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The Radical Potential of Poetic Hesitation, and Other Everyday Dysfluencies

Jeffrey Careyva (Harvard University)

Résumé

Les hésitations dans la parole sont à la fois omniprésentes et négligées dans notre vie quotidienne. En accordant une plus grande attention aux grognements, aux bégaiements et aux blocages du corps parlant, on souligne le fait que les engrenages de la communication s'ébranlent souvent, à contre-courant des rythmes socialement prescrits de conversation. En m'appuyant sur la théorisation par Michel de Certeau de la glossolalie et du discours quotidien, ainsi que sur la critique des rythmes quotidiens d'Henri Lefebvre, je soutiens que l'hésitation vocale pourrait être une révélation inattendue (bien que souvent importune) dans le tissu social qui, si elle est acceptée plutôt qu'ignorée, ouvre l'espace et le temps nécessaires pour permettre de nouveaux modes d'interaction. Dans mon analyse de la poésie de William Carlos Williams, JJJJJerome Ellis et Adam Giannelli, j'adopte la perspective critique de la dysfluidité [*dysfluency*] en prêtant attention à la myriade d'hésitations dans le discours que nous avons tendance à ignorer poliment. L'incapacité intensifiée des locuteurs *dysfluents* à éviter un discours hésitant souligne la précarité des modèles d'interaction sociale et de signification « sans friction », et je vois l'hésitation comme le lieu d'un conflit entre l'attachement de notre société aux rythmes du statu quo et les locuteurs *dysfluents* qui ne voudraient pas (ou ne pourraient pas) les suivre. Bien que peu d'attention critique ait été accordée à la signification de l'hésitation vocale dans le rythme poétique, je montre comment, à travers leur emploi innovant de la forme poétique, tous ces poètes s'attaquent à la gestion de leur discours hésitant en l'incorporant dans leur poétique plutôt qu'en le gommant. Je suggère en outre que les hésitations offrent un espace critique publiquement humilié mais sous-évalué pour cartographier notre incapacité à maîtriser la communication ainsi que notre ingéniosité pour transformer un déficit perçu en un surplus imaginatif et provocant.

Mots-clés : poésie, dysfluency, rythme, bégaiement, vie quotidienne

Abstract

Hesitations in speech are a ubiquitous but neglected presence in our daily lives. Paying closer attention to the speaking body's grunts, stutters, and tongue-ties highlights the fact that the gears of communication often grind, if not to a halt, then at least against the flow of the socially prescribed rhythms of conversation. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's theorization of glossolalia and everyday speech as well as Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday rhythms, I argue that vocal hesitation could be an unexpected (if often unwelcome) exposure in the social fabric that, if embraced rather than smoothed over, opens the space and time needed to allow for new modes of interaction. In readings of the poetry of William Carlos Williams, JJJJJerome Ellis, and Adam Giannelli, I take the critical perspective of dysfluency by paying attention to the myriad of hesitations in speech we politely tend to ignore. Dysfluent speakers' more-than-usual failure at avoiding hesitant speech highlights the precarity of "frictionless" models of social interaction and signification, and I see hesitancy as the site of conflict between our society's commitment to the rhythms of the status quo and dysfluent speakers who would not (or could not) follow them. While not much critical attention has been paid to vocal hesitation's significance in poetic rhythm, I show how through their innovative employment of poetic form, all of these poets grapple with the management of their hesitant speech by incorporating it into their poetics rather than smoothing it over. I further suggest that hesitations offer a publicly shamed yet undervalued critical space for mapping our inability to master communication as well as our resourcefulness for turning a perceived deficit into an imaginative and provocative surplus.

Keywords: poetry, dysfluency, rhythm, stuttering, everyday life

Introduction

Hesitations disrupt the rhythms of everyday life and speech. Each stutter, pause, or vocal block extends an uncomfortable moment in conversation and flows against the grain of our social expectations for fluency and speed. You try to order a dish at a restaurant but suddenly lose the ability to speak its name to the waiter. You need your driver's license or passport updated, and the clerk's simple questions leave you dumbstruck. You find yourself in a lovers' spat and cannot repeat the simple words that would put an end to the conflict. These banal, everyday moments are usually best ignored and quickly forgotten. Yet, they speak to the fact that as much as linguists, semioticians, rhetoricians, and philosophers of language highlight the complex functions of speech across a wide variety of settings, there is somehow, *maybe fittingly*, very little to be said about the failures of language, about the phenomenology of being at a loss for words, about hesitation rather than quick and fluent speech.[1] Spend a couple of hours in any busy cafe however, and the sounds of hesitancy—"umm", "hmm", "I…I…I…"—and uncomfortable silences abound.

Hesitancy is an absent presence in our daily lives, and it marks the fact that the gears of communication often grind, if not to a halt, then at least against the flow of the socially prescribed rhythms of conversations. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's theorization of everyday speech and glossolalia and Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday rhythms, I argue that vocal hesitation could be an unexpected (if often unwelcome) exposure in the social fabric that, if embraced rather than smoothed over, opens the space and time needed to allow for new modes of interaction. Out of politeness we regularly excuse hesitations and turn the other cheek to their disruptions, thus pretending like they never happened. But to those for whom society makes speaking in public a problem, such as disabled or neurodivergent people with "speech impediments", this politeness finds itself quickly stretched too thin to allow for their full participation in society. For a lifelong stutterer like myself for example, the inability to follow consistently the expected momentum of everyday speech makes all too clear how much these rhythms rarely cater to individuals. The hesitant rhythms of what I would call *dysfluent* speakers highlight the arbitrary character of linguistic codes and rhythms (and thus the possibility of altering them), but their hesitations are far from the only ones that exist, even in polite society. Everybody is occasionally at a loss for words, or repeats syllables, or experiences the awkward sensation of a "cat got your tongue" moment. As Craig Dworkin suggests in "The Stutter of Form", "communicative transparency has such symbolic force that we tend to forget the extent to which a range of corporeal opacities are in fact a perfectly normal part of speech production" (Dworkin 2009, 166).

