

Student Reading Group 2 – Language of Gestures

Unit: Language (Elementary and Middle School)

Paraphrased from *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*
by Carolyn Gilman

When they came to the Rocky Mountains, Lewis and Clark needed to find the Shoshone Indians. They needed to obtain horses from the Shoshones to help them travel over the mountains. At the Continental Divide, Meriwether Lewis finally met up with a Shoshone Indian. But the explorer immediately faced a problem: his translator, Sacagawea, was miles behind with the boats, and neither he nor his three companions spoke Shoshone. He had learned only a single word: *tab-ba-bone*, which he believed to mean “white man” but which modern-day Shoshone speakers either do not recognize or do not agree on. In this critical moment, language failed Lewis as a way to communicate, and he had to find other ways. Fortunately for him, language in Indian societies was not just verbal. It included space and movement—how one stood, wore clothes, gestured, made facial expressions, and exchanged objects. Unfortunately for Lewis, the messages conveyed by such means were sometimes no more translatable than words.

Lewis and his party continued to walk westward. The day after crossing the divide, they again encountered Indians. “We had not continued our route more than a mile when we were so fortunate as to meet with three female savages [a term Lewis uses to refer to Indians – no longer used today]. . . . they appeared much alarmed but . . . seated themselves on the ground, holding down their heads as if reconciled to die.” This

time, Lewis tried the universal language of gifts. “I took the elderly woman by the hand and raised her up. . . . I gave these women some beads a few mocassin awls, some pewter looking-glasses and a little paint. . . . I now painted their tawny cheeks with some vermilion [red paint] which with this nation is emblematic of peace.” Whether or not Lewis was right about vermilion communicating peace, the language of gifts worked. The women “appeared instantly reconciled,” and Lewis asked them to lead him to the Shoshone camp, which they did.