**A transcript of content from *(Critical) Blindness Studies : Current Debates and Future Directions***

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**Roundtable #9**

**Blindness and Societies: Sites, Representations, Institutions**

**Chair: Gildas Brégain**

**Moderator: Corinne Doria**

**Speakers: Daniel Defoort (University of Reims, France)**

**Nidhal Mahmoud (Sorbonne Université, France)**

**Aggée Célestin Lomo Myazhiom (Université de Strasbourg, France, and Université des études étrangères de Tokyo, Japon)**

**Gildas Brégain** 00:00

Good evening, everybody. I'm **Gildas Brégain.** I'm French. I have short brown hair. I'm 38 and wearing a black shirt and grey glasses. First of all, we're going to listen to **Daniel Defoort,** who is a doctoral student at **Reims** doctoral school with Martine-Herzog Evans as his supervisor. He is going to talk about “Visual cells, penitentiary cells for incarcerated blind people: Where is the biggest fault?” and I hand over to him now.

**Daniel Defoort**

Good evening. I'm Daniel Defoort. I'm very short hair, almost a shaved head. I'm 50. And I'm wearing a red shirt and I live in Aix-en-Provence. I've chosen to talk to you about visually deficient people in prison. How do you choose to be a delinquent is the first question? We form our personality through our family environment, that gives us values, and our social environment that acts on our behavior. Consequently, we see that people who've had inverted commas “normal” education, they very rarely become delinquents. These people meet people or people who become, do have delinquent friends, which leads us to show, to see that a human being changes over their lifetime. And they can be a very good person and at a given point in time, they suddenly become delinquent. So we also need to ask the question, why? What makes us become delinquent? Do we choose to be a delinquent? Is there something, something else that makes us fall into delinquency? Maybe either spontaneously, somebody gets angry; they don't feel good and they act out? Or did they become professional delinquents? Repeatedly? And that is a bit more of a problem. Do we choose to become blind? Again, when an embryo is formed, there is a human being with all of its senses. But sometimes there are accidents along the way that cause an anomaly. So, although we are born with all our senses, the trials of life mean that sometimes we can find ourselves with disabilities, physical disabilities and sensory disabilities. So, for example, to become non sighted. Whether we're delinquents, disabled, or both, that's things we don't choose. And disability and blindness adds in an additional problem, which is vulnerability, because vulnerability makes us fragile, every day and even more so when we're in prison. There's a paradox in which an incarcerated person is seen as a dependent, fragile, vulnerable person. But and we think they can't be dangerous, whereas no handicap stops us from breaking the law and being punished as people who have no deficiencies. And so the prisons need to be able to accommodate disabled people. There's a law from 2005 that says, that public access places need to be accessible to disabled people. And prisons are no exception to that rule. And they shouldn't constitute an additional sentence for disabled people which should take into account their needs and meet those needs. All vulnerable people today that are blind, clinically blind, either totally, or partially, were in if they are deprived of their liberty, are now in prison. They are alone in a cell; they don't know where they are. And so what happens is that these people don't have any landmarks. Either they're alone or with cellmates. And at a certain point in time, for example, when they need to perform their toilet, they can't move, they can't go to the shower, they don't know how to move around, because they've nothing, no tactile landmarks to tell them where they are. So what happens is that these vulnerable people are subjected to or become subject to their cellmates who aren't always very pleasant. And it is their cellmates or the prison guards who take the place of carers to help them to wash themselves, or confront the universe around them. And, for me, this is something that isn't normal. Because these people are already in a vulnerable condition; they're in prison. These are two things that for human beings are dramatic; they're deprived of their fundamental rights, because they're not recognized. And as they're vulnerable, what happens, as in all groups, is that there are people with strong personalities, who go towards the people to say, I'll help you, don't worry. But the person, the vulnerable person, becomes indebted. And so that they're deprived of everything. And they start trusting the people that are guiding them. But then at a certain point in time, these people are the people will influence- that's not the right word, really, but they'll exploit the disability to make them do things that they shouldn't do, that they don't want to do. But because they're disabled and vulnerable, they'll start putting themselves in very difficult situations. And the problem with accessibility prisons is that we should have prisons that are adapted to all forms of disability. But for now, the law exists, it came out a few years ago, but due to prison overcrowding, and the work that would need to be done, as things stand at the time being, with problems of accessibility for people in wheelchairs, and the visually impaired people, they can't, for example, go out into the exercise yard, which means they're cut off from society, from the prison society. They can't make friends, and then penitentiary law is obliged to take these people and put them in other prisons. And then what happens is that they are isolated even more because they are taken further away from their families. And they no longer have any landmarks at all. They're already destabilized due to the change of prison, and in addition, they can no longer talk to their families, or see their families; it is the same thing for going to the visiting room. There are people who are visually impaired and don't have any landmarks. They need to be taken to where they're going to be able to go and see their family. Education: that too, there's almost no books in braille, there are no resources so that they can read for themselves. I think that disability is already a factor of exclusion in the outside world, but this isolation is accentuated in prison. This exclusion is seen on two levels. Firstly, by isolation from their families, and it's already a source of prejudice. Prejudice is certain because people aren't incarcerated for life; they're going to come out one day and the aim is that they shouldn't come back. That is a subject of my thesis to understand why people who come back into society, sooner or later go back to prison. So these are the difficulties encountered by the people who are incarcerated. So I think I've said most of what I wanted to say.

