

HISTORY *of the* BOOK

Preliminary 1. Histories of the Book and Literacy Technologies

How should we approach the study of the history of the book and the related field of literacy technologies? Posing the question in this way already suggests that the traditional approach, in which an object, the codex book, is assumed at the outset, will not suffice. Our critical paradigms have changed. Even within the field of bibliography, the codex—the bound form of the book—is only one of the objects that come under consideration alongside manuscripts, tablets, writing on stones, wood, and textiles. The list could be elaborated, but the point is not simply to add to the range of materials or artifacts that should be included in our study, but to shift the basic foundation from an object-based one to a process-based engagement with literacy as a cultural phenomenon that takes different forms in different geographical and temporal locations.¹

To fully embrace such an approach, a new form of bibliographical study has to be developed: *biblio-alterity* is the term that will be used here to characterize this broader conceptual framework, though *ethnobibliography* might be a better rubric for its practices. The premise of *biblio-alterity* is that while bibliography was established on the basis of western cultural book practices, its analytic and descriptive methods need to be rethought to serve a broader range of types and modes of communication.² Discussion of these issues were fostered by scholars of non-Western writing systems, particularly, those of MesoAmerica and the New World, whose work could not be accommodated by traditional book-based approaches. Keeping some connection to bibliography emphasizes the continuity of these methods as well as their differences.

Communication practices go back into the very foundations of human civilization. We have no material evidence for spoken language, gestures, and communicative action from the past, since these are time-based and fleeting. Paleoanthropologists have to abstract from other remains of social behavior and organization to imagine these ephemeral practices. Our earliest traces of written sign systems may be the recent finds in the Blombos region of Africa, dated to 70,000 BCE. But by the time of the cave paintings in the Loire Valley, from 40,000

years ago, signs of codified communication are undoubtedly present many millennia before the development of writing in the Nile Valley (4000 BCE) and the Mesopotamian region (10,000-8,000 BCE). But, as scholars of non-Western systems have noted, the analytic methods developed to describe Western literacy lack the range necessary to consider forms of written inscription and memory practices that are distributed, performative, ephemeral, or embedded in cultural activities that preclude the very conception of an object that stands in a complex relation to its conditions of reception.³

All theoretical models of the history of the book developed to this point have taken the codex as a given, even as they have modified their approach to its study. But before outlining the tenets of a new approach, it behooves us to revisit the major paradigms for study of the history of the book, and consider their principles and value for forging an innovative paradigm ahead. After all, much historical study has been built on these models.

A few points of clarification are also in order at the outset. The “history of the book,” bibliography, and textual editing are related fields. The first tracks the development of writing, publishing, and communicative instruments in material form across a long-view of historical development. Bibliography, by contrast, is primarily a method of description and analysis of physical objects through forensic methods in the service of humanities scholarship including, but certainly not limited to, the history of the book. Textual editing focuses on establishing authoritative versions of works and texts. It takes into account the lifecycles of production—including authorship, publishing, and versioning over time.

Bibliography: A brief overview

The history of the history of the book in Western culture begins with bibliography—which is simply to say, people listed and described books long before anyone thought to reflect on the historical trajectory of the form or physical object. Bibliography, as far as we know, begins with enumerative practices, the creation of lists of books in collections, for sale, for inventory purposes, and for scholarly study. As long as collections of books existed, whether as scrolls or tablets, or bound codices, their owners—and those charged with disposition of their property—made records of their existence. Methods of organizing books for retrieval made use of hanging tags and labels, as well as systematic spatial arrangements on shelves, just as in contemporary libraries. By the 7th century BCE, Ashurbanipal’s library had been organized spatially by subject matter, with tablets distributed across the rooms of the building that housed them. *Pinakes*, the catalogue used in the third century BCE to classify the holdings in the library at Alexandria, and attributed to the librarian Callimachus, is much cited and studied for its intellectual organization. Evidently, various forms of knowledge management or information infrastructure have a long

history, even if the first printed version of the Pinakes only appeared in a late 17th century edition.⁴ [Figure TK]

