

# On spirit writing: materialities of language and the religious work of transduction

WEBB KEANE *University of Michigan*

This is a speculative essay in comparative possibilities. It looks at some widely separated religious contexts in which a power-laden relationship across ontological difference – for instance, between living humans and a world of gods or spirits – is mediated by operations on the materiality of the written sign. These operations typically result in either materializing something immaterial or dematerializing something material. But they may also involve other activities that take advantage of specific physical properties of the written word such as being persistent, transportable, perishable, alienable, and so forth. Once divine words are rendered into script, they possess a distinctively material quality and form. They appear on some physical medium, and so are both durable and potentially destructible. Anything that can happen to another artefact can happen to them. The practices I dub ‘spirit writing’ subject the written word to radical transformation, taking advantage of its very materiality in order to dematerialize it, even if only in order to be rematerialized in yet some other form (such as a person’s body). Many such practices seek to generate or control religious powers by means of transduction across semiotic modalities, material activities that help render experience-transcending forces realistic or at least readily imaginable.

Across a wide range of contexts, people respond to various possibilities and powers that the materiality of writing can seem to suggest.<sup>1</sup> These responses are hardly confined to exotic curiosities. Take, for example, the ‘Good Riddance Day’ staged in New York City at the end of 2007. An industrial-size paper shredder had been brought to Times Square ‘to give people an opportunity to get rid of their most unpleasant reminders’ of the year (Schapiro 2007). As people crowded to the spot, they showed how inventively one might take up the invitation offered by a large mechanical device, bringing all sorts of physical tokens of otherwise immaterial memories they wanted to dispose of. The reminders included failed exam scores, mortgages, evidence of broken engagements, and other forms of paper documentation. Reducing potent words to illegible matter, their bearers took advantage of their ability to act upon material stuff in order to enact a hoped-for transformation of thought and feeling. Thus the very physicality of writing and its media seems to have prompted ordinary New Yorkers to spontaneously reinvent, in rudimentary form and no doubt with some self-mockery, an aspect of ritual – one they may not have imagined before (and one that, once invented, may or may not

take on an explicitly 'religious' character) – that belongs, at the margins, to a large and highly diverse family of practices I will call, for economy's sake, 'spirit writing'.

In this essay I look at some widely separated religious contexts in which a power-laden relationship across ontological difference – for instance, between living humans and a world of gods or spirits – is mediated by operations on the materiality of the written sign.<sup>2</sup> These operations typically result in either materializing something immaterial or dematerializing something material. But they may also involve other activities that take advantage of specific physical properties of the written word such as being persistent, portable, perishable, alienable, and so forth. Once divine words are rendered into script, they possess a distinctively material quality and form. They appear on some physical medium, and so are both durable and potentially destructible. Anything that can happen to another artefact can happen to them: they can be transported, hidden, revealed, embraced, kissed, spat upon, burned, decorated, copied, ingested – the possibilities are, in principle, without limit.

Many of these practices subject the written word to radical transformation, taking advantage of its very materiality (the fact of being soluble ink or flammable paper, for instance) in order to dematerialize it, even if only in order to be rematerialized in yet some other form (such as inscription on or ingestion within a person's body). I will argue that such practices often seek to generate religious powers by means of what might be called 'transduction' across semiotic modalities.<sup>3</sup> Consider how a turbine works. It transforms the movement of water into the quite different motion of a mechanical device in order to generate power. The water in motion becomes electrical energy. By analogy, semiotic transduction aims to tap into the power that can be obtained by the very act of transforming something from one semiotic modality to another. Although it is probably true that in most cases the divine *source* of the words is considered by practitioners to be the ultimate source of power, this alone does not explain the practice. Rather, the ability of humans to gain access to that divine power depends on the act of transformation. It seems these practices develop a notion that the very capacity to alter or move among semiotic modalities is itself a source of efficacy.

I propose that such practices of 'spirit writing' are evidence that the perceptual experience of writing offers some very general features. That is, for all their cultural and historical specificity, practices of materialization and dematerialization draw on ubiquitous properties of writing. These properties are thematized in the practices of transduction. Going against the particularizing trend of much humanistic research, I want to suggest that these practices may open up possible avenues for ethnographic and historical comparison. Comparative endeavours in anthropology and history have long been out of favour, mostly for good reason (see Keane 2003a), but their rejection has come at a steep cost. This essay, in a frankly speculative spirit, aims to suggest one opening towards the reinvention of the comparative imagination in these fields.

