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

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## Roundtable #7

**Teaching and Learning: Pedagogies of Blindness Part 1**

**Chair: Suzanne Commend**

**Moderator: Dannyelle Valente**

**Speakers: Bruno Liesen(Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium)**

**Maria Romeiras Amado(Institute for Contemporary History, Universidade Nova de Lisbon, Portugal)**

**Noëlle Roy(Conservatrice honoraire du musée et de la bibliothèque patrimoniale Valentin Haüy, France)**

**Pieter Verstraete (KU Leuven, Belgium)**

**Dannyelle Valente** 00:03

Hello, everybody. I’m **Dannyelle Valente**. I’m the moderator for this session. Thank you very much for the invitation to be here for this session. And I'm Brazilian background, white skinned, dark curly hair, and I'm wearing a blue top today. So my background is Brazilian but I've been living in France for 17 years and I'm in the Rhone-Alpes region in Annecy. There’s a cupboard with books on it behind us and part of my work behind me, as you can see. So, this session is entitled Blindness and Tactile Training for Therapy; it'll be chaired by Suzanne Commend. And hi Suzanne, and the session will have a number of speakers. So **Bruno Liesen** from Brussels Free university in Belgium, who's also here; **Noëlle Roy**from the **Valentin** Heritage Library in Paris, France. And there's also **Maria Romeiras** from the Lisbon University in Portugal, and from the University, Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, **Pieter Verstraete**. So, I'm going to hand over to Suzanne who can share this roundtable debate; so, Suzanne Commend?

**Suzanne Commend** 02:18

So, I'm Canadian, white, Québécois, short hair, blue eyes, and a big jersey and I'm chairing this session. And it's for me an honour, an honour for me to do so. This brings together four speakers. We're going to be hearing first from **Bruno Liesen**; he’s an author, scientific editor, an author and professor who works in the history of blindness and also the history of books and writing, working for the Braille Institute, or has worked for the Braille Institute for over 20 years and also secretary for a review. He has worked with the institute both as a researcher and as a counselor, advising on communication; he’s going to be talking to us today about reading with fingers over the centuries and so I'm going to be handing the floor to him right away. Thank you very much.

**Bruno Liesen**

And good morning or good afternoon, wherever you are. So I’m **Bruno Liesen** and I'm a sighted, white man, Belgian and I'm 59, dark graying hair, short hair, gray beard, quite a full beard; I have clear glasses and also I have hearing aids because I am hearing impaired. I am working out of my home in Brussels; I have a bookshelf, just as there is just about everywhere in my apartment, apart from in the bathroom. And so I am a historian with qualification from **Leuven** University in Belgium in 1987 and I am from a family of book binders. And so I was particularly attracted by the history of books and libraries. And my dissertation has been published on this; the history of popular libraries in Belgium was the subject. And then I abandoned the idea of a career in research and spent some time in my family business for 10 years. And then in the late 1990s, I resumed studies in Brussels Free University, where I was able to become a scientific researcher. And so my aim... so, I basically will just come back to my first love with history research, historical research, and that was in 1999 when the Braille League recruited me as part of a part- time contract. I'm also an employee in a bookshop, which is specializing in antique books. And so this is... I've basically jumped at every opportunity that fortune has sent me. The Braille League is one of the leading Belgian Associations dedicated to the cause of blind and partially sighted people, founded in 1920 by two blind women. Initially, I was hired for the publication of an Encyclopedia of Blindness published in German originally by Alexandra Mell in 1999, and another Encyclopedia of the same type published by Heinrich Scholler in 1990. So, that's a century later, the first one was in 1890. So, this is a huge project, which unfortunately, has not, sort of did not initially see the light of day because Servaes, the managing editor was appointed to another position within the Braille League. And so, I had to take over the position as editor of the *Voir et Parler* (*Seeing and Speaking*) review. This publication was originally published by a research center interested in the cultural aspects of vision, set up in 1990 by the Braille League with the aim of promoting dialogue between researchers from different disciplines in, on various aspects of vision, sight, and that was the issue of exclusion factors for partially sighted, insufficient knowledge of blindness and visual deficiency in general with human experience from various fields, including in the medical field, as well as social activist positions, so, quite broad spectrum. So, that is how I got to know Zina Weygand, who was an eminent member of the editorial committee and also one of the three initiators of the center. Raoul Dutry, a philosopher by training, a member of the board of the Braille League, a sighted individual whose wife is visually impaired; Jean Paul Herbecq, who at that time was president of the Association for those blind from an early age and was one of the, was the first the first blind person in Belgium to achieve a doctorate in law and had a career as a civil servant in a public body. And the third person is his wife, Francoise Herbecq, born Hardy, who was a historian by background. So right from its creation, this research center established a documentary search center for researchers, students in particular, and then published a twice-yearly review, multidisciplinary review, looking for cross-cutting approach to sightedness and blindness with issues devoted to a particular topic. In addition to being Secretary of this Review, I also write in-depth articles, reviews of publications, and historical columns. My own research concerns two areas in particular, firstly, representations of blindness, in particular, in biographies of blind individuals, historical figures of blindness, as they're sometimes referred to. These figures, obviously, are the product of a certain historical fiction. And these biographical notices formed part of the initial project to write and compile an encyclopedia. The other avenue is the access to the blind to written culture. As a historian of books and libraries, I was, of course, interested in this topic, all the more so in that originally, the plan was to establish braille libraries, which we took the name of Braille to, as part of the name of the association. And I was also drawn by to the subject because Zina Weygand had just published her foundational thesis on the history of the blind in France, which was a real epiphany for me and others, which left a lot of room, gave a lot of room over to tactile writings and reading. I've also been involved in many other projects. In summary, my contribution in the history of writing for the blind over the last—it covers 2000 years—there are many fields of research, of course, encompassing that and I've also drawn on research by Zina Weygand. So I'm somewhat of the dwarf on the shoulders of a giant in that respect. I've also picked up the 2011 text ‘Repères culturelles de la cécité’ in the most recent edition of our article, sorry publication, we had an article by her with a slightly simplified form of the original insight of the project so that really closed the loop on the whole story. And to conclude, I could emphasize that my contributions have not stopped with the halting of the publication of the review in 2011 although I felt somewhat orphaned by that. I then had an invitation to join the communications department, even though I was a researcher. And there was also the launch of a Blindness Research Network, which gave me a second lease of life in some ways because that way I could stay connected with this research movement and over time it has opened up various historical projects which have been accepted by the Braille League. And to conclude my most recent work was a brochure covering the history of the Braille League to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its foundation in 1920; so obviously, it was in 2020. And this anniversary year was, of course, somewhat disrupted. But nevertheless, that was perhaps my most recent contribution to the history of blind people because shortly afterwards, I was invited to fulfill a full-time position in antique books, which-- so I left my job at the Braille League, but I'm still working on a volunteer basis for the Communication Department. So although we don't have any particular projects for me, in terms of Blindness Studies, I am still very interested and I think perhaps there may be other opportunities for me to get back into the business of research in this respect. Thank you for your time.

