Susan Linn's Distance Ventriloquism:

Play's Therapeutic Potential in a Virtual Space

by Felice Amato

Mac and Billy chat with Audrey and Susan photo: Jessica Dreishmeier

In the early spring of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments across the globe asked people to isolate in their homes. Dr. Susan Linn, a psychologist, play therapist, author, and award-winning ventriloquist, thought immediately of the toll that isolation could take on families with young children.[1]

Linn describes herself as "a woman of a certain age who talks to a duck" (Case 1). The duck in question, is a fleece mouth puppet (or bill puppet, in this case) that Linn has had since age twelve, when her mother made the first Audrey Duck. Linn was a budding ventriloquist and needed something larger to replace the sock puppets she had been using to perform. Since that time, Linn and Audrey have worked with children in many settings, helping them cope with challenging situations, including long term hospitalizations, painful illnesses, and frightening medical procedures. Audrey Duck is also a girl. "Once [puppets] begin to speak, regardless of their physical characteristics, they become people. After all, the ability to translate thought into speech is a uniquely human characteristic" ("Foreword" vii). Audrey Duck wonders and worries about the same things that children do. "Corona, Corona, Corona! Who is Corona anyway?" ("Defending"). Something special that puppetry offers in therapeutic interactions, however, is that it is inherently "mirthful" because of its odd juxtapositions and, through them, it provides an "opening to healing" (Astell-Burt 71). Regardless of the seriousness of the conversations that arise, plush Audrey Duck, with her braids and jumper, is a mirthful juxtaposition. Her non-realistic complexity allows for creative play.

A space for mirth and play (so crucial to social-emotional well-being) is what Linn worried would soon be in short supply. She began to explore the only space available in which to work – the virtual space and relational field of the screen. Perhaps video chat technology could facilitate the respite of imaginative play to children in different states and even countries (Interview). Linn stresses, however, "I'm not doing therapy with these kids; I don't know them. I don't know their families. But it has reminded me *why* I started getting interested in puppet therapy in the first place—because kids do open up to Audrey and say things to her that they might not say otherwise" (ibid).[2]

Puppeteers have long embraced new mediums, shaping and becoming shaped by them—the stage offered by television, for example. Despite the one-way nature of broadcasting, Fred Rogers, with whom Linn worked extensively, was able to create something that many children actually experienced as a relational space.[3] Perhaps this was because Rogers took pains to envision that field in his mind and to cultivate connectedness through it, describing it as "holy ground"(Merritt). Linn and Audrey appeared multiple times on *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*; Linn remembers that Rogers remarked, when he first watched her work: "You must remember what it's like to be a child" ("Susan Linn").

Unlike television, the screen can now be a two-way medium, opening a space where Linn's play-based work can be interactive and co-created with children.[4] In addition to individual sessions, Linn created two accompanying videos .

In the videos, Audrey voices thoughts that may be on children's minds, illuminating their distinct worldview and modeling, for parents and caregivers, ways of responding to create more space for kids to speak. In the second of Linn's videos, "I'm Tired of the Virus," Audrey complains that the virus isn't fun, and Linn models listening and mirroring to discover there is more behind the feeling.[5]

Audrey and Susan talk about masks
Courtesy photo: Susan Linn

"No, it isn't fun, Audrey. The virus isn't fun. (pause) Sometimes we have fun still!"

"I know, but sometimes, we don't have fun. (pause) And sometimes, there are things that are… bothering me."

"Well, you know, if there are things that are bothering you, you can tell me, Audrey."

"Even if one of the things that's bothering me is … *you*?"

"Me? I'm bothering you? (pause) Well, can you tell me why I am bothering you?"

"Yes, because you have been snapping at me … and I don't like it!"

In Linn's work, one can see how play is able to encompass education, entertainment, and therapeutic goals that are fluid and interconnected. While Linn is a pioneer, recently the term "trauma-informed practices" is being used across education to acknowledge trauma's effects (including neurological effects) on children ("Creating"). In the puppetry community, those who create work for young children have been making efforts to engage them and their parents in discussions of mental and physical health, through webinars and broadcasts.[6] Because of COVID-19's sudden appearance and spread, little study has been done yet on its wide-scale societal impact, how it will affect children, and how to help them (Lee). Speaking with hope early on, Linn said, "There is a terrible problem in the world, but the kids (most of them), are intact, and they don't have terrible illnesses"(Linn Interview). Parents, caregivers, and educators will likely see a range of effects. Trauma responds to three variables: severity, duration, and reactions; even prolonged grief or fear can affect social, emotional, and cognitive learning, much as violence can (6–7). Melissa Potter, one of two mothers interviewed for this article, described her family's situation in early April 2020:

> We were all very traumatized and raw at that moment…. We had no balance. We were relearning our lives, trying to make do with no car in a city apartment with homeschooling, and Landon was having daily temper tantrums.
>
> The fun that Linn and Audrey's visit provided was more than just welcome and healing silliness. "[Audrey] made jokes about [my son's] green hair, which he loved. She also asked questions which were an interesting challenge for him to articulate: who he is and what he knows" (Potter).

