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Blind Women and Invented Pathologies: The Claim Over Normalcy

For the last three years I have researched different aspects of the gender identity of blind women in Israel and representations of sight and blindness in the Israeli public sphere. In this presentation I will offer an ethnographic glanceⁱ into what I call "blind women's claim over normalcy," and a short discussion of this idea.

Blind women are located in a complicated social intersection which brings together multiple aspects of gender and femininity next to body and disability. As Aviva,ⁱⁱ a woman who has been blind from the age of four, saidⁱⁱⁱ

I don't know how you work with femininity when you are sighted... I don't know how you do it with sight, but I can tell my friends 'I really feel like looking like a million dollars tomorrow' so I will do it, you understand? I am preoccupied with it, I play with it... It is important for my own feelings and also because I walk down the street and people look at me, so I want them to see something that looks good, not neglected. Like everything else, it started from 'I don't want them to pity me, I don't want to be the poor blind woman.' From the moment I lost my sight, I understood I had to calculate my every move, so I won't be less in any aspect, so they won't come and say 'well, what can you expect? She is blind.'

The study of the everyday social experiences of blind women provides a unique opportunity to challenge traditional assumptions regarding disability, blindness, and femininity, and offers new understanding of issues that have traditionally accompanied the study of gender and women, such as sexuality, embodiment, and the objectifying gaze. The discussion of blind women's social performance integrates several different spheres: the personal embodiment experience of impairment, the private decisions about feminine gestures, the cultural construction of disability and the senses, and the public struggle for accessibility and mobility.

One of the characteristics of blind women's feminine performance can be seen as a claim over normalcy and human subjectivity --an act that allows them to step

outside the traditional categorization of blindness and disability, and to refute the social label of "disabled" and "blind." This performance does not simply involve "passing" as a sighted or normative woman in the sighted society, but rather challenges the *normativity of "normalcy"* and attempts to redefine it. It offers the possibility of being blind and feminine at the same time and in the same body, and broadens the understanding of visual skill, not merely as a physical one, but rather as "an ability to translate images in all their complexity and resonance into words" (Kleege 2005, 188). Today, I invite us to focus on the everyday practices of blind women that "show that blindness resists its mere depiction as a (visual) impairment... [While] describing the richness and differences of sensory practices of blind people" (Schillmeier 2006, 481).

Before moving to discuss ethnographic examples from interviews, I would like to offer an abbreviated version of a theoretical framework that will be useful in understanding the tangled triad of blindness-gender-disability --the multiple "invented pathologies" that express the medical, cultural, political, and social barriers surrounding these concepts.

In relation to blindness, among the physical disabilities it is the one that attracts great attention in literature, cinema, and poetry (Deshen 1992) and has traditionally served as a central metaphor in the debate on human nature (Jay 1993, Michalko 1998, Tyler 1984). Our daily language includes a vast number of phrases and metaphors "connecting blindness and blind people with ignorance, confusion, indifference, ineptitude" (Kleege 1998, 21) - a syntax which also influenced the scientific understanding in the quest for observations and insights (Dundes 1972). This wide stigmatization is also expressed in folklore, beliefs, and mythologies

around the world in which blind figures play the role of both the sacred and the prophetic, as well as the villainous and sinful (Wagner-Lample & Oliver 1994).^{iv}

In addition to blindness, the categories of gender and disability create paradoxical sets of cultural expectations that relate to blind women's appearance as *women* from one side and as *persons with disabilities* from the other (Zitzelsberger 2005). While women with disabilities are seen as non-gendered, nonsexual, childlike and dependent, aesthetic discourse of the feminine body demands a narrow range of accepted female appearance which does not include artificial aids such as a wheel chair, a white cane, a guide dog or artificial limbs, and includes beliefs that "people with physical disabilities do not and should not care about their appearance" (Zitzelsberger 2005, 395). Society usually dismisses disabled women from the expectation to display a feminine look (Limaye 2003, Lonsdale 1990) and "exempts" them from "nurturance, sexuality, and reproduction" (Asch & Fine 1988, 12). Added to the triad of blindness-gender-disability, blind women also live in a 'visual culture' which is saturated with images of the feminine body. Although they are not directly visually exposed to images or to other people's appearance,^v they are visible and being seen, and are aware of it.