**Suzanne Commend** 16:54

So I’m going to hand over to the other speakers. [unclear audio] Bibliothèque patrimoniale **Valentin Haüy... Noëlle Roy a été conservatrice… has been curator for the museum for several years, with the library in particular. [unclear audio] of the bicentenary in 2009 of the birth of Louise Braille and I am going** to hand over to her so that she can explain her work, and her talk is entitled ‘Sharing Codes and What the Museum Can Teach Us’; over to you, Mrs. Roy.

**Noëlle Roy** 17:50

So if everybody can hear me, I'm going to begin. I'm **Noëlle Roy**, I'm a French white woman, I'm speaking from Paris, I'm 70, I have gray hair, glasses. And I'm an old woman in a world that I believe is made for young people, young, healthy people. I've been retired for five years now. And I was curator employed by the Museum and Heritage Library. And we’ve already mentioned the importance of this place where a lot of researchers come to work and I'm pleased to find them here on my screen. And I would also like to thank Céline and Marion Chottin for the project to digitalize the library archives as Zina talked about her ambition for this project to include ... to have a unique place for resources on disability. So I've researched on the history of education for blind people, and how they learned written language with braille being the culminating point of that, and **Valentin Haüy** worked on this, to found a school, the first school, I believe, in Paris, a free school for blind peoples of both genders and from all backgrounds, ended up being the Institute of Blind People in Paris, and he conceptualized tactile writing, which has been named after Louis Braille, its inventor. And he talked about poor blind people who can write and so they could possibly control their own destiny. And this led to the emergence at the end of the 19th century of the elite fighting for the autonomy of blind people and recognition of their specific needs. And so this explains so in 19… 1899 of the **Valentin Haüy** Association. I've often led people around the musuem and seen that this history is poorly known by the general public and there's lots of haze there; it’s very foggy. And so that enhances the victimization of people in people's mindsets. **Valentin Haüy** was made a hero with, well, who's forgotten he's played a key role in this history. But it's the work of Charles Barbier on the urgency of facilitating writing for the most vulnerable populations, which led to the coding of braille in relief. And the work of Canadian researchers has been very revealing in this respect. So there was an opposition with the poor child Louis Braille who was blind, makes a separation between populations with severe consequences in terms of marginalization, not only for the history of blind people but also for the people themselves by preventing them, them from believing they belonged to humanity. The innovation, such as braille, uses several skills, transforming into an individual adventure; it takes people out of victimhood; braille didn’t fall down from heaven in a form of braille by chance; it's the combination of work done for many centuries to allow people who can't read and write because of their blindness to have access to education and culture and writing. **Bruno Liesen** won't contradict me on that; the history of Braille, the conception of Braille is exemplary. Before him, blind people were supposed to read and write out ordinary writing by increasing the size of the letters, guaranteeing reciprocity for, with sighted people whereas braille breaks away from visual writing, but respects all of its properties. It puts forward a sharing of codes using different methods to get the same [unclear audio]. These codes that [unclear audio; no English translation].

