

***Indigenous Graphic Communication Systems: A Theoretical Approach*, edited by Katarzyna Mikulska and Jerome A. Offner. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2019.**

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This volume derives from a 2015 symposium, held in Warsaw, Poland, whose name is shared with the title of the book. In 13 chapters, it brings together the work of scholars working internationally: three in Mexico, two in Germany, France, and Spain, respectively, and one in the U. S. As is often the case with conference volumes, the papers are a little uneven in terms of approach and theoretical sophistication, but all told, the volume succeeds in capturing the complexity and excitement of new research on New World writing systems. While readers of this volume will repeatedly encounter a trio of manuscripts, probably all created by Nahuatl speakers, from central Mexico (the pre-Hispanic *Codex Borgia*, the *Codex Xolotl* of ca. 1540, and the *Florentine Codex* of 1575-78), the chapters are less directed at them as holistic entities, but rather focus on the writing on their surfaces.

Most of the chapters build upon a paradigm shift, ushered in some 30 years ago, about the nature of Mesoamerican writing. At that moment, “writing”, was widely accepted to mean a system for setting down a spoken language. Even earlier in the 20th century, writing had been used as a yardstick to measure the relative “development” of a culture, by whose measure most autochthonous American cultures, among them the Nahuas, were lacking. The Maya seemed the rare exception because of the blocks of texts found on their monuments. Particularly in the United States, where the Maya are the best known of all the ancient American cultures, Mayanists promoted the idea that writing was a code that could be cracked. When anthropologists and epigraphers were able to render Maya glyphs into the Roman alphabet, they reinforced the idea, sometimes unwittingly, that any system of writing could be “translated” into an alphabetic text. Their activity must be understood against a wider backdrop of hermeneutic philoso-



phy, and its attendant discipline of philology, at whose base was translation, and whose outcome was the alphabetic text.

Seen from the perspective of traditional Eurocentric scholarship, the “writing” found in Mesoamerican manuscripts barely functions to record spoken language, as very few of the signs found on the pages of manuscripts are glottographic, that is, representing sounds, words, or phrases in a language. As such, glottographs are usually presumed to be language-specific. Seen from the perspective of the Americas, however, it is conventional Eurocentric interpretive (or hermeneutic) strategies developed for alphabetic texts that are weak and undeveloped. In 1994, Elizabeth H. Boone (Boone and Mignolo 1994) argued for an expanded definition of writing that encompassed both semasiographs (symbols for ideas) as well as glottographs, and developed this idea more fully in a 2000 book (Boone 2000) as well as later publications. Mikulska and Offner build on this foundation to argue that the semasiographs, glottographs and everything in between, that is, Boone’s “writing,” is actually best understood as being bound up in a much more holistic system that they call indigenous graphic communication system (GCS). As such, it cannot be fully understood unless set within indigenous orality, a position long advocated by Michel Oudijk, whose work is included in this volume. It also needs to be understood as a spatialized practice, and all of this entails new hermeneutics.

Mikulska’s revealing essay, “The System of Graphic Communication in the Central Mexican Divinatory Codices from the Functional Perspective,” explains why the need for the break from classical hermeneutics: most manuscripts are not meant to reproduce what she calls an “original model” or an “original version,” by which she means an ur-text. This point is not new, as other scholars, like Boone, have described manuscripts as “scripts for performances,” that is, intended to inspire an oral recitation. But Mikulska goes further still to explain the nature of the relationship between the manuscript page and the discourses it was intended to produce. She uses a historical-ethnographic method, and turns to some of the few known Nahuatl incantations, recorded by the 17th century priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, to show typical features of patterned Nahuatl discourse. These in turn structure for her hypothetical “readings” of the *Codex Borgia*, the most important and elaborate of the pre-Hispanic books devoted to calendrical and mantic knowledge. In addition to Boone’s work, Mikulska’s interpretive model is indebted to the work done on Mixtec codices by John Monaghan (1995), Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez

(2007), whose ethnographic work has underwritten their readings of Mixtec codices. I'm somewhat resistant to reconstructed, hypothetical "readings" like the ones that Mikulska proposes in that they seem to reinscribe the primacy of a text set down via alphabetic writing, and are largely unverifiable, but hers are helpful in aligning what we know of ritual discourse (via Alarcón) and the images set down on the pages of the *Codex Borgia*.

