

Guest Editors' Introduction

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Since about 2000, several converging debates have put Native American ways of writing (in the broadest sense: communicating by inscribed marks) onto the scholarly front burner. A sensible ethnohistorian might ask, whatever took so long? Isn't it evident that systems like pictography, petroglyphs, genealogical drawings, models of terrain, emblematic insignia, tribute tallies, colonial syllabograms, and the like form a very large part of humanity's graphic practice? Shouldn't anthropological common sense tell us that *all* kinds of inscription, not just "true writing," make parts of a culture visible to its agents? Doesn't historical common sense decree that any account of a people's past is incomplete if it fails to consider their way of organizing action through signs? Yet somehow, for a very long time, Amerindian graphic inventions, with the important exception of Maya writing, were hardly ever addressed in discussions about literacy.

This neglect was not for lack of evidence. Readers of *Ethnohistory* hardly need to be reminded that 115 years have passed since Garrick Mallery published *Picture-Writing of the American Indians* (1893). Rather it was a result of conceptual discord about what writing is and which properties of "graphism"—André Leroi-Gourhan's (1993 [1964]: 187–216) inclusivist term—merit study. In the first chapter of a deservedly influential compilation, *The World's Writing Systems* (1996), Peter T. Daniels reaffirmed a deep-rooted—originally Aristotelian—definition of writing as phonography: recording by means of signs that stand for segments of the speech stream. The attribute of interest was ability to unambiguously represent an utterance. Nobody can deny that scholars, including Mayanists, have

achieved legendary successes by following this formula. The unintended consequence, however, was to narrow grammatology down to studying “civilization” and phonetic writing, rather than the vast range of graphic behavior. An illogical but habitual corollary was that systems using other principles, or conveying information in ways other than verbal equivalence, were considered less worthy of study. These languished, defined only by what they were not: namely, not a part of the grand genealogy of “letters” as enshrined in the humanities.

Discussions that return American inscriptions to the forefront are taking place in multiple arenas. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo’s 1994 *Writing without Words* called this problem to the attention of a wide humanist audience, remobilizing Ignace Jay Gelb’s 1952 attempt to theorize nonphonographic alternatives under the rubric of “semasiography.” By this Gelb meant signs that refer not to speech sounds but to the objects they name (music notation being a commonly cited example: written notes refer to sounds themselves, rather than to their verbal names). Semasiography seems at first to fit many American systems, such as clan insignia, at least at first glance.

How far does this construct reach? The linguist Geoffrey Sampson (1985: 26–45) has argued that general-purpose semasiography is an impossibility, because it would be impossibly prolific of signs. Semasiography appears to be a superior solution in cases where people lacking a common tongue must exchange information about a sharply delimited body of knowledge (as in music), and also in cases where the syntactic logic of sentences obscures a dissimilar logic in the thought to be communicated (as in mathematics). Many American scripts function under one or both of these conditions: for example, Panamanian shamanic pictography (Holmer and Wassén 1952, Severi 1997) or tributary and census *khipu* (Andean cord records). Semasiography is undergoing an immense, but questionably successful, growth as programmers strive for language-neutral ways to represent digital processes.

The notion of semasiography also has defects. Mignolo (2003: 146) labels as “problematic and obscure” Giambattista Vico’s declaration that “all the nations have spoken in writing.” Semasiography is a more precise term than Vico’s notion of universal graphism was, but it too remains unanalytical. It uncomfortably throws together inscriptions whose systems of reference are similar but which differ in myriad other ways: systems of sign syntax, transient versus permanent signing, iconic or noniconic representation, standardizing versus esthetically innovating norms of inscription, and so on. Further theoretical sorting is needed. And when one actually digs into Amerindian graphic practice, one finds additional layers of complexity:

many inscriptions use plural types of code. For example, Nahua pictography (Boone 2000) is often semasiographic but also in part phonographic and in part diagrammatic—a type of complexity likewise present in Maya and Egyptian systems.