Linn is intentional about the effects these questions generate. She wants to cultivate children's sense of autonomy and self-confidence. In order to do so, she creates a "safe" yet constructive space, without demands that might jeopardize it ("Article").

Linn is able to create a sense of sharing a space in these virtual face-to-face encounters; young children sometimes ask when Audrey can visit (Interview). The term *space* describes a complex phenomenon, especially in therapy and performance. Even under normal circumstances, it seldom refers to physical space alone. Rather, it is a figurative, metaphorical, temporal, and relational construct—a field of co-presence, felt-sense, and the psychological experience of an encounter, often (but not always) taking place in a physical location (Britten 22-4). While it is outside the scope of this article to delve deeply into phenomenology, our frequent framing of encounters as "space" illuminates how it is that Linn is able to extend her practice through the visual and vocalic interconnectedness of ventriloquism. In his book, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Steven Connor devotes substantial energy to how the form is shaped and shapes space. In addition to the acoustic quality of performance venues, the vaudeville roots of the form required a quick transition on and off stage just

Scenes from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood featuring Audrey Duck and Susan Linn

when the form was becoming standardized. Hence, the look of the show we now associate with the art form (a stool and "the single diminutive juvenile dummy") became standardized (398-9). Voice took on primacy when there was a limit to what else could be transported in the performer's arms. We see this echoed in Linn's pared-down structure. She describes children's occasional inclusion of props in her book, but she and Audrey rely on voice (and accompanying non-verbals), each becoming what Conner calls the vocalic body: "Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies" (36). He further explores the metaphysics of ventriloquism through the concept of vocalic space:

> Vocalic space signifies the ways in which the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time, and divinity. What space means, in short, is very largely a function of the perceived powers of the body to occupy and extend itself through its environment (13).

The public might not readily identify Linn's work as *ventriloquism*, with its often visually-fixed and readily-recognizable aesthetic (Conner 403). Nevertheless, many of the qualities (even *tools*) that make her work pedagogically and therapeutically effective, while also being entertainment and play, are specific to ventriloquism, in which words and utterances are the world. Thus, while there is no set, Linn is world-making nonetheless. Jessica Dreischmeier, a mother and art therapist, whose boys had two meetings with Audrey, recalled:

> I have noticed how much it opens up their creativity after consuming so much through screens lately. Today for example, Audrey asked the kids about their favorite foods. Billy said, "Buttered noodles and pizza!" And Audrey started to ask if they grew on trees or bushes. Mac took it even farther and started pretending that he had "pillow trees" where he could pick pillows to snuggle whenever he wanted, and together, the group came up with ideas for lots of trees that had things growing on them that they wish they could just go pick outside.

In constructing a world through conversation, ventriloquism is, by necessity, an art of turn-taking, and body language contributes to sharing the floor; it is quintessential to the social-emotional pedagogy. Audrey's dramatic shifts of gaze (looking at Linn, at the audience, and away) are additional serendipitous inheritances from the form that reduce expressive cues, such that a child can track the gestures and their meanings quite clearly.[7] Throughout ventriloquism, a symbiosis of form and function–and effect–have shaped the traditional style into one that transitions well to the screen, such as the very pared down and tightly-framed relationship, which resulted from the vaudeville ventriloquists' limits of what they themselves could pick up and carry on stage.

> And while plush puppets (both rod and hand) are more recent variations within ventriloquism, their superficial differences sometimes disguise the continuity of the historical dummy, which commonly featured a head that rotated; prominent, moveable eyes; an articulated mouth; and a stiff, erect body (all of which could be manipulated solo) (Stockman). Perforce, the puppets were positioned in tight proximity to the ventriloquist, such that their gaze and speech were all that the puppets had to distinguish themselves ontologically.[8] Absent physical distance, in the tight depth of field of a stool and lap (and now a screen), the gaze could reference a sense of dramaturgical space. Truly, it is as if the closer one is positioned to someone else, the more powerful the gesture of turning away becomes and the farther away the horizon retreats. The intimacy of the often playfully adversarial relationship is intensified. Also, the limited movements of the head in the traditional form, which give a clarity of intention to the body, have shaped the classic persona of the dummy, for whom nuance is not characteristic.