I hasten to add, however, that this does not mean we should leap to any strong universalistic claims about religion, language, or writing. If writing offers affordances of which people *might* take advantage, it does not determine or require that they *do* so.<sup>4</sup> Local linguistic and semiotic ideologies are crucial preconditions for any practice of transduction. More generally, of course, any given ethnographic analysis will, in the final instance, depend on a grasp of the particularities of social context, the interpretative frames of culture, the pressures of politics, and contingencies of events. To say this, however, verges on mere truism for contemporary socio-cultural anthropology and allied disciplines. Taking it to be axiomatic that 'context is everything', anthropologists sometimes forget to

ask what can count as ‘context’. The affordances sketched out here can be understood as aspects of context as much as any culturally, sociologically, or politically specific circumstance. Indeed, one might argue that even the ubiquitous, trans-contextual aspects of writing are themselves conditions of possibility for the kinds of historical difference on which anthropology has tended to dwell. One reason has to do with the inherent historicity that is implicit in the very materiality – and thus sociality – of religious practice, and the semiotic ideologies it presupposes.<sup>5</sup> But I cannot fully develop that claim within the limits of this essay.

### Inscription in the body

In its materiality, writing shares some features with *any* physical entity that might be taken as a sign. Certain basic themes of spirit writing are apparent, for instance, in non-literate divination. Haruspicy or entrails divination was commonplace on Sumba, in eastern Indonesia, at the end of the twentieth century. (It is noteworthy that Sumbanese sometimes called haruspicy ‘our writing’, comparable to the writing systems possessed by the Javanese, Balinese, Arabs, and the former colonizers, the Dutch, and closely associated with their political, economic, and cultural power.<sup>6</sup>) In Sumba, the living interacted with ancestral spirits by means of spoken words. Spirits were not represented in iconic form, nor did people have clear ideas about where the spirits might be located. Verbal interaction with spirits imposed a material requirement, that it be accompanied by the sacrifice of an animal, such as a chicken or pig. Speech was conveyed to the animal, whose demise enabled it to carry words to the dead. But the dead are located somewhere beyond the realm of human sensual experience. The diviner thus faced a common religious problem, namely how do those who exist beyond our perceptions, those whom we cannot see, hear, smell, or feel, respond to us?<sup>7</sup> In Sumba, the conventional solution was to open up the dead animal after the sacrifice and seek out signs in its intestines or liver.

The marks on entrails are *visible* answers to *spoken* questions. One of their fundamental properties is that they cross semiotic modalities. They reply to speech in a medium other than speech. In the process, they also respond to denotational language with indexical (and sometimes iconic) signs.<sup>8</sup> Thus a shift of medium can alter pragmatic functions and the relative weighting of semiotic characteristics, a shift to which the multiple relations among linguistic form, semantics, and pragmatics readily lend themselves. What is crucial here is that this relationship of semiotic difference between query and reply is paralleled by that between the ontological planes in which the agents are situated. The marks on entrails are physical signs that arrive from a non-physical world, which otherwise remains invisible and silent. Their very character as signs embodies the ontological problem to which they are posed, for at the start of the ritual it is never certain whether the spirits are present. Entrails reading is a response to the problem of interaction with non-manifest others. The spirits enter the perceptual world via the hidden interior of the body; in this case, that of the sacrificial animal. The act of opening that body and reading its entrails draws attention to the very invisibility of the sources of those marks.

The scenario staged by entrails reading shows some basic problems to which spirit writing is often meant as a solution: how does one cope in practical terms with an invisible and silent world, and what can one hope to gain from doing so (Keane 2007)? This is the practical expression of an ontological dilemma. To the extent that living humans seek out relations with an invisible and silent world, then they will tend to

encounter difficulties centring on their own materiality as well as that of the world they perceive and the media for action that are available to them.

In the study of religion, there are two traditional approaches to such problems (Keane 2008). One starts from what we might (in shorthand) call a religious perspective; the other does not, but they are symmetrical. If, on the one hand, we begin by taking the existence of some realm beyond immediate sense perception as given, then the question will take the form 'How does that world reach us? How can we reach it?' If, on the other hand, we start from the position (again in shorthand) of an outsider to the religious perspective, that sensual perceptions of a material world are the given, then the question can be formulated as 'What perceptions will count as signs of something beyond? How do material practices make the invisible world a presupposable ground for what practitioners perceive? How do people produce the immaterial using the material means available to them?' Although I will start from the latter perspective, it is important to bear in mind its logical relationship to the former. And spirit writing can work in both directions, as noted above: in some cases materializing the immaterial, in others dematerializing the material.

The reading of entrails gives a practical means of coping with the uncertainties implied by the questions 'Are you there spirits? Can you hear me? Can I hear you?' and draws its force in part from the capacity to transform one semiotic modality, speech, into another, physical marks. The reading of entrails displays a logic that is parallel to one of the ways in which script can manifest spirit. Both practices seem to treat writing as a means of bringing something into the empirical realm through a process of externalization.

