

2002

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Recommended Citation

Mintz, Susannah B. "Invisible disability: Georgina Kleege's sight unseen." *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002): 155-177.

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Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*

SUSANNAH B. MINTZ

This essay discusses Sight Unseen, Georgina Kleege's collection of personal essays about partial blindness from macular degeneration, and explores the challenge Kleege poses to the presumably universal relation between vision, knowledge, and stable subjectivity. I argue that the semiotic and personal analysis Kleege performs in her essays disrupts the entrenched connection between seeing and selfhood whereby the blind are construed as diminished or helpless figures. Sight Unseen maximizes the specular effects of the autobiographical situation, making transgressively visible the anomalous body that patriarchal discourse has sought to control and that feminist theory has largely ignored as a meaningful category of identity. The text manifests the defining impact of disability on a woman's idea of herself in a culture in which the parameters of normative gendered identity are circulated largely through visual imagery, but in turn contests the ontological primacy of vision by orienting the narrative toward the new focal point of blindness. Unveiling the fictions surrounding sightedness as a stable mode of access to identity and reality, Kleege subverts the dominance of myths of knowledge and mastery granted to the eyes.

Keywords: blindness / blindness narrative / disability narrative / women's autobiography / women and blindness

In a short piece entitled "Autobiography as Performative Utterance," Michael Bérubé writes, "the conditions under which certain authors claim the authority of autobiography are sometimes exceptionally hostile to the claim" (2000, 341). Making a link between slave narrative and the life-writing of people with cognitive disabilities, Bérubé argues that self-representation serves the radical and political function of declaring a self worthy to be named—asserting, in effect, that it *does* matter who speaks and that the speaker is a legitimate self—which in turn disrupts the kinds of dehumanizing ideologies that equate difference with unworthiness, inferiority, and lack.¹ For a disabled woman, the act of writing herself into a textual identity entails combating a triple erasure—from the long history of autobiography in the West, which has typically excluded women's experience from the kinds of life-stories deemed worthy of recording; and from able-bodied culture and feminist theory alike, in which disability is either stigmatized as the sign of failure and inadequacy, or simply ignored altogether as a meaningful component of identity. It is from a position of cultural invisibility, then, that the disabled female life-writer struggles

toward a "performative utterance" that will announce the authority of her multiply unspeakable self.

To be female and disabled in Western culture is to straddle a divide between the Cartesian severing of mind and body that understands subjectivity as cognitive and immaterial, and the linkage of body and self effected by negative attitudes toward corporeal difference. Disability narratives that aim to prove that identity is *not* a function of the body capitulate to the very condemning associations against which they would protect their authors; separating a "higher" self from the lowly disability merely reinscribes the sort of prejudice that reads temperament according to the delineations of the body. Disabled women's autobiographical texts seek to retrieve corporeality from the narrative and cultural margins, but in writing "as" bodies, disabled women do more than simply valorize their anomalous shapes or styles. Where traditional autobiographies by men presume universality and representative status, women's disability narratives tend to be more cautious about the dangers to a feminist agenda of making essentialized statements about female, disabled experience. Keenly aware of the impossibility of generalizing between various forms of physical impairment, they refuse to speak for anyone but themselves. In this way, much disabled women's life-writing maps out a new autobiographical *I*, one that challenges Western culture's paradigmatic model of singular, will-driven, or consciousness-driven identity.

If disability narratives by women often revise the narrative conventions that underwrite patriarchal norms of disembodied, autonomous identity, they also challenge the ableist assumptions of contemporary feminism's "return" to the body, demanding recognition of bodies that do not abide by feminist ideals of social and professional independence, sexual and reproductive agency. Feminist disability scholars have pointed out that mainstream feminism's critique of patriarchal myths of women as essentially sexual and maternal ignores the fact that ableist culture also deems disabled women to be essentially asexual and unmaternal. As Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch argue, disabled women have been "severed . . . from the sisterhood" by nondisabled feminists fearful of the loss of control and perceived helplessness of physical impairment (1988, 4). A body that suffers may not inspire the kind of celebratory rhetoric typical of Irigaray and Cixous, for example, and Susan Wendell makes the emphatic point that very real bodily limitations may also be overlooked by post-structuralist feminist accounts of cultural and discursive oppression (1996). In a different way, describing the joys of heterosexual sex or conventional marriage may be an unexpectedly subversive feminist act for a disabled woman taught not so much that her sexuality is a source of shame, but rather that she is altogether incapable of experiencing or arousing sexual desire. From this perspective, when a disabled woman represents herself in terms of her erotic and/or maternal experience, her

narrative can be openly resistant in ways that an able-bodied feminist reading may mistakenly disregard.

Irregular bodies, bodies in pain or in need of care, bodies that are far from unequivocal sources of pleasure—such is the corporeality that disabled women's autobiography seeks to make visible in both material and ideological terms. By showing that identity is inextricable from the afflicted bodies whose particulars they narrate, bodies marginalized by both gender as well as form or dysfunction, disabled women autobiographers level a public critique against both masculinist and able-bodied attitudes, suggesting that the personal experience of a disabled body is inherently connected to cultural myths about gender and normality. Yet unlike much contemporary self-writing by disabled women, Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* is more an indictment of negative representations of the blind, and of cultural mythologies about perception, eye contact, and *normal* behavior, than it is the story of one woman's experience of losing her sight (1999a). A collection of autobiographical essays that "do not pretend to offer a definitive view of anyone's blindness" but her own *Sight Unseen* paradoxically minimizes autobiographical detail in favor of cultural and semiotic analysis (5). Yet I would argue that Kleege's suppression of personal revelation serves an important feminist argument, in that it calls particular attention to the dynamics of gazing. Kleege makes *specularity* the spectacle, putting vision itself, rather than her body, on display.

Compared to recent work by such writers as Nancy Mairs, Lucy Greely, Cheryl Marie Wade, and Anne Finger, *Sight Unseen* is especially striking for its exclusion of any discussion of how Kleege feels about her sexuality or "femininity," or about how her blindness might intersect with traditional female roles of mother or caretaker.² Kleege's collection follows a different path: its parameters are neither a masculinist public domain, a feminized domestic sphere, nor the explicitly contestatory and sexualized space carved out by many disabled women writers. While the performative display of body and sexuality in works by other disabled women forces a re-evaluation of normative conceptions of beauty, desire, and "legitimate" female identity, Kleege's investment lies more in deciphering how people see than with the telling of her own story, and she thus subordinates her childhood and "interior" experience to her adult, active participation in a sighted world. Implicitly invoking women's cultural position as passive and preoccupied with their own appearance—what other disabled women might deconstruct by actively examining their bodies in terms of the social relations that define them as abnormal—Kleege authorizes her blind gaze to wrench apart the equation of seeing with knowing, exploding conventional binaries of male and female, subject and object, seer and seen.