**Gildas Brégain** 10:43

Thank you very much and now then we're going to listen to **Aggée**, who's a professor in sociology, and a member of the Institute in Strasburg.

**Aggée Célestin Lomo Myazhiom**

I'm not sure if you can see me. But thank you for giving me the floor. And I have apparently five... and I'm afraid I'm not able to be at the whole of this session. But briefly, I’d like to tell you about what I've been talking with, with, with doing with Frédéric Reichhart for the last few years. We've been working on a comprehensive approach to disability within France-- France, Belgium, Switzerland, and sub- Saharan African countries-- looking at two types of disability and particularly for those living in our region of Africa. The text we passed on emphasized in particular albinism and I wanted to explain why we wanted to talk about these types of disability because firstly, in the general population, the rate is 1 in 50,000. But in Africa it is more like one in 1000. This is also the case of river blindness and into tropical areas, 90% of sufferers are in Sub-Saharan Africa and these two disabilities affect skin conditions and also sight and these issues cover several areas including that of social representation and how people are treated in society. This view is not only anthropological, but historico - anthropological. And we look at these two pathologies, there's serious discrimination against these categories of individual and there are some examples of individuals’ river blindness who have been able to move on in life and they will be liable to be treated as heroes and, on the other hand, people affected with albinism may be the victims of cultural or ritual violence. This is particularly the case in Sub-Saharan Africa. This may be at birth. Others may see Albinos that may play a particular role in the ritual cultural process to do with ancestors who are visible, so that this person may become sought out because that's they're believed to hold powers with regard to the ancestors. Sometimes these people are killed to harvest the organs or bones, because these are believed to confer powers. And all of this, of course, takes place in a particular social and cultural environment as a triple heritage: the African ancestral heritage then changes with colonialization and then westernization which will mean, on the one hand, these people will be cared for or there'll be some attempts take them into account, as you've heard previously with the social involvement and social participation of those individuals.

**Gildas Brégain**

Thank you very much. We are going to try and see if **Nidhal Mahmoud** is with us. His Doctorate of Literature (Research Institute of French language and literature) written on Lucien Descaves’ published in 2020, called Lucien Descaves: A reflection of his works from naturalist roots to libertarian ideas. And there's the personality of the blind person in religious literature. I hope that he will be able to join us soon. I’m just going to give you a brief summary of his paper in the meantime. This is very different from the two previous presentations because Nidal Mahmoud's text presents a much more positive image of blind people while being somewhat abnormal, because the blind person sees what others cannot. In Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel known as *The* *Sacred Night*, Nidal Mahmoud studies the character of blind person, a central person in the story called the consul who is a blind man who teaches the Koran and his sister who often calls him the consul because she imagined him in a diplomatic career. But in actual fact, this consul allows the heroine of the book, Zahra, to become a woman in her own right, because the father had wanted her to behave as a boy because he already had eight daughters and did not want a ninth and wanted to restore his honor amongst other young men of the town. And so he ordered his daughter Zahra to become a boy and the consul, who is blind, enables Zahra to become a woman and he is extremely sensitive and he tells Zahra to face her fears and emancipate herself through spirituality through mysticism, Sufism. And Zahra on the council will also experience a romantic relationship which emancipates her and having killed her uncle in a fit of violence is able to survive prison as a result of this. So Zahra describes a blind person who is a great poet, highly sensitive, who sees what others do not see. And in this work, blindness allows the counsel to achieve harmony with the world and with himself and enables the heroine Zahra to also come to terms with who she is. Nidal Mahmoud is now with us. So I briefly summarized your paper. So over to you.

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

Thank you. Thank you very much for this excellent summary and before talking about that, a brief word of introduction.

**Gildas Brégain**

Please do switch on your camera if you wish.

