apologies if by misquoting, that, if it's right to foreground blindness all the time, all the time. Right, in my view, I'm really just expressing my personal view of your comments, is that my blindness comes to the fore at some times and then retreats at other times. It sort of changes all the time, depending on the circumstances of the situation I happen to be in, you know, for my work as a, as a blind artist, I put blindness of the very forefront of it, because it's sort of very important, inescapable elements of my, of my art. But if I'm doing other things, nearly all other things, actually, blindness doesn't feature very much. So it's a really complex thing. Do you agree or ...?

**Kishor Alam** 1:27:08

Well, I thought of my blindness as just one of my other attributes. And we don't use all of our attributes, all the time, we use them as and when they're necessary. And we use them for a particular purpose. And I really thought that when I was blind, I didn't understand all the negativity that was surrounding me, because I was just getting through the day. And I didn't think I was really in... I wasn't in the condition that society thought I was, including my parents who had some learning to do. I agree with you, and it's what Selina said earlier about, depending on which room she is, with which people here are which situation she is, where and when her blindness is front and center or back and behind.

**Marion Chottin** 1:28:04

So, it is time to, to end this fascinating roundtable. Thank you, warmly, Selina and Kish for and Hannah who chaired it. I hope that the non-blind people of this conference are the proof, the living proof that there is still space for understanding that is not violent and that is not ocularcentric. So in 15 minutes, we will meet up to talk for the roundtable on Decentering. Thank you. Thank you.