Kleege argues at the start of *Sight Unseen* that the linear structure

of conventional blindness autobiographies reaffirms the idea that blindness can be separated from the self as an affliction one overcomes; a narrative of transcendence and resolution “presupposes that blindness is somehow outside oneself” (4). Describing her own book as a “‘coming out’ narrative,” she suggests that the radical intent of *Sight Unseen* is to claim blindness as constitutive of identity in ways that are surprisingly, unfamiliarly positive (5). The three sections of the text proceed from the opening discussion of “Blindness and Culture” through “Blind Phenomenology” to final essays on “Voice, Texture, [and] Identity.” In one way, this sequence seems to move us steadily inward, ever closer to some authentic Kleege. But I would argue that the trajectory of Kleege’s text is in fact deliberately anti-linear, non-progressive, and fragmentary in a way consistent with the discontinuities of both female and disabled existence.³ *Sight Unseen* charts a mock journey or quest that presents the self not as an isolated individual triumphing over cultural forces, but rather as something one accumulates in contact with the stuff of culture. In its gesture toward, and subsequent rupture of, the typical life-path structure of men’s self-writing, *Sight Unseen* exposes what is usually left invisible in canonical autobiographies—the influence of cultural mythology, the expectation of a *normal* body, the triumph of mind and will over the body and the circumstances of birth. Culture is thus not so much a secondary background against which Kleege’s singular subjectivity stands out in high relief, but rather the very material from which she explicitly fashions a sense of self.

When she asks, “Incompetent, dependent, potentially unruly, sexually deviant—is this really how the sighted see the blind?” (57), Kleege might also be speaking of how patriarchal culture views women. Her project thus becomes a doubled act of dismantling what Susan Wendell has referred to as the “disciplines of normality” (1996, 88). If inhabiting a world that privileges sighted men requires Kleege to dis-identify with herself as blind and as a woman, then writing herself into a blind identity means having to create new and acceptable versions of blindness that contest inhibiting stereotypes—or as Wendell puts it, the “young, healthy, professionally successful blind woman who has ‘overcome’ her handicap with education” (1996, 12). To an extent, Kleege actually conforms to this image. Yet her exploration of blindness and vision seeks not to prove equality with the sighted nor to announce her triumph over impairment, but rather to dislocate her readers, to complicate the grounds on which dominant assumptions about blindness are constructed, and to provoke readers toward a more subtle awareness of the gendered relationship between vision and power. *Sight Unseen* is a manifesto for change, levying a powerful charge against both patriarchal and able-bodied ideology.

In the first sentence of *Sight Unseen*, Kleege announces, “Writing this book made me blind” (1). Such a proclamation establishes an important

framework for this collection of personal essays, which investigate representations of blindness and sight through the conceptual lens of Kleege's own partial vision. The book's opening gambit invokes an entrenched cultural prejudice that reads illness as a kind of punishment, a sign of mental weakness or moral lapse. The implication that Kleege might have *made herself sick* by writing links her visual impairment with the unfeminine self-indulgence of art, even as it seems designed to instigate readers' pity for her diminished capacity. The author's physical limitation becomes the mark of her psychological overreaching, and the proof of her audience's difference from her. Yet Kleege summons the myth of disability as Otherness and failure only to disrupt it. Declared legally blind due to macular degeneration at the age of eleven, Kleege did not literally go blind during the composition of the book, but her statement underscores the relationship between self-creation and writing that forms the basis of ideological resistance in many feminist disability narratives. Kleege suggests that only through the construction of *Sight Unseen* was she able to discover new, positive meanings for blindness, and thus to claim a blind identity on her own definitional terms. Calling herself blind is not a capitulation to enfeeblement or helplessness, but rather an act of defiant self-re-creation.

Kleege's story foregrounds the conflictedness of female disabled subjectivity in a culture that privileges male able-bodied independence, the paradox of having to accept marginalized status along with the pressure to conform and perform *normally*. The internalized stigma of blindness, Kleege argues—the “burden of negative connotations and dreaded associations”—encourages blind people “to sham sight” through technology and adaptation (19), even as those very efforts serve as a reminder of their failure to meet culturally agreed-upon designations of normality. Kleege writes that as her own vision began to deteriorate as a child, she learned quickly to disguise her difficulty reading books and blackboards, and recognizing distant objects, by mimicking the body gestures, the tone of voice, even the facial expressions associated with sightedness. She thus raises questions about how a culture determines the limits of normal behavior, appearance, or physical ability, and about how we understand and experience illnesses that don't render a person obviously or visibly disabled. Though Kleege's visual acuity is less than 20/200 (the barrier of legal blindness), she is nonetheless able to “pas[s] as sighted” in certain social situations (12); at the same time, she calls herself “imperfectly blind” (150), as if to suggest that what sight she has actually debar her from full participation in the category of blindness. In this way, Kleege's liminal condition shows us how the boundaries of identity are both highly arbitrary and easily disturbed.

Perhaps more importantly, however, *Sight Unseen* confronts a sighted reader's complacent trust in the certitudes of perception by situating the so-called norm on the margins of Kleege's own visual experience. Her

descriptions of what her eyes perceive, and how she actually looks at an object, challenge a normative sense of the “right way” to see (96). Because her form of macular degeneration leaves a very large “blind spot” in the middle of her vision, Kleege must “move [her] attention off center, viewing the world askance” (104). She holds objects an inch from her face, sliding her eyes from one edge to another in order to see with her peripheral vision. She stands “a foot” away from (93), then edges “closer and closer” to (94), huge canvasses in museums. Her “flawed vision” necessitates a kind of literal close reading or Nietzschean slow seeing—two of the text’s controlling metaphors (147). All this slowing-down and moving-in defies the notion that “seeing is both instantaneous and absolute,” or that “[s]ight provides instantaneous access to reality” (96). If the only proper way to see “is to take something in at a glance and possess it whole, comprehending all its complexities” (96), Kleege suggests, then her sidelong way of looking, “circumambulat[ing]” objects (104), becomes an ideological metaphor for displacing the eyes as the source of power and eyesight as a guarantor of knowledge and identity.