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

I'm afraid I'm not able to at the moment. Anyway, I won't describe myself physically either. That way you can leave your imagination to run riot because I believe that voices are already possibly a way of creating a mental image of the owner of the voice so, it's up to you who are listening to me to from my tone of voice to construct a visual image of who I am. I'm a research partner at the research institute attached to Paris Sorbonne; I work on naturalist and realistic literature in the 19th century and anarchist literature from the 1890s. And I, I’m also interested in disability studies and particularly the role of the blind person within French literature and North African French speaking literature including the literature of Tahar Ben Jelloun. And I'm delighted to be able to tell you about research and to do so, with

specialists Marion Chottin, Céline Roussel, and Hannah Thompson. Within disability studies, my work work goes back to 2011 when I started to look at Lucien Descaves who was the subject of my PhD. Somebody I ran across somewhat by chance in the Valentin Hauy library in Paris. I saw a hand transcribed book in Braille called The Walled In People, dedicated to the blind and the sighted to free the former and raise the awareness of the latter. I believe that that was fully the issue of the time. The novel is a time, a product of its time, the naturalist period, but Descaves, however, gets away from the stereotypical characters of his day and the stereotypes of the authors of his day. And his protagonist is a blind man called Savinien and describes his biography, his struggle against a world that is not always in favor of the emancipation of the blind. This novel is partly literature, part sociology, part literature and I devoted my contribution at a conference in November 2015 in Paris to this subject. So, the proceedings of the symposium were published in 2019. And I, in particular, mentioned aspects of this novel with regards to intersensory perception which are really essential to the aesthetics of Lucien Descaves. So, after The Walled In, this novel, I then looked for other characters in French literature and this led me to a number of authors and characters. I'm currently conducting a comparative study of a number of authors including Lucien Descaves from a comparative perspective, looking at the blind person in Eastern literature. This led me back to Tahar Ben Jelloun, very well known, prolific writer, studied by many critics and having read his novel, *The* *Sacred Night* published in 1987, I looked at how his unusual treatment of the issue as you summarized it just now. In my research, and in fact, in almost all my work, I've adopted a thematic approach. Jean-Pierre Richard being one of the architects of this approach, where they, he defines the theme as a practical organizational principle, an object, for example, around which an entire world is constructed. Themes are constructed in terms of recurrence, and the recurring themes in a work will give us a way of interpreting the work as a whole. So, postcolonial North Africa is an environment in which we can look at theoretical considerations of blindness from religious and social perspectives, sociological perspectives. I also deemed it relevant to look at the views of Islam on the blind and physical disabilities in general. And, in my paper, on this issue in Arabic and Muslim societies, it is often highlighting the fact that prior to the 2000s, the blind was not possible previously. Now, this has become more possible. In the Arab and Muslim world, there are some famous blind individuals who have made their impact on this world. Al Ma'arri is a poet who has had an effect on medieval Arab literature and there was another who was education minister in Egypt in the 1950s and was shortlisted for the Nobel Literature Prize. So, this novel is based on a fundamental paradox: the fact that the blind man sees more than the others, mysticism, apparent in this novel, through the predominant Sufism in the work, is a way of rehabilitating the figure of the blind man. So there's a metaphysical role, metaphysics plays a role in rehabilitating the blind man, bringing his contemporaries out of the blindness of materialism. This process is at the crossroads of philosophy and metaphysics. So, on the one hand, highly rationalistic and extremely fantastic metaphysics. And there is something of a glorification of blindness.

**Gildas Brégain** 29:20

Thank you very much for your presentation. The text presents a much more positive image of a blind person whereas the works of **Célestin Lomo** encourage us to fight against discrimination and broken laws that blind people suffer in prison and that albino people worked in, suffer in Sub-Saharan Africa. And what struck me in reading the different contributions is the question of the historic inertia of negative representations of blindness and, in my mind, to my mind, this raises a fundamental question, which is the question of the impact of public policies and historical changes in the reproduction or slight modification of these representations. Because in Arab countries, there's, there's the primacy of the aural tradition, where blind people can have high positions in society. Thanks to Koranic instruction, but it's true that this raises the question of a complexity, as all blind children in a Muslim society won't have access to education. And so there's a complexity, a diversity of life experiences, and even majority representation, like we see in the western world and I think that these three texts led to questions about these dominant representations that can be quite negative, or the minority positive representations, like in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s text. And so I’d like to come back to a few minutes to Daniel Defoort’s text and **Aggée’s** text. Daniel, in your book, you showed the blind people in prison encountered a lot of difficult to get out of their cell because the prison isn't accessible. There is no tactile strip, for example. And some blind people can't have access autonomously to activities. And they can't have access to certain leisure activities such as reading braille, for example. And so all of these elements restrict the social progress of incarcerated people and their degree of dependencies due to the unsuitability of prison environments. And so you showed that this visual feeling is very important given that their vulnerability sometimes causes them to be targets of other prisoners and other inmates. And I thought that was interesting. And **Aggée**, you also look at the representation of victims of, of albinism in Sub-Saharan Africa and most of these people that are victims of discrimination, they're dismissed, based on the fact that they're attributed magical powers. And they can be marked, they can be rejected by their families, and discriminated because of their lack of intelligence or so it's thought. And they can also be victims of infanticide; in certain territories there are hunts organized by other able bodied men, who seek them for the organs, and they sometimes even kill them even because their organs are considered to be useful to be eaten, because they can create some link with the, with animism, but often reality is more complex. There's not just these representations, dominant representations that are very negative and discriminating in some societies. Albinism, somebody with albinism, can sometimes be seen to be positive, for example, in Cameroon, where, it is seen to be a lucky mascot in the family, because of their mystical powers. And so I find it is interesting to see that all of these texts talk about representations of blind people in given societies in a historical or social political context, sometimes in institutions, such as in prison. And so I now invite you to, the three speakers, to answer the three key questions for the conference. Where do you situate your work in French speaking work on disability studies? Who would like to speak first?

