

“Speaking in Hands: Signed Poetry and the Residues of Audism”

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“...it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again” (Gertrude Stein, 313)

Gertrude Stein may have had some insight into American Sign Language (ASL) by referring, in this example from *Tender Buttons*, to language as a “pointing” system. Here, she foregrounds the indexical function of language by rejecting the semiotic binary opposition: green / red, go / stop. She stresses instead the deictic function of pointing that positions speakers and—in this case—concepts to each other. When green points not to its contrary, red, it points at itself as part of a signifying system. Instead of pointing *outside* the poem at semiotic conventions in traffic signals she points *inward* at a metalinguistic function foregrounded by the poem.²

Daniel Tiffany’s essay, “Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language,” confronts the vexed question of how a poem “records and engages with the external world” (1). A formalist answer might be that it attempts to render events, objects, and persons by creating an objective correlative or sustained metaphor that universalizes the quotidian, turning away from the world in order to see it more dispassionately. This view—from Eliot to the New Formalists—creates, in effect, a parallel world within what Theodor Adorno called the “aesthetic monad.” Another way of looking at formalism would be to think of how the poem brings the world into its purview by quoting from the heteroglossia of everyday speech—class inflected registers, dictions and vernaculars--thereby undermining the presumed difference between inside and outside, poetic language and social idiom. Of course poetic diction has, as Tiffany observes, been a key component of the lyric tradition, whether in the elevated diction of Keats or Countee Cullen or the rural idiolect in Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. But he wisely distinguishes between treating dialect as

a component of form—analogue to its prosody or “style”—and its unconscious betrayal of “the social textures of language associated with various communities.”

Diction, as Tiffany quotes from Sir Phillip Sydney, is the “outside” or the edge of the poem. It occupies a liminal site with one foot in the quotidian and one in the verbal matrix of the poem (3). This locational aspect of diction is reinforced in its Greek root “deixis” or the “gesture of pointing to something outside itself” (16). Linguistic treatments of deixis usually refer to those aspects of language like pronouns and prepositions (“here” “now”) that situate individuals in relation—what Jakobson called “shifters.” Tiffany rightly observes that this aspect of linguistic pointing has implications for manual sign-language, and it is this intersection of the two ‘d’ words—diction and deixis—that I want to pursue a bit further with reference to ASL poetry.

Given Tiffany’s emphasis on the “outside” of poems I want to ask what is “external” in ASL when persons and locations are rendered on and by the body and where space can be literally pointed into existence. In ASL directional verbs (HELP, GIVE, ASK) are not inflected for person. There are no pronouns in the sense that they are used in English. If I want to say “you help me” the sign for HELP (a fist on the palm) shifts from the indexical location of the person being addressed back toward the speaker. Several parameters work simultaneously: the shared space of interlocutors, the handshape that forms the sign HELP and the movement of the hands from addressee to speaker. If I want to express urgency (“Please, help me”) my facial expression (furrowed brow, narrowed eyes) and body position provide further morphological indicators. If I reverse the phrase, “I help you,” the direction of the handshape moves outward from speaker to addressee.³

Emile Benveniste’s belief in the universality of pronouns is complicated by thinking of persons as spatial entities.⁴ Can points in space be the same as “I” or “they”? As Carol Padden has written, “space is implicit in oral languages, but explicit in signed languages” (qtd Berenz, 2006).⁵ Spatial Deixis is particularly interesting in this regard since in ASL locational signs (OVER THERE, NEARBY, COME HERE) are established in relation to the actual, self-present signer. If I want to

signal that something is “over there,” I can indicate the distance intended by making the sign for AREA--a flat hand, palm down, in a slow circle--either near or far, using my eyes to indicate how far. Space is visibly rendered in my physical relationship to that which is “outside.” And if I want to represent interchanges among non-present persons or what Scott Liddell calls “surrogates” I can stage their interaction by using the space in front of me to position signs that enact a reported conversation (336). “He walked up to his friend” can be signed by pointing to a space in the distance that will remain the site for HE. I then make the sign for FRIEND (two interlocking curved index fingers) and point to another space, perhaps to the right of the HE site. I then move the left index finger, pointing up, from the HE position toward the right index finger that represents FRIEND.⁶

What has all of this to do with poetry? One answer would be to look at the poetry of deaf poets whose signed poems exploit the possibilities of deixis, space and gesture. In this context, Tiffany’s essay, “Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Languages” might have to be retitled as “Speaking in Hands.” His subtitle, would have to include the historically charged residue of oralist education and the presumptive authority of speech and hearing. Since most American deaf people know English (or another oral language) and use signs or fingerspelling based on English words, they “share” two languages. But deaf persons’ incorporation of English is fraught, due to the historical attempt in the late 19th century to forbid the use of sign language and to impose oral education (emphasis on lipreading and speaking) on deaf children. The common early phrases for deaf persons, “deaf mute” or “deaf and dumb,” annexed negative attitudes about the mental health of deaf persons that led to various forms of exclusion and in some cases incarceration. That historical residue is often a ghostly linguistic presence in deaf poetry.