Kleege’s description of various ways of seeing calls attention to the gendered dynamics of looking. The objectifying gaze that purports to guarantee wholeness—long associated with the mechanisms of patriarchal power and manifested in the *blazons* of Petrarchan poets, in the Renaissance penchant for dissection, in the scopophilic certitudes of Enlightenment philosophy, Freudian and later Lacanian psychoanalysis—occludes even as it anticipates a woman’s returning look. So thoroughly is subjectivity bound up with vision that the possibility of a woman looking back has provoked fears of castration, a dismantling or disabling of coherent male identity, even as the so-called female gaze has been said to reclaim the power to determine subjectivity. But Kleege goes beyond merely inverting a gendered specular exchange. Introducing herself as the legitimate subject of a manner of looking that Slavoj Žižek might define as “awry” (1992),⁴ Kleege achieves something more complex than simply authorizing herself as a viewer; she tears down not only patriarchal trust in vision, but also the notion that women can look (or look back) in a way that confers or guarantees selfhood.⁵ Neither the freak show spectacle who must protest her basic humanity to readers (what Kleege describes as the “conventional goal of blind autobiography” [3]), nor a hero whose will and fortitude defeat the defects of the body, Kleege repeatedly focuses her attention on her readers, as if staring directly at them: “Look at me when I’m talking to you,” she demands. “Do you really see all that you say? . . . Aren’t you projecting your own expectations, interpretations, or desires onto my blank eyes?” (138). In one way, such provocations empower Kleege as the origin of language and meaning: her vision is panoptical (she knows where one’s gaze is directed) and capable of undetected spying; she can control where one looks and even what impression

one might have of the view. But the display of monological—and perhaps Medusan—visual power is deceptive; Kleege's manner of looking moves her, and her readers, to the margins, where meanings are discovered rather than imposed. *Sight Unseen* redefines the meaning of blindness not so much by attempting to establish an equivalency between vision and blindness, but rather by disabling sightedness itself, undermining its epistemological stability. Kleege uses her gradual, tactile, relational way of seeing to illustrate that "there is no one way to look . . . no optimum vantage point or viewing condition" (147). Hers is a gaze transformed, a look whose approach to the stuff of the world, and whose sense of its own power, contests not just the idea that men dominate through looking, but also more recent feminist theorizing, particularly in studies of film, about the viability of an active female gaze.

In the first several essays of *Sight Unseen*, Kleege complicates gendered stereotypes about blindness and vision by demonstrating her facility for a variety of *sighted* activities. In "Blind Nightmares" and "In Oedipus' Shadow," Kleege presents herself as a skilled semiotician, deftly unpacking representations of blindness in literature and film. In "The Mind's Eye," she details her penchant for art museums and her unusual way of looking at paintings. In each of these instances, Kleege transforms a conventional understanding of what it means to be blind or sighted: how has a "legally blind" woman seen the movies and read the books she describes? What exactly does she *see* at the museum? Where other women writers tend to generate a critique of dominant paradigms of disability strictly through personal experience, Kleege starts her story with an extended interpretation of culture's stories about blindness and vision. Beginning with Oedipus and ranging through texts as divergent as *Jane Eyre*, the 1967 film *Wait Until Dark*, and Monet's *Waterlilies*, Kleege situates herself as just one other looker, as a participant in the visual world, a teacher as well as a partner in the project of seeing. In short, she makes us viewers together, eliding herself as the object of our attention while simultaneously using her visual perspective to argue for the limitations of sight as one's sole or primary means of knowing the world. Kleege stretches the limits of identification with her readers, avoiding the dual seductions of voyeurism and sympathy—indeed, for much of *Sight Unseen* we are not looking at Georgina Kleege at all, but rather at habits of looking themselves.

The cumulative and strategic effect of Kleege's discussion of movies and literature through two chapters is clearly to dissociate her from characterizations of the blind as "supernatural or subhuman, alien or animal," "different" and "dangerous" (28), and of blindness as symbolic of "fragility and helplessness" (55), "divine retribution" (71), or "the complete loss of personal, sexual, and political power" (69). But displaying her dexterity as a cultural critic allows Kleege not to simply protest the inva-

lidity of such negative stereotypes; more to the point, she *proves* through her own performance of intellectual analysis their single-minded and reductive attitudes about loss of sight. Kleege makes her case less through personal outcry than through a scholarly marshalling of evidence, dismantling “facile assumptions about blindness” by exposing the underlying cultural anxieties that motivate those assumptions in the first place (65). Narratives about blindness “are not about blindness at all,” as Kleege suggests (58), but rather about a need to guarantee the privileged status of the sighted—a need that, in its turn, emerges from fears about the fragility and unpredictability of embodied identity. In what Susan Wendell has called “the flight from the rejected body,” disability signifies all that must be carefully guarded against by normative corporeality: “tragic loss, weakness, passivity, dependency, helplessness, shame, and global incompetence” (1996, 83, 63). Kleege’s staging of herself as an interpreter of myths of blindness thus serves as a specific refutation of the kinds of associations Wendell enumerates; far from weak, passive, or incompetent, Kleege takes charge—she surveys the ideological territory, she infiltrates, she squares off against an imagined reader’s resistance to any suggestion that sightedness is less than immediate and unfailing. “[W]hy not break this absolute dependence you have on your eyesight?” Kleege queries (32). “The sighted can be so touchingly naive about vision” (96).

Positioned at the start of *Sight Unseen*, Kleege’s deconstructive examination of blindness in film and literature deflects attention away from Kleege herself—from the personal or intimate details one tends to associate with the autobiographical mode for women—to such an extent that we lose *sight* of Kleege altogether, at least temporarily. We may forget that her own vision is at stake, here, too—even that she herself is blind, so thoroughly do we associate reading and movie-going with sightedness. Not only do these chapters demand, therefore, that we re-examine stereotypes about the blind; perhaps more pointedly, Kleege also puts pressure on the category of *sightedness*. Blindness—as a trope, a symbol, an event that must be interpreted and invested with meaning—is situated in the culture, rather than the individual author, and Kleege further insists that whatever diminishment a blind person experiences is a function of social relations, rather than personal insufficiency. Rejecting sustained autobiographical narrative at the start of her text, Kleege thus enacts on the page the sort of favorable depiction of blind people that she fantasizes might someday be possible in film: “blindness would become invisible,” Kleege writes, because “a ‘realistic’ blind person on screen would have so mastered the skills of blindness that there would be no need to draw attention to them” (57). Kleege’s phrasing here—the “skills of blindness”—dissolves impaired vision into just one other form of normal behavior. To speak of the skills of *blindness* rather than the skills of seeing is to disturb the hierarchical binary, figuring blindness not as tragic dimin-

ishment but as something *anyone* could learn to do, even as a kind of expertise or virtuosity. Indeed, Kleege encourages her readers to *practice* blindness, as a way of decentering sight and relinquishing their monological—and ultimately anxiety-driven—grip on vision as one's primary mode of contact with, and sense of rootedness within, one's environment.