**Aggée Célestin Lomo Myazhiom** 34:48

Yes, if I would, if I could speak first because I have to leave soon.

**Gildas Brégain**

Yes, yes, of course.

**Aggée Célestin Lomo Myazhiom**

Before answering this question about where I would situate my work in Disability Studies I would like to speak in front of the computer because the mic isn't working very well. The first element that I'd like to add, because I listened to what the previous speaker said about the overvaluation of blindness in the literature, and that in certain contexts, there's the process of making heroes of blind people and the dimension of, because in Africa, the context is different and you find [unclear word] that are valued because of their talent and then the speaker presented this very well. It's a kind of anthropology, where you try to overvalue people and this is also the role of people who are visually impaired to be able to see invisible things to perceive things that other people can't perceive. And you, as you said, very well, there's the issue with negative perceptions of pictures, images. And this is very, for example, the way people look at people and relationships with people becomee very reductive, when people try to domesticate otherness, and because you can't do this so that the people, the people who are a bit different are rejected. And to answer your question about where my studies are situated, the work I'm doing with my colleague, as I said at the beginning, this has a comparative dimension, to see how in different societies, that is something that seems to be important to me is the factor of moderning. If we take African societies, they've been westernized with a very strong notion of the place of codification, which is fine, for example, in Western biomedicine. But people do also go to seek the solutions from their ancestors. And so this dual system, which we find in Africa, we find in other places, too. For example, every time we say, why do people go to Lourdes in France, when they can get medical treatment. I live Alsace for many years. Why did you go to this, an emblematic shrine that we have locally? And so we, we have this element that was seeing where we get hold of these issues, and we can look at the different forms of that we find of social treatment and accessibility, which my colleagues talked about in their work on prisons. And now I have to leave you. I'm sorry. Thank you very much.

**Daniel Defoort** 38:49

It's true that I've been looking at disabilities for a long time, because my first job was to work as a nurse. And so I was confronted with disabilities and I still find that, in my family I've got disabled people in my family. So my research work on, for my thesis is, is looking at things to be caused by crime; people are repeat offenders because they find themselves in cells with other inmates who have a strong character who try to dominate these vulnerable people. And for me, vulnerability is a certain form of disability. It's a psychological disability. So working on psychiatric conditions, for example, if you have a weak person who is weak mentally you can't put them with other cellmates, on the same level, that that they realize that what they've done, they can be corrected. And when they leave prison, they can start to live a new life. Where it's strong people, strong persons, they say, you can do this, you can do that, you can steal that, or you can sell drugs, I'll give you money. And what happens is that these strong personalities, they don't have families, and they live in the, on the streets, and they start to become delinquents again and go back to prison. So that's my work on, on disabilities.

**Gildas Brégain**

Thank you and Mahmoud, can you hear me?

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

Yes. So, as far as I'm concerned, to answer your question. For disability studies, the literature, for instance, French language literature from North Africa was one region [unclear audio] For the time being, disabled people haven't been checking out in the socio cultural context of North Africa, at least in literature. Most of the time, they're people in the background, as they appear in certain novels, certain plays, and then they disappear without leaving any trace of themselves. And I spoke about this earlier. In most of the critical studies, the character is a disabled character, doesn't have the attention that they would deserve. Often, they have mystical qualities, which isn't related to their blindness. For they could be a person incarnating a certain metaphysical vision of the world, which hasn't always been explained or associated with the blindness of the character as though it were somehow a physical defect that you'd like not to talk about. And this is contrary to the author's intentions who would like to make the character, the disabled character into a hero, to use a substantial notion, a sort of canonization of the disabled person, because they're elevated to the rank of a saint, and a tribute is paid to them. And that it's as though they're going to be able to light up our, our paths in the context of North African literature. Physically deficient characters don't have, have enough interest paid to them. And my contribution, my research tries to contribute to reducing or to remedying this deficiency.