While Linn animates Audrey in the traditional sense, a more metaphysical process of animation is taking place; it is almost exclusively through their dynamic that Audrey is brought to life as a character—going past artifice to authenticity, Linn creates a relationship that is a dimension of herself and has been for decades. While Linn has other puppets, she is most likely to reach spontaneously for Audrey (Interview). "She is simultaneously me and mine" (Case 1).[9] Many forms of puppetry feature "co-presence," a word used to denote ways that actors and puppets co-exist in the audience's field of vision. Paul Piris defines it as a puppeteer-performer creating "a character whose presence next to the puppet has a dramaturgical meaning" (31). Though this is not easy to do convincingly, he points to gaze and speech as two ways that the puppet can "confront" the human actor to create a sense of alterity (41). The co-presence one finds in ventriloquism differs in that ventriloquists not only appear as constant characters—but ostensibly as "themselves."

The ventriloquist performs the functions of both puppeteer and actor, playing a role of himself in the performance… . The artist may need to occasionally look in another direction, speak, gesture, and engage in dialogue (written or improvised) as an actor while also concentrating on the task of maintaining the illusion of life as he fulfills his duties as a puppeteer (Stockman).

While the inventiveness and hybridity of contemporary puppetry means that generalizations are hard to make, the manifestation of co-presence in ventriloquism has a marked difference; the characters cannot exist separate from each other because the relationship creates the world in which they both exist.

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> Their speech and movements exist—not as actions—but as *re*-actions that weave the story into being. The back-and-forth allows Linn as solo practitioner to model intensively both self-awareness *and* social awareness, both foundations of social-emotional learning. Communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, negotiating conflict, and appropriate help-seeking are some of the primary skills that children ought to develop during these years (Greenberg 13). Imaginative play is fundamental to developing self-regulation, the "crowning achievement of early childhood" (Bronson et al. qtd. in Berk et al. 75). Also, the iterative nature of ventriloquy means that any interaction is contextualized by other interactions. Linn and Audrey Duck's relationship develops through layers of diverse encounters over years, including *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, keynotes at Harvard and other institutions, and an adult stand-up show called "What the Duck?".

Another convention of ventriloquism that contributes to the form's therapeutic potential is the role of the vaudevillian straight man. By adopting this persona, Linn becomes a "container" for the interaction and can, if necessary, set rules and reinforce the therapeutic framework of make-believe. Given that, "everything that comes out of Audrey's mouth is play," Audrey cannot create the necessary metastructure that reminds a child that something is pretend—a key aspect of working things out safely. As a character herself, Linn, however, can intervene simultaneously from within and from outside that which a child views as play.

photo: www.neighborhoodarchive.com/mrn/episodes/1172/index.html

Comparisons with ventriloquism that aims to entertain reveal both similarities and differences. Linn's work is playful. She does leverage misunderstandings and misapprehensions for humor, but it comes at no one's expense. (Audrey is a stand-in for any child, so her safety matters). Certainly, there is a familiar humor derived through

> …the contrast between the restraint of [the ventriloquist's] voice and pose and the animation of the dummy…. [The] differential access to the language is dramatized in the very form of many ventriloquial dialogues, with the wranglings, and misinterpretations over single words or phrases, which are passed back and forth between dummy and ventriloquist until the comic payoff (Conner 400-1).

Ventriloquist "dummies" are sometimes described as sassy, cheeky, saucy, or wise-guys. While Audrey is outspoken and sometimes awkward or impulsive, to describe her using these terms would undermine Linn's goal of validating children's efforts to express themselves in order to become conscious of (and confident in) their own feelings by speaking them out loud—even imperfectly.

> The kids do talk about things that are worrying them, like the distance learning…. I have one little girl who teaches Audrey and, in the course of that, she says to Audrey, things like, "Well, learning is hard!" And she created a teacher who was very strict…. We're stuck on colors. Audrey's just having a very hard time learning colors. I mean, part of the reason I think the kids like talking to Audrey is she's very admiring of them! And they know more than she does. So, they can feel powerful! Audrey is younger than them. She doesn't count very well. But she's convinced that she's older than them—even when she's not! Young children, especially, really like that kind of "getting things wrong." (Interview).

While speech is a focus in ventriloquism, Linn has discovered that skillful listening is an invaluable byproduct of the performance—even though (or because) she is playing both parts:

> I find that I listen differently and I think that that helps me listen to children as well. When Audrey talks, it's not just that I hear what she says very concretely, but I listen to what I say to her differently–because I have to answer myself. I hear what the problems are with what I'm saying. I hear the flaws or I hear the misconceptions there could be in what I've said inadvertently (Interview).

