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Blindness

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Blindness is a condition of the flesh as well as a signifying operation. William R. Paulson maintains that blindness “means very different things, and moreover it *is* very different things, at different times, different places, and in different kinds of writing” (1987, 4). Such a critical stance can lead the field of disability studies to analyze disability in a manner that reckons with both the ways that bodies are made accessible through language and the ways that bodies exceed language. The state of visual impairment long ago assumed a metaphoric plasticity, making literal blindness serve as a figurative marker for other diminished capacities. This interplay permeates, for example, one of the West’s foundational texts, Sophocles’s version of the story of Oedipus. It is evident in the confrontation between Tiresias, the blind prophet, and the figuratively blind Oedipus, as well as in the ghastly scene where Oedipus literally blinds himself upon gaining his figurative sight (Stiker 1999).

Perhaps the earliest English-language example of blindness’s physical/metaphysical conflation occurs in the tenth-century *Blickling Homilies*. The narrator of the second quire, *Quinquagesima Sunday*, observes of the blind beggar of Jericho, “Right was it that the blind man sat by the way begging, because the Lord himself hath said, ‘I am the way of truth,’ and he who knows not the brightness of the eternal light is blind; and he liveth and believeth who sitteth by the way begging, and prays for the eternal light, and ceaseth not” (Morris 1880, 16). This exegesis clearly demonstrates a transformation

of the physically blind beggar into a surrogate for the intransigent spiritual blindness of all sinners. By taking care of the blind beggar, sinners can move closer to Christ and therefore erase their own metaphoric blindness. In his examination of l'Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, the institution founded in Paris by Louis IX in 1256, Edward Wheatley (2002) argues that the church treated physical blindness as evidence of sin, which could be ministered to in order to imitate Christ's role as protector and healer.

During the European Enlightenment, blindness became fetishized in debates among both rationalists and sensualists. As in the Middle Ages, though, it was not really visual impairment itself that was central to such debates; rather, blindness became a form of "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Davidson 2008). Blindness aroused the thoughts of several Enlightenment philosophers because of an intellectual quandary posed by William Molyneux, a Dublin lawyer, to John Locke in 1688. Molyneux asked whether a man born blind who had tactually learned to tell a globe from a cube would be able, upon having his sight restored, to immediately distinguish through vision one object from the other. In later printings of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1955), Locke answered Molyneux's epistemological problem by arguing that such a man would be incapable of distinguishing the objects by sight alone. Inclusion of the query and Locke's response in Locke's seminal text brought the hypothetical scenario to the attention of eminent philosophers such as Berkeley, Condillac, Leibniz, and Voltaire, who regarded blindness as a mere intellectual puzzle that held no social value by itself. By contrast, it formed the impetus for Diderot's *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*, which explored blindness as a valid subject unto itself.

Against a backdrop of emerging industrialization and modernization, blindness became not a marker of

sin, as it had been during the Middle Ages, but a marker of sloth. James Gall, a pioneering Scottish educator of the blind, for instance, declared that a blind person's "condition is a state of continuous childhood. . . . He can produce for himself neither food nor clothing; and without the unceasing assistance of his friends he would of necessity perish" (1834, 13). Without intervention, it was feared that the blind would wallow in unproductivity and gross dependence. In the nineteenth-century United States, pedagogy for blind students heavily emphasized Protestant Christianity and nationalistic ideals; together they were meant to implant in blind students an ethos of independence, thereby making them capable of performing sighted normalcy. Furthermore, through educational and vocational institutions blind people were disciplined toward industrious participation in the nation. Such disciplinary practices were intended to transform them into facsimiles of the sighted. Additionally, this inculcation was meant to ameliorate the anxiety many sighted people had over blind people's inability to join the imagined community of the nation.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, blindness was increasingly indexed according to complicated metrics of visual acuity, and there were tremendous efforts to achieve complete empirical exactitude. A universal medical definition, however, has proven elusive, and various global institutions have come to employ different quantitative standards. The inability to secure total agreement regarding the measurement of blindness demonstrates how "the evaluation of impairment is . . . full of errors of reification and false precision" (Stone 1984, 116). As such, the failed quest for an absolute metric has given rise to multiple classification schemes, all of which measure degrees of blindness.