Building off emerging "dysfluency studies" scholars such as Joshua St. Pierre and Chris Eagle, I take the critical perspective of dysfluency by paying attention to the myriad of hesitations, stutters, blips, mispronunciations, and umms we all too politely pretend to ignore. For St. Pierre, a critical understanding of fluency "attends both to ableist practices of communication and to the distinctly temporal aspect of ableist norms that govern embodied difference under neoliberalism and globalized capitalism" (St. Pierre 2017, 340). Dysfluent speakers' more-than-usual failure at avoiding hesitant speech highlights the precarity of "frictionless" models of social interaction and signification, and I see hesitancy as the site of conflict between our society's commitment to the rhythms of the status quo and dysfluent speakers who would not (or could not) follow them. Building from St. Pierre's analysis, I

[1] There are of course notable exceptions, including Cheryl Glenn's work like Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence (2004) and Alia Al-Saji's chapter "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing" from Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race (2014).

suggest that hesitations offer a publicly shamed yet undervalued critical space for mapping our inability to master communication as well as our resourcefulness for turning a perceived deficit into an imaginative surplus. The literary works I examine below all make something out of hesitancy, rather than ignoring it or smoothing it over. Many stutterers know the experience of someone filling in their pauses with the wrong words, for example, as if the pressure for maintaining the rhythm of conversation calls for ventriloquism. But if we were to sit with hesitation and explore its openings instead of so quickly closing them off, hesitation's denial of fluency could serve as an entry point for divergent modes of speaking and listening, of crafting novel expressions and aesthetics. Rather than merely considering people tongue-tied and incapable, we could consider each hesitation as a knot in time that ties together what came before, the stalled moment of the present, and the uncertain expectation of what could be coming next.

When looking for examples of potent hesitancy in literature, we might think of what Theodore Ziolkowski refers to as the "hesitant heroes" of capstone western works like the *Aeneid* or *Hamlet* whose heroes' hesitations to act suggest the cultural crises that shaped their creation and reception. (There also exists myriad works that depict hesitant speakers, such as Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* or Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.) This is certainly a valid approach, but in my opinion, lyric poetry offers a privileged site for exploring the functions of hesitancy and dysfluency. More than perhaps any other genre, lyric is celebrated for its elegance and mesmerizing rhythms, yet its memorable language is built from repetitive sonic and syntactical patterns that often flow unexpectedly. In a rhythmically hypnotic poem like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufock" for example, T. S. Eliot's dreary speaker assures himself that there will be "Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea" (Eliot 2018, 1401). What poetry offers us is not only a perspective on the representation of hesitant figures like the lovelorn Prufrock, but also examples of how hesitancy can inspire innovations in poetic form. Eliot's poem for instance employs hypnotic formal effects such as anaphora, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance to generate a languid, hesitant mood. Hesitation influences then the level of *poiesis*, of how poetry is *made* in the first place, rather than only how hesitations are depicted.

In what follows, I further explore hesitation's disruptive, creative potential through the work of three poets: William Carlos Williams, JJJJJerome Ellis, and Adam Giannelli. Through innovative employment of poetic form, all of these poets grapple with the management of their hesitant speech while listening to and incorporating hesitation rather than smoothing it over. Prefacing my readings is a discussion of the significance hesitation plays in the work of de Certeau and Lefebvre as a potential source of social disruption. This disruptive potential of hesitation, which dysfluent speakers know all too well, is precisely what accounts of lyric poetry often miss in their approach to recognizing the powers of rhythm. Without further hesitation…

Hesitation and the Rhythms of Everyday Life

In an era in which there is seemingly no way outside of the economic, structural, and ideological forces that shape our available ways of life, Michel de Certeau's project in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (first published in 1980) hopes to make possible the discovery of creativity within an everyday life so otherwise constricted. De Certeau investigates how people employ to their own ends the systems and institutions into which they are coerced. Individuals' creative, tricky uses of these systems are what he defines as "tactics", which are opposed to the "strategies" that hierarchized institutions of power employ to maintain themselves. His examples consist mostly of what we today would call "quiet quitting"—goofing off at work, using the company's resources for your own

projects—though as he approaches the question of how individuals may tactically use language, de Certeau makes space for hearing the body before and beyond language, for attending to its murmurs and screams that fall on either side of the linguistic system. He approaches the surpluses of language as if on a mythic journey, venturing on "a quest for lost and ghostly voices [...], these fragile ways in which the body makes itself heard in the language" (de Certeau 1984, 131). The myriad of inarticulate sounds we produce "seem to certify, by a 'disorder' secretly referred to an unknown order, that there is something else, something other" (*Ibid.*, 163-164) beyond language. De Certeau doesn't specify what this something could be, but I read it as not only the vocal excess that suffuses our speech but also the bodily source for unexpected utterances: our umms and ahhs, our hemming and hawing, our involuntary stutters and tongue-ties. The range of sounds our bodies produce exceeds the phonemes and expected rhythms of any singular language, which prevents the body—and associated concerns like proper enunciation, control, and fluency—from completely fading away from our experience of everyday communication. There are "ways of speaking" (*Ibid.*, 156), as de Certeau calls them, left over for each speaking body that cannot be avoided even if we don't intend to produce them.