Various contributions to bibliography and the history of printing in the 18th century were framed in terms of the study of “antiquities” in a period when historical chronology was still measured in biblical time. One milestone in English language study of the book is Joseph Ames’s *Typographical Antiquities: An historical account of Printing in England*, which was published in 1749. This work was updated about a half a century later by Thomas Frognall Dibdin, a towering figure in bibliography whose work had a direct influence on current methods. Through these linked references we can track the transmission of specific citations and information in book history. Dibdin published several monumental bibliographical works in the early 19th century—including the more playful *Bibliomania* and *Bibliophobia* (which includes such chapters as “Women, the enemy of books”). But his real scholarly purpose was reflected in the title of his first major publication in 1802, *Knowledge of the Editions of the Classics*, and in 1812, in partnership with a wealthy aristocratic patron, he co-founded the Roxburghe Club, considered the first book club.⁵ These scholars were focused on the legacy of western classical culture and its history. [Figure TK]

Bibliographical societies became established in Britain in the late 19th century, and in the United States in the early 20th, as techniques for critical editing and textual scholarship became established and integrated into other fields. Major contributions to modern bibliography included the development of analytic and descriptive approaches that addressed production history and physical features in a systematic way. Figures influential on the 20th-century maturation of the field included Ronald B. McKerrow, W.W. Greg, and A.W. Pollard. Their work and its traditions became integral to literary and library studies in mid-century through the efforts of Fredson Bowers, Thomas Tanselle, and others, and these techniques still provide methods of critical engagement with books as objects.⁶

In the late 20th century, greater attention to the social dimensions of books, texts, and their use in cultural contexts added new and sometimes contestatory engagements with the study of the book. Published in 1986, Donald F. McKenzie’s *Sociology of Texts* challenged the positivist approaches of traditional bibliographical methods, demonstrating that the value and meaning of written documents was entangled in cultural conditions. Many scholars working in critical editing and bibliographical studies were influenced by McKenzie. Among others, Jerome McGann built on McKenzie’s work (as well as that of traditional approaches) to engage with digital transmission and production of texts and textual artifacts. Our study of the history of the book and literacy technologies necessarily begins with these changes in place, but with the still considerable need to challenge traditional approaches to the field. Hugh Amory coined the term *ethnobiography* several decades ago, and, as noted elsewhere, work by anthropologists

and scholars of Meso-American writing and Native American signage is beginning to shift the discourse away from the book object and into literacy practices.⁷

Critical editing and Diplomatics

Though it might seem obvious that the study of books and their history is tied to the critical engagement with texts, in fact, that is not always the case. Many a bibliographer has toiled long and hard on deciphering collation formulas (the schemes for binding assembly encoded in the printing process), bindings, or watermarks without bothering to read the book whose history they are studying. The careful analysis of versions of texts, manuscripts, variations, and other corruptions or interventions is the work of the textual editor, not the bibliographer. Scholarly communities, particularly those engaged in the authentication of sacred texts have practiced critical editing and studies for millennia. Interpretative glosses on the Old Testament play such a large role in the Jewish tradition they constitute an entire work, The Talmud. The daunting task of establishing an authoritative biblical text was taken up by Jewish and Christian scholars in the early centuries of the Common Era, through the work of careful, word by word, comparison of all known scraps of evidence or “witnesses”.⁸ Scholars of classical texts took up similar methods as well as interpretative approaches throughout the middle ages and into the present. Other engagements with textual authenticity were driven by concerns about property rights and other legal matters. This approach is generally associated with diplomatics and the work of 17th-century French Benedictine monk Jean Mabillon. He was concerned with ways to authenticate documents, rather than texts, through the study of handwriting, scripts, and other features—as well as language. Mabillon’s work arose from disputes over church property and ownership, rather than textual transmission. His 1681 *De Re Diplomatica* is a masterpiece of facsimile copying and critical editing, but its purpose was to provide techniques of authentication of documentary evidence.