**Suzanne Commend** 23:03

[unclear audio; no English translation] the benefits of research into the history of handicap and a lot of projects and publications, which are currently underway. And I'm going to hand over to her straight away.

**Maria Romeiras Amado** 24:24

Hello, thank you for welcoming me. I am **Maria Romeiras Amado** from the University of Lisbon. I am a non-blind, white, mid to mid-50s cis-woman. I speak to you from my house office in Oeiras on the outskirts of Lisbon. I have brown and gray hair and green eyes. I wear light brown glasses, a green t-shirt, and a brown, brown bead necklace. I'm currently, I'm currently exploring three projects on disability history or as I like to say, the rich history of human diversity. The first one is a study of the importance of the architectural plan of the first school for blind pupils in Lisbon in 1888- on the control of the bodies. I'm working also with interviews in the richness of blindness culture of the surviving students and teachers of this school; there’s amazing data. The second project is the analysis of the social magazines’ photographs of Portuguese blind musicians in the 19th century, either street musicians, or institutionalized. I am looking forward to better understanding the stereotypes that you can perceive, to the social ways on the blind musician, both men and women. And there are differences both in gender stereotypes and on the social stereotypes on those images. And I am working as well in a class on the creation of an accessible database of pedagogic correspondence between several schools for blind pupils, namely, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro, and Montreal. This is a more a methodological project, aiming to be an accessible and open data resource as a result of my researches. I'm glad to hear that more projects like this one are being built. Therefore, with this last project, I'm creating databanks of school correspondence, to share with fellow disability historians, and disability studies networks through my university’s digital platforms. For this project, I structured the different sources and identified their geographic, geographical provenance, creating as such a cartographic record of pedagogical issues. In addition to communication between institutions, including records related to students, relocation will be documented and explored. Comparative history and geo-reference systems are my tools for this particular purpose. Finally, I wish to add that disability history for me is not just a new and powerful tool of social analysis. It's also a way of deconstructing stereotypes that fuel ableism. My work as a disability historian aims to empower digital accessibility and to enable the academic community to better understand and respect diversity. Thank you.

**Suzanne Commend** 27:49

Thank you very much. So, we're going to continue now with Pieter Verstraete. I hope I'm pronouncing his name correctly. So you are Associate Professor of the History of Applied Education at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, and President of the Belgian and Dutch Society for the Leuven Films on Disability, and you've done research on disabled people and the role, the role played by blood and silence in that. And so our lecture is about blind veterans in the First World War. I haven't translated the exact title, which I'll allow you to explain more of that to us, please.

**Pieter Verstraete** 29:06

You can hear me, but I cannot hear you. But anyway, for the time being, that is the most important, so give us a sign if the sound would fade away again. So indeed, my name is Pieter Verstraeteand the name was perfectly pronounciated by you so- Thank you very much for that. I'm indeed affiliated to the KU Leuven, that is a university located in Leuven, next to Brussels. I am a white male, wearing glasses, a t-shirt with black and white stripes. And I'm sitting in a room with a lot of white boxes and the reason for that is that I cannot actually enter my normal desk or office anymore due to the fact that my youngest boy is ill, and he is currently having a nap over there. So anyway, that being said, I am indeed a disability historian or an historian of education having a great interest in disability history. And indeed, my PhD was about the history of education for persons with mental disabilities in between 1800 and 1870. And what I did in my PhD is that I kind of constructed a critique against the American, dominant approach towards disability history. And I will come to that in a minute. My main focus at that time was Western Europe. And I demonstrated the role played by emotions, and the cultural history of those emotions in the history of special education. And the two emotions I've focused on, were solitude, on the one hand, and happiness, on the other hand. So what I did in my PhD was demonstrating that cultural transformations in the meaning dedicated to those emotions, kind of triggered also the interest in the education for persons who could not see, who could not hear, or who could not reason as ‘normal’ people do, and I put it normal in between brackets. And since then, I have focused on different disability history related projects. And you are right Suzanne to point out one of those projects, namely, the history of re-education, or rehabilitation of Belgian mutilated soldiers. And I was focusing on the physically disabled soldiers and a special group amongst those soldiers were, of course, the blinded soldiers, and here at least, for what concerns the Belgian case, a special Institute was being founded for those soldiers. At first, they were treated and re-educated in other institutions located in France and Great Britain. And from 1919 onwards, they were brought to Belgium, and they were re-educated in a special founded institute for them, which was protected by a Belgian King at a time, King Albert. What I wanted to do with my research is not only uncovering the unknown history of the rehabilitation of Belgian mutilated soldiers, but I also wanted to point out that, according to me, we do also have to be aware of the fact that not only enlightened values, like for instance, autonomy, self-sufficiency, being able to speak up for oneself, are important values for historians of disability, but that historians of disability also have to look out for stories of - histories of - disability that demonstrate that also fragility can be a very important value for humankind and human beings. And so, when, on the one hand, my history is always trying to uncover a particular fragment of the history of disability that up till now has not been explored yet. On the other hand, I want to demonstrate that values like fragility, being dependent, perhaps also can be a value for not only disability historians but for humankind in general. And when we want to move up towards the 21st century, it might be interesting to focus more on those issues, as according to me, they are of great interest for rethinking the way we can, in contemporary times, conceptualize big concepts like emancipation, big concepts like inclusion. And I think that's, connected to that is indeed the work that I'm carrying out in the context of the Leuven Disability Film Festival, which I organize on an annual basis in the month of March or the month of May. And this is a week where we project every evening a film, a movie, where persons with disabilities play an important role, and on the basis of that screening, we want to trigger, we want to steer discussions about contemporary dominant representations of persons with disabilities. And maybe, just to end, I would like to mention one of the historical movies that we projected, not this year, but last year, and that was the Belgian colonial film *Katutu* which is a film made by white fathers who were active in the Belgian Congo. And this film portrays a blind Congolese person. And what we did is that we provided this historical film with audio description. And we constructed a participatory process in order to come up with that audio description, and to trigger the discussion not only about the representation of persons with visual disabilities, but the intersectional elements that are connected to it. So here, we had a Congolese blind person, and for us, and the organizers of the film festival, the intersection of those different differences, were important to, to take up and to consider as the basis of our discussion, I'm looking at the clock and I'm afraid that’s my five minutes are up so I'm looking forward to the discussion. So thank you very much.

