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## Roundtable #4

**Writing Blindness: Blindness and Self-Representation**

**Chair: Georgina Kleege**

**Moderator: Hannah Thompson**

**Speakers: Aravinda Bhat(Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India)**

**Krishna Kumar (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India)**

**Céline Roussel (Sorbonne Université, Paris, France)**

**Georgina Kleege** 00:00

Writing blindness, blindness and self-representation. So we have three scholars speaking today, I'm going to keep my eye will introduce each in turn and keep my introduction, introductions very brief, to maximize the time for each speaker. I will go in the order that is printed in the program, available in the program. So, I will begin with Aravinda Bhat who comes to us from the Manipal Academy of Higher Education in India, where it must be very late at night, I assume. So, thank you, Aravinda, for being with us. And you will have five minutes to tell us about your work, particularly your work on blindness and self-representation. Thank you very much.

**Aravinda Bhat** 01:03

Okay. Thank you, Professor Kleege. Right. So, thank you for inviting me to this wonderful conference. I wish to begin by thanking the organizers, Professor Hannah Thompson, Professor Vanessa Warne. And Professor Chottin. I hope I have not mangled the last name. I don't speak French, so I beg your pardon if it went wrong. So I will take five minutes. But before I start, I will just like to remember one of her colleagues, whom we met at the Blind Creations Conference in London, Royal Holloway, University of London in 2015, June 2015. I'm speaking of Brian Miller. I learned from Professor Maria Romerias that Brian Miller passed away due to COVID-19. And I would like to begin this brief presentation by dedicating my remarks to him; he was a man of great spirit and humour, I really enjoyed our time, however brief it was, back in 2015 June. Okay. So, my inquiry into blindness, blindness, literature and philosophy began in 2007. That was the year I finished my MA, MA in English Literature at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages at Hyderabad in India. When, in 2007, I started my MPhil, again in English literature and my mentor, Dr. Rajiv C. Krishna- he's a poet and a Cambridge educated scholar of modernist and post-modernist literature- he advised that I inquire into, investigate literary works written by blind people. You know, this was for my MPhil. And fortuitously, I continue with that research, even at the doctoral level from 2011 to 2016, 2011 to 2016. Of course, I'm aware of the time limit, so I'll keep my remarks brief. At this time, in 2007, I was introduced to humanities-based disability studies, which revolutionized my thinking about blindness and disability. To put it very ... in a nutshell, it was the social model of disability, which you know, which, which politicized me. So, you know, I can I can locate my politicization in that moment. And that was coincidentally or not when time when the UNCRPD, the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted. So, it was, it was a very exciting time. And I discovered that, to that, until that date, a lot of disability studies scholarship, within literary and cultural studies, was devoted to the representation of disabilities in literary works. And that continues to this day. But I wanted to do something new; I wanted to break new ground, as it were, and I wanted to study writings by visually impaired blind people. Okay, now, I use the word blind to mean totally blind people, people who cannot see at all and visually impaired to mean people with low vision. I am aware that these are terms which are slippery, they're not straightforward, but however, I choose to use these terms. And I wanted to look at how you know, writers such as Ved Mehta, Indian American writer who passed away recently and Tom Sullivan, the American singer and autobiographer, right- so, how these two writers achieve literary representation. We can get go deeper into this later. Then, coming to my PhD, you know, in 2006, I had heard that for Jorge Luis Borges had gone blind, midway through his life; I also had heard of John Hull, and his diaries *Touching the Rock* and *On Sight and Insight* as well as of Steven Kuusisto, his beautiful memoirs, *Planet of the Blind* and *Eavesdropping* and, most recently, *Have Dog, Will Travel*. So, in 2011, when I started my PhD, I wanted to work in philosophy itself, because I was deeply interested in the philosophy of blindness and so on. However, due to certain circumstances, I continued with literary studies and looked at the prose works of Borges, Hull and Kuusisto and investigated the influence of blindness on narrative choices and artistic subjectivity. And most recently, I have diverged into the philosophy of perception and the, the philosophical significance of audio description. I deploy linguistic description as a tool which enables the blind to comprehend something of visual imagery and so on. So, we can go deeper into these matters later. What are my methods? My methods are literary criticism, textual analysis, philosophical analysis. What are my findings? My findings in doctoral dissertation were briefly put- how blindness and time are deeply bound to each other in the writings of Borges, John Hull and Steven Kuusisto and you know the temporal articulation of blindness manifests artistic subjectivities, which are widely divergent, but at the same time, strangely, you know, they align with each other. So I hope I have made sense, some sense. I'm willing to take questions and go deeper into these matters in the time that is left during this session. Thank you, one and all.