Diplomatics is crucial to the history of archival studies and professional practices that engage with documents. Its techniques have their own development, but, like bibliographical and editing practices, these remain relevant even as they are constantly reinvigorated with new dimensions and critical insights. But though the fields of archival studies, bibliography, and critical editing have been influenced by cultural studies and theoretical paradigms arising from post-structuralism, the history of the book as a field has only begun to question its methods—and their assumptions in what constitutes their proper object of study.

Book History

“Histories of the book” usually map the development of writing, early codes for recording speech or language acts, and the sequence of

technologies from sticks to clay to brushes, papyrus, leather, vellum, parchment, paper, and print (and recently, electronic formats and digital files). From wall and monument to tablet and scroll to codex and screen, the technological developments march along and with them a well-marked history of milestones in publication methods, major figures, important works, and shifts in the controls over intellectual property, production means, and distribution networks. The standard narratives are histories of publishing, particularly within national boundaries, and “the book in France” or “printing in England” essays track the development of audiences, publishers, licensing and state controls, censorship, and other institutional practices and social conditions. We know the names of the major figures in print history from Gutenberg to the present, and observe the trajectory from printer-scholar to publisher into the present day international mega-corporate conglomerations.

The narrative version of the “history of” has been complemented by a statistical, sociological methodology associated with the French *Annales* school, particularly for the earlier periods before and after the invention of printing. Not content with the description of physical artifacts, knowledge of their makers, or conditions of production, the *Annales* historians added considerable breadth by extending the field to considerations of commerce, politics, economics, and other aspects of book history that would not be immediately extractable from the object, but required analysis of account books, documents and records, and other historical materials. The very act of periodization, such as that performed by Roger Chartier in his attention to the “break” between scroll and codex, manuscript and print, for all its benefits and virtues, reinforces certain assumptions that are readily undone when points of continuity, rather than over-determined notions of difference, are brought into play. [Figure TK]

Book history, then, is the explicit narrative discussion of the origins and development of the book (broadly considered), that emerges from the combined traditions sketched above: the study of classical and biblical texts and their transmission, the enumeration and description of books and collections, the analysis of the physical object and its production history, and, more recently, engagement with the book as a cultural object whose meaning and value depend upon its use. But as the study that identifies itself as “the history of the book” took shape as an academic field, the articulation of models of what its approach should be also came into focus. Self-critical reflection on the field was a relatively recent development, and three main models have succeeded each other, each adding new dimensions to the conversation, but leaving much room for new work ahead.

Three models of book history

The first explicit discussion of a “model” of book history was proposed by Robert Darnton, the second by Nicholas Barker, and the third by

Michael Suarez. Darnton is a historian, and his landmark article, “What is the History of Books,” published in 1982, stresses social relations of production as a primary way of understanding book history.⁹ Rather than study a book as an object in isolation, trying to extract analysis from its forensic observation (physical or textual), he suggested that a book be studied within a circuit of six stages of production: authors, publishers, printers, shippers, booksellers and readers. These stages are each linked to a role played by a person or people, and their activities, rather than the form or content of books—or the books as objects, are what drive the discussion. Darnton was influenced by the French *Annales* school of scholarship, but his model stills assumes the book as an a priori given, an object in circulation. The *Annales* approach challenged traditional bibliography by suggesting that books be seen as ordinary objects, rather than rare ones, and as mainstream objects of study and use. These bottom-up, generally empirical, frequently statistical, methods were in striking distinction to the hermeneutic and descriptive techniques of standard bibliography and textual analysis. Stressing a communications process and lifecycle, Darnton’s model included books before movable type, newspapers, and other print media within its scope. Emphasis on everyday life, long views of history, and social processes characterize this approach, which is also associated with Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, and Roger Chartier, crucial figures 20th century in book history.¹⁰