One problem encountered with methodologies that grow out of deciphering alphabetic texts is their inability to account for the spatial encoding of content found on a Mesoamerican manuscript page. Here, visual analysis of the kind practiced in art history has the upper hand, but few ethnohistorians and even fewer linguists are trained as art historians. Mikulska's discussion of the role of tabular formats in the *Codex Borgia* is notable for its sensitivity towards spatial relationships. The same is true of Katarzyna Szoblik's contribution, "Traces of Orality in the Codex Xolotl." The *Codex Xolotl* was created to document the history of the Acolhua ruling lineage, and was interpreted by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, 2019) in the early 17th century. The Ixtlilxóchitl histories have been a blessing and a curse for the *Xolotl*. They allowed for the interpretation of its complex contents by Charles Dibble, whose publication of the manuscript largely served to align the content of the pages with Ixtlilxóchitl's alphabetic text (Dibble 1951). At the same time, they have overshadowed consideration of the *Xolotl*'s unique presentation of that history. Szoblik highlights the scale of elements, arguing that larger forms on the manuscript page served as entry points for the specialists who would recount the narrative. Countering the historicism of Ixtlilxóchitl, and Dibble who followed him, she ascribes some of the "incorrect" chronology, particularly in the genealogical data identified by Jongson Lee (2008), to features of oral narratives—the exact temporal position of events being less important for happenings in the deep past than they are for more current events. Jerome Offner also contributes a chapter on the *Codex Xolotl*, to show how complex notions like kinship obligations (*tlacamecayotl*) inform its narrative.

If these chapters draw on an earlier paradigm shift that redefines writing to better encompass the Mesoamerican codices, it is in the contribution by Danièle Dehouve that one sees the most radical new paradigm shift underway. In a series of works, published over the last 15 years, she has drawn on her firm grounding in ethnographic fieldwork among the Tlapa-necos, or Me'phaa, of Guerrero as well as careful consideration of Nahuatl

sources, to propose a “logic of ritual language,” (p. 95) whose latest iteration comes in her chapter, “The ‘Law of the Series’: A Proposal for the Decipherment of Aztec Ritual Language.” Identifying the creation of series as “a cognitive procedure common to all humanity,” (p. 96) she turns to the philosophy of logic to help identify two types of series that can define a term or concept. Extension is “the totality of beings or things designated by [the] name” of that concept, whereas intention is “the internal content of a term or concept that constitutes its formal definition” (p. 96). To define words or concepts by extension, the human mind turns to metonymy (and the related synecdoche), which is a “cognitive procedure” wherein “one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target” (p. 98, quoting Kövecses 2010, 324). To students of Nahuatl, a classic example of extension would be the *difrasismo*, but Dehouve argues that the series of two often serves as a kind of shorthand for a much longer extension (p. 101). Turning to the texts of the *Florentine Codex*, which offers abundant examples in its explanatory passages of extension, Dehouve analyzes the principles that she finds within. Centering her discussion on two target terms, the sacrificial victim and the lighting of fire, Dehouve identifies the metonymic series used as extensions of each. She finds that only one or two elements of the series is needed to give rise to the target, or “head of list.” For instance, “chalk” can mean “sacrificed,” “because it represented and replaced the list-inventory of the accouterments of the captive to be sacrificed” (p. 105). She then goes on to offer some examples of the ways that words could belong to more than one series (flower/*xochitl* was particularly popular) as well as the ways that metonymic series could entwine to create new meanings. The implications of metonymic series, and the principles of substitution, have enormous consequences for the interpretation of the semasiographs found on the manuscript page. The method of traditional iconographic analysis used in manuscripts, where, say, the flayed skin is a sign for the deity Xipe Totec, has a rather limited repertoire, favoring direct associations between vehicle and target. Dehouve’s proposal opens the range of metaphoric substitutions at the same time that it offers a rigorous means to test their validity. Dehouve’s charge is taken up by two of the chapters that follow hers. The first is “Sacrifice in the Codex Borgia” by Angélica Baena Ramírez, which builds a graphic inventory of concepts related to sacrifice (like punishment, and Mictlan). The second is “Clothes with Metaphoric Names and the Representation of Metaphors in the Costumes of the Aztec Gods,” by Loïc Vauzelle,

which offers three case studies of costume: *acuieitl* and *chalchihucueitl* (water skirt and jade skirt); *ayauhxicolli* (mist jacket); and *tzapocueitl* (sapote skirt).

Despite there being a consolidation of scholarly opinion that a range of semasiography and glottography constitute Mesoamerican writing systems, there's still some divergence in terminology. In his chapter, David Wright-Carr attempts to create a more precise set of rules allowing scholars to classify signs as semasiographs or glottographs and its subcategories, logographs and phonographs. As he is quick to admit, the assignation of any element as a glottograph is a fraught enterprise, but he does provide some examples from *Huichapan Codex* that suggest that even glottographs, usually presumed to be language-specific, could produce similar readings in two different languages (Otomí/Nahuatl), a hypothesis that merits further testing.