Something more overtly gendered is also at work in Kleege's display of her proficiency as a reader of text. Comparing male and female blind characters, she writes, "While movies occasionally allow blind men some instructive wit and wisdom, blind women are nothing but need. . . . Their helplessness is surpassed only by their passivity and desperation" (51). What's more, the "obsessive self-preoccupation" expected of blind women in cinema would "label a sighted woman as a dangerous vamp" (55). Such statements remind us that if patriarchal ideology tends to pinion women generally in the paradox of emotional immaturity and sexual threat, blind women may have an even more vexed relationship to the self-appraisal of autobiography. At the start of the book, Kleege recounts the behavior of her students when she first informs them that she's blind: they stare at her, "Eyeing her askance," gazes "intent" (9–10). To identify herself as blind, as she does in the first sentence of *Sight Unseen*, is to invite and perhaps amplify the objectifying looks of sighted readers, whether female or male. That Kleege looks so consistently outward frustrates readers' desire to *see* her, thus refusing the kinds of stereotypes that encode blind women in film as at once frail and child-like, egotistical and sexually voracious. The blind characters that Kleege explores (most often the creations of male writers and directors) may require the assistance of male heroes to rescue and protect them, but it is Kleege herself in *Sight Unseen* who seeks to *save* sighted readers from cultural misapprehensions about blind identity. Kleege is thus a woman who sees much more than herself being seen. Keenly aware that blindness makes women both "unsightly" (54) and "tempting to men" precisely because they can't "look back" (56), Kleege-as-author looks awry, eyes the world askance, and rends the sighted world's faith in a stable connection between vision and knowledge, seeing and being whole.

When we enter a Matisse exhibit with Kleege, her unique way of seeing comes more fully to the fore of her narrative. Kleege describes her behavior in museums in highly physical terms, as a kind of dance: "I perform a slow minuet before each painting, stepping forward and back, sweeping my gaze from edge to edge" (95). Such a procedure seems sequential and partial, resulting not in the instant intake, the global impression that the sighted claim to experience, but something more interactive, involving the whole body's motion in the process of looking. As such, Kleege's sight is neither complacently unquestioned nor singular, but rather follows feminist theorizing about embodied identity toward a more partial and relational form of vision. Because she proceeds so methodically, Kleege

forces us to slow down too, and to reconsider the very process of making meaning out of what we see. To see slowly is to resist the idea that we “see” wholly and instinctively, that through seeing we achieve mastery over the phenomena of the world. From up close, Kleege observes details that casual viewing “overlooks”—texture, thickness, size, color. “The most ‘realistic’ eye” in a painting “may be no more than a swirl of brown with a thin comma of white laid over,” Monet’s waterlilies are “crusty” rather than “liquid,” and abstract paintings have “depth and form” from two inches away (94). Reading such descriptions, we begin both to imagine what Kleege sees as well as to remember our own impressions of what painting looks like, an overlap that serves less to reify Kleege’s identity as impaired than to upend our belief in a single, correct way of looking—always to be understood as a correct way of being.

Kleege, then, is what Shakespeare might have called the master-mistress of vision and blindness alike, both instructor and student of the dynamics of looking and interpreting what can be seen. Cautious about positioning herself as “instructive spectacle, useful to everyone but [her]self” (90), she keeps readerly attention focused on the ambiguities and deceptions of sight generally, not the anguish or struggle of losing her sight in particular.⁶ Yet there is one sighted activity Kleege emphatically cannot participate in: eye contact. Where *Sight Unseen* starts from the premise that Kleege “find[s] it easy to imagine what it’s like to be sighted” (3) because the dominant culture—from infrastructure to ideology—is so fully oriented toward the sighted, the chapter entitled “Here’s Looking at You” admits to feeling “confus[ed]” (122) by the “mystery” (124) of eye contact. Macular degeneration makes it impossible for Kleege to pick up facial details or even to perceive the totality of a person’s face in a single glance. “When I try to look someone in the eyes,” she explains, “he disappears” (124). Since the same “off-center gaze” that troubles her fellow museum-goers makes her appear “shy, distracted, suspicious, bored, or untrustworthy” (124), Kleege “fake[s]” eye contact (138), aiming her eyes and face in the right direction, “perform[ing] tricks” (126) with her eyes that mimic the concentrated intimacy, the assertiveness or honesty associated with a direct look.⁷

That Kleege’s experience of seeing and feeling “nothing” could be interpreted as “the most significant visual exchange” (125) with another person, throws into question the privileged cultural and theoretical status accorded an exchange of looks. “Here’s Looking at You” repudiates the idea that because they are “excluded from [the] constant, kinetic interchange” of eye contact, the blind “must take the sighted’s word” for its importance and trustworthiness (131). Kleege focuses her discussion on what eye contact is believed to reveal—the “truth” of a person’s psychical or ontological state—as well as on the contextual data that contribute to our assessment of the “genuine” emotion allegedly communicated by the eyes. What the sighted attribute solely to eye-to-eye understanding,

for instance, Kleege explains as a function of the entire face and body: stretched skin, widened eyelids, light reflected off of the eyeballs, furrowed brows, and twitching lips. Again, the effect is to shift the reader's perspective away from the eyes themselves and onto what surrounds them. Compared to the specular exactness claimed by the sighted, Kleege admits that she "focus[es] too much on the peripheral details" (128) for her to appreciate fully the significance of eye contact. Yet what lies at the periphery of vision is precisely Kleege's concern in *Sight Unseen*. Calling attention to the stage of looking—all the details from body posture to setting to desire and projection—Kleege suggests that the presumed guarantees of visual contact are, on the one hand, partial and gradual, and on the other comprised of myriad pieces of information that *supplement* what the eyes alone exhibit. Thus by conveying to her readers all that presses into a scene of looking from the surround, Kleege explodes any idea that we have access to, that we can "know," the other's "interior" just by looking into his or her eyes.

As a result of what Kleege can't see, the essay concentrates on what she knows, transforming a putative lack into a cognitive advantage. "Here's Looking at You" ranges from the physiology of "the visual system" (128), to the artificial strategies (air-brushing, dilating eye drops) employed by actors and fashion models to maximize the specular effects of their appearance on film, to the sighted habit of employing metaphors that "point to the eyes . . . as the site of all significant experience" (131). At the same time, however, Kleege also repeats such words and phrases as "apparently," "I assume," "I'd like to see," "I'm not sure," "I've heard tell," even "I miss the point." These terms seem to emphasize the cultural displacement of a disabled woman assumed to be "not in full possession of [her] reasoning powers" (Keith 1996, 86); as one who can't make eye contact, Kleege doesn't "get it," and thus she speaks tentatively, she seems intellectually blunted, out of the social loop. Yet the fundamental pressure point here is less blindness than sighted arrogance about eye contact, with all the psychological, erotic, epistemological charge of that phrase held under scrutiny. Kleege situates herself in a sighted milieu where stories are trafficked as truth, a world where people uncritically "tell" the appropriate narratives of cultural myth. The doubt and uncertainty implied by "apparently" or "assume" pertains not at all to Kleege's limited understanding, then, but instead level the author's skepticism against what people insist they can discern from the eyes. By figuring the certitudes of eye contact as the product of a kind of rumor-mill, Kleege interrogates one of sighted culture's most sacred forms of accessing another's true self, refusing to take for granted, to take anyone's word for, what constitutes meaning, significant experience, or identity.