**Gildas Brégain**

Thank you very much for these answers. And now I'm going to ask you the second question. How would you describe blindness studies and what topics appear to be essential to be included in blindness studies?

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

Blindness studies from what I've appreciated is the relationship with putting a person on the stage, their relationship with the world and with others, etc. The topics, the most interesting topics seem to me to be the image that the author gives to the character because earlier you talked about negative representations. What we can call our age-old prejudices. And a lot of writers tend to give a very negative image of blindness. When I read a literary work, where there's a blind person or another disabled person, so the first thing that I'm interested in is to see what representation the author gives to this character. And then there's the way in which this character interacts with others. And that's really important. As far as Jelloun is concerned, he adopted two approaches, complementary approaches. And he started with a positive approach, like Lucien Descaves, he talks about the extreme acuity of his senses, the way he deals with his daily life and his extreme sensitivity, his intelligence, etc. And this is a rational perspective. And then he talks about metaphysics, and here he give, he gives his character a certain number of gifts that are inaccessible to ordinary people. And so this is vision with the heart, which is a fundamental notion in Sufi mysticism, which is a controversial stream of Islam, that is, is very spiritualistic, that gives capital importance to the spirit and the heart.

**Gildas Brégain**

So, Mr. Defoort, would you like to say anything about this?

**Daniel Defoort**

Yes. How to characterize blindness? This is not a negative vision. I see blindness: it is negative because I think there's a thing, there’s things they can’t have. I'd say, I've already said that, for me, blindness studies can be taken from the aspect where I try to do as much as possible to give people sight, where you can have glasses. So partially sighted people could have good glasses. For me, it is on that level. Blindness studies could look at, researchers could look at how we can find a way to replace our eyes so these people can see and try to discover the world. Of course, my colleague spoke well, because with his voice, you can imagine what he looks like, maybe that's not what he actually does look like. But at the same time, we can put ourselves in the place of partially sighted people. And when they listen to people, you can, they can get a picture of us. But is this picture, does it really reflect what we really look like? And I put myself in their place and say that this is always taken negatively: it’s a shame not to be able to see their children or grandchildren. Look for me, blindness studies are to look at the psychological sciences to see what's happening in their lives, when 20 years ago, they could see well, and then they lose their sight and how are they looked after? For the people I've seen, what can we do to give them a certain form of wellness? For me, that's what it is.

**Nidhal Mahmoud** 48:58

I'd just like something to add, if I may, before the last question. As to seeing things beyond materiality, I think this is one of the possible answers to today's questions because of the search for spirituality which is to be found in Western societies, a different way of looking at things or looking at the world. And I think that we could definitely see this as a response to the crisis in values which the world experience, is experiencing. And many readers of *The Sacred Night* had, saw this as a revolutionary work from this perspective.

**Gildas Brégain** 49:55

So the last question. How have, how has your research, what kind of definition of blindness has your research led you to adopt?

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

So if I may, I'll lead off two aspects to my response. Firstly, blindness is a deficiency. With the rise of technology, this deficiency can be effectively countered and mitigated. Sometimes the gap between the sighted and non-sighted can be reduced, but nevertheless, it remains a deficiency. The second aspect of my answer is that visual deficiency can be an opportunity for a fresh exploration of the world from a new perspective over, getting over and beyond a purely physical view of the world.

**Gildas Brégain**

Daniel Defoort?

**Daniel Defoort** 51:15

I would add that it leads to dependency, virtually total dependency, which can lead to psychological trauma. While my colleague sees lots of positive aspects in blindness, I cannot get over my view of it as literally handicapping. And I think if I would become blind, it would be a personal disaster. Of course, some non-sighted people don't at all want any help. But I, personally, cannot get away from my negative view of this. And I think well, there's the whole breadth of views on what a good life is involved. And many different life narratives might inform our answer to that; we have our own fears. And I think, for my part, it's quite hard what is a good or bad life, for myself or others.

**Gildas Brégain**

Corinne Doria, perhaps you would like to address the questions that have been raised by members of the audience?

**Corinne Doria**

Thank you very much. Thank you to our speakers for their presentations and this new aspect of the panel discussion, which will no doubt further enlighten us. I see two hands up already. You can either raise a virtual hand on Zoom or switch on your camera and wave physically or indeed you can use the Google doc to ask a question. Marion has a question.