Bilingual manuscripts have the potential to reveal more general principles about semasiographs and glottographs, particularly when the same sign is used to represent words in different languages. Such an opportunity is offered by a manuscript from the 1570s, the *Libro de los Tributos de San Pablo Teocaltitlan* (also known as the *Codex Valeriano*), the subject of another chapter by Juan José Batalla Rosado and Miguel Ángel Ruz Barrio. This lists the names of tributaries and the tribute delivered by one of the *tlaxilacalli* of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Characteristically for the 1570s, indigenous men and women had names that included both Spanish and Nahuatl names. In this document, they are written with both glyphs and alphabetic texts. The authors offer some interesting interpretations of a limited number of name glyphs. However, their work is still in its preliminary stages, and a larger data set, as well as comparison with other manuscripts from the same time and place, might yield firmer principles, like the ones that Joaquín Galarza (1980) attempted to discern (although these authors reject the “Galarzian method” [p. 315]). Surprisingly, these authors seem unaware of the work done by Gordon Whittaker (2012a and 2012b) on personal names in a manuscript from about the same time and place, and his analyses could both complicate and challenge theirs.

Whittaker has a voice in this book, with a chapter, “Hieroglyphs of Virtue and Vice,” which centers largely on images from the *Florentine Codex*, which portray men and women of dubious virtue. He has discovered that terms and phrases recorded in the Nahuatl text are also included in the illustrations, sometimes written with glyphs. He thus adds to the discovery

of Diana Magaloni (2014) that the images of the *Florentine Codex* include glottographic “tags” to convey the color of objects that are rendered in black and white. Whittaker opts out of using Mikulska’s terms, however, substituting “iconography” and “notation” for semasiography. His choice of “iconography” threw into relief what is often overlooked: that the graphic communication system is above all one of images, and that the features of complex images—like their relative scale, their position in relation to other images and to the page as a whole—all convey meaning.

The book’s strong central focus on the graphic communication system of central Mexico is somewhat diluted by the inclusion of three chapters from distant regions: Christiane Clados’s work on Andean *tocapu*, Stanislaw Iwaniszewski’s chapter on rock art in Northeastern Mexico and Baja California, and Janusz Z. Woloszyn’s contribution on Moche iconography. However, it does offer exposure of these writers and their ideas to an English-speaking public.

In editing the volume, Mikulska and Offner seemed to exercise only the lightest of touches, thus there’s a fair amount of repetition in the individual articles, particularly in their introductory sections. This means, however, that most of them could be read as stand-alone pieces. In some cases, closer consideration of each other’s work was called for: Dehouve’s metaphoric chains involving “flowers” was ripe for the plucking by Whittaker, who discusses flowers; considering flowers within Dehouve’s metonymic series might have added more complexity to his analysis. Lacking is a strong conclusion, given that the “Afterward” by Offner could also serve as an introduction. Scholars (myself included) would welcome more reflection on future directions for research, and for some acknowledgement of other, perhaps complementary, approaches. Striking to me was that there was little acknowledgement of the material nature of the works under discussion. While “communication” may be abstract, “graphic” is not—it is a material practice, happening when ink, or charcoal, or pigment is laid down on a surface of skin or paper. Separating the ideational from the material, just like limiting “writing” to “visible speech,” may also be a Eurocentric habit of mind, and well worth calling into question.

For instance, for all the discussion of semasiography, there’s almost no mention of color as a bearer of meaning. Some blindness to color is the biproduct of the costs of academic publishing, as color illustrations raise the cost of a book considerably. (This volume has eight color illustrations.) While the volume includes abundant black-and-white reproductions, too

many of them are line drawings of poor quality, rather than better quality photographs. If we think that the creations of Indigenous people are worthy of our scrutiny, why not do our best to reproduce their creations, rather than our interpretations of them, in the form of drawings?

All in all, this is an interesting and useful book. The writers of the chapters within profit from an established paradigm shift around an expanded definition of “writing,” which now includes the range of glotographs and semasiographs found on the pages of Mesoamerican manuscripts. Many attend carefully to the spatialized nature of this writing system. At the same time, the chapters dealing with metonymic series, which grow out of human cognitive operations and thus underwrite a larger body of performative and graphic expression, gives evidence of a new paradigm shift that is now underway.

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