**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**"(CRITICAL) BLINDNESS STUDIES:**

**CURRENT DEBATES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS"**

**INTRODUCTION**

Hannah

Hello and welcome to the conference « (Critical) Blindness Studies: Current Debates and Future Directions."

I am Marion Chottin. I am a French citizen and I am speaking to you from Paris. I am a white, non-blind woman in my forties, with brown hair tied back, with a fringe, and I am wearing big black headphones, a floral blouse and a red jacket

My name is Hannah Thompson. I am a white British woman in my very late forties. I am partially blind, and I am speaking to you from Oxford, United Kingdom. I am wearing thick purple glasses and purple headphones.

Hello, I’m Vanessa Warne. I too am in my late forties and I am a non-blind white woman. I have short brown hair and I’m wearing a black shirt and glasses. I am sitting in front of a book-case of ink-print books in my home on Treaty One Territory also known as Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

***CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION***

We are very happy to welcome so many of you to this conference of a somewhat unusual format, intended to outline the contours and sketch the paths of a field of research that has been expanding rapidly over the past forty years, and particularly since the year 2000, in many countries of the world: that field being blindness studies.

Although not all researchers on blindness in the humanities and social sciences were able to respond to our call and join us today, this symposium brings together a large number of them, which delights us.

Many disciplines are represented, including literature, history, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, musicology, museology, anthropology, psychology, museology and the arts.

And many countries are also represented, spread over 4 continents: in Europe, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Belgium, Switzerland; in America, Canada, the United States, Brazil; in Africa, South Africa; and in Asia, Israel, India, Japan and China.

Among these researchers from all over the world, we have the particular pleasure of welcoming our two plenary speakers, Corinne Doria, who in a few minutes will open this colloquium with an intervention entitled **(**Re)Defining Blindness: An Invitation to A Critical Understanding of “Visual Impairment” and Georgina Kleege, who is also doing us the great honour of accepting our invitation, and who will give tomorrow, at the same time, a plenary talk entitled "The art of touch". We thank them both very, very warmly, as well as all the speakers of this conference. We also wish to send our very best wishes to Dr. Piet Devos whose work we admire greatly and who we hoped to have join us for this conference.

In addition to these plenary events, this conference will feature a series of thematic roundtables, during which the speakers will synthesize their research on blindness, and then discuss their ideas and impressions with each other and with the chairperson of the session, and finally with the audience.

Here are some of the themes and issues that will be addressed:

**-In today's roundtable discussions, we will explore together the language of blindness and the decentering of sight:**

How are the words most commonly used to talk about blindness and the meaning of sight stigmatizing to blind people? In other words, how are they ableist? Where do they come from and by whom are they used? How can we use other words to combat the centuries-old prejudice against blindness? Is the dualism of seeing and not seeing relevant? Can we use language differently to overcome not disability but ableism? Is there an ecology of blindness? Is there, quite simply, a world of blindness?

How can writers, both blind and not blind, such as D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges, Jean Giono, Helen MacDonald, Kyo Maclear, or even Jacques Derrida, Michel Henry and John Hull, nourish a renewal of the language of blindness and knowledge of blindness?

**-Tomorrow's roundtables and the first roundtable on Monday will explore relationships between blindness, literature and the arts:**

In what ways do blind writers (Ved Mehta, Tom Sullivan, Jorge Luis Borges, John Hull and Stephen Kuusisto, Pierre Villey, Georgina Kleege, Helen Keller, etc.) attest to the subversive potential and creative power of blindness?

How does this creativity of blindness express itself in the arts? How has music, in space and time, given blind musicians a paradoxical place in society, a source of clichés but also access to collective and positive identities? In what way can we speak of a blind aesthetic?

Moreover, how can museums today be the place where the hierarchy of blindness and sight is reversed? How does audio description, paradoxically, allow non-blind people to see differently, and blind people to increase their access to visual culture? How can we talk about a social model of accessibility?

**-On Tuesday, we will continue with two round tables dedicated to the relationship between blindness and education or rehabilitation, both in history and today:**

How is it that access to education and culture for blind people, though not a recent phenomenon, was revolutionized by Louis Braille, whose 70th anniversary of pantheonization we have just celebrated? In what way was this revolution not the work of a genius who came out of nowhere, but rooted instead in a collective history, both human and material, including the work of Valentin Haüy, the bicentenary of whose death we marked in March 2022, and of other people, such as Charles Barbier, who is often caricatured? How did the education of blind people subsequently become globalized? How was their rehabilitation after the First World War the occasion for debates on the access of blind people to independence? How did blind people themselves fight, and how do blind people continue to fight, for their right to education? Why, in many countries of the world, is access to higher education still marked by exclusion? How does an education based on inclusive tactile devices contribute to the fight against discrimination?