At first apparent in de Certeau's analysis is how he leaves open to individuals what we could basically call style, i.e. everyone's unique usage of language, their own turns of phrase and refashioning of stock tropes. His emphasis on bodily experience however gestures beyond creative combinations of words and towards the sub- and extra-linguistic levels. Also first published in 1980, de Certeau's "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias" ventures much further into the mess of hesitant and unrestricted sounds the body could produce. Glossolalia means more than just *speaking in tongues* for de Certeau, as he suggests that "[a] glossolalia already pushes up through the cracks of ordinary conversation: bodily noises, quotations of delinquent sounds, and fragments of others' voices punctuate the order of sentences with breaks and surprises" (Certeau 1996, 29). Glossolalia showcases the pre- and post-linguistic, the generation of sounds from the body that make speech physically possible, as well as the breaking apart and remixing of phonemes into unfamiliar and startling combinations. In its sometimes frightening and revelatory excess, glossolalia figures as a kind of vocal "utopia" for de Certeau, insofar as it represents possibilities of the speaking voice not limited by the rules of language or the etiquette of discourse. Given glossolalia's frequent depiction as a sudden, rapid, and somewhat sustained burst of unintelligible speech, we may think that glossolalia is opposed to hesitation, but de Certeau includes "occasional stammers, hesitations, and vocal tics, or lapses and drifting sounds" (*Ibid.*, 30) as examples. Moreover, hesitating to communicate in a shared language does not necessarily mean to stop speaking; a stutter for example is often a prolongation of a sound that might appear like nonsense out of context. These unkempt, unseemly, and often uncontrollable ways of speaking highlight the materiality of language in the speaking body as it remains unconfinable to any mutually intelligible system of signs.

If de Certeau's investigation into the unacknowledged possibilities of expression ventures into the mythical, the work of Henri Lefebvre on the rhythms of everyday life keeps us rooted in hesitation's banal yet telling situations. Lefebvre's three volume project, the *Critique of Everyday Life*, spans roughly four decades as he explores the monotonous world of the everyday from an evolving post-WWII perspective. Lefebvre is concerned with how we reduce the alienation of everyday life, and in resistance to French Marxist orthodoxy at the time, he finds that "socialism (the new society, the new life) can only be defined *concretely* on the level of everyday life, as a system of changes in what can be called lived experience" (Lefebvre 2008b, 49).

The repetition of the same in bourgeois culture frankly disgusts Lefebvre: "[b]ourgeois individualism implies the

dreary, ludicrous repetition of individuals who are curiously similar in their way of being themselves and of keeping themselves to themselves, in their speech, their gestures, their everyday habits" (152). Lefebvre's theoretical effort to understand this repetition is simultaneously an encouragement for us step away from it, to hesitate from following the socially prescribed rhythms of work, leisure, and rest that would make each individual so uniform and dronelike. The task of opening up the everyday rhythms of production and consumption increases in relevance across the evolution of Lefebvre's project; by volume two, he suggests that a robust critique of everyday life must study "the persistence of rhythmic time scales within the linear time of modern industrial society", as well as "the defects and disquiet" the socialized combination of linear and cyclic scales produces for the individual (Lefebvre 2002, 49). In the supposed linear march towards progress and increased productivity, the task for the critic is to demonstrate how contemporary capitalism a) takes advantage of cyclical rhythms present in the human lifespan and natural environment, and b) imposes an alien set of rhythms onto the individual's repetitive everyday life.

By the end of his career, Lefebvre would further explore the force of rhythm with the third volume of his *Critique* alongside one of his last projects, *Rhythmanalysis*, which seeks to establish the groundwork for the study of the body's rhythms across multiple environments. The goal of his investigations is not so much to do away with repetition or rhythm's compelling force, but rather to understand the way multiple rhythms (like those originating within the body and those imposed from without) interact. As Lefebvre suggests, "[r]hythm does not prevent the desire for, and pleasure of, discovery"; it is in "*linear repetition*, by contrast, [that] the formal and material identity of each 'stroke' is recognized, generating lassitude, boredom, and fatigue" (Lefebvre 2008a, 129 [my emphasis]). The dominance of the linear repetition of capitalist society creates "a need of [different] rhythms", such as those to be found in music, and various other Dionysian rhythms of "rupture, transgression, ecstasy" (*Ibid.*, 135). Revolution for Lefebvre must have the radical transformation of monotonous daily life as its goal. This means not a simplification of social relations but the welcoming of a greater rhythmical complexity, "a different way of living, extending to the creation of a new social space, a different social time" (*Ibid.*, 165), liberated from the existing forces that reproduce our tedious schedules.

To look more closely at the socially prescribed rhythms that our bodies attempt to adopt, we may turn to the sociological and anthropological work of Marcel Mauss. Mauss conceptualizes the rhythms and postures of our bodies as culturally acquired "techniques", which are "assembled for the individual not by himself alone but by all his education, by the whole society to which he belongs, in the place he occupies in it" (Mauss 2006, 83). Mauss's key examples include the walking patterns of different national militaries—as well as young people influenced by the exaggerated sauntering of American film actors—but we may very well add the rhythms and intonations of speech to Mauss's catalog of bodily techniques. Lefebvre echoes Mauss when he highlights the role of "dressage", i.e., of repeatedly breaking and bending ourselves to fit into society's rhythms— "Humans break themselves in [*se dressent*] like animals" (Lefebvre 2021, 48). Hesitations of speech manifest in the repetitions and blocks that never seem to finish breaking the speaker into language as a social and poetic practice.[2]

Given both de Certeau and Lefebvre's acknowledgement of the friction between the rhythms of the individual and those of capitalist society, dysfluency offers a canny subject position from which to launch a critique of the everyday. Who knows better the tactics required to talk to a stranger,