A discussion of the local, interpersonal event of eye contact, then, becomes a critique of patriarchal technologies of understanding, of culturally sanctioned mechanisms of interpretation and assessment. Kleege

foregrounds the way in which sighted ideology reduces knowledge and meaning to the single action of seeing, wholly subsuming the participation of bodies, expectations, and desires into the mythologized behavior of eyes. She concedes an evolutionary and biological basis for the importance of vision (citing, for example, mother-infant mirroring and the predatory advantage of forward-directed eyes), but she refutes the symbolized, romanticized, poeticized assumptions about eye contact that deny legitimacy to other forms of making contact with the world. The sheer “diversity” of the stories Kleege recounts about the impact of eye contact reveals more, finally, about sighted people’s belief in its authority than about any real access it has to “reality.” Perhaps more pointedly, Kleege makes it clear that social codes governing visual interaction are embedded in patriarchal mythology: whether she is looking at photographs of fashion models, reading self-defense literature that cautions women against eye contact with strangers, or pondering romantic clichés about love at first sight, Kleege links the cultural privileging of vision with both physical and discursive violence. Yet if power cannot be said to reside in one’s ability to see, as *Sight Unseen* endeavors to prove, then power itself must become open to reclamation, and identities constructed within certain cultural configurations of power are in turn available for rewriting, revision. Kleege performs her own version of eye contact in this chapter. “Pull the wool off your eyes,” she commands her readers. “Tell me what you see” (138).

If it is possible to see in a different manner—off-center, askew, up-close, and side-to-side—*Sight Unseen* also argues that we can “see” with a different part of the body. To contest sight as culture’s dominant mode of knowing (a structure that necessarily assumes the blind as less than fully human or grants them supererogatory and highly idealized “insight”), Kleege defocuses the eyes entirely and shifts to the hands, examining various forms of touch as an additional metaphor for relating to the world. Describing her father, for example, an artist known for large-scale sculpture, Kleege relates an early memory of him helping her to weld together pieces of metal: “My hand moves inside my father’s hand. His index finger lifts and points. I look where he points. I draw the flame to the point. . . . Like most of our conversations, this one was essentially wordless, conducted hand-to-hand, my small hand inside his” (163). The scene accumulates images of both real and symbolic connection—the fused scraps of metal, one small hand clasped within another, daughter to father, human to metal, idea to “form and dimension” (163)—that reflect a central preoccupation in *Sight Unseen*. To be “hand-in-hand” with the world is to refuse a subject position defined by static hierarchies of gender and health that equate women with receptive passivity, physical difference with helplessness. Though she was not yet blind in the scene above, the metaphor of welding shapes one of *Sight Unseen*’s central proposi-

tions: American cultural myths of self-reliance and isolationist identity privilege male able-bodiedness, and condemn intersubjective relations, caretaking, and disability as signs of, or thresholds onto, regressive dependency. In contrast, Kleege argues for reciprocity and mutuality, for “conversations” between people and between people and things in the world that unite body and idea, hands and eyes, words and movement. Kleege suggests that communication does not derive solely from sight (that, indeed, it may not even require sight), and that it is only through the mutual interaction of embodied selves that the myriad seams of reality and identity stay “fast and lasting” (163). Relationality, then, in Kleege’s articulation of it, informs everything that she does—from seeing and reading to teaching, writing, making art—but in a way that challenges reductive models of female identity as selflessly oriented toward others and others’ feelings.⁸ Importantly, the scene of welding with her father emblemizes a relational experience in which meaning emerges from active partnership, rather than domination or mastery.

The quintessential manifestation of this dialectical phenomenology, the most potent instance of “hand-in-hand” contact with information and meaning, is Kleege’s decision to learn braille, a process she begins only as an adult. Reading braille is profoundly physical, involving the whole self from fingertips and arms, through the shoulders and into the head, brain, mind. Reading this way, Kleege reactivates her body in communication with the world, empowering her hands in the place of her eyes. But she does more than propose hand reading as secondary compensation for the loss of sight, and she “returns” to a body that is signified not only as different, but in fact as *deviant* (this move is at once literal, textual, and theoretical, as Kleege turns from the more intellectualized chapters of the first part of *Sight Unseen* to chapters that foreground her corporeal self).⁹ “Close reading” had once signified Kleege’s literal proximity to a computer screen or a printed page—she describes herself as “the physical embodiment of close reading” (198)—and therefore measured the distance between Kleege and “normally” sighted individuals, whose eyes “process as many as a dozen [characters] at a time” compared to Kleege’s “three” (199). But despite her wry analogy to the habit of “dwell[ing]” (197) closely over textual detail (Kleege was a Yale undergraduate and writes that she “felt physically well-suited, if not predestined, to be a close reader” [198]), the liberating possibilities afforded her by braille have little to do with New Critical interpretive practice or ideology. The tactile reading of braille allows Kleege to rediscover a way of being in the body that the struggle to read with her eyes had forced her to relinquish. With her eyes, Kleege is in fact an inefficient reader; with braille she reads more quickly, with less strain, and greater mobility. With her hands at work, Kleege can in fact move *away* from the page, letting her body uncoil, stretch out, and relax: “The frantic uncertainty of read-

ing print was gone. And there was no pain . . . I was serene, floating" (204). Moreover, hand reading has the unexpected effect of disguising Kleege's visual impairment. Comparing the logistical problems of giving public readings by sight to the ease of reading by braille, Kleege writes that "[her] blindness is less visible to [her] audience" (227). In a paradoxical way, reading braille makes Kleege both more and less "blind"; it is one of the "skills" of blindness that indicates her difference from the sighted world even as it strenuously resists negative connotations of failure or inadequacy.