**Suzanne Commend** 36:38

I think you can continue with a few words about the content. I think we have a bit of time to continue talking about the main features of your research and what you want to deal with, with the war blind and the adaptation, and rehabilitation. I'll give you a few more minutes to talk about that if you'd like to because we've got, we've got time to do that.

**Pieter Verstraete** 37:09

As you wish. Yeah. If you want me to say something about the rehabilitation of Belgian mutilated soldiers, I think that, indeed, what I tried to explain in my article dedicated to that particular moment in time is the fact that, on the one hand, if you look indeed, at the theories, and the descriptions of the rehabilitative practices, that indeed, enlightened values, like autonomy, being self-sufficient, being able to help out one's family, that those values, enlightened values, that they were very important in order to steer the direction of the rehabilitation. But when you look at the reality, then you immediately are confronted with particular stories, where the mutilated soldiers could not live up to the expectations of autonomy; they could not live up to the expectations of becoming self-sufficient, and again, 100% economically fit again. And for me, that particular friction, that particular tension, was very interesting. And what I wanted to do by highlighting the case studies of the mutilated soldiers who could not live up to those expectations, is opening up the space for us to rethink the value of fragility, not being able to be independent. And I think more and more, especially in the 21st century that we have entered, that is the important task, which lies ahead of us. Of course, and I totally agree with people that would counter my argument by stating that well, did we not need the important emphasis on autonomy during the 70s and the 80s, in order to trigger the emancipatory processes of persons with disabilities? I absolutely do agree. We would not have come to this point if that would not have happened. But I think that now, we need to move further. We need to take another step. And according to me, the concept of fragility can be of great help. And maybe just to add one last thing, and that is my first personal, my personal story related to the rehabilitation of persons with, with military, visual disabilities, so mutilated soldiers, and that is that they were one of the major actors in the prohibition of blinding finches in Flanders. So for a very long time, there was this kind of sport that was being practiced. Now we call it finch sport. And apparently, in the 19th century, the finches, the birds that were used for that particular sport, they were blinded by a glowing, very hot needle that was approached to the eyelids. And as a reaction, the birds would close its eyes, and then the eyelids would be burned to one another. At the start of the 20th century, it was mutilated, blinded soldiers that came to protest against this, what they called cruel act that did not fit any more within the civilized world that the globe became after the First World War. And they referred also to their own fate in order to say, well, this is not something that we can accept anymore. We have to prohibit these kinds of cruel practices. So this is one of the stories that I also wrote about, in my research dedicated to the blinded, mutilated soldiers of the Belgian army. I'm not sure Suzanne, and all the other ones, if you want to hear more, please say so and I'm happy to speak.

**Suzanne Commend** 41:38

Thank you. Only maybe in the questions, we can come back to some other aspects. But I would just like to summarize what we've just heard. This will enable us to promote the fact that or at least revisit what we've heard in this roundtable, which allows us to examine how research challenges presuppositions as to how writing systems for the blind actually emerged. As Noëlle Roy was telling us, we can perhaps temper the image of Louis Braille by also highlighting the work of Charles Barbier, seeing how research into the creation of writing systems did not emerge spontaneously, but was a whole historical journey, which allowed this creation of collective, reinterpretation research. Maria Amado also allows us to see how discussion that works between schools and institutions for the blind are important, between these special schools is really vital in a range of ways. And the work you've done in that respect to identify them and to re-examine historical sources, obviously, is a rich field of inquiry for historians and researchers who will express an interest in these possibilities and research also helps us to qualify some of these preconceptions. We have this image of veterans from the First World War, blinded, presented as heroes who quickly acquire social independence, and with this talk of autonomy, but you've qualified that image of the fully rehabilitated veteran by emphasizing fragility, vulnerability, which brings a counterpoint to these images. And it is the role of historians to add this depth to our view; so thank you for this. I don't know whether before we come to questions whether any of our panelists would like to comment or question, ask questions about your colleagues’ contributions to this roundtable discussion. So Mr. Liesen would like to intervene.