**Georgina Kleege** 10:30

Thank you very much, Professor Bhat. This is Georgina speaking again. Yes, you've raised many interesting questions that I think our other speakers will also want to address. So we'll move before we get to general discussion, we'll move to our next speaker who is Krishna Kumar, who comes to us from the English and Foreign Language University in Hyderabad, India, which were Professor Bhat also studied. I will give Krishna Kumar five minutes to introduce yourself and your work specifically on self- representation and blindness. Thank you.

**Krishna Kumar** 11:32

I am Krishna. I'm speaking from India and to begin this short description of myself: I am a totally blind person and I am wearing colored polo shirt. And I also have my spectacles on. And currently, I'm completing my PhD thesis on the letter-writing practices of blind and visually impaired writers and for my research, I have chosen writers from the 17th century onwards, including John Milton from the 17th century and Priscilla Pointon from the 18th century, Helen De Kroyft in the 19th century, Helen Keller who represents the transition from the 19th to the 20th century and Georgina Kleege, who represents the 21st-century artistic practice of the blind. So, I began my PhD in 2017, planning to go on with memoirs of blind and visually impaired writers, but I clearly realized that it was it was the topic over explored in disability and literary studies. And I was struggling to locate my voice as it were in the field of disability studies. A semester into my work, I came across this book, *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, written by Georgina Kleege. And that was a turning point in my research career. I thought I was initially intrigued by the book and in particular, the use of open letter to address Keller. So that set me thinking about letters written by other blind and visually impaired writers in history. That was how I investigated and came across the titles that I mentioned in my introduction, from John Milton to Helen Keller and so, right now, I'm completing my thesis on these five writers and my key arguments are that blindness as a phenomenological condition affects the practice of reading and writing letters and also the kind of interaction, interpersonal interaction that these writers have with their particular correspondents. And conversely, the specific conventions specific material culture conventions and the formal and functional properties of the letter itself have a bearing on how these writers [unclear audio] in their letters as blind people. So, I tease out these twofold variables in my research. But, for this particular symposium, I have shared a book that extends beyond my PhD research. It is on the late Professor John Hull’s epistolary text, which is called “Open Letter from a Blind Disciple to a Sighted Savior.” It is a fascinating book, a short epistolary book in which Hull addresses Jesus Christ referred to in that it as the sighted savior. He addresses Christ from the perspective of a blind believer and the document that I have shared is a working paper, which I have tentatively titled as ‘Resistance, Reconciliation, and Reclamation: Episolary Intimacy in John Hull’s Open Letter from a Blind Disciple to a Sighted Savior’. So, I situate Hull’s letter in contemporary disability studies literature, in particular, particularly in the strain of writing that is aesthetically and politically self-conscious of disability and Hull’s letter participates in this new sort of very self-conscious understanding of disability and how it is represented and lived. So to provide a gist of my paper, I have divided my inquiry on this particular work into three phases: one concentrating on resistance, that is how Hull addresses Christ from a very, from a position of indignation, for Christ's disparaging use of blindness and his attitude towards the blind in the Bible. There are very many examples that Hull goes into that show that Christ's use of language for dealing to blindness is very much problematic. It is problematic because since it is recorded in the Bible, and given that the Bible is one of the primary cultural sources in Western society, the kind of use and the kind of language use pertaining to blindness still persists today. And given that it comes from an authoritative source, that is Christ, it is uncritically used to this day. And Hull also talks about the damaging effects of Christ's metaphorical use of blindness to imply ineptitude, incompetence, and also tying it with sin, and so on. So that is regarding the resistance part. And the reconciliation part is where being a believer, Hull has to find an alternative way of relating to Christ from the Bible. So he goes about explicating instances in the Bible, that are pro blind, as it were. So, there are several things that he does and the first one is that he finds that Christ does not uncritically accept his society's view of the blind. He challenges that particular aspect of his society and Christ is also critical of the ocular hubris of the society, which is represented in this sermon, the sermon on the mount, and Christ is also talking about the kind of pride and hubris that gives rise to, because of this over emphasis on sight, and Hull also references Christ's Lord, Lord's prayer, in which Christ talks about his father, who is able to see life while remaining unseen and invisible. So, there is this particular strain that is non-ocularcentric. So, that is another important strain that he finds out.

**Hannah Thompson** 23:20

I'm sorry to interrupt. This is Hannah, the moderator for the session. Could you conclude please, so, that we have enough time for discussion.