Linn mines the potential of vaudevillian humor for comedy and the release of laughter. Children do hear things very concretely, and their misunderstandings are excellent pedagogical tools for distilling information about complex topics, like contagion. For instance, Audrey takes Linn at her word when she is told that she should not get near other people. She dramatically pulls her yellow bill away from Linn herself. Later, when Linn says that she is "sick" of the virus, Audrey gasps: "You're sick?!?" Linn then explains the nuances. When there are children in the interaction, Audrey is the one who speaks with the kids. She uses open-ended questions and asks for clarification ("Is that like…?"). The negotiations around meaning provide opportunities for elaboration, building cognition and empathy. Jessica Dreischmeier, Billy and Mac's mother, says of a second video chat:

> This time being quarantined (coming up on 70 days) has been really kind of demanding on the kids in a strange way. School has been a hard battle. Enforcing limits about screens has been tough, getting them to clean up their rooms and help has been hard too…. The thing that makes it so fun and unique to talk to Audrey is she doesn't ask about anything that makes the kids feel out of control. They can change any part of the conversation or be silly or have opportunities to tell Audrey something that she doesn't know but THEY know, letting them feel more in charge and smart and like they have something to offer. Talking about if they are ducks or elephants and they laugh and say, "NO! We are HUMANS!" or she asks, "You live in Minneapolis? Is Minneapolis on the MOON?!"… [They] feel smart and important when she asks those things.

Audrey has a "diffused voice" that Linn expertly creates without moving her lips (Stockman). In fact, Linn's body language is shaped by the way ventriloquism works; she watches Audrey intently as she manipulates her, maintaining an expression of concentration—even slightly smiling because it facilitates "throwing" her voice. It reads as openness and anticipation which draws–and colors–the focus of the audience.

As a vocalic body, speaking is what Audrey does--and is; we come to know Audrey as she works to articulate new words or difficult feelings. She shares the specific vocal qualities of ventriloquism dummy voices that are "less human and more appropriate for the most often more diminutive character [the ventriloquist] is bringing to life" (ibid). The symbiotic and semiotic relationship between construction, animation, and being in the traditional characters: "The voices of the dummy are indeed characteristically defective,… their bodies are in fact all voice, the very stiffness of their movements a gestural enactment or substantiation of their imperfect articulation" (Conner 400). While "defective" is not descriptive of Audrey's speech, she is a child and, unlike Linn, she emulates the imperfection of a verbal initiation into the world.[10] Linn's manipulation makes the cognitive or social-emotional struggles audible and visible, through her animation.[11] Unlike the movable slot-jaw that the traditional dummy often had, Audrey's bill is neither stiff nor hinged (Stockman). Without movement in her arms, the bill takes on a gestural function: She twists it up like one might cross one's arms. In the tight frame of the performance, she creates a sense of a kinesthetic and emotional space: She draws her bill down to listen or away to think about something. Reading another's body language, while gaining awareness of their own, is an important skill children must also develop. Through the years, Audrey has needed to be remade and redesigned. Her mouth, because of the expressive importance it carries, is the hardest (Interview). Linn finds that many of the puppets available for kids do not facilitate subtle expression. A snug fit is important to a child's ability to manipulate and, while a stiff cardboard insert may assist in the opening and closing of the mouth, it limits the co-verbal expressiveness (Interview).

The children in the video chats seldom bring puppets to use in the primarily one-time encounters they have with Audrey. They, as well as the children she profiles in *The Case for Make Believe*, most often participate through their own bodies in a space where what is real is nevertheless negotiated and the story flows through and between both puppet and human bodies, another form of co-presence. The subjects that children talk to Audrey about vary greatly and, while Linn may not be practicing therapy in the video chats, her extensive background with children and experience with improv have prepared her to venture into uncharted territory—even that of monsters or God. She cannot anticipate what a child will say and "you can't legislate what the kids are going to get out of what you're saying to them" (Interview). In puppet therapy, the "content may not reflect what is happening in a child's life but may reveal a child's preoccupations" (Aronoff 119). The term *space* in a conversation, often refers to temporality and permissibility. However, the words we use (feeling "pressed" or "cut-off") reveal a physical experience of space in our verbal interactions (as if our voice were acted upon like a body). The field of the encounter (what is between the participants) is also experienced as spatial, even when it is virtual. In this space, the triad of the child, Linn, and Audrey (as another child) offers many options for diffusion (a metaphoric version of the ventriloquist's vocal diffusion). By Audrey claiming a feeling (putting herself in a child's place), Linn provides a space for the feeling. The child can retain control in the unfolding of the process, seeing how it feels to hear the words out loud.[12] Audrey (like most children) sometimes asks things that she already knows the answer to. Linn might reply, "I think you know the answer," or "We've talked about this before." Sometimes Audrey replies, "I *can* remember, but I don't want to." Through a scaffolded retelling, Linn coaxes her to say, not just what she knows, but also what motivated her to ask again. Mirroring the emotions of another is an important aspect of human connection, something we are wired to do from infancy. Even simply repeating the child's words, "reflecting content," and "reflecting feelings," help children stay engaged without having to move the conversation forward themselves, while also helping to assure a shared understanding (Kjellstrand Hartwig 210-11).