Reading braille thus carries an even more political valence in that it serves to mark identity: "the way we read defines who we are" (217). To choose braille, to read not with the eyes but with the fingers, is to seem to regress to a benighted state of incapacity and to openly identify oneself as disabled, to repudiate the promise of low-vision aids and thus of "progress"—but it is also, accordingly, to reject sightedness altogether, and so to defiantly claim disinterest in trying to be or seem "normal." Particularly because Kleege does have some sight, because she can, however "imperfectly," read with her eyes, her decision to learn braille inspires resistance and anxiety from those who are threatened by her apparent indifference to a sighted way of life: "braille is a part of the dim and dire past, not the desirable present," Kleege explains; "My desire to learn braille cast me as an eccentric Luddite" (215). The issue is less old-fashioned recalcitrance about technology, of course, than it is the choice of "blind" behavior over sighted, a willingness to "be seen" as blind when gadgets and machinery could allow her to mimic the practices of the sighted. Kleege makes the point that reading braille has to do with more than just convenience, physical comfort, access to materials, or lower costs; a far more confrontational desire to challenge the dominance of the norm is at stake here, a call to widen the array of ways of being in the world and of articulating subjectivity. "The first time I read my name in braille," Kleege remarks, "made me muse on identity again: 'This is me in braille'" (217–8). Reading braille thus effects a shift in Kleege's sense of herself as a person and as blind; far from confining her to a state of diminishment, braille is generative, creating new possibilities, surprising her with the discovery of an unfamiliar but no less legitimate self. Braille enables Kleege to move back and forth across the divide between ability and disability, to transgress and thus to destabilize that boundary. "Me in braille" is just one more self, one more version of Georgina Kleege.

The intersection of feminist and disability theory seems obvious here. Kleege "repells" her name, and thus herself, both in braille and then in the pages of *Sight Unseen*. Layering text on text, she claims multiple identities that depend on particular languages she knows, some of which exclude her sighted readers; "she" becomes mobile and elusive.¹⁰ But at the same time, her braille identity, no less than the self she creates in her

book, has no meaning apart from her physical condition: the material reality of the body produces the discursive play. Kleege's representation of herself in a language she must reclaim from the margins of sighted culture effects a breach with what Leigh Gilmore has called "a patriarchal regime of names" (2001, 124); but unlike writers whose self-representational project indulges the ambiguity of signification at the expense of bodily specificity, Kleege's act of naming and identifying herself ("This is me in braille") is rooted in the material condition of her eyes. Despite its origin in the gradual loss of her sight, reading herself in braille is thus a form of gain for Kleege, one further implement with which she can traverse, and thereby denaturalize, the boundaries of disability and health, passivity and agency, patriarchal authority and the silencing of women.

There *is* a kind of patrilineal narrative at work in *Sight Unseen*, but it is a revisionary one that problematizes fatherly law. "Up Close, In Touch" recounts Kleege's pursuit not only of braille but also of the life of Louis Braille himself, including an odyssey to the Braille Museum at his birthplace in Coupvray, France.¹¹ Kleege details the accident that blinded Braille as a child and his later perfection, as a teenager at the Paris Institute for the Young Blind, of a system of coded dots. She acknowledges her admiration for Braille's "strength of character" (225) and his willingness to take enormous risks in the face of institutional resistance to adopting his new system (a resistance ultimately due, Kleege implies, to sighted fear about the ramifications of empowering the blind with the ability to read). Identifying with Braille because he "stood up to sighted authority and said, 'What you offer is good. What I offer is better'" (225), Kleege in turn indicts her own culture's oppressive myths of normalcy and impairment. And by ending with Braille's story, *Sight Unseen* wraps itself back to the rhetorical mode with which it began: making use of cultural representations of blindness in order to uncover the power dynamics and ideological anxieties that contribute to their perpetuation. Braille's life-narrative becomes significant at this particular juncture in the text for several reasons. By emphasizing Braille's inventiveness, lingering over the crafty subterfuge whereby students utilized his system despite the threat of expulsion from the school, Kleege implicitly counters the very stereotypes of blind helplessness that hindered Braille and his peers. The story also provides an historical context for Kleege's insistence on learning braille, her own refusal to accommodate herself to the dominance of the visual. Braille's system, and his insistence on its usefulness, resonates with Kleege's own project in *Sight Unseen*; she too defies cultural authority by telling an alternative story of blind identity, by creating a new language with which to articulate a blind and female subject. As we read Kleege's discovery of Braille and his refusal to accept defeat in the face of cultural pressures against his new language, we have been situated in Kleege's own position, witnessing *her* invention of a new vocabulary

with which to spell the world and herself within it.¹² And she reminds us powerfully that no identity is ever unattached to others in the world; far from superseding her voice or story, Braille's narrative is adamantly Kleege's—she is the mediator, the translator, the bilingual interpreter, the legatee of the freedom of Braille, and the creator thereby of her own new story.

Kleege's effort to locate this alternative father figure is juxtaposed to what she reveals about her relationship with her own father, the only intimate one to figure prominently in *Sight Unseen*. The text devotes a chapter to him, entitled "A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter." Given that Kleege is so circumspect about other significant relationships (her husband Nick and her mother, also an artist, are mentioned but do not factor as "characters" to nearly the same degree), this singling out of the father seems noteworthy, and motivated by two important and intertwined thematic issues: patriarchal authority and the father's broken body. Kleege states that she "inherited [her] flawed vision" (149) from her grandmother, who developed the more common form of age-related macular degeneration, and that the linchpin of this connection is her father, through whom the "defective gene" passes (150). These two other impaired bodies establish a familial legacy of responding to illness in ways that reinforce the antagonism of mind and body, defining consciousness as if it were at the mercy of an unruly body—unless it can be subdued through enormous force of will. Kleege explicitly describes her grandmother as a hypochondriac who used illness "to manipulate the people around her" (149). Partially sighted, like Kleege—or "imperfectly blind"—the grandmother was suspected of "faking" incapacity, of disguising how *capable* she actually was, so that her health problems became a sign of what was assumed to be psychological weakness. The father had "doubts about the severity of his mother's blindness," and read physical impairment as proof that she was "dependent, fearful, and needy" (150). This resentment of, and resistance to, his mother's ailments is bound up with Kleege's father's own childhood infirmities—asthma and other respiratory problems—and his mother's anxiety about the severity of these conditions, which Kleege describes as "almost completely debilitating" (151). Not only did Kleege's father learn to suspect sickness in his mother as deceptive and manipulative, then, but to also deny physical limitations in himself. Kleege writes that he deliberately transformed himself into "an extremely athletic adolescent" (151), and specifically links the scale and muscularity of her father's artwork to his determination to overcome any vestige of the "sickly" child that his mother feared he was (and, we are to assume, very nearly produced in him).