**Krishna Kumar** 23:31

Yes- So, in reclamation part, Hull explores Christ’s de facto blindness in his child as well as his loss of sight on the cross, referencing crucifixion. So, these three phases are from my working paper. And with that, I'd like to conclude my presentation and I'd be open to sharing more of my work in discussion.

**Georgina Kleege** 24:15

Thank you, Krishna. Yes, there's, you've raised so many points that I'm sure that we will want to delve deeper in discussion. But let us move now to our third speaker in this session who is Céline Roussel from the Sorbonne University in Paris, though I believe she is coming to us from Germany today. So please give us your five minutes, Céline.

**Céline Roussel** 24:50

Thank you very much. I will not unmute my camera, I will just talk; I am come calling from Munich in Bavaria in the southern part of Germany. I am a non-blind 32 years old person. I am a literary person interested in literature; I started my research with my Master 2, which I started in 2012. So, I've been studying this field for the last 10 years, it's my 10 years jubilee, should I say? Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to present my research work. So I take the viewpoint of comparative analyses of literature; I was trying to do that at Paris University, thus allowing me to explore a wide range of fields, fields or corpuses. I work at the University of Munich, where I teach French language, thus allowing me to look into different text and I combine the analysis of the speech [discourse analysis] as it is done in the French language, especially done by Dominique Maingueneau, from a well-known French scholar. I use also methodology of the blind Writer using the framework of the critical disability studies, analyzing the blind writers, from the very early age to the contemporary age, a wide range of ways works, John Hull, George Kleege, Jacques Sémelin - all of which are, feature a wealth of information. They are very diverse pieces of arts, works of arts. I try to show this represents a great opportunity to disassemble, to deconstruct, the standardized conventions on the body and to revert and to use a counter discourse on the basis of a double gesture, first of all, to disassemble, deconstruct, and then reconstruct, rebuild on a new basis. And therefore I'm trying to show how the blind autobiographer becomes an actor of his or her self- representation, allowing to use blindness as a positive attitude, not only to reduce to body impairment. What I'm trying to do in the meantime, I hope I'm not too, that I speak too quickly, interpreter-- what I'm trying to do in the meantime is examine the autobiographic speeches have emerged, in which conditions this took place. I think it is well known in the context of empowerment and disability studies; I think it is less well known in France and less studied and I have used the Heritage Library of the AVH which features lots of texts, manuscripts which have not been studied and in this library can be found a wide range of text of blind writers, which allowed a culture of blindness to come to life in France. I'm thinking about Maurice de la Sizeranne, the Founder of the Hauy Association but also to his counterpart. These are blind scholars which I like to call the master of the reflection when it comes to blindness who provide it counter ways and counter discussions on... how to deconstruct preconceived ideas pertaining to blind people. So I'm trying to recenter, the image projected, of the blind people. And the third research pathway is not only to think how blindness is presented in autobiographical works but to challenge its very existence in autobiographic work- so I am analyzing the language items and resources used by the writers. The multi-sensoreality; multi-senses aspect is essential to me. I'm also questioning how this writing allows us to give birth to new ways of writing. Autobiography is not only a space to express one’s self-representation, but also a space where one writer can dialogue with other people; a space where social norms can be challenged, and one can wonder what blindness can do to this autobiography-- back to the argument defined by Phillipe Lejeune in France, the fact that we cannot see: is that an obstacle, a holdover to the fact that we can provide testimonies. So this is for that brief presentation. I am open to any questions you may have. Thank you.

**Georgina Kleege** 31:35

Thank you Céline; this is Georgina speaking. A lot of interesting connections, obviously, between your-- everyone's work here. I'm impressed by the historical range of authors that have been mentioned here, from Milton up until contemporary writers... the subject of autobiographical writing about blindness is very near and dear to my heart as I am a practitioner of this form. I also for many years at Berkeley taught a course, a class in autobiographical writing by people with disabilities, not just blind people, but other, other people. And I've also taught courses in writing memoir, autobiographical writing, personal essay. So that these issues are very much at the heart of my thinking. I, oh, I have so much to say; I have so much so many questions to ask and so many things I want to pull out of discussion. We were talking quite a bit yesterday about how, you know, for centuries people, sighted people have written about blind people as medicalized subjects, or as objects of charity, or whatever it is. But it's a relatively recent, more recent development that blind people were writing for themselves. And many people yesterday, were talking about the significance, the importance that, the, the essential nature of recording, of chronicling the lived experience. And you know, I will say this, one of the reasons that I revere Louis Braille, Louis Braille, is not only for his role in developing a system of, of reading for the blind, but also for developing a system of writing for the blind because prior to that, and some of the authors that Krishna mentioned writing in the 17th or 18th century, were writing but they were writing through dictation to an amanuensis. But with braille’s invention, suddenly blind people could write for themselves and write to other blind people who could read braille. Um, so maybe my first question is to think about audience because I think any writer, whether of, of autobiography, or of nonfiction, or of fiction or of poetry, always, at some point has to think about who is the reader? Who am I writing to? That there's always a kind of two way communication taking place. And so I'd like to ask you, each in turn to think of maybe a specific example from one of the authors you study, where there's some kind of explicit representation or address to a specific type of reader. Are these writers, blind writers writing to the sighted majority? Are they writing to the blind insider - to people who they have something in common with? So let's, let's go in turn and so I will start with Professor Bhat. Can you think of a specific example from one of your authors where there's some interesting expression of who they think they're writing to?