Dreischmeier noted one way in which Audrey's interaction with her sons opened space:

> One of the things I really appreciate when talking with Susan and Audrey is that Audrey is so curious. There is really no sense of judgment at all. We battle over screen time with the kids a lot these days, because all they want to do is play video games and... subsequently, there is a little hint of shame for Billy [age six] when he talks to other grownups about any video games he plays. When Mac told Audrey about a game he likes to play, she just asked very innocent, genuine questions without a comment or judgment or opinion, and I noticed that put Billy at ease in their conversation.

Linn has been able to use her extensive experience with children to respond to the limits of the moment and to develop a virtual approach that is able to extend through the screen and provide a crucial social-emotional space. In her therapy work, both live and in video chats, the relational triangularity possible in ventriloquism specifically allows Audrey to be a medium for Linn's work, the inheritance of a popular entertainment now coming into service of children's linguistic and social-emotional development. During the pandemic, as uncertainty permeates homes, Linn offers children mirth and imagination and the possibility of finding the words to ask questions, even if there are no answers:

> "And when is it gonna end? Tomorrow?"
>
> "No Audrey, I don't know when it is going to end."
>
> "Why don't you know?"
>
> "I just don't. We don't know. We don't know when things are going to be able to go back to normal. But one thing we do know, Audrey, is that it *will* end."

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Endnotes

1. Among other awards, Linn received a UNIMA-USA Citation of Excellence for Live Performance in 1979 (Abrams).

2. Dr. Matthew Bernier, a professor of art therapy, states that the terms *therapy* and *therapeutic* are used broadly and that, even without "attempting to be therapists," there can be therapeutic value to using puppets. (Bernier 112). One of the parents noted: "Most of what [my son] was doing at that time was all prerecorded. The live aspect of Audrey was therapeutic, in my opinion" (Potter).

3. Rogers addressed the confusing quality of space and television explicitly with his young viewers—dispelling the logical conclusion that he might actually be inside the set.

4. While most of Linn's encounters have been confined to a single chat, she has met with some kids more than once, and a few she meets with regularly.

5. Meant for families, the videos address dynamics specific to the current moment, including parental stress. While Linn might model strategies to repair relationships, she does not show actual mo-ments of conflict because, as the most intense part of a vignette, they could become the most interesting part and be what captures a child's attention (versus the resolution).

6. Sesame Workshop held a town hall where they answered real questions about COVID-19 that they had solicited beforehand from children (Ryzik "How to Get to 'Sesame Street'?").

7. Hand puppets and other styles may include the co-presence of the audience as witness or accomplice, triangulating the puppet's attention. In ventriloquism, however, due to the construction, scale, and manipulation of the vent doll, the three-way gaze (at the ventriloquist, at the audience, and away) is core to all aspects of the performance.

8. By traditional, I refer back to the standardization of the form in the late 1800s that Conner describes. Regarding co-presence, Piris underscores the importance of separating (41).

9. It is not uncommon for those who work with puppets to have a particular bond with a specific character that they feel animates an aspect of themselves. For instance, Fred Rogers had a strong bond with Daniel Striped Tiger, through whom he "was able to show his own inner feelings and use them as teaching moments... He did all the voices. But Daniel was the real Fred" ("Daniel Striped Tiger").

10. We find in elements of Audrey's persona, resonances of other traditional puppetry characters from across the globe that summon qualities of innocence and trickster.

11. Conner argues that voice influences our visual perception: "When animated by the ventriloquist's voice, the dummy, like the cartoon character given voice, appears to have a much wider range of gestures, facial expressions, and tonalities than it does when it is silent" (36).

12. When Linn was working with children with HIV, she recalls that many didn't have the words for their emotions (Personal interview May 15).

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