[2] In his discussion of Marcel Mauss's techniques of the body, Haun Saussy highlights how the techniques of the body "reveal themselves to consciousness as techniques, as artifices, when things do not go according to plan—and they would not do this if the bodies were simply carrying out successful goal-directed actions according to a technique" (Saussy 2019, 113).

or to navigate systems of education that demand linguistic competency, than someone for whom everyday speech is a recurring problem? Like de Certeau, Lefebvre finds there to be some room for a breaking away from mechanical life—"yet, at moments of intense risk, in passion and poetry, daily life shatters, and something different comes through with the work, whether act, speech or object" (Lefebvre 2008a, 95)—and I suggest the *everyday* troubles of dysfluent speakers accentuate these gaps where something else could 'come through', even as social pressures like shame and embarrassment would, out of politeness, close them off. Lefebvre includes "[e]loquence and verbal rhythms" (Lefebvre 2021, 27) in his taxonomy of rhythms and he suggests that we tend to notice individual rhythms only when they break down from illness or injury (*Ibid.*, 37)[3], but he offers few examples in his analysis. He does suggest however that a good rhythmanalyst takes their own bodily rhythms as reference for studying larger social rhythms, leaving dysfluent and disabled people as perhaps the most suited to this new science due to the self-awareness that society already forces them to cultivate.

Taking Your Time with Poetry

While poetry's relationship to everyday life is tenuous—Lefebvre, indeed, imagines poetry as a potentially disruptive force upon the repetitive everyday—there is less doubt about poetry's ability to offer enrapturing rhythmic experiences. When imagining the role of hesitation in poetry, the first concept that might come to mind is the *caesura*, that enigmatic and palpable pause occurring in the middle of lines since at least the old English of "Cædmon's Hymn." The caesura's impact on the flow or rhythm of lyric is significant, even if caesura is, as Friedrich Hölderlin describes, "a counter-rhythmic intrusion", that stitches together rhythmic units (quoted in Lacoue-Barthe 1998, 234).[4] Additional features like punctuation, meter, line breaks, and repetitive patterns like alliteration secure the foundational role that rhythm—and by extension, hesitation—plays in genre. We popularly think of lyric as a moment of heightened eloquence and emotional intensity, and some stutters find that their everyday hesitations disappear when singing, acting, or reading lines of poetry—i.e., the kinds of speech acts that foreground sound over sense as well as borrowing somebody else's words. Despite its tangible impact on readers, the study of rhythm in lyric poetry has been decentralized: much of the focus has lied on the highly specific affordances and historical contexts of meter and prosody, or else broad gestures towards the sense of community that a shared rhythm grants to the inheritors of poetic traditions. Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015) for example focuses on institutions and defining distinct literary periods as she explores rhythm and prosody's ability to organize our temporal experience on larger social scales. Derek Attridge's popular works such as *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (1982) or *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (1995) emphasize the cohesive role that 4-beat prosody has played across the English language tradition. While rhythm shapes lyric poetry's uniqueness as a genre, scholars often work around the question of how rhythm affects the reader's sensuous experience of a poem.

In her striking discussion of lyric's spellbinding rhythmical potential in *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the*

[3] Lefebvre suggests again: "We are only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin to suffer from some irregularity" (Lefebvre 2021, 86). In his analysis of Lefebvre, Sunil Manghani highlights the ethical and medical valences of his theorization: "Lefebvre uses various terms that suggest order, disorder, pathology, and health. [...] There is seemingly an implied interest in or *desire* for 'good rhythm'" (Manghani 2021, 153).

[4] In his brief look at Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Hölderlin's concept of caesura, Jacques Derrida reformulates Hölderlin's formulation as "antirhythmic" and "arrythmic [sic]". As Jacques Derrida concludes in his introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typographies*: "Gap or hiatus: the open mouth. To give and receive. The caesura sometimes takes your breath away. When luck is with it, it's to let you speak" (Derrida in Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 42).

Pleasure of Words, Mutlu Blasing holds the slow and hesitant process of language acquisition as central to her theory of the lyric. The pleasure of poetry for Blasing consists in returning to this moment of our entrance into the world of language, in putting on pause so to speak language's semiotic function in order to delight in its play of sounds like a babbling *infant* still unable to speak intelligibly. In her framework, the experience of poetry is split between cognizing the meaning of a poem's words and attending to the patterns of sound that the poem orchestrates. One could for example attend to either Prufrock's silky rhymes and assonances *or* his rhetoric of existential dread and indecision, but not both successfully at the same time. For a theory of poetry rooted in the natural, everyday acquisition of language, the significance that "delay" plays in Blasing's framework is notable:

> Poetic effects thus entail a delay or a disruption of smooth cognitive functioning […]. Poetic forms of repetition ensure the experience of such delay, which recalls the lived, "historical" delay in the acquisition of different phonemes. Attention to sounds that linger in memory, the pleasure of lingering between acoustic and phonemic processing, and the emotional value of this delay in cognition constitute a conscious, subjective experience of time that is a living history (Blasing 2009, 51).

It takes time and often multiple readings for us a) to attune our ears to a lyric's dense patterns and b) to develop a sense of what lyrical language might mean, and in Blasing's point of view, both discontinuous processes mirror our infantile acquisition of language. The key force in acquiring language for Blasing is rhythm: "Learning language depends on a rhythmic training that precedes and enables meaningful speech" (*Ibid.*, 53). Learning language is as much about attaining a rhythmic competence with speaking and listening as much as it is in recognizing the connotations and denotations of words. Rhythmic competence in language is "learned" (*Ibid.*, 54)—"the rhythmic body is the 'socially constructed body'" (*Ibid.*, 58)—and lyric's rhythmic play serves as a pleasurable activity that recalls the novelty, fascination, and even the pain, of our entrance into verbal language.