**Marion Chottin**

Thank you very much, Corinne, and thanks to our speakers. I have a question for Nidhal. But first and foremost, I want to point out that I hope that this symposium on blindness studies has showed that there is more than one way of addressing blindness over and above ophthalmology and medical science and seeing it in terms of deficiency and I hope that all the blind contributors to this symposium would be able to provide other perspectives than drawing a straight line between blindness and virtually total dependency and the psychological trauma that could entail, and I think that we have other things to say, rather than simply assimilating blindness to a catastrophe. Nidhal, I’d like to say that I haven't read Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel, but reading the paper which you put in and excerpts from the novel, I got the feeling that this text distilled every age old prejudice there is in blindness, as Lucien Descaves said, had anything but a benevolent image of the blind person or a positive image or concept because, of course, while the consul has a satisfactory social role as a teacher I really saw in them the distillation of all these prejudices: he has a sixth sense, can visualize in the way the others have described. Also, this ability to be extremely insightful, see through appearances, to see the true, to have true sight, which also recalls Jacque Lusseyrand’s talk of, of recruiting resistance fighters, of blind people as resistance fighters and so on. There's this over hero-ization of the blind person as a blind person who has overcome their blindness-- doesn't really do much to combat blindness. Do you not think that actually, this is an opposite text to the world of Descaves?

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

You're absolutely right, to highlight the fact that in this novel by Ben Jelloun there is an exaggeration and you're absolutely right, in that respect, an exaggeration, which doesn't actually help his cause. And the person to whom I submitted this article said the same thing very implicitly. And that's perhaps what you, lead you to put this question to me implicitly. I don't actually like this exaggerated treatment of the blind person who is somebody who is very clear sighted, in fact, discerns, that Zahra blushes and so on. This exaggeration of positive prejudices, which is absolutely opposite of what Descaves says about blindness may actually not be helpful to the cause of rehabilitation of blind people because it reinforces ideas that some may term puerile, the blind, all, the all-seeing blind person. And a positivist could just see this as a catalogue of prejudices. And but, we could indeed come to that conclusion, reading this novel, and perhaps Tahar Ben Jelloun could we feel have toned things down a bit, but that said, his image of the blind person is nonetheless positive.

**Marion Chottin**

Thank you. Yes, I believe, perhaps, but I think that there are positive prejudices which have extremely harmful effects, equally harmful as negative prejudices. Of course, I am not the only person with that view.

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

Yes, which is why you are right to raise the point. As the proverb says, The best is the enemy of better; exaggeration may actually end up having a blowback effect, a rebound effect which is not good, and that is indeed a valid criticism of Ben Jelloun with this exaggeration, putting their character on a pedestal and as a result, perhaps, not done himself any favors. Especially with respect to this metaphysical considerations that have much to do with real life. And in real life, somebody may meet a non-sighted person and attribute to them the attributes that they have encountered in this fictional character but we will hope that perhaps they do not make such a leap.

**Corinne Doria**

Thank you. Thank you for this first set of questions and answers. I think it's Vanessa's turn now.

**Vanessa Warne** 1:00:05

Thank you, Corinne. And thank you also to our chair for this session. Um, my heart is beating very fast. I admit, I am having strong feelings. I will say that this is one of the last places on the earth, I expected to encounter equations between blindness and dependency or blindness and tragedy. But I feel that has happened in this session and I would like to speak against it. I hope perhaps something was lost in translation. But I think our translators are doing excellent work and so I think this may have to do instead with a kind of conventional medical model of disability coming into our conversation. And perhaps instead of feeling troubled by this, I should try to welcome it as an opportunity for me to kind of affirm my, my own learning over, over many decades of listening to reading and working with people in disability studies, including experts on blindness studies, that blindness gain is a lived reality, and it is a lived reality for both blind and non-blind people. And I would say, in the context of prisons, our crisis has to do with over-incarceration, often with the racism and classism that shapes over incarceration, and that the problem will be the industrial prison state, and not the experience of people who are within that state who happen to be blind. And so I just do not come with a question. I come with an effort to affirm my, my strong belief that equations between blindness and dependency, blindness and vulnerability, or blindness and tragedy, call for our critical reevaluation rather than our affirmation. And so I will, I will, I will hope for my heart rate to slow and I will listen and learn from others who have raised their hands. Thank you.

**Corinne Doria**1:02:47

Thank you, Vanessa. Thank you for this comment, rather than a question. I think we can therefore hand the floor to Susan, who did have her hand raised after Vanessa. Susan, please go ahead.