Balinese practices offer another example of how one might see writing as the externalization of something that otherwise remains inside the body and inaccessible to the senses, albeit one developed with reference to a semiotic ideology quite different from those prevailing on Sumba. Reversing the premise of much modern linguistics, that speech ontogenically precedes writing, Balinese traditionally considered letters to be contained within the body and to be written on the tongue; speech is a subsequent and derivative manifestation of this prior writing. Thus 'sacred syllables uttered by the priest ... [are] a vehicle of power and they can affect the outer world because they are a distillation of the written language within the body, a literal exhalation or ex-pression (forcing out) of inner power toward some external goal' (Zurbuchen 2000: 96; see also Rubinstein 2000). This example reveals several common features of spirit writing. First, it portrays writing as emerging from an enclosed and therefore invisible interior space. This seems to be one way of making sense, in concrete terms, of the relationship between non-manifest and manifest worlds; or to put it another way, it seems to find in perception a correlative to a non-perceptible realm. Second, the Balinese seem to be thinking of language at least as much in terms of the materiality of the body as in terms of mind.<sup>9</sup> Third, the Balinese case portrays the externalization of that which is hidden, or control over that possibility, as being an exercise of power (cf. Wiener 1995). I will return to these points below. Here, however, I want to elaborate a second aspect of the question. For if writing is one instance of the very general problem of materiality for religion, it is also something more specific: an instance of problems concerning language.

### **Logos and transcendence**

In 726 CE, the Byzantine emperor Leo III banned the worship of icons and initiated a period of iconoclasm in the Christian Orthodox Church. The politics and theology of

this ban lie beyond the reach of this essay (see Louth 2007). It is relevant to reflect, however, on the basic logic that it carried out. The ban on worshipping visual images, mere physical objects, derives to an important degree from the core concept of divine transcendence (Belting 1994). Whatever else iconoclasm does, it works to sharpen the distinction between spirit and that which can be manifested to the senses. This distinction marks precisely the gap that spirit writing is meant to bridge. In response to the ban, St John of Damascus wrote a treatise in defence of the veneration of divine images (Louth 2002). Among other things, it was a defence of materiality itself. Identifying the iconoclast's sharp opposition between spirit and matter with that between good and evil, he admonished the reader 'do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing is that which God has made. This is the Manichean heresy' (John of Damascus 1994: 17).

St John of Damascus's argument rests on one of the distinctive features of Christian theology, the doctrine of incarnation. As he put it, this doctrine holds that God, being aware of human limitations, condescended to become flesh in the form of Jesus. But if the doctrine is about materiality and morality, it can also take a distinctly linguistic turn. In the words of the Apostle John, 'the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14). So although St John of Damascus was primarily interested in visual representations, to substantiate his thesis he also drew on ideas about the experience of language:

Just as the Word made flesh remained the Word, so flesh became the Word remaining flesh, becoming, rather, one with the Word through union. Therefore I venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead. I paint the visible flesh of God, for it is impossible to represent a spirit, how much more God who gives breath to the spirit (John of Damascus 1994: 4-5).

By 'Word' of course, St John of Damascus was referring to *Logos*, which is certainly not strictly linguistic.<sup>10</sup> To reduce some complex theological discussions to rudimentary form, references to *Logos* and other linguistic terms often arose in Christian traditions as a way of understanding the relationship between divinity and incarnation. In Augustinian thinking, for example, references to language developed the idea that as inner thought is to outer utterance, so God is to the incarnation. The Augustinian analogy draws on a particular understanding of the language. In this particular linguistic ideology, language has a dual character, existing as both immaterial inner thought and material outer expression.<sup>11</sup>

Without conflating Augustine's view with that of St John of Damascus, the former does suggest a way to understand the latter's invocation of language in a defence of icons. As outer expression, St John of Damascus's portrayal of language seems to treat it as being like other physical substances in certain key respects. We might surmise that the analogy depends on the fact that speech has form (phonological, morphological, and syntactic) and substance (sound), in addition to semantic and pragmatic functions. I suggest that writing pushes this materiality still further, giving it orthographic form and, if we include the writing medium and surface on which it depends, other physical properties as well. Like other artefacts, the written word has special characteristics that distinguish it from speech, being, for instance, portable, durable, and destructible. The concept of *Logos* can be seen as one way of responding to a widespread (but *not* universal) religious problem of grasping the relationship between the immanent world of familiar sense perceptions and the transcendent world of divinity. It deals with this potentially abstruse conceptual and practical problem by drawing on a more

familiar intuition (again, not necessarily universal) that language can take the form both of inner thought and outer substance.