Blasing outlines how rhythm serves to constitute individual subjects in language and also brings much of the affective impact of lyric, but she does not significantly consider the possible failures or hesitations *within* the process of rhythmic socialization. Everybody may have a different emotional resonance to the sounds of language, but what about those like dysfluent speakers for whom spoken language becomes a problem? Blasing draws on psychoanalytic theories of the trauma of linguistic socialization, but seems to assume a singular outcome that everyone can more or less be socialized in these rhythms. Theories of lyric poetry like that of Blasing or Jonathan Culler's *The Theory of the Lyric* (2014) like to highlight lyric poetry's ease of absorption: we all know bits of songs and nursery rhymes by heart, and the same devices that structure these nonsensical songs deliver similar effects across the history of the lyric genre. But we should also acknowledge the awkwardness that beginner readers of poetry can feel of not knowing when to catch their breath, slow down, or hesitate before starting the next line. Poems without clear punctuation for example become uncertain scores even for the trained reader, regardless of the role that our rhythmic socialization has on our enjoyment of the genre.

Hesitant Form & William Carlos Williams

Across his poetic career, William Carlos Williams emphasized the need for American poetry to re-incorporate the novel rhythms and quirky cadences of spoken language. Rhythm has been an important topic for Williams since at least his 1913 essay "Speech Rhythm", but the subject of shaking off the shackles of poetry's rhythmic past acquires new urgency in his later work. In his 1948 lecture "The Poem as a Field of Action", for example, Williams launches an attack of "the rigidity of

the poetic foot" (1969, 289) and "the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza" (*Ibid.*, 281). In the wake of the incredible technological and sociological change after World War II, Williams finds that poetry needs to catch up to the present pace of a society that has embraced such novelty as Einsteinian relativity. Like Lefebvre, Williams finds himself wondering how so much yet so little has changed. Sonnets in iambic pentameter may have suited Shakespeare, but Williams announces the need for new forms that could measure and orchestrate poetic rhythm for the present.

While many American poets would take Williams's message to heart (or reject his narrow understanding of what traditional forms offer to the present), less acknowledged is the fact that Williams's own last decade of poetic output was rocked by a series of medical and personal crises, including a series of strokes in 1951, 1952, and 1958 that subsequently left him physically disabled, visually impaired, and experiencing expressive aphasia, i.e. brain damage that can affect all facets of one's language abilities. In Williams' case, he could struggle to call to mind the right word he wanted to say, find himself repeating words or syllables in speech and on the page, or have difficulty reading quickly through one of his old poems with short lines and frequent enjambments.[5] As the world was seemingly speeding up, Williams had to slow himself down. In a letter to John Hilmes from May of 1952—a year after Williams's first stroke—Williams writes:

> What shall we say more of the verse that is to be left behind by the age we live in if it does not have some of the marks the age has made upon us, its poets? The traumas of today, God knows, are plain enough upon our minds. Then how shall our poems escape? They should be horrible things, those poems. To the classical muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores. They should be hunchbacked, limping. And yet our poems must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them. And we must SUCCEED even while we succumb… (Williams 1984, 315-316)

In a fall 1960 interview with Walter Sutton, Williams begins his discussion of his poems' formal innovations by straightforwardly stating, "This stops me at the first thing. I'll have to get you used to my hesitation in speech and all."[6] Williams's later poetry is thus inflected not only by his desire to render new rhythms of speech in poetic form but also his own need to hesitate in language.

A poem like "To Daphne and Virginia" (1954) for example showcases the connections Williams was making between hesitation and poetic expression in his last decade. By the second stanza, Williams offers an apology for his current state of health as well as his reliance on poetry:

> Be patient that I address you in a poem,
> there is no other
> fit medium.
> The mind
> lives there. It is uncertain,
> can trick us and leave us
> agonized. But for resources,
> what can equal it?
> There is nothing. [...]
>
> (Williams 1988, 246-247).

Williams late poetry makes room for hesitation, for taking one's time and asking for needed patience. Given the agonies and resources of the mind, poetry is the

[5] In his analysis of Williams's poetry readings of the 1950s, Raphael Allison points to Williams's reading of "To a Mexican Pig Bank" at UC Berkeley in 1955 as an example of his struggling with the rhythms of his earlier poetry. For Allison, Williams's invention of the variable foot through such poems as "The Desert Music" (1951) represents a privately accessible score for the recently disabled poet. For a further analysis of the role that physical disability and verbal dysfluency plays in Williams's late career, please see my forthcoming article in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, "William Carlos Williams and the Dysfluent Poetics of Aphasia".

[6] You can hear Williams begin to speak after the first 20 seconds of the recorded interview, which is available on Williams's *PennSound* page: https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/Williams-WC_Interviews-with-Walter-Sutton_Oct-Nov-1960.mp3.

appropriate medium for expressing oneself through use of its disjunctive rhythms. The organizing principles behind the triply-indented form that Williams would use across much of the 1950s, the variable foot, remain ambiguous to critics, though several have theorized connections between Williams's late-in-life disabilities and his use of indented lines with frequent enjambments.[7] The staircase-shaped pattern assists the eye in tracking down and across the page, and the regular opportunity to continue or hesitate after each short line suits Williams's perhaps dysfluent speaking abilities. Later in the poem, Williams relates that,

> In our family we stammer unless,
> half mad,
> we come to speech at last .
>
> (*Ibid.*, 248)[8]

While vocal hestitation implicitly shapes Williams's last decade of poetic innovation and performance, my next two examples very explicitly take advantage of the creative potential that stuttering in particular provides.