**Bruno Liesen**

I hope you can hear me. I wanted to acknowledge, in particular, Noëlle's work in the field of the history of braille; your courage and willingness to demystify this story or history which has sometimes really caricatured the origins and development of the braille writing system. I wanted to thank you for the emphasis on Charles Barbier’s work, which also can contextualize, with Valentin Haüy as well and Louis Braille, but to do that you have to demystify some legends, which is part of what historical researchers do, in challenging our historical stereotypes and have a clearer picture of this somewhat heroic past, which we need to demystify in order to rediscover reality. So I'd like to honor this work. The work done as well to highlight the objects which form part of blind individuals’ memory, and particular, the means of producing braille, with many braille typewriters, braille shorthand, and so forth. And in particular, Mme Mireille Duhen who has worked extensively in this field, enabling us to understand the purpose of these items, and how they operated. And it's important to compose living archives that are not simply textual, and/or hardware libraries of these reading and writing instruments.

**Suzanne Commend**

Thank you. No**ë**lle Roy, would like to come back to that?

**Noëlle Roy**

Yes, with each machine and object, there are people behind them. And we don't necessarily know exactly how they worked to improve writing systems and enable the blind to write. Legend is also part of history, I should say, I would say as well. Some legends are rather more attractive than reality. As we see in some movies, Westerns, perhaps in particular, but sometimes reality is better than legend. Louis Braille was undoubtedly a fascinating individual but he had a lot of help. He did not win out single handedly; we should not engage in hagiography because that leads us to lose sight of historical reality, which also informs the present and if everybody thinks that Louis Braille was a hero and braille was created ex nihilo this would not be very helpful. And this, when it comes to writing the history of the disabled, this is an important aspects of mystification, obfuscation even, and we need to combat that. It's something of an irritation for historians to see that these same ideas come up. So for example, that Quinze-Vingts was founded for 300 knights that were blinded by the Saracens. This is not at all the case and stories like this are, it seems, impossible to get rid of. This is part of the work of historians- is to seek to understand why these legends emerge. Louis Braille is an embodiment of the cause of the blind; they had struggled to gain a voice but he nevertheless- he had help with that which he would not have been able to devise his system. We are, we function as a society and he was exactly the same. So, that was what I would like to add to this discussion.

**Suzanne Commend**

Thank you if we... did you come across any women in working on these inventions?

**Noëlle Roy**

Well, no basically. Theresia von Paradis, of course, is mentioned but this, there is no other particular woman whose name unfortunately emerges right in the midst of all this.

**Suzanne Commend**

**Bruno Liesen?**

**Bruno Liesen**

Yes, in terms of tactile writing, I have not noticed any women. However, when it comes to the history of charities, associations, women had, did play a major role. In particular, in the early days, the Braille League was founded by two blind women who set up this Association. Previously there had been sighted men who founded specialist institutions for education or associations outside Belgium to create employment opportunities for the visually impaired. Also, in the field of charities you have benefactory societies-- 19th, late 19th, early 20th centuries, women played a major role in these benefactor type settings. But there again, unfortunately, history is not linear. It's two steps forward, one step back. The Braille League, after World War Two, saw men taking over the League through to this day. For a year now, a woman has, however, become chief executive officer of the Braille League. So, if you like, justice is finally emerging.

**Suzanne Commend** 53:08

Thank you. A question before we go to the floor: so, if you could tell us something about your methodology, how you talked about mapping and how ideas circulate between institutions, if you could tell us more about that, Maria Romeiras?

**Maria Romeiras Amado** 53:37

So, we are at the beginning of the project. We are trying to establish a structure in which to classify all the correspondence and other documents and to structure them geographically in order to, to have the point of view, of the material, persons, the ideas that flew from one country to the other. So, through the correspondence of the schools, we will gather in a cartographical way, all that flows from one side to the other. And this is going to be gathered in a specific structure that will allow us to, to work, as you know, in a 3D database. I mean a general reference system. Our big problem now, our main issue at this moment, is that most systems, most, most cartographic systems are not accessible. So this is a very important issue, a very big issue to us. So we are trying, we have tried with, with one at first, Bellagio, and it isn't accessible at all. So we are trying to program one ourselves, which is the, I think, it is the only way to do it in order to get the good results, in order that anyone can consult the system and obtain the answers and obtain also the description of images of maps. Because this is very important, and also the description of the images of the objects that flew from one school to the other. So all of that has to be thought out and it is really a big work that is going on in our digital laboratory at the moment. And I'll be glad to hear all the opinions that you have about this. Because it's, it's has been a real headache to turn this into an accessible system. But we will try to do our best to put this out in, I mean, two years. In two years, we would like to have this online.

**Suzanne Commend** 56:47

Thank you; fascinating. We would love to do more research into that and to learn the findings. Before handing to our moderator, **Dannyelle Valente,** if some of you would like to tell us about your research in critical disability and blindness studies, and then when you've done that, we'll go over to the floor. Who would like to contribute. Ms Roy, yes?