And this raises an interesting question about diction. As Tiffany writes, “Diction in the most general sense is usually understood to pertain to vocabulary, the choice of words in a text “and to the kind of language deployed in a poem” (3). He goes on to discuss the ways that diction in poetry often code shifts between registers that interpolate a poet’s class, gender, race, and regional

background, the “social textures of language associated with various communities” (3). A poet’s incorporation of vernacular argots, pidgins, or interlingual merging of several languages—his examples include Lois Ann Yamanaka, Cathy Park Hong, Rodrigo Toscano—brings dominant and subaltern languages into conversation. The same could be said for ASL poets, but the categories of shared experience, the meaning of “communities,” might be different depending, for example, on whether the poet was educated in an oral school, a community with a large deaf population, a community of black signers, a public school, or a family that does not sign.⁷ As Margalit Fox has written, the origin of ASL itself is a product of intersecting dictions. When Thomas Gallaudet opened the first school for deaf students in Hartford, Connecticut with his native French deaf teacher, Laurent Clerc, he incorporated Clerc’s French sign language overlaid with imposed English word order, tenses and pronouns, plus local vernacular and “homesigns” developed among the students independent of their classes. Since there was as yet no indigenous American sign language it grew, like all natural languages, by a rhizomatic path from pidgins to creole.

In my own experience working with a number of ASL tutors and teachers, I’ve noticed dramatic differences in the meanings and shapes of various signs, depending on generation, schooling and family background. And there is plenty of sign play between languages. When I asked one of my tutors how to sign “decaf coffee,” he made the sign for DEAF (the index finger from ear to mouth) and then the sign for COFFEE (a fist rotating over the other fist), perhaps as a joke about hearing persons’ ideas of deaf people as “decaffeinated.” This example reveals the “residues of shared languages” that include the overwhelming authority of audism, the ideology that privileges hearing. The portmanteau sign for audism, THINK- HEARING, is represented by an index finger rotating in front of the forehead. Here the conventional sign for SPEECH, the index rotating in front of the mouth, is shifted to the head to show how “speech” is naturalized as ideology.⁸

Let me give two examples of how diction and deixis are combined by comparing some lines by John Ashbery and Clayton Valli’s poem, “Snowflake.” Ashbery’s “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” is

an operatic display of multiple dictions, from the sublime to the ridiculous, different levels of rhetoric often overlapping within a few phrases:

That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he's
 Done to me now! I scarce dare approach me mug's attenuated
 Reflection in yon hubcap, so jaundiced, so *déconfit*
 Are its lineaments—fun, no doubt, for some quack phrenologist's
 Fern-clogged waiting room, but hardly what you'd call
 Companionable. (227)

Here the wildly shifting set of sociolects reflects class and cultural levels, from Looney Tunes (“That mean old cartoonist,” “me mug’s attenuated / Reflection”) to cocktail party banter (“so jaundiced, so *déconfit*”) to intellectual camp (“quack phrenologist’s / Fern-clogged waiting room”).⁹ Ashbery’s dance of dictions is in some respects a verbal collage of Hollywood movies, one part Walter Brennan, the other part Laurence Olivier. These sudden transitions imitate the 1953 Daffy Duck cartoon it celebrates in which Daffy undergoes multiple transformations—and erasures—by the absent “mean old cartoonist.” Just as Daffy is becoming comfortable playing his ukulele in a tropical setting with palm trees he is rudely moved--on skis--to a snowy alpine landscape. A more philosophical reading of “Daffy Duck” might conclude that these shifting registers reflect the culture of simulacra that epitomizes, for Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, the postmodern condition. The modernist deep Subject is dead; in its place is a cartoon series of interchangeable repetitions. Deixis in the poem strives to locate cartoonist and Daffy, artist and creation, only to expose the placelessness of identities, the absence of any authorizing subjectivity in a media drenched environment. The mediated subject exists as a portrait in a convex mirror, a hubcap, that expands the “mug” to grotesque proportions.

Clayton Valli's signed poem, "Snowflake" is a different species altogether in tone but nevertheless manages to move between registers on several significant levels. I have discussed this poem elsewhere, but I want to call attention to Valli's fusion of diction and deixis in a lyric whose center concerns a conversation between a deaf boy and his hearing father.¹⁰ The father, who does not sign, is trying to impress his hearing friends by asking his deaf son to verbalize answers to questions: "what is your name," "how old are you?" Valli signs the entire poem in ASL, but switches registers to represent the father's oral speech and the child's halting attempts to respond. Spatial and positional deixis here is embodied by the father's shifting body position as he addresses his friends, using the sign for nonsense ("blah blah blah") to indicate the boy's confusion about his father's oral conversation. He then turns to the son to ask him questions and then adopts the son's point of view as he attempts to respond to his father's questions. Their interchange is conducted in Signed Exact English (SEE), an invented language that uses ASL signs imposed on English syntax. It also includes fingerspelling of certain words that do not have ASL equivalents such as the copula in the phrases, "how old a-r-e you?" and "my name i-s...". The rest of the poem surrounding this interchange, a description of a cold winter day and a falling snowflake, is signed using ASL syntax and an innovative collaboration between dominant and subordinate hands. Valli uses at least four levels of manual signing: fingerspelling, SEE, regular ASL and a hybrid version of ASL that creatively modifies or extends handshapes, body position, facial expression. This, in Tiffany's terms, marks not formalist experiment but "a disruption and expansion of poetic diction" by making the dominant language subservient to the minor (29).