**Aravinda Bhat** 35:34

Thank you Professor Kleege. Yes, indeed, I can think of a few examples. So, I'll begin with the Kuusisto. You know, for me his memoirs, more so than his poetry, because I haven't gotten around to reading is very complex poetry- I think Krishna will be able to speak more about that. However, his, in his memoirs, especially, *Eavesdropping*, the second member published in 2006, he composes such wonderful you know, audio postcards, which you know, he calls them audio postcards. They are brief essays, prose poetry even. And he develops an aesthetic of listening, of blind perception, okay: he manages, in fact, excels in transforming his blindness from a lack which Borges dealt with, Borges alternated between affirmation and the rueing, the mourning of sight, okay, the affirmation of blindness, and the mourning of sight; he alternated between them. But Stephen Kuusisto, he transforms blindness into an art of knowing the world. And why am I talking about this when I, when you have raised the question of the audience: the reason is this. He writes not just for blind people, not simply to express the voice of a blind traveler, but also to, to people in general, sighted and unsighted, non-sighted or blind people, and people with other disabilities. He wants to show them how, you know, this perceived lack can be a mode of knowing the world, of being aesthetically awake to the world. Right? So this is one prong of my answer. The second one is more in the mode, or the mold of realism. Why do I say this? Kuusisto has, you know, he has these extremely interesting aesthetic avant garde methods of writing. John Hull, in his diaries, and his theological books on blindness and so on, he works in the mode of, of realism. Take for instance his book *On Sight and Insight*, which is an expanded version of his first diary *Touching the Rock*. He wrote that book to communicate his experience of blindness, of going into blindness, his journey into blindness, communicate it to sighted people. He does say that in this foreword, in his preface, right. So it is a sort of, you know, it's a sort of letter, if you will, that he writes as a blind person to sighted people. So, why does he do this? Now, I have read disability theorists who say that we don't have to explain ourselves to the non-disabled, but Hull adopts a different view. He says, I want my near and dear ones, my friends, and other people to know what it is I’m going through. So that's why I wanted to bring in both Kuusisto and Hull; Kuusisto as a self-conscious blind artist, and Hull, as an epistolographer, in a sense, or a letter writer in a sense. So I hope this made some sense. Thank you.

**Georgina Kleege** 40:25

Ah yes, it makes perfect sense. I'll just, I'll give you a recommendation once you get to reading Kuusisto’s poetry, he has a series of poems that are addressed directly to Borges. So that will be fruitful avenue for you, I'm sure. And your, your comments about Hull as a letter writer, brings us maybe most directly to Krishna, whose work directly addresses the epistolary form of life writing for some blind authors. So Krishna, can you, can you cite a maybe a single specific example of the authors you study where, where who are they writing these letters to? A letter always has this idea of, of a receiver and how, how is that understood in terms of who the actual reader would be?

**Krishna Kumar** 41:31

So, I would like to reflect upon this question from a slightly different perspective, I explain why I do that. So, I would like to cite Helen de Kroyft. She is a blind American writer who lived in the 19th century. So, she compiles a collection of letters and tries to publish it and sell it in order to earn a living for herself. She has gone blind, in midlife when she was 25 and also at the same time she is widowed. So she doesn't have a source, of source of finances. So, what she does is that she collects your personal correspondence and publishes it as a collection, as a collection to the public. Now, she addresses this particular letter collection to the non-blind community, primarily, but interestingly, in, in her preface, she says that these letters were written either through dictation or through using a sort of a grooved card. So, this takes me back to the point that you made about Louis Braille’s invention of braille being a medium that enables both reading and writing. Now, what I've observed in my research, in the research in the epistolary tradition, is that many of these blind people have always found some means or the other to write their letters, in de Kroyft’s case, grooved card. But the challenge that this particular mode of writing poses is that you can write but you cannot read what others write to you. So, that that becomes, that becomes an issue. So which is where the importance of braille comes in. So back to De Kroyft, another important thing about her readership is that her letter collection contains letters addressed both to her sighted as well as blind friends. This is something new because the letters that I have managed to trace before the 19th century, there is, the large part of it is, I mean the primary audience for these letters these are sighted, sighted correspondents. So de Kroyft’s letter collection is the first instance that introduces this not only blind to sighted correspondence but also blind to blind correspondence. That is because de Kroyft lived for three years in the New York Institute for the Blind. So, where she cultivated friendships with fellow blind people. So, that is interesting, but the larger readership, readership of her letter collection may said to be sighted. But, but at the same time, we should also recognize that the letters when they were addressed in their specific moment also included blind correspondents. So, I hope I answered your question.

