

**John Lee Clark. (2023). *Touch The Future: A Manifesto in Essays*.
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Touch The Future: A Manifesto in Essays is a collection of essays by John Lee Clark, a Minnesota-based “DeafBlind poet, essayist, historian, translator, and an actor in the most thrilling development in DeafBlind history, the Protactile movement” (Clark, 2023). Clark was born Deaf and gradually became blind due to a progressive-blindness condition known as Usher syndrome. He is the author of several books including *How to Communicate* and *Where I Stand: On the Signing Community and My DeafBlind Experience* and the editor of anthologies *Deaf American Poetry* and *Deaf Lit Extravaganza*. Recognized in the field for his work and contributions, Clark has been a recipient of multiple prestigious awards and fellowships.

As a Chinese woman with a physical disability currently living and working in the U.S. in academia, I first read Clark from a translated essay of his, “*Against Access*”, on a Chinese platform committed to introducing anthropological works (Tying Knots, 2023). This happens to be one of the first essays in this book. I remember the heated discussion sparked by this translated work in the Chinese disability community. The idea of “against access” was counter-intuitive and revolutionary, and it resonated with many readers to some extent for its unapologetically claiming disabled people’s subjectivity and power. Clark’s writing is incisive in critiquing prevalent ableist manifestations in disabled persons’ lives, specifically, DeafBlind people’s lives. Admittedly, his writing should be understood from disabled persons’ experience in the U.S. legal, social, historical, and cultural context. Some of his writings may not be the

most relevant in disabled people of other countries, yet the insights he gained as a DeafBlind person in a dominantly non-disabled world are precise and could be highly relatable for disabled people elsewhere.

I found this book quite enjoyable and accessible to read, compared with the common academic literature that I often read as a disabled advocate and academic. My reading experience was almost like listening to an exciting guide or mentor introducing me to a whole new world, or, to put it another way, seeing the common world we live in from a whole new perspective. The writing of the book invites one's visualization and inspires interaction. Speaking from someone outside of the DeafBlind community, my impression of the book is that it is genuine, imaginative, lively, welcoming, witty, poetic, at times intimate, and overall, highly educational. One can feel the liveliness and welcoming vibe starting from the beginning and many other parts of the book:

“Welcome, welcome. Steady, friend. Here’s a nice textured wall. I know, I know. You’ve stumbled into a new world. DeafBlind people have been here all along, but now everything is spinning faster than before. Everything you touch is alive with brave and precious pasts, which have now accrued and are opening up futures. This is the power of Protactile. We want to share it with you.” (p. 1)

The central purpose of the book is to introduce readers to a world of DeafBlind people and to share the power of Protactile. Protactile is a transformative and powerful language born in 2007 from the DeafBlind community. It is still developing and evolving in an exciting way. Clark does an excellent job conveying the central purpose of the book via his vivid, friendly, exhilarated, and witty writing. To my knowledge, there are not too many scholars with DeafBlindness in academia. Nor have I encountered much academic or grey literature on issues

of Protactile or DeafBlind experiences, except for the ones on the famous Hellen Keller and the contemporary DeafBlind activist Haben Girma in the U.S. This book fills an important gap in disability studies literature by providing a critical DeafBlind perspective and a participant/observant account of the exciting Protactile Movement. Writing from a disabled advocate and academic's perspective, I resonated with Clark's writing greatly and was challenged to reflect and gain new insights on disability inclusion.

Totalling 187 pages, the book includes a touching dedication essay serving as an introductory text, a main body of four parts, and ends with acknowledgements. I was brought to tears reading the dedication essay, which touched upon the story of Leslie, a multi-talented DeafBlind person, an activist, and a friend. It was bittersweet to read Leslie's story: his multi-talents, his work and experience looking for work, his impact on the DeafBlind community, and his destiny as someone who's more disabled by the ableist system/environment rather than his own DeafBlindness. I grieved for the loss of such a talented soul in an ableist world. Unfortunately, our world has been underappreciating and neglecting disabled people such as Leslie for too long.

Each part of the book is made of three to four essays of various lengths. The four parts add well together to depict a contemporary and contextualized DeafBlind worldview, a lived reality, an evolving community, and the promise and power of Protactile. Part one "*Knowing and Being Known*" shares how Protactile as a new language was born and how it evolved out of a community. Clark radically problematizes the commonly accepted approach, assumptions, and philosophy in creating "access" to include people with disabilities, hence the title "*Against Access*". By providing multiple real-life stories from DeafBlind people including his own experience, Clark introduces Protactile to the world of readers and to provoke readers' interest in

getting to know this language. In his sharing, Clark exudes pride being an active participant and witness in the Protactile movement. Protactile comes natural to DeafBlind community and has immense power to help DeafBlind people stay connected within and beyond their community. As Clark writes, “whenever I talked with fellow tactile listeners, however, I feel alive.... I felt my most authentic, most eloquent, most myself” (p. 33).

From Part Two (Forever and fluently fumbling) to Part Four (How it feels to us), Clark further dives into different aspects of the DeafBlind world and the Protactile movement. For example, he introduces some key concepts such as “distantism”, “co-navigation”/”co-navigators”, and a brief history of the name “DeafBlind”. He shares DeafBlind experience in the virtual space: how DeafBlind community has traditionally maintained contact and continues to communicate and connect in the virtual space. He writes about how he and other DeafBlind people experience (or not) art in different settings (such as museum, garden, theater, etc.). By writing about the reading environment for DeafBlind people, Clark explains the interesting point that “to be a poet is a very DeafBlind thing” and the role of writing in the DeafBlind community. Lastly, Clark drives the point that providing “access” to maintain/replicate the status quo of a hearing-sighted world does not count as true inclusion. To facilitate true and meaningful inclusion or integration of DeafBlind people (and by extension, disabled people), a transformative framing is needed, and a set of new questions should be asked. Fitting in the existing world is not the end goal for DeafBlind people. As Clark writes, “we’re interested in collaboration. We’re interested in changing the world” (p. 182).

This beautifully written book comes with many strengths. Clark is undoubtedly a trailblazer in disability studies literature with his eloquent writing grounded in his experience and observations in the DeafBlind community. The book provokes deep reflections on many present

practices of disability inclusion. It provides readers with rich texts to understand DeafBlind experience as well as the Protatile movement. Perhaps one limitation of the book lies in its lack of intersectional lens, as there seems little accounts or perspective from other marginalized positions. The book is written from Clark's personal experience as well as from the perspective of DeafBlind community that he has had access to as a white heterosexual DeafBlind male born into an ASL-speaking family. As readers would imagine, race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, citizenship status, geographic location, and educational background etc. all influence one's access to resources and experience with disability (such as DeafBlindness) in the U.S. context.

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