**Noëlle Roy**

Clearly, in the historical critical field, I have a critical approach to a certain version, a credo, attempting to identify the components of legend, so I'm repeating myself somewhat but that is what I can add.

**Suzanne Commend**

**Bruno Liesen?**

**Bruno Liesen**

As you would have understood, I, I'm in a similar position to **Noëlle;** after Zina’s research, what I wanted to add, which is an aspect of my work, which I felt was important in the Braille League, in terms of reception to sight, is communication of history. It's no accident that I've gone to the communications department because it is important for us as blindness researchers to pass on the findings of our research, not only to other specialists, and researchers, as we are doing here, but also to the general public, on as broad a basis as possible through nonprofits, which have a big role in awareness raising, and also in publications. For my part, I present my work in a historical review that covers the history of education and also *Leuven Review*, which is published in two languages, and then also the general interest - this is a general interest publication for all those who have connections with the University of Leuven. And also for a Parisian publication, which is a review published by a historians’ association, former pupils of the Henry the Fourth Lycée. Showing the fruits of this research helps the public to raise, to have their aw awareness raised about disability issues, and also enables institutions and nonprofits with responsibilities in the field of disability to have a theoretical and intellectual footing on which they can establish actions with a significant impact in social terms, with a view to a more inclusive society.

**Suzanne Commend** 1:00:54

Thank you, very much. Pieter Verstraete, did you want to say something?

**Pieter Verstraete** 1:01:07

About the methodological approach, I found it's marvelous, and very, very interesting. I think it's an important work that is being carried out. And what I just wanted to point out is that a couple of years ago, I did some volunteering work in an importance Institute here in Flanders, and it's one of the oldest institutes for children and adults with visual disabilities. It's the Institute located in the town where I grew up, Bruges, so is the town located next to the seaside; it’s a wonderful touristic town, of course, but also it has a very important historical institute for persons with visual disabilities. And what I wanted to say to you Maria Romerias is that the archives of that institute contain a marvelous collection of international communication between the founder of that institute and the priest Charles Louis Carton, and most of the leading directors of institutes for the blind at that time. So there was a huge collection of letters, exchanges between Charles Louis Carton, and the director of the Paris, the London, the Berlin, and many of the other existing institutes at that time. I have a collection of the... or I have a description of everything that is contained in the archive. And so if you're interested, please send me an email. And I can deliver you a bit more work if you want, for the project. But maybe you do not want to receive more work, of course, that is also possible. And then, to come back to your question, Suzanne, I think I also made clear in my intervention, what's my personal stance is with regard to the critical approach in critical blindness studies. But I'm happy to discuss that with the participants in what remains of this, this section. Thank you.

**Suzanne Commend** 1:03:33

Merci beaucoup. [no English translation]

**Dannyelle Valente** 1:03:47

Thank you. Can you hear me? Yes, I'm going to open up questions to the floor; you can either raise your hand virtually with the reaction button, or you can actually raise your hand. I'm going to take questions by the order in which the hands were raised. I'm going to hand over first of all to Michelle Botha. Can you hear me, Michelle?

**Audience Member** 1:04:22

Thanks. Can you hear me? Great. I hope you can hear me I feel like I might have a connection issue. So give me a shout if I'm not audible.

**Pieter Verstraete** 1:04:39

We can hear you perfectly well.

**Audience Member** 1:04:43

Yes, so it's Michelle Botha, speaking from Cape Town, South Africa. And I'm just interested in this idea of tension that Pieter raised. My own work focuses on visual impairment rehabilitation services in South Africa and the tension between these spaces that can feel very empowering, but at the same time can feel very limiting and controlling and normalizing for people. And I was wondering if the panelists could speak to, to how and whether that tension is seen in the institutions, the educational and rehabilitation institutions that they, that they're exploring, that tension between these empowering spaces of learning and perhaps spaces that might feel limiting and perhaps paternalistic, or normalizing. Thanks.

**Dannyelle Valente** 1:05:46

Would anyone like to answer or comment on the question? Pieter maybe?

**Pieter Verstraete** 1:06:01

[unclear audio] educational practice, namely, inclusive education. And I think that's from different perspectives that can and also should be considered as an enormous step forwards for children with disabilities, so by including persons with disabilities in the regular schooling system, we do something else than by segregating them in different institutions and providing them with the education they need in those institutions. However, at the same time, research, contemporary research, demonstrates that these inclusive approaches sometimes also have negative side effects, that there is a shadow side connected to those educational practices. And maybe just to point to two possible side effects. So if you look at the idea of Deaf culture, or if it exists at all of blind culture, then what we see and what that is, is that Deaf culture, but maybe also blind culture, that is, that it is becoming endangered by the fact that blind and deaf children are being included in the regular schooling system. So that would be a first tension that I would like to point out and a second tension, and now I'm basing myself more on literature that dealt with persons with mental disabilities, that is that the inclusive tendency, it also leads to a situation where persons with mental disabilities are included in society in general, in the regular schooling system, but that they feel too solitary. And so they kind of long back to what was provided for them on an educational level in the institutes. So, yeah, it's very difficult to give a particular good answer on what the best approach is. But what I wanted to point out is that the tension you refer to can definitely be found in the practice of inclusive education. But maybe Bertrand, you want to pick up on that, Bertrand Verine?