**Georgina Kleege** 46:40

Yes, that's very interesting to think about this writer who, who is sort of writing for both audiences. Let me turn to Céline and ask if you know, it can give us an example from the authors you study of an occasion where they announce or describe a specific readership for their work.

**Céline Roussel** 47:08

Yes, thank you. There was a change over in the translation but I think I understood the question. I was thinking about John Martin Hull, which was talked, talked about by Professor Bhat. And I follow, I agree with everything he said. I would add something- in his famous foreword to his published memoir, John Hull mentions particularly in a paragraph to the blind reader that the preceding paragraph, that it made it sound like he was talking mainly to seeing, sighted people, but he is also doing it for blind people. And there was distinction quite interesting to be made, is that he is speaking to blind readers but did not expect to speak for blind readers, he speaks for himself to blind readers. He does not, he does not try to speak for blind readers saying that a blind reader knows what is blindness and John Hull doesn't want to teach, that isn't, he doesn’t expect to teach him anything about that. So that process of recomposition of his self, that is present throughout his extraordinary text that he wrote in the prospective of a personal journal, a retrospective, an autobiography, not, not a retrospective, but day by day, destined to be read by both readerships: sighted and non sighted. The idea of speaking to or for is a perspective, is an interesting perspective on text. The other example would be to reference Thérèse- Adele Husson, who was mentioned in the introduction to this conference that can be found in the internet website. First autobiographical text that we were able to find written by a woman, a feminine voice, so many things to be studied there. I tend to call it an apex, an archive apex, one of the rare manuscript occurrences from that period of time since that manuscript was just discovered, once again, lost into the archives. And then in this archive of apex, the writer talks to the administrators of the public institution the Quinze-Vingts that she hopes to be accepted as a member of, the text could seem a bureaucratic formality. She is defending her, herself as a candidate to this institution. She is, she is soliciting their acceptance in this institution. What I find very interesting is that she has... explores blindness in this text and substitutes to all of the deficient ideas that she considers deficient, all her own ideas about blindness. And this text is much wider ... it concerns a much wider readership than just the sighted readers and the people that she was addressing in this institution. That's another very interesting question.

**Georgina Kleege** 50:53

Thank you, Céline. And this is Georgina again. Yes. Adele Husson looms large in all my thinking today. And I would just like to mention that the editors and translators, I think are, I don't know if they're both present, but Catherine Kudlick and Zina, Zina Weygand, who discovered this text, translated, and published this text. And it's, it's a marvelous resource for us all. And I take Adele Husson as a personal role model precisely for the tone of that text, which is, by times, formulaic, obsequious, but at other times, quite assertive, that she's not someone who's going to be pushed around by this institution. And I think we can all derive strength from reading Adele Husson. Anyway, so we have a diversity of answers there of writers writing to sighted people, Kuusisto or John Hull saying that I am writing to sighted people because blind people know about blindness, but I'm also writing to them, and so forth. And maybe that takes us to, I'm supposed to have us discuss the three questions that everyone's being asked at this conference. Um, so that the one that I would start with is about definitions of blindness. And I'm thinking specifically, for each of you doing research in the 21st century, where, you know, we have ways to talk about blindness and visual impairment or blindnesses, we have different terminology, but maybe to think about your authors, particularly those from the past the recent past or the more distant past, and maybe to address what it feels like. Are there occasions where you find yourself noting that an author is defining blindness in a different way than you would? Is there a tension there that you, you know, or do you take a sort of historical point of view and say, Well, of course, in this or that century, this person wouldn't have the same way to articulate definitions of blindness that we have today. So I'll go back to Aravinda Bhat. And can you think of how one of your authors defines blindness and maybe how that-- how you agree or you disagree and your own definition of blindness?

**Aravinda Bhat** 53:45

Okay, thank you. I hope I'm audible.

**Georgina Kleege** 53:49

Yes, you are.