The long, quiet discussion about theorizing codes that are not “writing proper” has been taking place mostly in disciplinary interstices. Authors who offer rewarding attempts to parse not-exactly-writings into a more orderly space of study include philosophers writing about art (N. Goodman 1976 [1968]), semioticians writing about literacy (Harris 1995), art historians writing about symbolism (Elkins 1999), and linguists writing about the nonverbal (Benveniste 1985 [1969]). We do not yet have any consensual basis for sorting the cases or even agreement on what the analytical axes ought to be.

The studies assembled here are primarily ethnographic, rather than theoretical. They demonstrate a wide enough range of cases to warn us that we should not be seeking any one, central New World graphic inclination but rather a fan of inventions exhibiting as much diversity as is already known from Old World studies. We do hope this collection will bring us from the ethnographic to the ethnological level of reading: we will see some common devices and usages and some axes of variation. We will gain an acute awareness that Amerindian inscriptions are as diverse as the social functions they had to address, but also be reassured that there is rhyme and reason in these functions’ relation to “graphism.”

A second debate that returns Amerindian graphic usage to the lime-light is taking place in the language-humanities groupings, chiefly English, Spanish, comparative literature, and the loose coalition called “history of the book.” Increasingly, literary scholars and literary historians see the colonial languages and their scripts as fields of interethnic contention rather than “handmaidens of empire.” Early (sixteenth-to-seventeenth-century) missionization took place in Christendom’s most logocentric and catechetical moment, on both sides of the Reformation (Wandel 2006). Native American peoples quickly learned that inscription was the supremely authoritative form of language in the conquerors’ eyes. Everywhere in the New World this changed the terms of graphic practice. Interaction between native systems of pictography or emblematics and Christian scripture gave rise to many kinds of inscriptive readaptation. In this debate the colonial remaking of native “graphism” and the emergence of what one scholar (Cohen 2008) calls an alphabetic “middle ground” (echoing White’s 1991 coinage) become parts of a single fecund discussion. It was the theme of a conference at Duke University in 2008.

However, for the most part, the discussion in language-humanities

groupings (Gray and Fiering 2000) is “reception” discussion. It studies early perceptions of American languages and attempts at a philology of them, or concentrates on production of missionary texts, but has rarely included actual study of indigenous languages or inscriptions. Some parties to this discussion go as far as arguing that Amerindian discourse as rendered in Roman letters durably shaped New World literary directions (Sá 2004). Discussion about the Amerindian uptake of the alphabet suggests that when the original peoples took up the Roman alphabet, they used it innovatively, making it in effect a distinctive code. For the most part, literary humanists like Mignolo, often hewing to the “discourse-and-power” theses of Foucauldian theory, have emphasized the power of imperial literacy to suffocate, obscure, and even obliterate indigenous scripts. One can also imagine—but so far, only imagine—a more positive study of the poetics that resulted from native people’s “secondary graphogeneses” (meaning cases in which the colonial situation stimulated new graphic inventions like the Algonquian and Yupik syllabaries).

A third arena of study about Amerindian inscription is, of course, archaeology. The New World’s greatest contribution to grammatology, the decipherment of Maya glyphs—a true phonographic system, with other components adjoined—is no longer only a study of the “classic” Maya age. Archaeological finds such as the “Cascajal block” (Rodríguez Martínez et al. 2006) have begun to yield tantalizing evidence of Mesoamerican graphogenesis itself (Urcid Serrano 2001). In the Andean orbit, the discovery of khipus in a context that includes their mummified owners at Laguna de los Cóndores (Urton 2001) and the study of khipus preserved within highland communities as patrimonial heritage (Salomon 2004) have enlivened discussion about khipus as the data infrastructure of polity. Although outside the scope of this volume, archaeological clarification of writing genesis (Houston 2004) promises to help ethnohistorians understand chronologically deeper strata to which our subject is related. Is there a New World answer to the perennial question about the relative importance of priestly and administrative functions in the emergence of scripts? Is the “noun-plus-number” syntax typical of protocuneiform similar to khipu syntax? Does this comparison suggest that what was “proto” in relation to the Near East was further developed in the Andes in its protoness, tilting toward diagrammatic rather than verbal representation? Is the artfully redundant relation of icon to phonogram in Egypt an analogue to Mayan? Should we entertain the idea that phonography is not the only thing glyphs achieve? Because these potentials are not inherently bound to the pre-Hispanic ages, and can recur or interpenetrate in any age, archaeological teaching informs ethnography tellingly. The volume to result from a 2008 Dumbarton Oaks conference on

“Scripts, Signs, and Notational Systems in Pre-Columbian America” will provide a powerful conspectus on the archaeological discussion.