**Audience Member** 1:03:11

What I wanted to really, I wanted to sort of agree with Vanessa, but I also wanted to state that my heart was beating fast as well because I found myself getting really, really quite riled. But I wanted to ask really, you know this, this blinkered, I don't want to say attitude, but it is a blinkered statement. And I just hope that we can learn from it, and we can move on from it. And I found myself re-looking at Bolt and examining the ocularcentrism and ocular normativity of the whole thing. And I just thought, it's scary that there's still this persistent or pervasive attitude to blindness. As a blind person myself, I acknowledge that there are differences in blindness and the conditions, so forth. You can't get away from that. But to say that blindness is tragic, and blindness is I can't remember what Vanessa said now but we need to, we need to move on and we need to, we don’t need to listen to the medical model as I really feel that we need to err away from it as well. So that's all I really want you to say.

**Corinne Doria** 1:04:31

Thanks. Thank you, Susan, for your contribution. If I can hand over to Zina Weygand, I imagine that she would also comment on this issue, before handing back to our roundtable participants who may also like to say things. Zina, what would you like to share?

**Audience Member** 1:05:17

There were two things that I'd like to say some first about, about what Mr. Daniel Defoort said. I think that Mr. Defoort meets or comes across actual situations that are the opposite of what we're trying to move forward with. We're trying to think positively about blindness and blind people rather than seeing them as people who could regain sight. That's an idea about blindness in certain social conditions, in certain situations, and millions of blind people around the world, I think they are, they don't really see things the way that we see them. We're trying to define a theoretical field that should help thinking to progress and we hope it will help us to move forward the way we consider blind people in society, the way we make room for them. And the way in which we, we consider them to be people who have got something to bring to us, something to make a positive contribution. But I imagine what can be the situation of blind delinquents in prison, the situation of blind delinquents in prison. Just thinking about it gives me shivers in my spine, because it's obvious that they're going to be targeted by other inmates, that they must find themselves completely lost in a hostile environment when nothing is done to help them. And at that time, in those conditions, yes, that blindness is tragic. But what I'm trying to say is that you need to look at what we're looking at. We're not talking about the same thing here. We are an intellectual elite that are debating about an issue, an ideological issue, to try to make progress with thinking. And then there are people who are confronted with terrible realities in their lives. And yes, it comes from society, doesn't come from them. It's not their fault. But they're not given any opportunity to get out of that. So you can react to what I'm saying, to my reaction, no doubt. But yesterday, I can't remember whether it was yesterday or the day before, where we have Indian colleagues who spoke, and at a certain time one of them said, you know, in our country, accessibility, that's not something that anybody is interested in. And, yes, we have a life, our life isn't easy. And because society isn't interested in that, because society doesn't do anything to improve things, to change things to make happiness possible. There are millions of poor blind people who still live as beggars in some countries. So that is a reality. I don't know, Gildas, what you think about that, because you've studied blindness in historical situations, in particular.

**Gildas Brégain**

Yes, I agree with you about the fact that blindness in certain situations, in certain circumstances, can make, mean that lives are tragic, but even in lives that have tragic endings, because it's not the whole life. That is just certain points in life. For example, a blind delinquent: is their life tragic all the way through to their lives then?

**Audience Member**

No, I didn't say that either. I'd say that was the case within those circumstances to be incarcerated in prisons as they exist today. Here Vanessa is right. Prisons are absolutely scandalous for everybody. And to be in prison as a disabled person if they arrive, being in prison - in the hospital, my husband was blind, as you all know. And he had a leg amputated when he arrived in hospital, and he died. The later years of life, this happened again, he was completely dependent. And I had to fight for him to have access to the things that he needed to survive with dignity in hospital. There are conditions in which disability because he wasn't just blind, disability in these conditions, and at that time, it is dramatic. I didn't say that his whole life was a tragedy. I’m saying that his life inspired my work, because I saw him blind, and he was an incredibly creative person. And he had a lot of humor, and lots and lots of qualities that he taught me.

**Gildas Brégain**

But I would plead for complexity, even in dramatic situations, in prison. Daniel Defoort also mentioned that certain blind inmates are dependent on other on, on other inmates, so there are social relationships, there are aspirations or disappointments, sadness, but for me, what's really at stake here is to show the diversity of possible feelings, and possible life experience. That's it, there's not a determinism, that's there, to say that, that's a tragedy forever. I think that even in a lot of southern countries, the life experience of blind people are very, very diverse. And there are people who can spend their lives as beggars. They can also go out in the evenings to have a drink in a bar, they can have friends. I've studied cases in Argentinian literature, where a blind beggar so were demonstrating in a political demonstration in order to be able to continue begging. Every time there is that leeway for people, blind people to take action, and to hope for something better, to have desires, to have social ties. And I think that reality is often very complex, and it isn't reduced to one particular characteristic for your entire life.