Kleege's own vision problems are thus shaped by an environment in which women's bodies are viewed as traitorous, their illnesses doubted

as inherently fraudulent, and in which men learn to define selfhood as a triumphant transcendence of physical limitation. In the Kleege family, the body becomes a source of falsehood and denial, demonized as an instrument of interpersonal treachery or suppressed as an obstruction to proper gendered behavior and parental approval. Kleege admits that she internalized a sense of guilt about her “flawed vision” (150) and exaggerated her self-sufficiency to protect her father not just from the bad feelings associated with her “defect” (150), but from his sense of personal inadequacy or defectiveness as well: “If I could preserve the illusion of normalcy, I would remain unflawed” (150).¹³ If Kleege’s father’s relationship with his mother is inflected by suspicion, Kleege’s relationship with her father serves as an index of the ways in which disabled women often experience their anomalous bodies as obstacles to specifically *male* approval and desire. While her father’s efforts to deny bodily weakness merely reiterate masculinist norms of singularity and strength, Kleege’s similar effort signifies a problematic association between denial of self and the need to please an authoritative father. Kleege’s father renounces his illness to move away from his mother (presumably heightening her worry and therefore linking health and autonomy with repudiation of the mother); Kleege disguises her illness to move *toward* her father, assuaging *his* guilty feelings and subsuming her needs into his. When she writes that her father “resisted any impulse he might have felt to disable [her] with paternal protection,” or that her blindness “never limited his expectations of what [she] could do or become” (151), such claims seem somehow disingenuous, particularly because Kleege also states that her father had a kind of morbid curiosity about her ability to “mask [her] lack of sight” (151). While the father may have respected and stimulated Kleege’s intellect, his fascination for her ability to “fake” sight—for the “artifice” of healthiness—nonetheless imposes on Kleege an explicit association between intimacy and normalcy. Kleege writes that because “complaining” about her condition “would only make [her] more troublesome and less lovable” (207), she impersonates sightedness: “it was . . . easier to pretend that I saw what they did” (208), “I could only draw a version of what he saw” (151).¹⁴

Disability repeats itself not only genetically, then, but also ideologically, circulating in families who take their cues from cultural attitudes toward gender, illness, and generational conflict. “A Portrait of the Artist” shows us that art is similarly relational, that it is created not by the “vision” of the solitary genius but rather by the many layerings of social dynamic. The chapter begins by announcing that Kleege and her father “disagree[d]” (139) about eye contact, suggesting again that “Visual experience is relative” (139) and thereby initiating an extended meditation on the various connections between seeing, disability, and art.¹⁵ The father’s giant sculptures take shape in direct reaction to Kleege’s grandmother’s attitudes toward bodily ailment. In turn, Kleege’s art signifies an explicit

break from her father's denial of both his own illness and her blindness. Her way of writing—the fact that she *is* a writer, and not, say, a dancer—emerges from her need to tell the story of what she sees, to intervene into familial and cultural tale-telling about blindness and gender. In its discussion of art, family, and illness, the chapter actively blurs a series of binary oppositions, deconstructing the boundaries that separate father from daughter, the disabled from the norm, the literal from the representational. Kleege's "portrait of the artist" is thus also a self-portrait, exploring the familial and social constructions of blindness, health, and gender roles that ultimately inform her identity as a writer.

When Kleege tries to describe exactly what she sees, she paints in words, passages as clearly and lyrically rendered as if she were describing an actual painting or writing poetry.¹⁶ Yet she confesses, "Words are only the restless prowl around and around the thing I want to name, a spiral search from the periphery toward the center. But words are at least a point of departure" (153). In a parallel movement, Kleege describes her father's return to painting late in his life (too weakened from cancer, emphysema, and tuberculosis to continue his metalwork), and the small abstracted pieces that resemble the "splinters of color," the "pulsating shimmer" of Kleege's own vision (159). Words and painting; each is instigated by physical collapse and by a desire to acknowledge both the simultaneous failures and continuity of the body. Kleege writes of one of her father's paintings: "I could hold it over any image and say, 'This is what I see.' It's not quite right. . . . But it's close enough. A point of departure" (159). The repeated phrase—"a point of departure"—joins words and painting in a shared understanding that no medium can make stable and solid whatever is threatening to come apart. The polysemic swirl around an absent center—words that only haunt the edges, "slashes of color" that "spiral" inward as if into the depths of a "cone" (159)—invoke the same "central black hole" (153) of Kleege's vision, the "frayed" cells of her retinas (155). These metaphorical eddies are precisely the point: there is no transcendental signified, no "truth" at the center that writing, painting, sculpting, or "perfect" vision could ever hold firm. All forms of storytelling, Kleege implies, from family legends to cultural mythology, are only a point of departure, endless beginnings that initiate inconclusive journeys. It is the attempt to travel that matters, Kleege has us understand, and the willingness to keep one's head turned toward the margins, toward the vibrant colors and shapes that occupy the periphery of our vision.¹⁷

Sight Unseen recounts a profound desire to escape the confines of the body through the performance of "normalcy," and it describes internalizing tenacious cultural messages that link social acceptance with an absence of identifiable difference. Kleege writes, "Offered no means of coping with my condition (the word 'blindness' was to be avoided), I did everything I could to conceal it" (206–7). Importantly, however, the text

also mounts a revolt against the tyranny of the visual, articulating new ways of seeing that, instead of wrenching the afflicted body to culture's limited narratives of gendered or disabled experience, make the body itself the very ground of narrative and subjective authority. *Sight Unseen* at once identifies its author as disabled and resists the stigma associated with disability, pointing out the ways in which Kleege's physical condition is different while calling attention to the way difference is embedded in cultural signification, and questioning the fictional and discursive terms by which we understand sameness. Where many female autobiographers—disabled and nondisabled alike—use the performative stage of life-writing to rethink the power dynamics of specularly, authoring themselves as both subject and object of a reconfigured gaze, Kleege interrogates the epistemological reliability of sight altogether. In her terms, the question of gendered identity has less to do with whether or not she controls a subjectifying look, but rather with vision itself and the knowledge that “normal” eyesight is believed to produce. Even as she claims a disabled surface (braille, cane), she unravels a series of binaries that would marginalize her from able-bodied circles, whether patriarchal or feminist, as defective. Transforming disability into a meaningful vantage point, Kleege “announce[s] her blindness without apology” (227).

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Notes

1. Following Bérubé, I am referring to the end of Foucault’s essay “What is an Author,” in which he asks, “What difference does it make who is speaking?” (qtd. in Bérubé 2000, 343 n. 3). A piece by Kleege on Helen Keller’s memoir *The Story of My Life* also appears in this special edition, entitled “Helen Keller and ‘The Empire of the Normal’” (2000).
2. I am thinking particularly of texts by Nancy Mairs and Lucy Grealy, who engage in a far more relentless anatomization of their shame, sexual longings, and acquiescence to patriarchal lessons. See Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) and Mairs’s several collections of personal essays, particularly *Plaintext* (1986). See also *Past Due*, by Anne Finger (1986).
3. On the discontinuities of female experience and autobiography, see Shari Benstock (1988). Nancy Mairs has written that “A collection of personal essays stutters—begins, halts, shifts, begins anew,” in a way that reflects but also

resists the cultural disenfranchisement of the woman writer (1994, 79); and G. Thomas Couser's *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* discusses the various narrative strategies that frame personal stories of disability and illness (1997).