In 1986, Nicholas Barker and Thomas Adams proposed “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” and though it also drew on *Annales* approaches, it stressed that the lifecycle of a book should be understood in terms of events, not people. This shift suggested that “publication” was a process, rather than the singular action of an individual, and should include the work of the author, publisher, editor, and other players. The five events in their model of the life of a book were publishing, manufacturing, distributing, reception, and survival. The authors were implicitly criticizing Darnton’s emphasis on people rather than books in his communication circuit. Barker and Adams placed their book events within a larger frame they called the “whole socio-economic continuum,” with its realms of intellectual, political, commercial, and social/ behavioral influences. Like Darnton, they extend the boundaries of the “book” to include other printed and written matter—posing the question of how “book history” could legitimately exclude the *Declaration of Independence* and other non-codex objects of significance.

In 2003-04, Michael Suarez took up the “Historiographical Problems and Possibilities in Book History” which he identified as those of periodization, national literatures, errors in scholarship, and gaps in knowledge.¹¹ Periodization posed problems because of the uneven history of technological developments in various locations. Even within the boundaries of a particular nation, conditions of literacy, print, and publication might vary considerably, but from a

global perspective, Suarez argued, such variations were so extreme as to make any characterization by period or century almost meaningless. The “late medieval” period in northern Europe cannot be usefully compared with the same period in the Islamic courts, equatorial Africa, or China, as the institutions and sites of literacy are so different in each instance. Even in more recent times, disparities are marked and prevalent. Periodization by technological innovation, rather than by simple date, still poses difficulties. Other criteria—such as what kinds of books or authors are in circulation, and what cultural tastes are driving reading—might have more impact than production processes on how the history unfolds. Geographically grounded approaches also raise problems since much of the production of printed work is done within trade networks. Paper supplies, type manufacture, the sale of printed sheets, piracy of texts, binding for individuals and local markets in various places around the globe are all factors in the dissemination and reception of books—and these are often not co-located. The question for Suarez is to what extent national identities can be used to define an area of study in an internationally configured book trade. The question only matters because, as already noted, so many “histories of” have been written from the perspective of modern nations. Further, if the book is approached as an object *in* history, then how can it be adequately addressed as an agent *of* history, and a means to constitute human agency? Suarez also pointed out other logistical problems for scholarship—the incompleteness of the bibliographical record (our evidence is spotty at best), ignorance (scholars have limited knowledge), and the lack of knowledge of the record we do possess (realities of research). Finally, given that attitudes towards such issues as intellectual property have not been consistent over time, and that reading practices have also varied considerably, how do we keep from falling into anachronistic analyses of historical phenomena?¹²

In spite of their many differences, these three models share some fundamental assumptions. They all work mainly within the realm of printed books and editions, or other manuscript and printed matter that is part of a continuous chain of transmission. They are all grounded in western cultural paradigms and the assumption of literacy as a mainly (if qualified) progressive process. And they are all dependent on the physical object at the center of their model, even if they are sometimes more focused on publishing than books. Recent attempts at shifting from these foundations and their framing assumptions draw on post-colonial and post-structural theories and the work of anthropologists, cultural historians, literary theories, and others concerned with rethinking our understanding of communications and media—and producing an alternative approach to bibliography.

Deconstructing and decolonializing book history

Walter Mignolo’s *Darker Side of the Renaissance*, published in 1996, deconstructed the standard approaches to the narratives of European