**Aravinda Bhat** 53:51

Thank you. So, you know, I'll bring in a couple of writers. So, I said earlier that for my MPhil, I picked up a few autobiographical works by the Indian American writer Ved Mehta. Now Mehta moved to the US in 1949. And he worked for several years at *The New Yorker*. And I find his definition of blindness or his attitude to blindness, a little problematic, and I'll tell you why. And I suppose he did, his view did evolve later on. But in some of his early works, like *Sound Shadows of the New World*, *The Ledge Between the Streams*, these are all wonderful books-- they come, they appear in the collection called *Continents of Exile*. He has this, you know, I will not use the white cane, you know, I will walk out, I will walk out in the streets, you know, using what he calls facial vision or echolocation. And, you know, he's this super-attuned person who is able to make minute distinctions between obstacles and so on. Now, that gives rise to this, you know, image of the super crip, you know, and everybody cannot do that. Now, I have not been able to read his later works, which he published in the 1980s, and so on, because his books are extremely difficult to come by in digital form, because I use a screen reader, just for Windows. And I don't read braille, because I was not educated in a school for the blind. So nor have I found, you know, truly accessible audio books. So, I mean, it's, it is unfortunate. So if somebody in this, you know, august company knows about his views later on, I'd be happy to hear that. Okay. The second one is, Borges. Borges, as I said, you know, he had this very difficult relationship with his sightlessness, with his blindness. And, you know, for him, it was difficult to move around, and so on, he had to take the help of friends to, to escort him around, to read to him, and so on. But, as you say, said, previously, I think Kuusisto addresses poems to him, and speaks about traveling and so on, you know, with a seeing eye dog, right. Now, you know, for me, I'm not very comfortable around animals per se. So I cannot imagine myself using the help of a dog; I use the white cane. And, and, you know, I must come to you all from an Indian perspective. Now, you know, here, accessibility is not incorporated into our built environment. So we don't have accessible footpaths or sidewalks; we don't have accessible buildings, we don't, you know, our roads are often dug up, you know, with the water pipes to be put underground or electrical connections to be made. So the disabled are not taken into account. So for me, even to use the white cane and move around is scary. You know, it's an every day adventure. So, you know, I do take the help of friends and so on more on so for me, what Borges says sometimes does ring true. Because, you know, it is difficult to take your life in your hands and move around on the streets with absolute confidence. So for me, Kuusisto’s globetrotting, you know, travelers’ outlook is not feasible, because I don't particularly like, you know, dogs and, and I hope I don't offend anybody here. This is my personal view. Right? So, I don't know, if I have been able to answer your question about definition for me. You know, blindness is, is a reality, it is, you know, not having access to the environment through sight. It is quite pedestrian, in that sense. It's very realist. Because, you know, in India, we do not have architectural accessibility, you know, factored into our construction and so on. So, yes, I do come from a very, very pedestrian, realist point of view.

**Georgina Kleege** 59:46

Thank you for that, that answer that reminds us that, you know, our definitions are always culturally and historically inflected. And those are great examples of, of how different blind people in slightly different areas, historical periods and cultural contexts talk about the, the issues of navigation, how we get around and how that defines us as blind people. Let me tell turn to Krishna and think about you as a blind author and blind scholar, studying blind autobiographers from different periods. Can you think of someone where there is this, what Professor Bhat is raising as some some tension between how they-- the author defines blindness-- versus how you might define blindness? Could you give us a brief example?

**Krishna Kumar** 1:00:48

So I take the example of Milton. And so what I'm thinking is how self-contradictory can we be defining ourselves in relation to blindness, which I will try to explain with Milton's example. So in one of his letters, addressed to his Italian friend, Milton is describing how he went blind. So that this description can be passed on to an eye, an eye specialist, as it were in Paris, so that he can dish out recommendations of the cure. So it is interesting that Milton is not very enthusiastic about having his blindness cured, because he gives a description of his visual loss, which is very poetic, and which alludes to mythology, and he alludes to mythological blind people, and so on. So he describes his blindness, also to show how learned he is. But, at the end of the letter, he says that, Milton himself says that I'm not too into enthusiastic about this, because I know that I am impure, that is the word that we use, and in because he says that he takes his blindness as God given – it’s an act of divine will, which which, which itself is a trope. But here, what I'm trying to say is that he gives this very nonchalant description of his physical blindness but at the same time, elsewhere in his letters, he also refers to his blindness as grievous and a misfortune, a deprivation. So, there are these two sides to this definition, self -definition of blindness, either negative or very nonchalant and not, not too much [unclear]. So, that is fascinating, because we go to an author, a blind author, in the distant past thinking that his or her attitude towards blindness would be rather negative. But we find these interesting, contradictory takes that need to be acknowledged. So that is something that I want to emphasize here.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:04:46

Okay, thank you. Let me go finally to Céline, it's Georgina speaking, and ask you about the definition of blindness and how you would define blindness today in 2022 versus maybe some of the definitions that you can extrapolate from authors that you're studying.

