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Title: Book Review: Touch the Future: A Manifesto in Essays.

Author: Dr Leda Kamenopoulou

Affiliation: Associate Professor, Department of Psychology and Human Development,

IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society Email address:

ledakamenopoulou@ucl.ac.uk

Email address: [leda.kamenopoulou@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:leda.kamenopoulou@ucl.ac.uk)

Twitter: @kamenopoulou

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/leda-kamenopoulou-a6037128](https://www.linkedin.com/in/leda-kamenopoulou-a6037128)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4657-6414

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John Lee Clark, *Touch the Future: A Manifesto in Essays*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 2023. Kindle Edition. ISBN-10: 1324086416. £10.99. 186 pp.

The deafblind author and educator, John Lee Clark, who is based in the United States, delivers a collection of essays about his experiences of navigating a world that privileges the two distance senses of vision and hearing, and about his involvement in the movement that led to the birth of Protactile, the first language based fully on the sense of touch. *Touch the Future* is a radical call for society to embrace tactile ways of experiencing the world and channels of communicating. To achieve this, Lee Clark draws on his lived experiences, but also a range of disciplines, such as philosophy, literature, history and sociology - interwoven with fine poetry and good humour.

The book is divided in four parts, which narrate the perspective of the author and the history of the community of deafblind people, in which he grew up in the United States. In the first part, with the essay entitled "Against Access", Lee Clark challenges common practices designed to ensure accessibility for deafblind people and questions current thinking around the very meaning of inclusion:

The arrogance is astounding. Why is it always about them? Why is it about their including or not including us? Why is it never about us and whether or not we include *them*? (20).

Lee Clark's proposition here is for a fundamental change in how we perceive inclusion in the first place. His argument is not *against* accessible practices, but *for* tactile accessibility, because providing visual information in the form of image descriptions, for example, does not enable access for a deafblind person like him, since the way he experiences the world more fully is through his sense of touch. Simply put, making visual information accessible excludes him, because this information is not relevant to how he perceives the world. If he was allowed to include others, he would no doubt prefer tactile channels of perception and expression.

Relevant to this conceptualisation of inclusion - and the long overdue question of who has the right to include whom - is "a fancy new word" (62) that Lee Clark introduces in the second part with an essay entitled "Distantism". Distantism, Lee Clark explains, is society's oppression of deafblind people, when the senses of vision and hearing are prioritised, and therefore deafblind people are prevented from using what comes

natural to them, namely, tactile means of communicating and exploring the world. Historically, deafblindness has been considered to be an extremely limiting disability, because it affects communication, access to information, and independent orientation and mobility. With distantism as his theoretical lens, Lee Clark flips the narrative and reveals that this very perception of deafblindness (as a great limitation) is mere social injustice:

We are at the bottom of society, because of what? Because we are deafblind. Which cannot be helped. Therefore, we belong at the bottom of society. It's an amazingly easy trick to pull. They take things out of reach, and then they say we have limited awareness. Whatever they do is our fault. (64-65)

Another form of oppression that Lee Clark highlights is the use of the sighted guide, a keyworker supporting a deafblind person in daily activities, such as visiting the doctor or going to the shops. Again, Lee Clark is not against "working with fellow human beings" (86) but he is against the way in which this has traditionally been done, with the deafblind person expected to passively follow the guide's lead. In his words, "implicit in the act of sighted guiding is the idea that there is one world and one truth, the guide's" (87). Lee Clark again introduces a new term, that of the "co-navigator"

(91), a person who maintains “co-presence” and if needed, provides additional information or “co-creates meaning”, to support the deafblind person to independently navigate a situation or experience failures. Such failures, bumping into corners or experiencing communication breakdowns, for Lee Clark mean that the deafblind person is “in thrilling commerce with reality” (98).

In another example of oppression and a true paradox in the history of deafblind children’s education, Lee Clark notes the complete lack of deafblind teachers, which he describes as “a shutout of tactile teachers and role models” (67). He points out the thousands of professionals working in the field of deafblind education, who are not deafblind and who “make sure we aspire to the distantist ideal. We learned to wait to be told things and to not find out things for ourselves” (67). He furthermore criticises the education system as failing deafblind learners, because “if its goal were to succeed in educating us, it would have long ago embraced the tactile worlds we manifest and would have valued us as teachers and leaders” (68).

Throughout the book, Lee Clark exposes deficit discourse imposed on deafblind people (who are often perceived by others as helpless or in need of help) as mere oppression, and firmly puts forward the argument that deafblind people *can* communicate, access

information and move around independently, become teachers, enjoy theatre performances, participate in conferences, independently go to the doctor and generally live a full and happy life, if they are simply allowed to be *tactile*. This is evidenced by a revolution that is currently taking Lee Clark's community by storm, namely, the birth of the first fully tactile language, called Protactile, which he describes as:

We insist on doing everything our way, fumbling around, groping along, touching everything and everyone. We are messing with traditional spaces, rearranging them to suit us better, rather than the other way around. The Protactile movement is obsessed with direct experience. [...] the question we begin with is not 'How do we make it more accessible?' Instead we start by asking, 'What feels beautiful?' (21)

The theory behind Protactile, the Tactile Language Theory, according to which if deafblind people are allowed to interact with each other, they will progressively develop a manual language that is natural to them, is explained alongside an excellent historical overview of the term "DeafBlind" in the essay "DeafBlind: A brief history of our name". In the essay "Tactile Art", Lee Clark introduces the term "tactile grammar"

to explain that for art to be accessible to deafblind people, it must have language with many elements, such as “texture, contour, temperature, density, give, recoil, adsorption” (131). He uses heft as an example of a common grammatical mistake made by sighted people, who frequently use size to express power, because “visually the power is with size; tactilely [...] the power is with the heft” (132). In the final part, with the essay “Reading Environments”, Lee Clark shares his experiences of being a marginalised reader, who, because of the limited number of accessible books, has “not been permitted to be omnivorous” (168-169). Despite these experiences having shaped his horizons and development as a writer, Lee Clark ends with the hope that his work will reach wider audiences and that he will eventually succeed in his efforts to make Protactile more widely known.

The literature on deafblindness has so far largely excluded the voices of deafblind people, which is why this book is invaluable. Lee Clark’s voice is powerful and to the point, and engages the reader in a constant dialogue that will lead them to question their assumptions about deafblindness, ability, disability, and human nature more broadly. I fully recommend this book, not only to everyone working with and for deafblind or disabled people, but to anyone who is interested in the great diversity of the human experience.

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