It is important to stress that even where this intuition *is* found, it need not necessarily be of great local interest or require any particular treatment. Relations between inner and outer, materiality and immateriality are problems only as they come to be thematized in specific semiotic ideologies, given certain political, religious, or other historically specific circumstances (Keane 2007; see also Eisenlohr 2009). At the time St John of Damascus was writing, for instance, the theological requirements of Christian orthodoxy meant that the separation of spirit and matter also required constant vigilance against idolatry. Therefore, at risk of falling into the Manichaeism he eschewed, even while defending materiality against any dichotomous association with evil, St John of Damascus still had to mark that boundary, and so he wrote: 'I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter' (John of Damascus 1994: 15-16). But as suggested by the several bouts of iconoclasm that have recurred across Christian history, if spirit means transcendence, then materialization and people's responses to the perception of things constantly threaten to become problems. People must learn to look beyond the material sign to a source in a realm that lies outside the senses. Image and word must be treated as pointing to something other than themselves. The theologically motivated need to distinguish between sign and signified underwrites a semiotic ideology, largely implicit in practices (albeit in this case also grounded in explicit theological teachings, or the worries about mediation they induce; see Eisenlohr 2009). Writing lends itself to appropriation within activities that deal with the invisible world by virtue of the way in which it lends to language some of the properties common to physical artefacts.

For all its specificity, however, the Christian doctrine of incarnation bears on a general problem faced by those who want to deal with a spirit world (*if* they conceive of that world as lying beyond the senses – which, of course, is not always the case): in just what way can any being that transcends the material world actually be available to perception? The idea of *Logos* is a highly abstract answer to this question, albeit one that makes use of an analogy based in ordinary linguistic habits. But there are many ways to answer this question not in theory but in practice.

The three examples I have introduced so far – the shredding of documents, the reading of entrails, and the rhetorical identification of language and icons – illustrate a nested set of problems to which spirit writing can be one response. First is the very general religious problem of the *materialization of spirit*. It is a problem that a wide range of practices, such as linguistic expression, images, altars, and relics, are meant to address. Within this larger religious problem we can identify a more specific problem, the *materialization of spirit in language*. Practices that deal with this problem include the use of scriptures, prayers, mantras, sermons, hymns, and so forth. More specific yet is the problem of the *materialization of spirit in language in script*. Here we encounter practices such as tattooing, the use of amulets, writing-based divination, ingestion of script in the form of potions, the production of obscure or biomorphic calligraphy, monumental inscription, prayer flags and wheels, physical manipulation of sacred texts, and many other practices that treat writing as a material substance with a specific form. The shredding of documents in New York shows how operations on writing can partake of the more common intuition that what happens physically to signs can affect those things of which they are signs. The reading of entrails exemplifies how writing



and other semiotic marks can serve as vehicles of communication between the world of the senses and one that is supposed to lie beyond it. The doctrine of *Logos* exemplifies how script can help make immaterial spirit material, and thus make it present for those for whom it might otherwise be absent. But the practices of spirit writing to which I now turn serve functions beyond those of communicating (and, by implication, of reference and denotation) and making present. They draw on the fact that any materialization must have a form; and any form opens up more than one possible meaning or use.

### Materializing and dematerializing the word

I am suggesting that spirit writing takes up certain affordances that are latent in certain properties of language and writing *wherever* they occur. But any given development of an affordance depends on the nature of people's experiences of language and writing. Such experiences are not direct reflections of linguistic and material properties, but are mediated by particular linguistic and, more generally, semiotic ideologies.<sup>12</sup> As I have noted, for the many traditions of semiotic ideology that do not share, say, the Saussurean doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign, or related assumptions in contemporary academic theories of language, the forms of writing can be significant in non-accidental, ways. For instance, writing can be iconic: that is, the very shape of script can itself manifest divine immanence through resemblance. Thus, in some Islamic mystical teachings,

[t]he letters themselves form an important part of the symbolical language in mystical and profane poetry and prose, some of them being charged with high religious qualities. *Alif*, the first letter, a straight line, numerical value 1, is the chiffre for the graceful slim stature of the beloved, but at the same time, and much more, the symbol of Allah, the One God, free from every worldly quality, the Absolute Unity ... In poetry, *mim* is the symbol of the small, dot-like mouth of the beloved ... Many letters ... have been compared to the curls or tresses of the beloved (Schimmel 1970: 12-13; see also Schimmel 1994).

This doctrine seems to crystallize a widespread notion, that the formal properties of writing are neither accidental nor merely conventional.