**Céline Roussel** 1:05:13

Thank you for this third question of the conference, and as you situate this-- you asked this question in a very good way in terms of tension, which is a really good way of asking the question. I am not blind myself. So I'm, I have a sighted perspective, a slightly different perspective, even if I must say that I have learned a lot from the writers that I've studied. And thinking of your question, I believe that basically, I, I had a very deprivational view of blindness. And I wanted to present to young people the fact that there was something else-- very young, I learned how to read braille from medicine boxes. It fascinated me to see these little dots raised dots on the surface of a box. So I must have very quickly understood there was more behind blindness than I thought at the time when I was young. So I learned a lot from the writers that I read, particularly Helen Keller. I know that many of you will be disappointed because it's a figure that is not... that is fairly unloved in our field of study, but I think we should reread, because beyond her autobiography, autobiography, *The Story of my Life* that is well known, from 1902- 1903, there are many other writings from her, that, that she where she breaks free from the visual norm. And we would all gain from your reading your book *Blind Rage*, that is, that confronts this person of Helen Keller, where at the end, you... we feel a reconciliation with her, I think it's a pathway, a journey that we could all go on. So I'm working from a literary point of view. But taking the words of Franz Kafka who said, I'm quoting him in German, [...] which means a book must be seen as an axe that breaks the frozen sea within us. And that is a good definition of blindness. It's an axe in the frozen sea of social conventions, literary conventions, representations, perceptions. For me, it is a way of breaking through conventions and conventional views. And these literary... this scenery of words of the different writers that I study, all the different possibilities sensorial possibilities arise, and it is for me a demonstration-- blindness is a demonstration that autobiography and ‘writing self’ is not just an account of an individual but also of society, its prejudices, and also an account of weapons to fight these things. This is my the answer from the literary field in which I, in which I am active.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:08:36

Thank you, Céline. You give us a new an expansion on this quotation we were talking about yesterday from Rod Michalko, of blindness as teacher. Now we have blindness as axe. Yes, very, very much in line with my thinking. Let me ask the moderator, I think do we have 15 minutes? So maybe we should go to the audience questions now. Would that be good?

**Hannah Thompson** 1:09:09

Yeah, is that okay? Thank you, Georgina. What wonderful chairing. Thank you. I can see that we have a question from Luna.

**Audience Member** 1:09:30

So, hello, can you hear me? Yes. I'm calling from Brussels in Belgium; I have difficulties in hearing and therefore I've had also some special interest in visually impaired people. I looked into blindness studies. I took part in some roundtable sessions on Tuesday within the framework of this curriculum. I was struck by the fact that deaf people claim... assert a Deaf culture and promote a Deaf culture and they want to defend it as whereas blind people, and the related blind culture, if that exists is more problematic. I have... it is my feeling, anyway. I wonder whether culture is not maybe too directly linked to the culture of writing. So, it's a twofold question for the participants of this roundtable. First of all, do you think that the autobiographical or fictional writings of writers who are blind, of blind people, are the elements that make a culture of blindness? And if so, how can we promote such a culture? And do you think that such a claim is still relevant? Not within the remit of inward perspective, looking into one's problems or issues. But do you think it rather aims at promoting its existence? And has a culture for other people? Do you think that's clear enough? Thank you.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:12:09

Because we've got other questions waiting. I'm going to start with Céline.

**Céline Roussel** 1:12:20

Yes, I think... thank you very much for your question; it was very clear, very interesting as well. To me, these autobiographical writings are part of a culture of blindness still rooted in the empowerment movement, which took place thanks to Louis Braille and his followers and there was an awareness raising of the fact that blind people can fully take part to society, to culture, how can we promote such a culture? I am thinking about promoting the reading of texts of those authors not in a way where the text would be dealt with as an heroic gesture, somebody with a cane, blindness or a visual impairment, the author offers a so called Master narratives in this case, so, a heroization of the history of the blind person-- that that conception is not good enough, because blindnesss would be only a depreciation-- that you can promote such a culture by prompting people to read and to discover the richness the wealth of that culture and I think from the viewpoint of cultural wealth, conceptual richness, I think promotion of such blindness culture would be relevant. But, of course, maybe language specific pertaining to blindness is still lacking, I think. I think the texts are part of a literary language, which is directed to all of us. I've tried to be brief; I hope it was brief enough. Thank you.