"The Clearing" by JJJJJerome Ellis

Across his multimodal creative work, poet and composer JJJJJerome Ellis harnesses the productive disruption that hesitations such as stuttering provide. (The styling of Ellis's first name speaks to the fact that many stutterers tend to stutter their name when introducing themselves.) While Williams turns to new vocal rhythms and patterns of indentation, Ellis's work employs the resources of music—such as loops, tempo rubato, and melisma—to think of dysfluent speech not as a failure of fluency but rather as an opening up of other temporalities and cadences. In his critical and creative work Ellis explores the concept of the "clearing," which I might begin to define as a suggestive opening in space and/or time that could lead to other paths than the one you took to get there. The clearing is a gathering space, calling back for Ellis to enslaved people's clandestine meetings away from the watch of overseers, where repressed subjects can explore rhythms and ways of being elsewhere unauthorized. Ellis searches the potential for hesitations in speech to open such spaces in *The Clearing* (2021), a twelve-track musical album that Ellis also meticulously and imaginately transcribes as a printed book. *The Clearing* draws from a wide set of sources—such as his own experience of stuttering, historical slave narratives, and Bernie Mac's stand-up—to think about how Blackness and dysfluency relate to one another. One of Ellis's first theses states that since fluent speech has historically been used to distinguish humans from other, subhuman animals, "then black [...] dysfluency places the paradox of black humanity [...] in the body" (Ellis 2021, 6-7). The dysfluent Black body would be somehow doubly inhuman through the failure of meeting the standards of both fluency and whiteness.

My quotation above fails to do justice to Ellis's "experiment in melismatic writing." The first transcribed song, "Loops of Retreat"[9] showcases Ellis's own innovative typographical practice. The time of performance is marked on the left-side margin in 5 second intervals, and whenever Ellis speaks with a hesitation, he fills the space of the page with the first letter of the stuttered syllable until the vocal block is over. The opening "d" of *dysfluency* for example begins around the 5th second mark and

[7] In her 1989 article "William Carlos Williams' Triadic-Line Verse: An Analysis of Its Prosody", Eleanor Berry surveys the various theories of how Williams's late-in-life formal innovation might function.

[8] The extra space here between "last" and the period reflects how the text is arranged in the 1988 edition of Williams's *Collected Poems*. "To Daphne and Virginia" is far from the only poem that takes advantage of this technique, which is possibly inspired by the way Williams composed with his typewriter.

[9] This performance on YouTube shows Ellis performing roughly the first half of the song/poem (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pbsc2DYOCBs) with several differences in the timing and duration of his hesitations.

continues until almost the 20th second (Ellis 2021, 3). While these stutters—which for Ellis, tend to consist of a glottal block—are often difficult to hear if not inaudible in the recording, the transcription makes their presence tangible, even monumental, on the space of the page. These hesitations are not simple failures to speak but more like an approach or anticipation of what's coming next. As the transcription continues across *The Clearing*'s 12 tracks, Ellis ventures into typographic play using these repeated letters, making them into a variety of shapes and curved lines à la concrete poetry. "The Bookseller, Part 1" for example showcases just some of the creative liberty Ellis takes. The pronoun "I", which the speaker is unable to pronounce quickly enough on the phone, multiplies and runs across the page, letting these repetitions convey a sense of urgency and frustration as the Barnes & Noble employee that Ellis is trying to speak to assumes that they've lost connection. While Ellis's "I" is absent for the employee's experience of the phone call, the transcription makes the "I" paramountly clear and expressive as it visualizes how so much is going on behind what might otherwise seem like a silent hesitation on the phone.

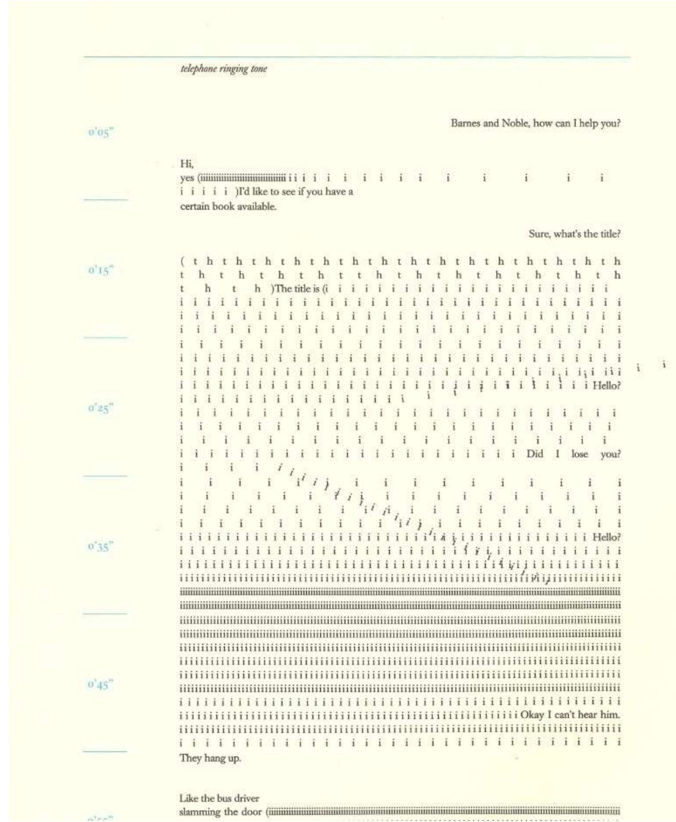

Figure 1 – page 29 of The Clearing (2021) featuring the track "The Bookseller, Part 1", copyright 2021 JJJJJerome Ellis and Wendy's Subway.