**-Monday’s last roundtable will address some singular social sites of blindness:**

Blind people in prison: blindness is often considered to be a sort of ‘physiological’ prison but how does this relate to the lived experience of incarcerated blind people?

Blind people in contemporary North and sub-Saharan Africa: how are they represented and treated? How are beliefs, which cut across all societies of the world, actively combated by local groups everywhere?

**-On the last day, Tuesday, a round table will be dedicated to deaf blindness and the links between blindness and deafness.**

It will be interpreted in LSF and ISL. We would of course have liked the whole conference to be interpreted like that, and we recognize that, due to a lack of budget, we have given priority to French/English interpretation. We are perfectly aware of the insufficient character of what we propose, and will work to secure more funding to do differently and better in the future.

Concerning deaf blindness: how did it become an administrative category in the 1960s? On a national and transnational scale, how did deafblind movements organize themselves? How was this experience of deaf blindness generated, and was it modified by these collective mobilizations?

On blindness and deafness jointly studied: how do they teach us that perception is neither individual nor purely sensory?

**-Finally, two round tables approaching blindness from a feminist perspective will close our conference:**

In the 20th century, how did blind women fight for their rights and against both sexist and oculocentric prejudices? In these struggles, what were the roles of Marie-Aimée Régnier, Marthe Henri and Paulette Pommier? How are the concepts of gender and disability articulated? How do the words of blind women denaturalize the hegemony of vision and the inferiority of disabled bodies? How are the concepts of care, gender and blindness articulated? How are blind women not only recipients but also providers of care? How can non-blind women study blindness and engage with blind women without perpetuating traditional relations of power and domination?

**-Finally, we have the great pleasure to be offering two workshops.**

The first one, which will end the day on Friday, is a workshop listening to audio descriptions, created by the working group "Discovering painting through listening", a partner of the ANR project "Guide muséal inclusif" led by Professor Edwige Pissaloux of the University of Rouen, in France. Representing this working group, we will hear from: Nadine Dutier, Catherine Grimaud, Tatiana Lujic and Valérie Pasquet.

The second workshop, on Tuesday, will close the conference. It is an interactive workshop entitled "The Mindful Body", which artist David Johnson has developed and will share with us.

***THANKS***

We would now like to extend our warmest thanks to the two people without whom we would not have had the idea of organizing this conference, and who jointly chair its scientific committee:

Catherine J. KUDLICK, Professor of the HIstory of Disability and Director of the Paul Longmore Institute at the University of San Francisco.

and

Zina WEYGAND, Docteure en histoire, habilitée à diriger des recherches. Ingénieure de recherche honoraire du Conservatoire national des arts et métiers à Paris.

We would also like to thank the members of the Scientific Committee:

Pierre ANCET, Tammy BERBERI, Alain BLANC, Maria FERNANDA ARENTSEN, Charles GARDOU, Rosemarie GARLAND-THOMSON, Nancy HANSEN, Simone KORFF-SAUSSE, Pierre-François MOREAU, Bertrand QUENTIN, Sharon L. SNYDER, and especially Henri-Jacques STIKER, who is the founder of French studies on disability and whose work is internationally known.

We would also like to warmly thank the members of our organizing committee, who have done and will continue to do a great job during the conference:

Kishor ALUM, Gildas BRÉGAIN, Anne-Lyse CHABERT, Thibaut CHAMBRIARD, Marion CORDEBART, Sébastien DURAND, Elisabeth EGEL, Anabel LEE-WRAGG, Mia LEVINE, Afida MADJIDI, Valérie MANSARD, Maria ROMEIRAS AMADO, Céline ROUSSEL, Maria Susana SEGUIN et Dylan SROUSSI.

Finally, we would like to thank the partners of this conference, without whom it could not have been held:

L’IHRIM, l’ENS de Lyon, le Cnrs, et l’ANR, Interdisciplinary Masters’ Program in Disability Studies at the University of Manitoba, Royal Holloway University of London, l’association Valentin Hauy and l’université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

***TRIBUTE TO BRIAN***

Above all, we would like to dedicate this symposium to a dear friend and colleague whose death, at the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic, leaves his family, his loved ones, and the blindness studies community in mourning: our friend Brian Miller.

Many of us got to know Brian at previous conferences on blindness organised in Paris (2013) and London (2015). Everyone who knew him was touched by his kindness, sense of humour and generosity. An intrepid traveller and thoughtful scholar, Brian brought energy and interest to everything he did. Had he survived Covid-19, we know he would have been with us at this event and we keep him in his thoughts.

***OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE***

It only remains for us to thank you all for your presence and to wish you a very good conference.