If, by contrast, language is viewed (within the terms of a given semiotic ideology) as an arbitrary sign, and writing as a second-order arbitrary sign of that sign, then it makes sense to focus on spoken language as ontogenically and logically prior to writing. In that case, linguistic *form* should not be taken to be meaningful in itself. One should not make anything of apparent iconicity: for instance, the apparent resemblance between the letter o and an open mouth – one might notice the resemblance, but not find it a plausible candidate for an efficacious practice. Here iconicity of visual form is an affordance that is not taken up in principle. But if, conversely, language is a divine emanation, then in itself it is *already* a divine presence, and its form is part of that presence. This is one reason given in the Islamic tradition for the non-translatibility of the Qur'an. Having been transmitted orally by the angel Gabriel, the text was first received by the Prophet as certain sounds. Those sounds are an inalienable part of the sacred text that was transmitted. Moreover, since translation is a function of linguistic diversity, to translate the sacred text would implicate it in human differences and the potential for conflict; it is only as a unitary Arabic text that the Qur'an remains stable as a text that is identical in all possible circumstances (Messick 1993). And in addition, if language is an aspect of divine presence, then this might also apply to its visible

embodiment as script. A version of this notion is found in the Balinese idea that letters are found in the body, and emerge as sound. In this view, spoken sound is derivative of a prior script.

Once attention is drawn to the potential significance of the written form, then script can be manipulated to take advantage of it. In Java, as in many other Islamic societies in which iconographic production is constrained, scribes have developed calligraphic techniques for depicting birds and other animals composed out of letters. In such cases, the script is usually not meant to be read. What is important is to perceive that the visual image of the animal consists of words. The viewer might not understand them, but knows they are there. The result is an allegory of divine immanence in creation (Behrend 1996: 198). This strategy of dealing with the more general problem of immanence and transcendence makes use of the dual character of language as both form and semantic content. Something similar may motivate a very common practice in both Arabic and Chinese writing traditions: the calligraphic production of abstract designs so complex that the result is illegible (Robson 2008; Schimmel 1970). Presumably such practices are playing with the aesthetic possibilities of script as a graphic system. But they also seem to imply some notion that even illegible words still maintain a degree of power or efficacy, beyond any merely communicative or archival function. That is, they are versions of the focus on a religious problem of presence.

A common kind of spirit writing that responds to the problem of the presence of spirits or divinity is the amulet or talisman (e.g. Skemer 2006). The Jewish *mezuzah* is one version of an amulet and can be used to demonstrate some of their general features. The *mezuzah* is a small cylindrical container into which a scrolled parchment is inserted. Written on the parchment is the statement of faith (the Shema). In accordance with scriptural directive, the *mezuzah* is posted on the door-frame. Once posted, the contents of the *mezuzah* are no longer visible, and the words – which are, after all, semantically transparent, and, in another context, entirely legible – will never be read. According to one semi-popular source, ‘In Hebrew, the word for human dwelling is *dirah*, while the word for animal dwelling is *dir*. The difference between these two words is the letter *hey* – signifying the Name of God. The presence of God in one’s home is what distinguishes us as uniquely human’ (Simmons 2008). This source adds that most *mitzvot* (acts that fulfil a divine commandment) have the power to protect while the actors are actively engaged in performing them, but the *mezuzah* is unique because it protects them even as they sleep. What the commentary emphasizes are two characteristic features of the amulet as a medium for establishing divine presence. One is that by treating writing as a physical object, the amulet stabilizes divine language in a way that markedly contrasts to the evanescence of the speech event. The presence of the object itself indexically presupposes the (more or less) permanent presence of that language. If that language is in turn indexically linked to its divine sources, the result is a mode of presence that is at least potentially the vehicle for enduring agency. (Of course, this agency depends on additional, more culturally and theologically specific, ideas about the powers of language beyond those about writing itself, but that response to writing is a crucial element this tradition shares with others.)

Consider now another kind of spirit writing. Both Jewish and Muslim popular traditions include techniques for ingesting texts. One method is to write a scriptural passage on a piece of paper, burn it, and dissolve the ashes in a liquid to produce a potion that will then be ingested. Others consist of infusing a liquid with a written text. For example, one may write a passage on the interior surface of a bowl or on a flat



board, using water-soluble ink, then, filling the bowl or washing off the board with water, use the resulting solution as a potion. For the Berti of Sudan,

[t]he highest form of the possession of the Koran is its commitment to memory, which amounts to its internalization in the head, the superior part of the body, whence it can be instantly reproduced by recitation. But the Koran can also be internalized in the body by being drunk. Although drinking the Koran is seen as being far less effective than memorizing it, it is superior to carrying it on the body through the use of amulets. A major disadvantage of amulets is that they are liable to be lost, left behind or rendered ineffective by exposure to ritual pollution (El-Tom 1985: 416).

Notice a formal parallel to the logic of entrails reading. Both techniques work with the movement between the exterior and interior of the body in order to manipulate relations between visible and invisible orders of reality. In the Berti case, mental and corporal internalization seem to be similar, if unequal, processes.