Even as Ellis's experimental writing suggests temporal rhythms outside of linear time—such as in "The Bookseller, Part 2" which records a second call made to Barnes & Noble—his multimodal project remains rooted in his own experience alongside other accounts of Black dysfluency. Moreover, everyday situations of communication and the body's under-acknowledged 'ways of speaking' work as opportune material for Ellis's explorations in sound and print.

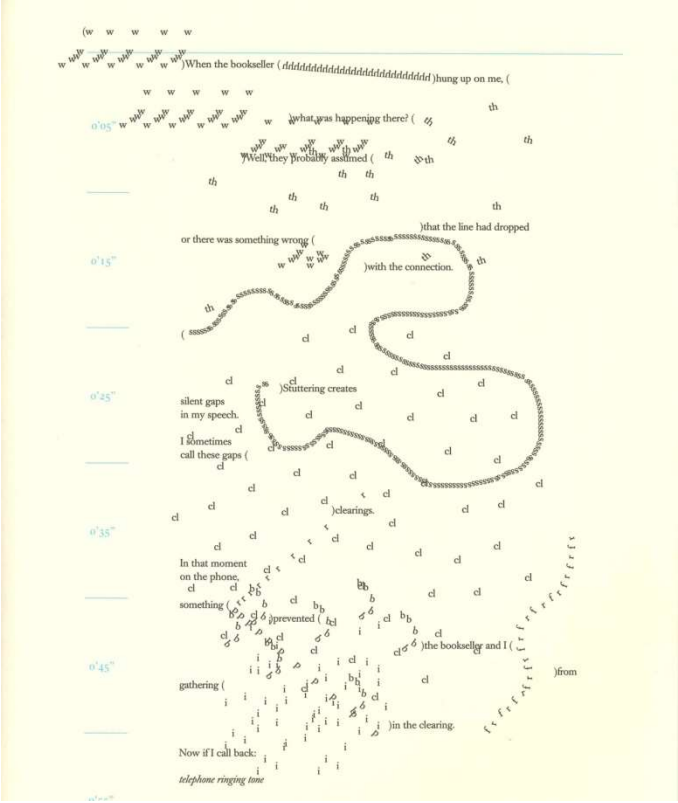

Figure 2 – page 57 of The Clearing (2021) featuring the track "The Bookseller, Part 2", copyright 2021 JJJJJerome Ellis and Wendy's Subway.

In other contexts however, the discussion of vocal dysfluency's influence on aesthetics quickly tends to abstract away from everyday experience. The most influential theorization of the aesthetic of stuttering comes from the work of Gilles Deleuze (and sometimes Félix Guattari), who also sees stuttering as a radical opening up of language's repressed potential. Inspired by J. L. Austin's divisions of speech acts in *How to Do Things With Words*, Deleuze in his essay "He Stuttered" points to a three-pronged schema of stuttering that gets increasingly abstract. What I would call mimetic stuttering for Deleuze consists of the imitation of the sound of a stutter, and descriptive stuttering is simply saying that someone stutters or hesitates. But it's the third level, that of performative stuttering, which Deleuze is by far the most interested in. As Deleuze provocatively explains:

> This is what happens when the stuttering no longer affects pre-existing words, but, rather, itself ushers in the words that it affects; in this case, the words do not exist independently of the stutter, which selects and links them together. It is no longer the individual who stutters in his speech, it is the writer who stutters in the language system: he causes language as such to stutter" (Deleuze 1994, 23).[10]

At this stage of abstraction and figuration, stuttering for Deleuze is not about any specific speaker or disability. Stuttering is a kind of disruption or freedom introduced into the language system, and even more explicitly than de Certeau and Lefebvre, Deleuze offers hesitations in literary language as opposition to the forces that continually seek to shape the way language is used. Deleuze offers a fascinating framework for considering the role of dysfluency in writing, but by the level of the performative stutter, he leads us away from the everyday experience of dysfluent speakers and towards a much more figurative thinking about hesitation. Deleuze's examples in "He Stuttered" range from Kafka and Beckett to Kleist and Artaud, and it's clear that what Deleuze is talking about is a *style* that destabilizes or opens up our expectations for language and how it can be used. Deleuze lets us think of something like an aesthetic of the stutter and perhaps broadens our conception of the 'tactics' that stuttering makes available, but he also removes us from the everyday moments—such as trying to order a book over the phone—where stuttering first creates a problem for conventional communication.

[10] The labels "mimetic stuttering" and "describing stuttering" are my own description of Deleuze's first two categories drawn from Austin, but "the performative" is the label Deleuze uses explicitly. If critics do not reference "He Stuttered", they are prone to cite instead Deleuze's longer account of performative stuttering in Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature co-written with Felix Guattari, or also Deleuze's essay "One Manifesto Less."