Close to archaeology, but never quite merged with it, runs a long conversation among specialists in textile technologies. Similar discussion occurs among students of other forms of inscription upon the human person such as paint and tattoo (chiefly in South America). Faced with bodies of emblems and canons about their display, such scholars have variously claimed to see semasiographies (Frame 2007, La Jara 1973, Silverman-Proust 1988, Arnold 1997) or even logosyllabics (Ziolkowski, Arabas, and Szemiński 2008). Zorn (2004: 97–105) has warned cogently that “reading” is all too easy a metaphor for the cognitive processing these signaries involve.

A fourth arena of scholarship has long existed equally in history “proper” and among ethnohistorians trained in anthropology. This debate concerns the use of indigenous inscription in colonial-native interactions. Well-matured examples occur both in North America (e.g., William Fenton’s contributions on wampum in eastern Algonquian and Iroquois territories, 1998: 80, 92, 101, 125, 178) and to the south (e.g., Carlos Sempat Assadourian’s 2002 synthesis on khipu as colonial medium). Parallel discussions concern scripts and colonial mission frontiers north and south (e.g., “Eskimo” syllabaries, Algonquian “hieroglyphs,” the Sequoyah syllabary, and Andean catechetical “pictography”).

Recent rounds of this deep-rooted literature concern the imperialist import of such interaction, most notably under the theme “colonization of the imaginary.” The latter phrase corresponds to the original French title of Serge Gruzinski’s masterwork on Nahua and Spanish inscription in interaction (translated as *The Conquest of Mexico* 1993). It remains the fullest single treatment of transculturation and interpenetration between coexisting Amerindian and European scripts. Some authors see “colonial graphogenesis” such as the Sequoyah syllabary (Bender 2002) or northern plains winter counts and calendars (Greene and Thornton 2007) as “transforming images” in response to state or mission frontiers. That is, they are not analogues to European media, but reconceptualizations of “own” culture in the context of sudden, unequal entry into a transatlantic community of visual sign use.

At the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the double session “Graphic Pluralism” brought together a hemispheric sampling of researchers concerned with one kind of Amerindian literacy problem. That class consists of situations in which conquest and colonization brought together Amerindian and European ways with signs, sometimes generating durable coexistence.

Some of the problems researchers see in the course of their new forays are relatively code-internal: they concern the grammars of individual codes themselves and mechanisms of interpenetration among them. Others involve what linguists call “external history.” They pertain to the agenda of understanding writing and writings as parts of social communication regimes. The latter sort of studies ask, for example, what are the information needs of varied social formations: clan, precapitalist state, “colonial tribe,” interethnic alliance, innovative sect? In given cases, how do inscriptive systems gain or lose constative or performative authority? Where is control of codes lodged? What roles do “cultural privacy” and vernacularity play on the one hand, or lingua franca expansion on the other?

The 2007 session took place at the portal of two larger ventures. One is the quest for a more omnidirectional grammatology, suited for understanding the properties of inscriptions outside the canonical terrain of writing. The other is a media historiography that places the originality of New World “graphism” into the complexity of mixed-media situations evolving around the edges of the transatlantic empires. That applies both to political empires and to hidden variation in the seemingly more unitary empire of letters.

What were the diversities of intercultural life when code itself was diverse? In many parts of the New World, during at least four centuries, graphic pluralism provided an extra dimension to cultural complexity. Two centuries elapsed between Columbus’s landfall and early proposals for a “republic of letters” generating enlightenment through a single common public medium, the alphabet (D. Goodman 1996: 10). When today’s indigenous groups—Cherokee friends of the Sequoyah script, Maya hieroglyphic revivalists, or Inuit partisans of syllabography—affirm continuing value in a graphic diversity that predated the “republic of letters,” they remind us that “Indian writings” are more central than ever to a larger ethnohistorical literacy.

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