Like the amulet, these techniques can be understood as a means of taking advantage of certain features of writing in order to deal with the problem of presence posed by an ontological gap. Of course, writing alone is not sufficient to generate such practices. They also depend on semiotic ideologies concerning both the efficacy of divine speech acts and the capacity of the written word to retain that efficacy. Thus, according to the Berti, ‘God himself created things by uttering “words”. The belief is clearly Koranic, as can be attested to by a few verses which are often used in erasure [and text ingestion]: ... “when He decrees a thing, He says concerning it: Be, and it is” ’ (El-Tom 1985: 417). But the important point is that practices give doctrines the sense of immediate reality, and expose them to further, non-doctrinal, potentially open-ended, possibilities derived from people’s encounters with writing.

These ingestion techniques and text-bearing amulets depend on the prior existence of scripture, and thus build in a basic premise of certain religious traditions that a principal means by which divinity manifests itself to humans is through words. To be sure, divinity may also appear in the form of rituals, relics, prophets, saints, miracles, icons, visions, holy places, laws, prohibitions, spirit possession, and so forth. But many scriptural traditions emphasize scripture and liturgy as people’s primary, most regularly available, and most controllable access to divinity for ordinary persons, even if they cannot read the text. In the Islamic case, the source of the scripture itself is revealing (Graham 1977; Rahman 1994). The angel Gabriel spoke to the Prophet Muhammad. So the primary link between the phenomenal world of the scripture reader and the non-phenomenal world of the divine is the aural transmission of words. But, importantly, Muhammad himself was illiterate. He memorized the text and in turn transmitted it by reciting the words to scribes. In contrast to, say, bardic traditions of oral transmission, the role of the scribes in this tradition seems to make salient a certain characteristic of the spoken word: that it is evanescent, at least in its most immediately perceptible character, as sound.

### **Writing and semiotic transduction**

If an amulet or a stone inscription seems to draw upon the materiality of writing in order to foreground permanence, ingestion works with certain other latent possibilities one might find within the material substance of writing. What comes to the fore is the potency that derives from the very capacity to transform the word from one semiotic modality to another. This is not a simple matter of translation, transformation, or metamorphosis. As I have suggested, a better term might be transduction: the act of

transforming something across semiotic modalities in order to produce or otherwise have effects on power.

Semiotic transduction focuses on movement, from invisible to visible, from immaterial to material, and from intelligible to sensible (or, in each pair, the reverse).<sup>13</sup> It may be an especially appropriate means of drawing power from a spirit or divine source because of the ways in which this movement can manifest the relations between worlds non-phenomenal and phenomenal. The practices of transduction I have touched on here each, in some way, seem to imply an analogy: as thought is to speech is to writing, so the unknowable realm of the spirit is to knowledge about the realm of spirit (e.g. as given in scripture) is to practical relations with spirit. In short, these uses of writing are responses to the problem of presence in the active mode of semiotic transduction, taken as a means of generating power.

The idea of transduction is not, of course, something that is necessarily explicit. There may be no doctrine to justify it. Rather, it often seems to be one possible intuitive response to writing and its relation to sound and thought, manifested in the kinds of practices I have called spirit writing. Again, I want to stress that this does not imply any universal claim about writing or the conclusions people will draw from it. But it is important to consider how the aural and visual materiality of language, in its spoken and written forms, and the potential contrast between materialized language and inner speech, do make certain responses *possible*. Those responses to writing are in turn *available* for appropriation, given certain historical conditions and specific kinds of problems. Thus St John of Damascus's invocation of the image of *Logos*, whatever else it involved historically and theologically, at a certain level was making use of a felt distinction between inner speech and outer expression in order to convey the relationship between materiality and divinity. The text-bearing amulet, whatever the particular social and cultural context in which it emerges, draws on people's encounters with written texts in order to cope with the practical demand for portable, enduring, and physically intimate access to divine power.

To the extent that language has a material dimension, it necessarily has form (phonological, sonic, morphological, calligraphic, etc.). And however much people may be inattentive to or even unaware of those forms in the more or less automatic habits of ordinary language use, under some circumstances and in some practices the materiality of language may become salient to their awareness. Roman Jakobson (1960) observed something like this long ago, in his analysis of poetics. The concrete forms language takes can become practical and conceptual affordances or provocations that (under certain circumstances and given certain problems or aspirations) people can take up. They may do so through a material practice, such as turning speech into writing, putting writing into a container to serve as an amulet, or burning it, or swallowing it. This seems to be what happened in New York in 2007: people invented new practices that seem to respond to the ubiquitous experience of documentation in contemporary life, the tactile properties of paper, and, I imagine, the violence of the shredding action itself.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, in reflecting on their experience of forms, and the practices they involve, people may develop new ideas. In some cases, the very idea of 'spirit' may be a back-formation, a reaction to the recalcitrant palpability of things, or a trope on their potential for being rendered impalpable. However, nothing *necessitates* such reactions. The experience of writing will only become salient and only suggest possible actions under certain social conditions and historical circumstances, given certain expectations, puzzles, or needs. For example, the concept of *Logos* might not have suggested

itself, or at least seemed an especially useful image, had early Christianity not had to distinguish itself against Manichaeism or idol worship. The shredder would not have invited the destruction of memories were New Yorkers not thoroughly habituated to identify themselves with bureaucratic and other written documents.