"Stutter" by Adam Giannelli

For a final look at hesitation's poetic potential I turn to Adam Giannelli's poem "Stutter," which opens his 2017 collection *Tremulous Hinge*. "Stutter" riffs on a skill many stutterers find themselves having to acquire: quickly substituting a different word or phrase when you feel like you're going to stutter on what you would otherwise want to say. Giannelli fashions poetry out of what de Certeau might recognize as the tactics of stuttering, of developing a different relationship with spoken language that treats language more like a 'borrowed' resource than an assumed power. The imposition to *say what you mean* is overwritten in this poem by the limited ability to *say what you can*. "Stutter" opens:

---

since I couldn't say *tomorrow*
I said *Wednesday*

since I couldn't say *Cleveland* I said
Ohio
since I couldn't say *hello*

I hung up
since I couldn't say *burger*

a waitress finished
my sentence

(Giannelli 2017, 3)

For a work titled after a communication disability, I find it notable that the poem at first blush refuses to represent hesitations of speech typographically; there is no rapid, Porky Pig-esque, repetition of syllables like "I-I-I-I-I". Rather, the poem takes advantage of the typographical potential of the printed page that Williams so depends on, and that Ellis remarkably explores (similarly via his own hesitations on the phone). Giannelli's use of subtle differences in enjambments and indentations reflects the hesitations of stuttering without reducing the stutter to an easily identifiable mark. For example by the second couplet, the poem introduces a novel form of hesitation: the anaphoric structure of "since I couldn't say X / I said Y" is broken when the third line ends abruptly with "said", and the fourth line begins a new clause while introducing a gap between "*Ohio"* and "since." The sonic and visual rhythm of the poem develops unsteadily, as these admissions of what the poetic speaker couldn't say in the past become the material for his current creative expression. Even if a listener thought that the speaker delivered their answers fluently, this poem highlights stuttering's less obvious effects on the speaker's entire approach to communication.

Although the repetition of first syllables defines the popular representation of stuttering, any stutter knows that blocks, elongations of syllables, and a variety of repetitions make stuttering elusive to transcribe faithfully. Giannelli's play with enjambment and indentation avoids the impossibility of perfect depiction while also embracing poetry's penchant for metaphor and simile. The poem presents multiple openings via catachresis and variously funny, surreal, and telling flights of imagination, for example:

---

since I couldn't say my name
I opened
as if preparing for a throat
culture (*Ibid.*)

The white space between "opened" and "as if" typographically performs a hesitation on the page, as if mimicking the opening of the mouth of the speaker or reader. The poem goes on to represent the different orientation that the lifelong stutterer takes to everyday life: there is not only the time-consuming (and often embarrassing) sessions of speech therapy, but also the everyday problems of ordering what you want from a cashier ("since I couldn't say *pistachio* / I ordered *hazelnut*"), of people losing their patience and finishing your sentences for you. It's not so much that a stutter adds an inordinate amount of time to a conversation, but that it can render the rhythm of conversation unfamiliar.

The issue lies not solely in the dysfluent speaker's incomplete mastery of language, but in the relationships between speakers and the shared resource of language. As Giannelli explains, "alone in my room I can / speak any word" (*Ibid.*, 5). He also find vowels easier to pronounce, which perhaps underlies the final stutter-substitution in the poem of the word *memory* for the more luxurious sounding *underbloom*: "since I can't say *memory* I say / *underbloom*" (*Ibid.*). The last three lines—"and under me / a mulberry tree / a puddle shorn from the storm" (*Ibid.)* —delight in the smooth and alluring repetition of vowel sounds that a critic like Blasing holds central to lyric poetry, without assuming a normative relationship to spoken language. The final verb of the poem, "shorn", speaks to speech being artificially cut off from the outside. But to shorn is also to make space for new growth. The speaker begins perhaps by making do with the careful and tactical employment of language around their stutter, until the last lines relish in stuttering as a personal route to creative expression.

Conclusion

Taken together, Williams, Ellis, and Giannelli each show hesitation's potential as a creative and disruptive force. Beyond the printed page or recorded performance however, a world in which these poets would always be granted the chance to speak at their own pace remains a distant utopia. In the introductory sessions of Roland Barthes's 1977 lecture at the Collège de France—"How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces"—Barthes looks to literary works like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Magic Mountain* as suggestions for more ideal ways in which we might live together without constantly interfering with one another. In his first introductory lectures he shares his incidental discovery of the concept of *idiorrhythm* as practiced by the Christian monastic communities of Mount Athos, Greece. In contrast to the communal structures of cenobitic monasticism, practices of idiorrhythmic monasticism consist of the devout living largely alone yet still taking advantage of communal gatherings and services. As Barthes summarizes: "monks [live] both isolated from and in contact with one another within a particular type of structure [...] Where each subject lives according to his own rhythm" (Barthes 2012, 6). The idea of idiorrhythm, living together with enough distance to not disrupt each others' rhythms, fascinates Barthes and provides one of the organizing threads of his subsequent lectures, even as he recognizes that its denial of repressive power relations and hierarchization makes it necessarily utopian, far-fetched. (Incidentally, the monks of Mount Athos have barred women from accessing their land for centuries.)

I find that dysfluent speakers, as well as much of the general public, share a similar fantasy of being able to live apart from society, with perhaps just a couple of friends who you could easily talk to. Although hesitation is an issue for some speakers more than others, its persistent presence in everybody's speech proves our inability to eliminate it from everyday life. Hesitation remains an opportunity, a detour, a reorientation, an uncomfortable position to find oneself in. Theorists of rhythm from Rudolf Laban to Henri Meschonnic recognize rhythm's unpredictability—the possibility of change is how we might distinguish different kinds of rhythm from monotonous repetition.[11] Listening more closely to these gaps, unpredictable repetitions, and extra-linguistic

[11] For brief summations of Laban's fascinating theories of "eurhythm" and "kakorhythm", see the "Eurhythmy and Kakorhythmy in Art and Education" (Laban 2014). Meschonnic has written prolifically on rhythm in many contexts, with Critique du Rythme generally considered to be his magnum opus on the topic; a selection from Critique du Rythme translated into English can be found in the recent collection Rhythm and Critique: Technics, Modalities, Practices (2022).

soundings of the body provides an opening to start imagining different ways of speaking and living together.

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