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Sanchez, R. (2015). *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*. New York: New York University Press. ISBN 9781479805556.

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In *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*, Rebecca Sanchez engages a range of methodologies—literary and historical analysis, linguistics, ethics, and queer, cultural, and film studies—to probe the relationship between images, bodies, and texts as revealed in canonical American modernist works. She takes the innovative approach of using contemporary American Sign Language (ASL) poetry to reconsider modernist literary experimentation and the critical tensions left in its wake—specifically, questions regarding celebrity versus impersonality, primitivism versus "making it new," modernist difficulty arising from juxtaposition and indeterminacy, and the problematic of the image. As she argues, reading modernist literature through the lens of ASL poetics and in the context of efforts to suppress the signing body—a critical framework she alternately terms "Deaf insight" or "Deaf epistemology"—productively illuminates how early twentieth-century authors responded to the standardization of the American language by producing hybrid literary works, ones that locate the body's presence in the interstices between language and image. In doing so, her study formulates an "ontology of the linguistic image" (121), a new understanding of the relationship between word and image, text and reader, that resists the tendency of critics to elide the body, and particularly the deaf body, from discussions of literary modernism and, more broadly, that challenges "assumptions about what language can and should look like" (3).

By attending to literary texts that are not by disabled authors and that do not necessarily feature disabled characters, Sanchez's monograph responds to Lennard Davis's call in *Enforcing*

Normalcy (1995) for critics to examine the ways in which disability structures texts that are not explicitly about disability. As Davis suggests, even in works in which deaf characters do not appear, "deafness as a critical modality" (p. 100) forces a reexamination of the parameters that define the human in relation to language. In many scholarly treatments, the application of Davis's Deaf critical insight involves attending to the representation of silence and/or the voice in literature, but Sanchez's work takes a different angle, instead considering how an understanding of the embodied and visual nature of ASL helps unpack the portrayal of richly layered, physical, and relational communicative acts. Unlike Jennifer Esmail, then, who in her *Reading Victorian Deafness* (2013) identifies a "somewhat discordant relationship between signing and writing" (p. 5), Sanchez locates a way to consider the two in relation to each other. Sanchez's analysis provides a new means of responding to the concept of "deafening" that entails exploring the semantic and subversive potential of embodied language rather than the presence or absence of spoken language, firmly rejecting the construction of deafness as a lack. In revealing how language acts that resist regulation—or rather, the bodies performing them—fracture textuality, Sanchez's work also aligns with that of Ato Quayson, whose *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007) contends that the "radical contingency" (p. 25) of the disabled body often dismantles a text's aesthetic framework owing to its oscillation between the abstract and the material, its refusal to permit its ethical weight to be subsumed into the aesthetic field. Sanchez's Deaf epistemology, however, is perhaps less limited than Quayson's "aesthetic nervousness," for the latter requires the presence of the disabled body in the text. In opening up this new critical space, *Deafening Modernism* contributes greatly to the dialogue about the insight deafness offers into the materiality of language, a conversation that has recently gained ground in literary studies thanks in large part to the work of Davis, Esmail, and Christopher Krentz.

Sanchez's book is divided into four chapters, each of which takes up one of the aforementioned longstanding debates in modernist studies and offers a resolution through the application of Deaf insight. The first chapter addresses T. S. Eliot's paradoxical assertion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that literary works should have personality while also maintaining an "impersonal" relationship between author and text. Sanchez uses her readings of how ASL poets negotiate the relationship between embodied literary production and poetic impersonality to propose that modernist works like Sherwood Anderson's *A New Testament* and *Mid-American Chants* reach toward a "model of embodied impersonality" (48), one that promotes the interpenetration of author, text, and audience. Recruiting dependency and queer theory for her analyses, she reveals how ASL poetry literalizes the "mode of literary ethical relationality" (56) figured in Anderson's poetry, presenting an important example of the sort of "radical openness" in the artistic process that forces a mutual recognition of the author's and audience's humanity. The second chapter historically situates anxieties about nonstandard communication that informed the modernist fascination with physical linguistic practices. Sanchez explains how works such as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, texts in which the nonconforming signifying body is scrutinized, directly respond to what she terms "communicative norms"—"assumptions about language and bodies that came together in the regulatory practices surrounding deaf bodies in the early twentieth century" (66)—and thus are not anachronistic in their celebration of nonverbal communication.