There is in principle no limit to which aspects of writing people might respond to or take advantage of. To repeat, nothing about writing will *determine* that it be the basis for any particular practice. Also, the very same practices may, depending on the context, bring into salience different dimensions of writing. Burning, for example, might be a means of reducing writing to invisibility (as in everyday Chinese ritual paper-burning) or as a step towards ingestion (as described above), or it may be a vehicle for the production of light or of smoke or of smells. Also, writing does not *inherently* have any specific effects. It may, for example, allow a certain degree of either alienation (words written by unknown authors in unintelligible languages) or intimacy (words tattooed on the skin, worn as an amulet, ingested as a potion).

Writing has the potential of bringing into play a potentially indefinite number of contrasts. Here are just a few examples: origin/stasis/dispersal; or alienable/inalienable; or sound/sight/touch/smell; or author/scribe/reader; agent/patient; or content/form; or hidden/revealed. Any one of these sets of contrasts (and they need not take binary form) has the potential to serve a practice mediating relations between distinct ontological domains or characters. Although these different dimensions of writing will coexist, in any given historical context any actual practice will make use of or bring into salience only a few of them (Keane 2003*b*). The practice may focus, for example, on iconicity (letters may take their efficacy from a purported resemblance to body parts), detachability (writing may be separated from its owner or author), circulability (the evangelical pamphlet – like a letter in a bottle cast out to sea – may fetch up in an unknown destination), or durability (a text hidden away for some future discoverer like a time capsule). But over historical time, one may switch from a focus on one aspect to another; as long as the properties coexist, that possibility remains, and may be realized in some future historical context. Thus the sonic form of ritual performance may give rise to illuminated manuscript – or to art music in a concert hall.

Different actions entail different roles for the body: for instance, script is the trace of the motion of the hand, recitation transforms script into voiced sound, tattooing turns the skin into a linguistic medium. All of these can help produce a perceptual contrast to the efforts of trying to make sense of another person's words, or to the silent verbalizations of one's own inner thoughts. Different actions give rise to distinct kinds of social roles for the actors: for example, the author of words may be different from their scribe, who may differ from the person who reads those words out loud or another who interprets them (Goffman 1981). These roles differ in turn from that of the person who sets the writing into an amulet, and in turn from the person who eventually wears the amulet. Thus we can see multiple planes along which comparisons might be possible, and along which the very same traditions may undergo transformation over the course of their histories. A form of writing that originated, perhaps, as a technology to aid the memory of a reciter might, in time, enter into technologies of social transmission and spatial circulation. Once materialized, those words are subject to any of the actions to which any material artefact is prone: the Torah may derive its sacred power from the divine source of the words and their pedagogic efficacy, but the scroll itself is also, potentially, something that can be decorated, shrouded, displayed, carried in procession, and kissed.

### The religious work of transduction

If we treat haruspicy as a quasi-reading practice at the limit, we can see that it treats question and answer as operating in distinct media, whose differences of semiotic modality are functions of the ontological characters of their respective authors. In other kinds of spirit writing, distinctions among media seem to centre more on differences among agentive capacities of different participants. Prayer wheels, the *mezuzah*, or a scroll hidden inside the figurine of a god all derive their efficacy from aspects of language that are notably not due to the voice, and take advantage of the capacity of written language to function in the absence of an author or speaker. Part of the appeal of the pronounced separation of voice and language in such instances seems to lie in the notion that the written words continue to function even when the human agent is not engaged in activity. The emphasis may be on extending the human's agency, or, conversely (where, for instance, local emphasis is on the fallibility of human agency), obviating it.

Some practices of spirit writing may value voice over writing, and others value writing over voice; nothing about speech or writing *dictates* that one or the other should be accorded the higher place or greater power. Nor do formal theologies necessarily state explicitly what their relations should be. As is well known, Derrida (1976) builds his critique of a certain metaphysical tradition on the way it takes the voice to manifest the authenticating presence of the speaking subject. By contrast, some kinds of spirit writing may take their guarantees precisely from the *absence* of the speaker. For example, in what we might call the Ozymandias effect, script that seems to have come from a now vanished and forgotten author may bear extra authority by virtue of that separation between unknown origin (in this respect, similar to an imperceptible otherworld) and ourselves. Its power lies not, or not solely, in what it says denotationally, but in the very fact that it addresses us from a lost world. The absence of the author makes the text an indexical icon of the gap across which it speaks to us, providing direct evidence of the power of the text over time, and offering a palpable image of our distance from its sources in the *past*. By operating on this absence, transduction can bring it into salience. Or, viewing the material durability of script from another angle, the authority of a scripture may derive from its apparent permanence, and thus its ability to speak to an indefinitely distant *future* audience. Here the text may be iconic of power over time itself, by virtue of its apparent ability to enter into communication with eternity.

