

**Deafening modernism: embodied language and visual poetics in American literature (Book Review)**

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**Deafening Modernism: embodied language and visual poetics in American literature**, by Rebecca Sanchez, New York, New York University Press, 2015, 240 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781479805556, £16.14 (eBook)

Although Sanchez is a Professor of English and *Deafening Modernism* is presented primarily as literary studies, it presents an important contribution to interdisciplinary disability studies more widely. Most obviously, Deaf studies should pay attention to the important points Sanchez makes about sign language and Deaf culture, which are often described primarily as “visual” but might also fruitfully be described as “embodied”; that is, sign language’s primary feature is that it cannot be separated from the body that produces it, unlike the written word. This important and under-utilised perspective underpins Sanchez’s argument that Deaf epistemology can and should be used not just in Deaf and disability studies but as a way to approach modern literature using “crip epistemic insight” (p.3). In other words, Sanchez does not simply analyse Deafness or disability in literature, she uses Deaf and disabled insights, primarily through the idea of embodied language, to understand and illuminate the nature of modernist literature and language itself.

In her introduction, Sanchez outlines some of the main ideas of disability studies, including the social model and criticisms that this model does not adequately address the embodied experiences of disability. She then covers some of the key issues around Deafness and language in the USA, covering some of the relevant history of Deaf education and the state’s requirement for its citizens to speak so-called standardised English. She convincingly argues that the suppression of American Sign Language (ASL) is linked to “structures of power invested in keeping bodies strictly under control” (Gilbert, 1995:341-345), lest they threaten those structures.

Chapter one discusses the tension between the modernist concern with the impersonal and the cult of celebrity surrounding poets such as T. S. Eliot. On the one hand, modernist poets were concerned with Barthes’ theory of the metaphorical death of the author (1978), while on the other, audiences were increasingly interested in the lives of poets, often conflating the authorial voice with the poetic. She considers these issues in relation to ASL poetry, in which the words of the author cannot be separated from the body, providing insight into how both English and ASL poetry deal with embodied subjects as the boundaries between subjects, objects and language constantly collapse and are rebuilt.

The second chapter, on primitivism, considers story-telling cultures and the ways in which cultural memory is passed on in oral (or signed) form. Sanchez covers the ways in which the US educational system enforced speech on Deaf signers, with the aim of controlling bodies which it saw as aberrant, comparing this to the reception of Josephine Baker’s dancing. She shows how Charlie Chaplin and Sherwood Anderson dealt with the ideas of enforced normalisation of speech. Rather than seeing works as primitive or backwards, Sanchez suggests that we reconsider them as responding to urgent, contemporary concerns that also consider universal, timeless questions.

Chapter three, ‘Difficulty’, uses insights from ASL linguistics to consider the ideas of modernist works’ juxtaposition and indeterminacy, which have been seen as not embodied. As signed languages work in very different ways to spoken and written languages (allowing a simultaneity of ideas) they allow us to consider these aspects of modernist works in new and exciting ways. Sanchez also discusses the relationship between the spoken and the written word, the latter of which has been seen as alienating the body, and the visual arts. She argues that these perspectives allow us to consider the body in modernist works in which they were previously considered absent.

The final substantive chapter considers the image in modernism, which is seen as being both present and truthful as well as having the potential to shift in time and space. Sanchez

uses ASL and Deaf epistemology to bring new insights to considering modernism, which also considers itself to be a visual culture. The cinematic nature of ASL poetry, as well as its fleeting nature, is used to consider temporality and image in works by H.D. and Faulkner. Finally, the epilogue suggests how the insights into embodied language might be applied to scientific advances such as the human genome – expressed as it is in letters and words. She suggests that texts are living things that can be better understood through a Deaf epistemology.

Sanchez's first book provides a refreshing approach to disability literary studies by not focusing on works by or about disabled people, or the meaning or role of disabled characters in texts. Some of the book's literary analysis might be outside of the comfort zone of the more traditional social science-based disability studies, as it is certainly based in a literary studies tradition. Nonetheless, it is worth persevering for Sanchez's insightful, thoughtful and original analysis. Equally, those without knowledge of signed languages need not be put off as the key issues are well explained. I recommend that readers watch the online videos of the ASL literature discussed (URLs given in the bibliography) to give a better idea of the points made by Sanchez.

It is a shame that the language of *Deafening modernism* might prove inaccessible to Deaf sign language users because of its academic language, although of course this is a wider problem in academia. However, those in Deaf, disability and Mad studies, as well as those in language, linguistics and literature, will certainly take a lot from Sanchez's innovative work. She manages to span an impressive array of topics, bringing in theorists, writers and poets covering Foucault, Charlie Chaplin, Stein, Yeats and more, as well as lesser-known ASL poets such as Cook and Lerner. Sanchez moves beyond the ideas of identity and difference to push the boundaries of current Deaf and disability studies.

## References

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