**Audience Member**

Yes, of course, life is complex. Gildas, life is complex for everybody. And as we move forward, we realize it's increasingly complex. But what I want to say here is that we shouldn't, just as we shouldn’t say that it's always tragic for everybody and for always, et cetera, et cetera. That's not what I was trying to say. But I also believe that we shouldn't be in to thinking that's too ideological and theoretical to ignore the reality or this facet of reality. That's what trying to say

**Gildas Brégain**

Yes, I agree with you.

**Audience Member**

That's what I wanted to say. In addition, with respect to what Mr. Mahmoud said, I was able to work on Rabah Belamri. I don't know whether you've studied Rabah Belamri’s work, which I think it's at least just as interesting as, I'm sorry. I'm forgetting the names of people, of the writer that you were talking about. Tahar Jelloun. I don't know whether you know what I'm talking about here.

**Nidhal Mahmoud** 1:14:13

Yes, you're talking [unclear audio]

**Audience Member**

No, no, I'm not. No, no, that's not who I’m talking about. No. I'm not talking about medieval literature. I'm talking about a contemporary writer who unfortunately, is now died at a young age. The contemporary of Tahar Jelloun, he was an Algerian. I'm sorry, I can't pronounce this properly; he’s called Rabah Belamri and this is someone who wrote he was blind. And he wrote his work in French. And this work was written after the War of Independence, the Algerian War of Independence. And this is interesting work. And that's what I wanted to say.

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

It's an autobiography?

**Audience Member**

No, it's not just autobiographical; he is a novelist, he wrote short stories too. And this made known his culture by telling stories, in schools, in cultural venues. And so it's like Taha Hussein he writes in a different register, more anthropological, and with translation, and telling popular stories. And in particular, there's one work, which is partially autobiographical, which is called *Regard blessé* which is interesting to read, when you're working on blindness, in the, in arab literature, even though it's written in French but Tahar Ben Jelloun as well, and Taha Hussein, his memories are amazing. As you know, he wrote his thesis. He wrote two theses, one in France, and before that, in Egypt, on [Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ma%27arri).

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

And these works have been published, and his autobiography is called the *Book of Days.* And this was prefaced by André Gide.

**Audience Member**

And there's another book been translated into French with a title, that didn't reflect the Arabic title. It's very interesting, which is *The Inner Crossing*. That's the last part of his work. It's very interesting.

**Nidhal Mahmoud**

Yes. So his wife, Suzanne published a book, which talks about his life, I can't remember the title now.

**Audience Member**

Yes, I published this in French. Suzanne Taha Hussein wrote her book in French. It was several times, she worked on it again, several times, she rewrote it. And then she really wanted it to be translated into Arabic so that her husband's admirers could read it. And so it was written, it was translated very quickly to Arabic. It was written around the time of the death of her husband, and it was in 1979, and published in Egypt in Arabic. But it was never published in French. And I find out that this book existed by reading books about Taha Hussein, and so I went to find it, and I found it. And I asked her to work with me to have a critical edition in French, because she did it in French, but it had never been published in French. And so it is published in French, in 2011, with notes, a lot of footnotes, and an end commentary to resituate her work in the historical contrast sociological context of the time when it was written. So it's called *With You from France to Egypt*: *an extraordinary love* *Suzanne et Taha Hussein. 1915 to 1972*, they met in 1915, and he died in 1973. So there you are; Taha Hussein was an amazing person. And what's interesting, for example, in Taha Hussein’s life is that in Egypt, he didn’t learn braille, because braille wasn't yet printed in Arabic. And so he was advised to learn braille when he came to do his PhD in France. And so he learned that but because he'd always worked orally, with his memory, he didn't really like it. And so he came back to the oral tradition, and that's how he met his wife. So I think there's a conception of dependence and independence that varies depending on the culture that we live in. I think that, independence at all costs, we can do everything alone; there are cultures where no, that's not the case, where having a guide, having a reader is part of standard existence. And Taha Hussein was the greatest intellectual, arab-speaking intellectual in the 20th century, but from a certain point of view illiterate because there's ocularcentrism but there's also ethnocentrism. Yes, exactly. So there we are.

**Corinne Doria**

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for all of these comments. I now be to announce the end of this round table because it's, in CT, it’s10pm. And tomorrow, we have another day, which will be full of presentations and discussions. I'd like to thank Gildas for having chaired this session. And a big thank you to three speakers, Daniel Defoort, Nidhal Mahmoud,and **Aggée Lomo**, who wasn't able to stay with us until the end. And also thank you to the audience, for the discussions. Thank you to everybody. And have a good night or the rest of your day, depending on where you are, which time band you're in. And it will be our pleasure to see you again tomorrow. Thank you. Good night.