**Dannyelle Valente** 1:08:42

Yes, Bertrand was raising his hand; I don't know whether you want him to answer straight away, or whether I'm going to follow the order in which people raise their hands. Bertrand, if you'd like to react to that?

**Audience Member**

Just a couple of words. I wanted to say a couple of things, but they're a little complimentary. First of all, I'd like to thank all the participants, which are in particular, Noëlle Roy, for her work as an archivist, but also on this dispute, with all the arguments, as to the binary nature of between hero and victim. I don't know whether it's something interesting for her. But I think that a lot of us can say that as blind people, we're constantly fighting against this binary reaction to be treated sometimes as heroes and at other times as victims, which is extremely tiring, particularly when we begin to get a little older. Then to move on, I would like to respond to all the speakers. And I'd like to react to what Mr. Verstraete said about the contradictions in the ideology of inclusivity and the dogma of inclusion, taken only as a slogan, that is waved about, about without really giving ourselves the means to really put it into practice. And I think it's really important. Based on geographical experiences, speakers have talked to us, given us their points of view on the current issue of braille, which is experiencing difficulties with respect to inclusion, which is poorly practiced, which often results in blind children, not having access, actual access, or constant access, thorough access, to braille writing. Thank you.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Thank you, would any of the speakers like to react to what Bertrand has just shared? Noëlle?

**Noëlle Roy**

I don't really have the competency as to present day teaching of braille and teaching blind children. What is sure is that writing practices have changed. And now people write text messages very briefly, and very superficially influenced by their emotions, whether it be for sighted children or blind children. I think that it's a common problem in education. And, as to blind children, it is true that historically the institutions and teachers, braille teachers, because braille was a conquest, and they wanted really to teach it. And they themselves were blind and so maybe it was easier for them to do that. I'm not saying that a sighted person can't teach braille. But I've heard lots of different things. I've heard people who regretted that this was no longer taught by blind people. And I've also seen in the museum, young blind children, who were very proficient in braille, and who'd learned from sighted people. So they're all different cases. I don't know what to even say about that. Because I think fundamentally, that writing practices have changed. And the preeminence of visual communication, oral communication, which means that writing as I experienced it and practiced it, I think that maybe just still exists but it is no longer what it used to be. And, and maybe some people don't agree with me. And I’ll listen to anybody who would like to contradict me.

**Dannyelle Valente**

I can't hear. So now I'm going to hand over to Pieter.

**Pieter Verstraete** 1:14:09

[unclear audio] to answer very concretely, the question posed by Bertrand Verine, but I totally agree with my colleague, **Noëlle Roy,** that indeed, writing practices are changing very fastly and according to me also dramatically, but I am what they call a romantic person so I love writing by hand. But if I look also to the regular schooling system, then I ask myself the question, how long will we still learn, children who can see, writing on your hands because they often do not practice that anymore in secondary education, or if I look to the level that I am teaching in higher education, almost no students are taking notes anymore by hands, they use the computer. And so probably what will happen in the upcoming decades is that we will not anymore learn children to write by hand, but perhaps to type. And I think that might come with some negative consequences, as research definitely demonstrates that using your body, your hand to denote, that it kind of contributes to the intellectual operations that you do with the content that is being offered to you. So, yeah, it's not a very concrete answer, but I see the importance of the question. Absolutely. And I agree with **Noëlle Roy**, with, with what she, she, she said.

**Noëlle Roy** 1:16:05

So if I can add, braille is very physical writing, the body is engaged, and which is, really, that's what I wanted to add, basically.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Thank you. I am going to hand over to Marion Ink.

**Audience Member**

I want to ask a question. I hope you can hear me. Yes. Thank you. Well, many thanks to the panel. Really a comment following on from what Noëlle and Bertrand said about braille. Louis Braille was not alone. And a lot of work has been done by a sociologist of science, Hélène Mialet at York University, which means that they... they are watching Stephen Hawking, who was a researcher into quantum physics, very well-known paraplegic who, and this research demonstrates that, as she follows him for several weeks this genius is, in fact, never alone and cannot be alone. And in fact, it is not specific to a disabled person, but the sociology of science has actually deconstructed all the geniuses, whoever they may be, explaining that there is never an individual that achieves something; it is a person with many others around them in a highly specific environment. And that if Louis Braille had not been born at that time, and in that place, then it would have been somebody else, and he would have had a different career altogether. So really, just to complement what has been said about the, an individual who has an extraordinary achievement, be they able-bodied or not. The book by Hélène Mialet*,* in French and in English, in French, it's called *In Search of Stephen Hawking* and in English *Hawking Incorporated: The Anthropology of the Knowing Subject*.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Thank you. Thank you very much, Marion. Any of the speakers, panelists like to come back, on what Marion has just said. If not, I'm going to hand over to Bertrand who's raised his hand. Zina, while we are waiting for Bertrand, Zina Weygand wants to say something.