colonial expeditions and the cultures with which they came into contact. Mignolo, describing the cultural politics of encounter between the Mayans and the Spanish, begins with the asymmetry present from initial contact. The 16th century Jesuit José de Acosta “ranked writing systems according to their proximity to the alphabet,” in spite of the recognition that the indigenous people had a highly developed literate culture.¹³ This included creating a vocabulary filled with colonial assumptions to designate Incan men of letters, “quipu camoyan,” scribes, “tlacuilo,” and surfaces for painted narratives “amoxtli.”¹⁴ Mignolo insists that we move beyond this kind of cultural relativism, particularly the sort based on comparative approaches privileging old world norms and conventions as standards on which terms of comparison are established. With rare exceptions, Mayan literacy has always been conceived from the European perspective. Among the exceptions was the aforementioned Acosta who observed that “in every bundle of these [quipu], as many greater and lesser knots and tied string” ...encode “as many differences as we have.”¹⁵ Acosta recognized *difference* as the basis of signs. But his recognition of the fundamental non-equivalence of these semiotic systems was equally striking. He knew that the bibliographic practices based in alphabetic literacy were inadequate for addressing literacy conceived in a fundamentally different mode. Each of these sign systems may be as complicated as the other, but they cannot be put into a relation of reciprocity. In Nahuatl, emphasis is placed on the connection between spoken words and an agent, Mignolo continues, and the Mexicans “had a set of concepts to outline their semiotic interactions.”¹⁶ If their “Sages of the Word,” were resident in the “amoxtli” or surfaces, learning was located in the body of elders, transmitted orally. The Christian philosophy of the word, conceived in connections between the archetypal book (of God) and the metagraphic book (of communication), was embedded in the Franciscan view of writing and book. Mignolo makes clear that this distinction doesn’t transfer to Nahuatl practices. More striking is that the 16th century Acosta had insight into these issues. [Figure TK]

Other asymmetries and cultural obstacles to equivalence have been recognized for decades. But the implications of these contact moments of the 16th and 17th century are still present at the deeper level: in the still unarticulated recognition of the basic differences in the ways different cultural semiotic systems emerge, organize the cultural world, and then pass themselves off as natural, erasing the process by which semiotic *conception* occurs. In other words, Mignolo’s argument is not that we need better “translations” across sign systems, but that we need a way to understand *difference* and *specificity* at the level of original *semiosis*—in attending to the emergence and structuring effects of the formation of sign systems. The ways signs and literacy are thought, conceived, and acted are distinct in these contact zones, and the bibliographic requirements for this alternative ecology of signs can’t be developed—or taught, or turned

into a critical or pedagogical method—as a simple appendix or corrective.

Mignolo also discussed later developments in the 17th and 18th century exchanges and the philosophical foundations of their attitudes towards signs, writing, and history. Various cross currents of belief in the “universal history” of humankind were at odds with the contact experience and exchanges. Boturini Benaducci, the 18th century ethnographer, for example, in his study of quipu, undercut the alphabet as the sole authority for the historical record.¹⁷ The lesson taken from these discussions is the impossibility of translation. Mignolo emphasized the paramount importance of attending to the description and discourse that arises around the objects, as well as the objects—because the objects are constructed by these discourses of inquiry and scholarly attention precisely in so far as they align with the conceptual principles on which the discourse itself operates. Difference cannot, in that sense, be translated, nor the problem of cultural specificity addressed through comparative methods.

More alternative approaches

Mignolo’s work has been crucial to restructuring the view of Meso-American writing practices, seeing the glyphs and signs of Aztec, Olmec, and Mayan cultures on terms that are not comparative. Letting go of “progressive” versions of cultural development in which literacy moves from oral to written to print and then other communications media is a crucial tenet of this approach. Robert Fraser’s *Book Through Postcolonial Eyes* (2008) opens with a case study of printing in India that leapfrogged from oral to print, upending the fallacy of a single progressive model. The above mentioned work by Hugh Amory, *The Trout and the Milk*, suggested that our understandings of the uses of print objects had to be radically qualified in cross-cultural contexts as the foundation of an alternative bibliography. Recent studies by Matt Cohen and others looking at pre-contact communication systems in the New World make the case that networks of signs made use of landscape, location, and local knowledge as part of their meaning in ways that books and print objects could not. The differences in cultural practices of legible communication are only beginning to be explored and long-standing biases put aside.

