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John Lee Clark (2023). *How to Communicate: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN: 978-1-324-03534-3

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John Lee Clark's *How to Communicate* is a collection of poems by the famed deafblind writer, educator, and agent of the Protactile movement. This movement is an ongoing process of tactile language emergence among deafblind community members in the USA that is also spreading to other countries. The book's sky-blue cover with bright yellow text features a fuchsia line drawing by Adrean Clark of four arms in the motion of Protactile communication.

The book is organized into six sections, prefaced by an author's note that explains how the displacement of English Braille, American Edition by the more cumbersome Unified English Braille has impacted ease of use of "italics, parentheses, and accented letters" (p. 11). As a consequence, these typographical conventions are not featured in the book.

The first section, "Slateku," evokes the processes, techniques, and conventions of writing using a Braille slate, including the 189 contractions found in English Braille, American Edition. This section includes 23 four-line poems corresponding with the four rows and 28 cells of a classic Braille slate. This demonstrates an innovative development in terms of poetic technique. These poems are economical and full of wordplay, including playful allusions to American Sign Language (ASL), as in the following:

A spat

Always starts out with a kiss

And ends with a high five

Aren't we lucky

The above poem describes an ASL sign for “fight” (as in a verbal argument) that begins with what is also a sign for “kiss” and ends with a single clap. The traces of ASL in this poem and others indicate how many deafblind individuals like Clark were formerly sighted, signing deaf people. Their identities and language were then transformed by losing sight and gaining greater knowledge of the tactile world. In this way, the collection also represents a process of renewal and regeneration.

The second section, “Pointing the Needle,” features 12 poems that are both personal and evocative, starting with “Line of Descent” that chronicles eminent deafblind writers and public figures. This begins with the English poet Susannah Harrison (1752-1784) and includes the African-American weaver John Porter Riley (1888-1928), Canadians Marjorie McGuffin Wood (1903-1988) and Mae Brown (1935-1973), and the poet’s own father, Lee. Other poems, such as “A Funeral,” also evoke the close community of deafblind people.

Some of my favourite poems in this section allude to the near-pathological independence of some deafblind (and deaf) people, including “On My Return from a Business Trip” that describes the nuisance of being helped by airline personnel:

Leave me alone. I don't know what colour

my bag is and I don't care.

No, it won't take forever.

Other poems, such as “Clamour,” evidence a phenomenological approach to the world that is to me one of the most exciting and revelatory aspects of Clark’s work: “All things living and dead cry out to me / When I touch them.”

The book’s third section, “The Fruit Eat I,” was one of my favourites. This section begins with a note to explain that the nine poems here are “erasures” of other “problematic poems by famous and less known poets” (p. 19). Although the erasures are stated by Clark to “address ableism and distantism,” (p. 19), I found their substance to be both more subtle and more profound than I at first supposed. This begins with “The Diagnosis,” an erasure of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Palingenesis.” Longfellow’s poem is not at first glance about disability but is rather redolent of Victorian nostalgia for youth and bygone days. Clarks’ erasure is simultaneously dismissive of such useless imaginings, and evocative of a different worldview: “What, what, what, what, what, what / Will hold still without its end?”

Not being familiar with the poems that inspired Clark’s erasures, I felt compelled to look them up. This process of digging up what was not immediately available to me and reading first the original poem and then the erasure caused the book to become a process of discovery and dialogue between the original poets and Clark, and between Clark and the reader of his erasures. Particularly strong in this section is “The Rebuttal,” an erasure of Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s “On Seeing the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl, Sitting for Her Portrait.” While Huntley’s poem states that its subject has “no eye,” “no ear,” “no speech,” and a “locked and guarded mind,” Clark’s poem commands: “Guide, passion, catch what / Hath no speech.”

The fourth section, “Who You,” features ten witty poems about romance in youth and maturity, a misguided teacher of the deaf, several deaf and blind historical figures, a hearing politician’s visit to a deaf school, and other interesting subjects. These poems describe myriad

encounters from Clark's profoundly perceptive standpoint. While the poem "The Bully" (like others in this section) again features ASL traces in its text about a school bully, "At the Holiday Gas Station" depicts tactile communication. In this way, the poems cross borders between languages and sensory channels.

The next section, "Translations," contains Clark's English translations of four ASL poems by deaf and interpreter performers and poets, and three Protactile poems by deafblind poets. The original ASL poetic works, deftly translated to English, utilize such devices as using only classifier signs or single handshapes for a full poem. This section includes Clark's description of his Protactile poem "The Rebuttal," based on his earlier erasure described above. A YouTube video clip of Clark's performance of this poem in Protactile with English voiceover is available.

The sixth section, "How to Communicate," includes fourteen prose poems, a form that is not featured in earlier sections. The poems here, featuring shorter sentences with rhythmic repetitions and parallelisms, are mainly about the deafblind poet's experiences, perceptions, and friendships. However, this section also includes a poem about the deafblind poet Morrison Heady (1829-1915) who is also mentioned in "Line of Descent." These poems are again evocative of the tactile world and its spinning and surprises. In "I Promise You," the poet writes of how kissing brings faces into being:

In the Old World we all used to kiss and kiss. It
was then that we did have faces. We had noses and cheeks and foreheads
and soft downy hair. In the New World we stopped kissing.

How to Communicate is full of such surprises and revelations. It pulses with life. I recommend it for all scholars of disability, language and literature, and anyone seeking to draw inspiration and understanding from alternate ways of engaging with the world.