Within this framework, we will see that blind women's feminine performance and claim over normalcy serve as a midpoint between femininity and personhood, and offer different ways in which it is possible to be a blind woman. Karin, a visually impaired woman, said in our interview:

You [a sighted woman] don't make an effort to look normal! In this eye for example I have a brown lens which conceals a white eye and that lens can move a bit, so... here is the difference. But it is not an effort that I am ashamed of. I really did a lot of work on it, so it is no longer something painful to talk about.

Karin described how she pays careful attention to her body movements and facial expressions. She tries to avoid bumping into objects and to control the right side of her face, keeping her eyebrows at the same height and her eyelids in the same shape. Karin and other women described their efforts as an ongoing tension in which they try to control the other's gaze and to be perceived as a person who is able to display femininity and human subjectivity. Eynat, a congenitally blind woman, explained the importance of her appearance:

When you don't see but give a message that you are well groomed and wear makeup, you make people want to talk to you and take an interest in you. As a blind woman I need to put more focus on these things... It doesn't matter if you think that I am pretty or ugly, what matters is that you look at me and you don't see a damaged hairy person. And you know, I arrive to work with a neat shirt and wear make-up and earrings. I don't need them to think that I am pretty, it is really not the issue, but a person should give a good impression, a person should be put together.

Blind women whom I interviewed expressed *a spectrum* of ways in which they perform femininity, from very detailed ways of managing their appearance such as using laser hair removal, color identifier devices, and Braille labels for clothes, to approaches that seek to minimize the time and effort spent on appearance, by buying clothes in neutral colors for example.^{vi} They shared a common concern about the "personhood" that they want to display, as Hani, a congenitally blind woman emphasized: "it is important of course to dress up in well fitted clothes... god forbid that I should walk around in stained clothes or something like that."

The management of appearance and "personal front" (Goffman 1959) is an issue of great importance in relation to disability studies^{vii} and for blind women it can be a significant tool that signals messages about ability and disability. Thus, Hani's careful attention to her clothes derives from her fear that making a mistake such as having a spot on her shirt, will be associated with her blindness. Her disability does

not allow her a wide range of mistakes, a position which results in a hyper-aware feminine performance. As Karin explained: "I am always and all the time in some kind of... readiness, awareness... most of the time I am paying attention."

This management of appearance has a dualistic nature. On one hand, it may collect high costs from its performers as it requires strict discipline of the body into sighted behavior and norms and prevents the opportunity to experience spontaneity and nonchalance.^{viii} As Tamar, a congenitally blind woman, said: "before I leave my house I know that I need to match this with this, and I can't just throw stuff into my bag." On the other hand, this performance can also operate as an "entrance ticket" to a feminine collective that imbues blind women with greater "physical capital"^{ix} (Shilling 1993, 127 in Paterson 2006, 96), allowing them to take an active part in the public sphere as parents, employees, consumers of goods, and more.^x

Moreover, this feminine performance highlights the body as a site of aesthetic and sensory pleasure and emphasizes "sensory practices other than sight" (Schillmeier 2008, 613). Taliya, a congenitally blind woman, said that since she doesn't need to depend on the mirror, what really matters for her is her "inner feeling," so she prefers to wear clothes that are comfortable and sees great importance in wearing perfume for example. This aspect of feminine performance also opens up questions about the amount of feminine pleasure and enjoyment women with disabilities, as well as women in general, are "allowed" to have, within the feminist discourse. During our interview, Karin expressed her pain in this issue and said:

I am always in some kind of awareness but this is me, you understand Gili? This is me! I have accepted this effort, it raises me, it pushes me forward... I am attached to its aesthetics, to the movement in it... Do you experience putting on lipstick as an effort? There are days in which I feel tired from being careful all the time, and on other days it is really fun for

me... Am I allowed to say 'I feel good in this way? Will people believe me? I am not sure they will.

To conclude, Karin's questions stayed with me long after our interview had ended, and emphasized the way in which blind women's feminine performance can challenge our concepts of blindness and gender. A blind woman who performs femininity gives the message that she does not only possess a visual knowledge regarding the norms of femininity and appearance, but also can decide how and when to apply it in various social contexts. When blind women creatively enact feminine performances they present a spectrum of being a *feminine-blind-person* and inspire us to "start writing a history of blindness that... may enable us to think of blindness and disability as a mode of inclusion instead of exclusion... [While] giving back blindness its own voice" (Schillmeier 2006, 481. 482).