The future history of the book and literacy technologies will depend upon development of a substantive theory of biblio-alterity in which specific cultural practices inform new models of description and analysis. This future approach should draw on: 1) the forensic techniques (attention to physicality, trace, materials) of traditional bibliography; 2) aesthetic analyses (forms, format, images, organization, presentation, and style); 3) study of political impacts (agency of texts and objects within power structures and forces); 4) engagement with social values (priorities, hierarchies, stratifications of groups and classes); 5) discussion of cultural practices (beliefs, mores, knowledge, etc.) that

have been part of our longer study of legible artifacts. But it should also be premised on a systems approach in which distributed nodes of production are considered as part of the processual conditions of identity and influence—contingent upon time, place, location, cultural contexts and other constituting factors. As noted at the outset, the point of developing biblio-alterity is not simply to expand the kinds of objects under consideration, but change the basic approaches that produce the objects of our study.

All images are from book in the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA, unless otherwise noted.

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Notes

¹ The definition of “literacy” is much debated. Strict interpretation of the term limits it to knowledge of letters, reading, and writing systems. Broader definitions are inclusive, and suggest that nearly all forms of de-coding cultural systems—from dance to astronomy, politics to emotions—might be characterized as “literacies.” In the context of this course-book, the term applies to sign systems of communication that are sufficiently codified to be identified, used, understood, and integrated into other cultural practices. Literacy technologies is used to designate all of the various aspects of production and reception that are part of these systems. Though this text is not focused on issues of infrastructure—wiring, broadcasting, electronic signal production and transmission or storage, for instance—it does attend to some of the more traditional features of literacy production—tablets in clay and wax, inscriptions in stone, writing on vellum, bark, and other surfaces, and printing in all its various forms. But newer work, such as that of Matthew Cohen, *Networked Wilderness*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2009) Robert Fraser, *The Book Through Post-Colonial Eyes*, NY and London: Routledge, 2008) and classics, such as Walter Mignolo’s *Darker Side of the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995) and Martin Bernal’s *Cadmean Letters* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), are all inspirations for expanding our understanding of bibliographical study to distributed systems of signs and processes for their use whether they appear in landscapes or on objects, are transient or relatively fixed, so long as they are codified to a sufficient degree to be understood within communicative actions and transactions.

² Or some other term that might engage writing, literacy, and their multiple dimensions.

³ Cohen, op.cit. and Walter Mignolo and Elizabeth Boone, *Writing Without Words* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

⁴ The edition of classical texts was assembled by Theodor Graevius with a 758-page commentary by Ezechiel Spanheim; Jeremy Norman, History of Information, <http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=169>

⁵ Dibdin, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Frognall_Dibdin

⁶ For an account of the work of McKerrow, Greg, and Bowers, see the Institut d’Histoire du Livre: <http://ihl.enssib.fr/en/analytical-bibliography-an-alternative-prospectus/editing-texts>

⁷ Hugh Amory, *The Trout and the Milk*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, 1997) and Boone and Mignolo, *Writing without Words*, op.cit. and Matt

Cohen and Jeffrey Glover, *Colonial Mediascapes*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

⁸ Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁹ Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" *Daedalus* 111 (3): 65-83; <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3403038>

¹⁰ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, (London: Verso, 1976) Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Michael Suarez, "Historiographical Problems and Possibilities in Book History and National Histories of the Book," *Studies in Bibliography*, Volume 56, 2003-04. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214496>

¹² For another important contribution, see Adrian Johns, in *The Nature of the Book*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) put forward the detailed study of individual cases whose granularity demonstrates the extent to which exceptions to generalized rules further complicate any "models" we create. The summary effect of these and other contributions to the field is to provide a highly useful set of analytic approaches that reveal different facets and aspects of objects under investigation. And Joseph Dane, *The Myth of Print Culture*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

¹³ Mignolo, p.4.

¹⁴ Mignolo, p. 75

¹⁵ Mignolo, p. 83

¹⁶ Mignolo, p. 103

¹⁷ Mignolo, op.cit.