4. Žižek claims that "if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e., with an 'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by *desire*" (1992, 11–2).
5. As one index of feminist trust in vision, consider Deborah Peifer's account of the effect gradual blindness had on her experience as a lesbian. "When I first came out as a lesbian," Peifer writes, "one of the things that confirmed my dykeness was the way other lesbians looked at me . . . [H]ow they gazed was an absolute indicator" (1999, 32). After becoming legally blind, the loss of visual interaction with other women produced "a sense of isolation that is sometimes overwhelming" (33). Peifer claims that because she is unable to see others or to see herself being seen by them, her "gaydar" (31) is diminished, disrupting the relational matrix from which she derives a sense of stable identity. Kleege, by contrast, discovers other physical ways of making contact.
6. A point of comparison here may be Jim Knipfel's memoir *Slackjaw* (1999), in which the author's "stupid little story" (xi) about losing his vision to retinitis pigmentosa takes precedence over a cultural analysis of blindness as both a material and discursive condition. Knipfel presents his narrative as an "honest" depiction of how blindness is "a big pain in the ass" (231), a self-consciously ironized send-up not only of his own stubborn resistance to the accoutrements of blindness, but of nearly everyone else who appears in the book—other blind people, those who assist the blind, women, academics, and so on. While *Slackjaw* was enthusiastically received for its apparently unsentimental depiction of disease, it is nonetheless a troublingly aggressive text that does not, in contrast to *Sight Unseen*, encourage its readers to participate in a thoughtful reevaluation of their own assumptions about vision. Where Kleege ascribes a lyrical and fundamentally intersubjective basis to her (diminished) way of looking, Knipfel's relation to the world tends to seem violent and mean, his descriptions of women often blithely disparaging, and his representation of his own blindness marked by dichotomies of enraged failure and mythic control.
7. Kleege's language of "faking"—like her assertion of "passing"—seems aimed at provoking deep-seated anxieties about "others" breaking down or infiltrating the hegemonic power structure of Western culture. If women can fake orgasm, and racial minorities pass as white, how are stable relationships of sexual and racial mastery to be maintained? The fact that Kleege can fake eye contact and thus "pass" as sighted makes her social position a threateningly liminal one, which she rhetorically maximizes. In a slightly different way,

her claim that *Sight Unseen* is a “coming out” story emphasizes not only her solidarity with a group blind identity, but also the potential affront that such allegiance might constitute for sighted readers. In each case, Kleege subtly undermines sighted complacency about knowing who Kleege “is.”

8. In defense of listening to books on tape, for example, Kleege writes that “reading this way almost always feels like a shared experience. I feel myself not merely a passive audience but engaged in a kind of exchange. Readers are not reading to me; we are reading together. I have a sense of a continuous back-and-forth commentary. . . . This is precisely what confounds the sighted reader who thinks of reading as a private and intensely personal act, a solo flight” (181). Kleege claims that reading aloud to someone is an “act of generosity that should never be underestimated” (191).
9. The distinction between different and deviant is made by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997, 23).
10. One thinks of Audre Lorde here, offering a “new spelling of [her] name” in her bio-mythography *Zami* (1982). See also the introductory chapter of Jeanne Perreault’s *Writing Selves* for a discussion of the indeterminate “I” of women’s autobiography and the political intersections of self-naming and group identification (1995).
11. I will follow Kleege here in using the lower case *braille* for the system of raised dots, upper case *Braille* for the inventor of that system.
12. *Sight Unseen* is itself available in both braille and on cassette, recorded by Terry Hayes Sales (1999b).
13. In her discussion of the intertwining of her father’s art, the family’s various ailments, and her relationship with her parents, Kleege repeats the words “flaw,” “flaws,” and “flawed” seven times in just three pages, as if unwittingly articulating a worry that her father’s awareness of her blindness might impede their closeness.
14. A similar sentiment recurs throughout Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994), which links the atypical shape of Grealy’s face (a sizeable portion of her jaw having been removed due to cancer) to being ugly and therefore unlovable. In contrast, Jim Knipfel’s efforts to mask his decreasing eyesight seem aimed not so much at retaining affection but rather guarding his autonomy (1999). Grealy and Kleege discuss their experiences in specifically relational terms; Knipfel speaks in terms of “pride and self-sufficiency,” “determination and cold viciousness” (1999, 225, 227), presenting himself as a solitary individual whose encroaching blindness exposes him to the vulnerability of neediness.
15. Kleege reveals ambivalence about whether or not her father’s vision can be relied upon; she both appreciates the “unfailing accuracy” of his artist’s gaze

and acknowledges his inability to perceive the extent of her impairment (143). She writes, "I had to believe that my father was someone who could read the language of the eyes" (139). Yet the "language of the eyes" has been under erasure throughout *Sight Unseen*, its validity—or at least its stability—thoroughly contested. In fact, as the ensuing essay makes clear, Kleege and her father share an understanding that seeing has as much to do with touch, with pre-existing beliefs, and with *a priori* conceptions of reality, than with anything like pure vision.

16. Training her writer's vision on the politics, the physics, the symbolism of seeing, Kleege travels back and forth between scientific and symbolic discourse. At times, there is clinical precision to her descriptions of both what her eyes can see, and how she actually goes about doing the seeing. Disability scholars might point out that Kleege's ability to penetrate to the core of her own eyeballs so technically is a sign of her capitulation to a medical model (that we view our bodies largely through medical language and thus as unrelated parts or things, disconnected from a controlling consciousness) of disability. But Kleege achieves two important representational goals: first, she complicates the authority of medical discourse by setting it against her own—*she* still has epistemic authority in her story. Second, Kleege uses scientific language as an antidote (anecdote?) to the literary and mythological connotations of blindness that comprise the first two chapters of her text. Despite the problems of attending to the so-called medical model, Kleege has a great deal of cultural baggage about vision to cut through. Her descriptions of what happens during fear or eye contact, then (e.g., the skin stretching, or certain parts of the brain being activated), move these activities away from the realm of popular belief, superstition, and myth, and into something more mundane, less charged with mystery and entrenched assumptions.
17. Compare Kleege's concern to make disability an alternative (and rebellious) vantage point from which the nondisabled might think more critically about themselves with Knipfel's remark, towards the end of *Slackjaw*, that "Going blind . . . has been my salvation . . . —or my karmic retribution" (1999, 231).

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