**Audience Member**

So just to say again that this, what's just been said, in the history of science, there has been a whole research into the role of the inventor, and confirms this-- that there is not, no isolated inventors and there is also a hero worship, which relates to various factors, including national factors, because each country will have its heroes. And I think this issue really isn't anything to do with the history of disability, but actually, is applies more broadly in the history of science and technology.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Thank you very much, Zina. Any of our panelists like to respond to this further? I don't see any other questions for the moment. So, Chair, I don't know whether you would like to come back. Sorry. Vanessa has just raised her hand. So we'll go to her hopefully. Sorry, I didn't see that. Sorry. Vanessa, did you want to say something?

**Vanessa Warne** 1:20:55

Yes. And thank you. Thank you all for what you have shared on this very important and engaging panel. I tried to be quiet as one of the co-organizers, but I take the privilege now to join you in this conversation. I was very struck by all that you share here a kind of a connection here regarding communities of care and exchange. And I'm very struck by what Bruno and Noëlle both share and do in their regular practice, in terms of reaching out to the general public. And I take very seriously what they share about the need to engage non-academic communities. I want to note how important and impressed I think it is, how challenging, how sympathetic perhaps I am to Maria, with the great challenges she takes on in terms of accessible platform design, accessible tool design, which of course has a resonance to what Bruno and Noëlle have studied for so long regarding the history of tools created for and by blind people for their use. So I'm struck that Maria is now doing that kind of work again, in the 21st century in a digital context with her project. And I would like to return if I could, to Pieter's attention to fragility, and the values around kind of embracing values that are not strictly focused on autonomy or accomplishment. And I just wanted to share a resource that might be of interest that is gaining attention in Anglo-American circles right now, but might be missed by people elsewhere or in disability studies communities because it comes out of Victorian literary studies and British 19th-Century Literary Studies. A colleague, a scholar in the United States called Talia Schaffer, and I will spell it now as Schaffer, Talia Shaeffer has a new book called *Communities of Care*. And in fact, it has the British member of parliament, Henry Fawcett and his wife, Millicent Fawcett, on the cover if you are interested, and she is very interested in collaborative relationships between people with disabilities, and people who identify as able bodied, and how those relationships of care are both multidirectional and affirm our humanity, and I hear a resonance with what Pieter is sharing about fragility. So as a kind of pushback against notions of heroism, which, of course, we see Noëlle pushing back against in her work, this work by Talia Schaeffer on *Communities of Care* suggests we all benefit from embracing a human fragility vulnerability and we develop community and collaboration and meaningful notions of humanity by pushing back against kind of heroic binaries which, of course, have been referenced elsewhere in this conversation. So I just, I speak to for too long but I wanted to share this very, I think, important and exciting new work and to thank you all for the work you have done in the past and continue to do; very important contributions and I will just sign off by saying good luck, bon chance, Maria with the digitization work which is so important and sounds very challenging.

**Dannyelle Valente** 1:24:46

Maria?

**Maria Romeiras Amado** 1:24:49

I would just like to add that one of the letters I've read has wonderful description of the city of Montreal after the fire. And when you read the letter first, as in every documents, you don't know who is signing it. And you have to characterize the person afterwards, look out for the person. And you don't know, of course, if a letter is written by a blind or a sighted person. And, in fact, the most wonderful description of Montreal at the time, it was in a letter written by a blind person. It's extremely accurate, and it destroys all stereotypes we could have. So it's amazing to look out for those communities of care, as you're suggesting, what is in fact a good read, because we are extremely surprised every time we get new documents, and we should, in fact, share these documents with the non-academic communities, and especially keep them accessible.

**Dannyelle Valente** 1:26:15

Thank you. I don't know if you have any other questions. We have two minutes left. Bertrand, I'll hand you the floor.

**Audience Member**

Yes, my apologies. More of a comment, really or a call for projects, in fact. I think that in this history of blindness and readjustment systems, and in the mapping, we've been discussing, an important aspect, and in my view a priority aspect would be the attitude to touch, when is touch recommended, prescribed prohibited, and when, in the sense of when, in terms of geography, when and where, and also in terms of educational contexts. Because I think this is key; it ties in with what we were saying on Friday, about the access to art, for example. That was it for me.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Thank you. So I also held back, since I'm a moderator, but I would just like to comment by saying that your research is fascinating, very significant as regards history. I very much like this idea of vulnerability, that Pieter you mentioned. And I remember when I began cultural studies, how important it was, Noëlle Roy’s work was, I don't know if you remember me.

**Noëlle Roy**

Yes, I do.

**Dannyelle Valente**

Well, when I was a wee lass I did the studies and it was a very rich source of information and a way into French literature on the subject of blindness. Thank you very much for this great work, **Noëlle**, on your part. So I will close this panel discussion by thanking all the speakers for this fruitful discussions. Thank you too to our chair Suzanne for chairing this. We're going to take a short break and move on with the next roundtable in 15 minutes’ time. Thank you all.