This is illustrated by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the World Health Organization, which use different

criteria for diagnosing what constitutes blindness. For both institutions, the logic of categorization is buttressed by ophthalmological measurements of blindness. Such definitions may prove useful in terms of policy decisions and the disbursement of financial benefits, but they also have the effect of dividing the blind community. Kenneth Jernigan, for instance, a long-serving former president of the National Federation of the Blind, observed in an essay originally published in 1962 that “the complex distinctions which are often made between those who have partial sight and those who are totally blind, between those who have been blind from childhood and those who have become blind as adults are largely meaningless” (2005). For Jernigan, as for many activists and scholars in disability studies, organizing around a common identity for social gains has proven more relevant than classificatory nuances.

Perhaps because no universal technical definition of blindness exists, the scale incorporating multiple measures of blindness employed by different medical domains has not significantly influenced sighted culture at large. Sighted culture accepts only a total, plenary blindness, a stark binary of presence/absence. One either sees nothing or one sees everything; there is no allowance for a liminal state of partial blindness or partial sightedness, what Beth Omansky (2011) has termed the “borderland of blindness.” This may explain why sighted people still experience both trepidation and wonder at imagining the phenomenological dimensions of blind people’s existence, stemming largely from the belief that the blind body has only limited access to the world through a pitiable, incomplete sensorium. Georgina Kleege wryly recognizes how many sighted people go “into raptures” when describing a blind person’s “ability to recognize . . . voices, to eat spaghetti, to unlock a door. People sometimes express astonishment when I find the light switch or pick up my coffee cup” (1999,

27). Guided by such erroneous presumptions, sighted culture fashions the blind body into a totem of daily miracles, where even the most quotidian activities seem extraordinary.

Anxiety among the sighted makes it seem that a life of blindness is necessarily devoid of autonomy, agency, or the possibility for any positive affect. Such a broad cultural misconception empowers the dominant non-disabled culture to believe that blindness is existentially incomplete, a stigmatized state of deprivation. As Michalko (1999) has noted, blindness represents a lack that menaces sighted culture; it is an absence not only of sight but also of independence, intellectual acumen, morality, and productivity. Blind people are thus confronted with two options: either succumb to disciplining practices in order to perform normalcy—that is, some version of sightedness—or else face rejection.

One curious aspect of medical discourse is that it opens the definition of blindness to perpetual revision because the clarity and focus of the techno-medical gaze are always becoming sharper. For example, the reductive social binary of being either sighted or nonsighted diverges from medical conceptualizations of blindness, which acknowledge that people experience various forms of blindness in different and uniquely subjective ways. Some experience a *mélange* of colors; some see eruptions of paramecium-like shapes; and for some photophobia precludes direct exposure to light. Less than 10 percent of people who identify as blind possess no light perception whatsoever.

Medicine’s perpetually revised definitions of blindness imply that the sought-after complete description and comprehension of blindness will someday be the precursor of techno-medical mastery. Moreover, it is presumed that such mastery will cross a biological horizon and at some imagined point take the form of absolute cure. This is not new; medicine has conceived of

blindness as being an inevitably conquerable condition, a belief that stretches from the second-century AD cataract surgeries by Galen of Pergamon to the first recorded reversal of blindness, performed by English surgeon William Cheselden in 1728, to the exuberant contemporary fantasies of the posthuman in the early twenty-first century.

Such efforts at mastery are problematic because they often displace efforts to improve the social conditions of current blind people. Future inquiries centered on blindness should instead assist in establishing a greater understanding of how human variation is an asset, and not a liability. Several disability studies scholars have created a foundation upon which future inquiries might be built. Robert McRuer's (2006) work, for example, can facilitate an understanding of how blindness "cries sighted culture. The concept of the "normate," proposed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997, 2006) challenges ocularcentrism, including the presumptive right to stare at others that saturates sighted culture. In addition, Shelley Tremain's (2001, 2008) application of Foucauldian theories to the ethics of disability demonstrates how poststructuralism can productively influence new conceptualizations of blindness and sightedness. Finally, the study of blindness can lead to fresh insights in fields outside of disability studies. Because many cultural categories and disciplinary practices are based on sight and the visual inscription of the body, blindness can reveal how sight influences negative constructions of people of color, women, queer people, and disabled people without visual impairments, thereby casting modernity's problematic foundational assumptions so that a richer inclusivity might be gained.