In the third chapter, Sanchez reexamines the notion of modernist difficulty as produced by juxtaposition and indeterminacy through the lens of ASL linguistics, exploring how "dense linguistic formulations" (33) result from the physical relationship between reader and text. She suggests that the simultaneity of ASL challenges the understanding of language as necessarily

linear and provides a model for a literary practice in which bodies can "stack . . . information onto words" (101), vertically layering meanings. According to Sanchez, this model is actualized by Hart Crane's "Voyages," which she shows to be governed by an associative logic that "challenges our assumptions of how we relate to each other through language" (108). She further reads Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Demuth in the context of signed languages to discover how the cinematic collapsing of images into a series enables literary cubist and imagist portraiture to generate a "continuous present" (111), one that calls attention to the displacement of marginalized bodies. The fourth chapter continues this meditation on the temporality of signification to consider how ASL troubles the notion of the image as capturing a distinct moment in time, thereby challenging the presumed differences between images and words that inform discussions of H. D.'s alleged departure from imagism and William Faulkner's supposed privileging of the visual. As Sanchez contends, ASL literature shows images to be "multifaceted, shifting, and indeterminate" (131) and "marked by imperfections" (134) resulting from their movement in time. This new understanding of the linguistic image and the temporal expansion it engenders allow for a reconciling of image and epic. Sanchez closes her book with an epilogue that reflects on the ethical questions raised by the textual body, or the body as text—questions made all the more pressing by the Human Genome Project's discovery that genes contain stacked meanings—and ponders the potential usefulness of a modernist interpretive framework for reading the language of genetics.

Sanchez's nuanced close readings of ASL poetry yield great insight into the complexities of modernist literary experimentation. I would like to highlight two such readings that I found particularly generative. In the first, Sanchez analyzes the Flying Word Project's "Poetry" to demonstrate how role shifting, a central component of ASL grammar, promotes a model of

embodied impersonality in which a text's meaning is bound up with a specific body—that of the author, whose subjectivity is fragmented in the artistic process. As narrated by Peter Cook, "Poetry" alternates between the subject and object positions of artist and painting, depicting the artist's struggle to retain control over his creation's meaning that results in his loss of a coherent subject position. Sanchez asserts that in embodying and moving fluidly between both perspectives, Cook celebrates aesthetic production as interpenetration—the porous body of the artist present but blending with its materials. She then, quite persuasively, uses her reading of "Poetry" to illuminate how Anderson's poetry formulates a "poetic ideal . . . [that] involves abandoning the boundaries of his body and merging with those of his poetic subjects, coming to know them by becoming him" (52), thereby encouraging an ethics of care that embraces the reality of humanity's interdependence. In another beautiful close reading, Sanchez explores how the simultaneity of ASL—its vertical stacking of meaning—as modeled in ASL poet Clayton Valli's "Tears of Life," can be used to understand indeterminacy and juxtaposition in modernist literature. In "Tears of Life," Valli uses his right hand to narrate the story of a person's life, from birth to marriage to fatherhood to death, while his left hand cycles through the repeated sign "tear." According to Sanchez, this juxtaposition produces the following effect: "Each time the cycle [of 'tear'] is repeated, the meaning of the sign changes as it interacts with the various events being recounted (tears of sorrow at death, joy at births, etc.). Each hand articulates separate linguistic content that is given new meaning when the two are read together" (101). She transitions into an interpretation of Crane's "Voyages" as an attempt to move beyond the confines of the written and spoken word's linearity, unpacking the work's vertical layering of semantic content to "access a transcendent meaning" (105). What makes these readings not only incredibly moving, but also critically forceful, is the way that they attend to specific aspects of

ASL grammar—here, role shifting and simultaneity—to open up the interpretive possibilities of modernist literature.

While Sanchez's pairing of contemporary ASL poetry and modernist literature is very productive, I sometimes found myself wanting to know more, at least in her later chapters, about how the modernist texts that she analyzes attest to the marginalization of deaf bodies in particular. The introduction offers a firm footing for her argument that much early twentieth-century American literature can be read as a direct response to the increasing regulation of the body and attempts at standardizing American English that followed from the Civil War, the rapid expansion of the immigrant population, American imperialism, and World War I. And her second chapter helpfully contextualizes portrayals of nonstandard communication by situating them in relation to the history of Deaf boarding schools in America. But I think more could be said about the critical turn against signed languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to locate more firmly the elided deaf body that ghosts the margins of canonical modernist literature. For example, in her reading of Gertrude Stein's "A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass," Sanchez seizes on the word "spectacle"—as layered with the "blind glass," the "pointing," etc. (113)—as a reference to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular entertainment of viewing non-normative bodies on display, a link that could be more thoroughly established through additional historical analysis. Moreover, Sanchez suggests that William Carlos Williams's "The Great Figure" "gestures toward elided bodies not mentioned in the poet's fascination with the appearance of the truck itself" (117), but it is unclear why these bodies are marginalized: Is it because they have faced trauma? Is it that they are silent bodies, or bodies silenced by the technofetishism of modernity that the fire truck embodies? Her close readings are so provocative that as a reader, I was curious to learn more about the potential links

between enforced linguistic assimilation, the specific anxieties surrounding the deaf body in early twentieth-century America, and literary modernism. Additional connections between these issues would have been welcome, but overall I found Sanchez's work very compelling in its use of ASL to mediate between the seeming contradictions in modernist aesthetic practice. *Deafening Modernism* is a truly groundbreaking work that bridges critical Deafness and modernist studies in an original—even crucial—way, and the Deaf epistemology it models is sure to add new vigor to the field of literary disability studies.

References

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