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Notes

ⁱ For the last three years I conducted anthropological field work which included forty seven interviews with blind and visually impaired women in Israel, and varied ethnographic observations in different activities that address blind and visually impaired people, and represent blindness to the wider public. Those observations included different sites such as a beauty care class in an educational institute for blind and visually impaired girls, the art exhibition "Dialogue in the Dark," a tandem-bike group with blind, visually impaired, and sighted people, a medical massage course for blind and visually impaired people in a national sport organization, and more. This paper is based on a small part of this anthropologic work.

ⁱⁱ Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

ⁱⁱⁱ The empirical materials were all translated from Hebrew into English. In this process, I made an effort to maintain the colloquialisms of daily language, as well as the tone, and terms that were originally used by the interviewees.

^{iv} Within the social stigma of blindness, there is also a folkloric image of blind women as hyper-sexual, as the lack of sight might heighten a blind woman's other senses, making her eager to touch, taste, and smell, and grateful for the attention of any man. It is important to mention that this view considers blind women unsuitable for marriage, assuming that their disability will prevent them from conducting traditional housework, and successfully performing motherhood (Sentumbwe 1995). The stigmatized hyper-sexuality of blind women might be one of the reasons that in some cultures blind girls have been sold into prostitution, so that "customers could enjoy the particular titillation of watching a woman who couldn't look back (Kleege 1998, 24).

^v Elsewhere in my dissertation I discuss ways in which blind women interpret visual images, using sensory, linguistic, and behavioral methods, as well as various devices. I discuss the critical effect that this interpretation process has on the amount of the influence feminine images have in the consumer culture. Since blind women are forced to conduct a daily active interpretation of the visual, the image cannot be taken for granted and thereby loses some of its power.

^{vi} The role of fashion, clothes, and cosmetics in the creation of a collective identity has been discussed mainly within theories of gender studies and material culture (Beward, Cokein & Cox 2002, Calefato 2004, Parkins 2002, Miller 2005, Veillon 2002). Parkins (2002) for example, discussed role of clothes in the creation of political and national identity, and Peiss (1996) studied the unique benefits that women from marginal groups in the US could gain by using cosmetics during the 20's. Peiss illustrated how women who were defined as the social "other" used cosmetics in order to display a normative feminine look, like the one that they saw in TV commercials, in order to display their American identity in the public sphere, as well as values such as modesty and modernity. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that unlike blind women, the women that Peiss discussed were visually exposed to the images and messages that promoted the feminine ideal and were able to *see* how other women displayed their American identity.

^{vii} Fassett & Morella (2008) discuss the importance of appearance management in relation to disability and performance, and the complexity involved in the exposure of a non-visible disability. Goffman himself discussed the management of "personal front" among mentally disabled people and indicated that the medical approach considers a neglected appearance a mark of inability and unwillingness to integrate into society (1955).

^{viii} This discipline of the body into sighted behavior and norms can be interpreted as "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988).

^{ix} The term "physical capital" derives from the multiple ways in which Bourdieu refers to a social capital, that can include a social, cultural, intellectual, as well as a physical one (Bourdieu 1997). "Physical capital" is a physical use of the body which projects over social status and symbolic resources and is an inherent part of lifestyle and taste. It can affect social segregation between groups and classes, which can be made through physical acts such as gestures, smiles, tonality, walking, body shape, and more. In theories of late capitalism and consumer culture, scholars use this term in order to

discuss ways in which the body is going through an intensive work of maintenance that controls its shape, sizes, and weight, in order to provide its owner with a greater social status (Shilling 1993, 127 in Paterson 2006, 96). Disability studies also acknowledge the important of a physical capital in relation to the disabled body, while indicating that "within discursive fields, subjects are produced and placed within a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power (Garland Thomson 1997, 6 in Zitzelsberger 2005, 389).

^x Blind women who perform a feminine appearance have to maintain a delicate balance between being considered a fraud that is excluded from the majority of the blind with the accusation of not being a "real blind," and being considered a "super blind" that doesn't represent the group. French (1995) for example, discussed this issue in relation her use of the white cane: "my feelings about using a white stick are mixed. I regard it as a symbol of independence rather than a symbol of dependency... I constantly feel, however, that others are judging me and thinking I am a fraud... [it is the message] that visually disabled people who use aids, and yet can see, are frauds" (French 1999, 25).