Deixis and diction are intertwined in the way that the interchange between hearing father and deaf son replicates the historical division of oral and Deaf cultures.¹¹ It also replicates Valli's biographical condition as the deaf child of hearing, non-signing parents. The very use of SEE embodies this history. One might add that for a deaf person the presence of SEE is in itself a form of diction since it brings the "outside" into the poem as a creolized form of sign language. But this

interchange is itself contained or wrapped into a more lyrical use of ASL, suggesting that the poet, Clayton Valli, has contained this unequal relationship on his own (signed) terms. “Snowflake” is about the positional relationship not only of speakers but of unequal power relationships between hearing and deaf persons. Code switching, the movement of registers, parallels the shifting body position and gaze direction of the speaker as he or she adopts different personas.¹²

Valli is a much more conservative poet than more recent deaf practitioners like Sean Forbes, Signmark, and Prinz D who have drawn from rap and urban subcultures as well as the activism on behalf of Deaf cultural identity to create a vibrant deaf jam tradition. And needless to say, Valli comes out of a very different aesthetic tradition from Ashbery. Although he has likened his use of ASL to Robert Frost and the prosodic traditions of English poetry, his ventriloquized use of several idiolects links him more closely to the New York School poet than one might think. For Ashbery the “outside” is like the image in a convex mirror, a version of oneself enlarged and distorted. For Valli the “outside” is a culture that expects him to assimilate the dominant culture’s attitudes towards hearing and speech.

At a 2005 conference at Ohio State University a group of deaf poets and scholars were asked to engage with a number of questions, one of the most salient being how to define ASL literature if “literature” is presumed to be a textual or verbal phenomenon?¹³ Discussion pursued possible alternative modes of translating and documenting signed storytelling or poetry, whether rendered into print or video or some other medium. The poet, Peter Cook, suggested that perhaps holography might be the best format since it would more accurately represent the spatial character of signed performances.¹⁴ Cook was no doubt thinking of his own collaborations with Kenny Lerner (the Flying Words Project) many of whose performances utilize the 360-degree field around the poet—Peter signing behind his back, he and Kenny dual-signing, Peter “throwing” a sign in an imagined circle around the pair, or the two of them passing a sign back and forth.

Cook implicitly suggests that the term “poetry” might be inadequate to describe work that engages the entire body, that draws on dance, mime, and other theatrical genres. Holography would take the poem off the page and place it in the world. Cook’s response suggests something fundamental about what happens when genre meets the body, when aesthetic categories encounter sensoria that defy what they are meant to contain. In thinking about the title of our Forum, “Poetic Language and the Outside,” I keep thinking of how speaking in hands changes what we mean by poetic language and the spaces and persons it imagines. The imperative, to adapt Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons*, is “act so there is no use in a center.” (344).

¹ I am grateful to Peter Middleton and Chris Krentz for their comments on drafts of this paper.

² Charles Olson titles his one-word poem, “One Word as the Complete Poem,” the one word being “dictic” which would seem to confirm Stein’s emphasis on the poem’s “earnest” ability to “point again” (425). Rachel Blau duPlessis provides an excellent discussion of Olson’s poem and deixis in “Statement on Poetics,” pp. 25-30.

³ Margalit Fox provides an important introduction to ASL verbs in chapter 12 of *Talking Hands*.

⁴ Benveniste, 217.

⁵ On debates about pronouns and sign language deixis, see Norine Berenz, “Insights into Person Deixis. “See also Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima, *The Signs of Language*, pp. 276-9.

⁶ On staging indexical loci, see Bellugi and Klima, 277.

⁷ Historical segregation of black populations into separate neighborhoods and schools has led to the development of a distinct black signing tradition which makes more use of two-handed signing, broader gestures, and idiomatic variants of ASL.

⁸ On THINK HEARING see Padden and Humphreys, p. 54.

⁹ I am indebted to Peter Middleton for the phrase, “intellectual camp.”

¹⁰ cf. “Tree Tangled in Tree: Resiting Poetry through ASL” in *Concerto for the Left Hand*, chapter 4.

¹¹ Like many commentators on Deaf identity I have capitalized the ‘D’ in “Deaf Culture” when referring to the cultural, as opposed to the audiological, associations with deafness. I have retained the lower case when speaking of deaf persons.

¹² We can see even in the work of first-generation deaf poets like Valli, Patrick Graybill, Ella Mae Lentz, and Dorothy Miles, the possibilities for using multiple dictional registers while, at the same time, signifying, in Henry Louis Gates’ sense, *on* the historic oppression of deaf persons by putting “English” in brackets

¹³ Brenda Brueggemann has described this conference and its goals in *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places*, pp. 47-53.

¹⁴ Cook has put his suggestion into practice in segments featuring him in Judy Lief's video documentary, *Deaf Jam*. Signing his poetry, Cook pulls words out of the air and throws them into space.

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