**Hannah Thompson**

Krishna.

**Krishna Kumar** 1:14:42

Yeah. I would like to specifically talk about the cultivation of blindness culture. On, on the basis of autobiographical writing. So I have a slightly different view there because I feel that the autobiographical writings and memoirs are a relatively recent phenomenon. But I ask, I mean, so my view is that we have to go back to different forms of life writing, if we are there to find different ways of establishing this blindness culture. So my work on letters and my search of blind writers who have written letters is a part of that quest. Thank you

**Hannah Thompson** 1:16:04

Thank you. And Aravinda, did you have anything to add?

**Aravinda Bhat** 1:16:07

Indeed, I hope, I really get three or four minutes. So let me just say that, you know, I've been given a lot of thought to this question and thank you to the participant for it. Now, you know, how do we move away from conceiving blindness as lack, as a deprivation, as Céline was saying, you know, there have always been blind people, there have always been visually impaired people. So, there is a world of the blind. Right? It, you know, and once we posit this world of the blind, it connects with what Krishna was saying that, you know, other forms of writing, not just, you know, memoirs or autobiographies per se, as the latest genres, other forms of writing of artistic expression, these too give rise to the, to blind culture. And, you know, I just wanted to add one or two things from the previous parts of this, this session to Céline. You know, I do remember that statement that Hull says that he addresses it to the blind reader. But he also makes another statement later on in his work that, you know, he found the other autobiographies of blindness, written before his diaries, you know, very simplistic, as you know, in a typical literary novelistic mode, with a beginning, middle and an end. So he says that blindness has no end. Right? So this feeds into this, this, this concept of the world that I was talking about. And to just, you know, give another pairing as it were. Even Borges says that blindness for him was an act of God. You know, there's a very famous poem called “The poem of the gifts.” It's a wonderful poem, and it says it's an ironic gift given to him by God. So, you know, these if you look at these different articulations, we can think of blindness as a world and Kuusisto his writings, Georgina Kleege’s writings, these, these, you know, they do give you know, a very window onto that world of blindness, which is, you know, other than the provision per se.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:19:05

Brilliant. Thank you, so much, Aravinda. I can see that Vanessa's got her hand up. Vanessa, have you got a very quick question?

**Vanessa Warne** 1:19:12

I will, I will make it very quick. Thank you, Hannah. This is Vanessa speaking. I just wanted to note that this is a question or maybe I will make it a comment. And Céline and I may be able to speak about it later. But it is inspired by Aravinda’s comments concerning access to digitized texts, and also by Krishna is work on Helen De Kroyft. And I'm struck by the responsibility we have as scholars of the history of blindness to make not only our own scholarship, but our sources available in digitized accessible ways and how we must communicate and collaborate with archivists, librarians, and curators to do that work, of kind of, responsible digitization and I was intrigued to speak with Céline about her exciting work in the Valentin Hauy archive. But perhaps I will just leave it there and perhaps simply just raise the topic of the ethics of the archive, and the ethics of access and the work that we as a community, could be doing more of or do, do better or do differently to make the primary texts of our field, especially historical ones, more widely available. So thank you all, and thank you to Georgina Kleege for the wonderful moderation, for the chairing of the panel. And to you Hannah for that moderation. Thank you.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:20:38

Thanks, Vanessa. I do want Céline to come in and just say a minute about your digitization project.

**Céline Roussel** 1:20:48

Yes, yes if understood rightly, the issue is to present that project briefly. Yes, the Heritage Valentin Hauy library is not well known. It features instrumental texts for the history of society in France, but also in other countries. It was set up in 1819 at a time where institutions began to exchange and with digitalization lab in Paris, we are trying to digitalize these texts. So as to make them accessible to both blind and sighted people on - via website, via audio as well. And providing also commentaries, remarks, providing some background information, some context information. So it is both an academic but also a digitalization project. We would be very happy, both Marion and I, but the success comes to life and becomes a reality and that research fellows from around the globe take part into the comments of those texts and books. And we are faced with institutional hurdles, unfortunately, but we hope we'll be able to do that.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:22:48

The Godmother of Francophone blindness studies, Zina Weygand, has a question. Zina, please ask your question. So therefore we should take a break and I shall have some a different technical staff to provide you with some help. And if it works, we'll listen to you later. Okay, sorry, Zina. Some technical problems. We'll come back to her maybe later. I feel like she might need to disconnect and reconnect. So we will, we will look into that. Okay. We'll be back at half past for the next session.