Again, the fact that no one can see the writing in an amulet may be an important source of its intuitive power. One may know the writing is there but it is invisible. In this respect, the persistence of its effectiveness under conditions of invisibility makes it like a certain kind of divine being (and, perhaps, brings into salience a palpable distinction between knowledge and sense perception that may give extra weight to a theological assertion: for instance, if the latter makes knowledge claims about that which lies beyond physical experience). If one takes the power of the amulet to be independent of form, meaning, or communicative function, one may also intuit another parallel to the spirit world: it functions *in itself*, just by virtue of being there, rather than by virtue of some effective mechanism.

Ideas like this could, of course, simply be matters of doctrinal teaching. But what is important about focusing on the practice rather than the belief is that it suggests how the belief comes to seem especially plausible because it seems to arise directly from concrete experiences. In this way, aspects of experience that are potentially available to *any* cultural tradition at all can, in concrete circumstances, become affordances that support or serve very *specific* ideas, problems, or needs. Each of the examples I have touched on here

suggests, albeit only in sketchy form, how the palpability of writing can enter into practical responses to certain problems posed by immateriality. Through their attempts to overcome the perceived gap between practitioners and the divine or spirit world, the resulting practices help give a sensuous and shareable reality to the silence of a spirit world that might otherwise remain only a private intuition (such as being subjectively affected by a divine or ghostly presence) or a propositional formulation (such as a creed).

The three-step movement from mental to spoken to written word, or vice versa, can be one way of perceiving relations between the spirit world and humans. Transductions among different semiotic modalities are practical analogues for relations between phenomenal and non-phenomenal worlds. But they are not merely representations. They derive their efficacy, in part, from their manifest manipulation of the relationship between two domains by operating within the world of perception. Spirit writing can emphasize this sense of movement across semiotic modalities and endow those relations with a heightened sense of reality. By focusing on the materiality of script, and sharpening its separation from either sense or sound, spirit writing can thereby also sharpen the intuition that an ability to effect a transformation from one to the other requires power or is itself power-generating. This is the religious work of semiotic transduction.

### **The possibilities of comparison**

Again, I must emphasize that writing only offers raw materials that need not be taken up in any particular way, or be taken up at all. Whether they are noticed, and whether, being noticed, they are seen to be interesting or provocative, and if so, exactly how they are taken up in practice, are functions of semiotic ideologies, arising within larger representational economies, and thereby have an irreducibly historical nature. It is these contexts that help establish degrees of plausibility (e.g. why it should seem reasonable that drinking the word might be efficacious or that one's fate may be tied to bureaucratic documents) and the relative salience of certain conceptual challenges (as with the need to resist the temptations of Manichaeism) or pragmatic problems (such as a conviction that divine presence is inherently uncertain). But affordances may play a more dialectical role in the ways in which they are taken up, not simply allowing themselves to be used in order to deal with existing problems, but even inviting new ways of thinking about them and presenting new problems in turn. Presumably Sumbanese have not thought since time immemorial that the divinatory marks on chicken entrails are like writing. Once they *are* recognized as like writing, however, the possibility that they form an alternative to scripture may be subject to further elaboration.

But to point out the obvious role of historical context should not lead to the conclusion that spirit writing is invented from scratch in each cultural world, or that each case can *only* be understood in its specificity – that the incommensurability of contexts means comparison can only be misleading. The conjunctions brought into this brief essay should allow us to ask what is it about writing that allows for the recurrence of similar practices, either because of their ready adoption or because of their reinvention. To ask this question can be an opening to comparison, by way of a focus on the materiality of language and people's encounters with it. Among other things, asking this question may help us notice cases like Sherlock Holmes's famous 'dog that did not bark in the night': that is, to look more closely into circumstances where a possible experience is denied, or an affordance not taken up where it might have been. The suppression of possibilities is quite different from their mere absence. We might surmise, for instance, that there is some aspect of their experiences of

material things that iconoclasts and iconodules *share* such that they develop very strong but opposing positions; and, further, that what they share distinguishes both iconoclasts and iconodules from others who are simply indifferent to the power of icons altogether. To attend to their common encounter with objects may – at least in some key respects – be more revealing than treating iconoclasts, iconodules, and the indifferent as simply creating distinct and unrelated interpretations of the icon.

Moreover, for a given particular practice, those aspects of writing that it takes up and develops can be *recognizable* from afar. It is important to stress that this recognizability across contexts itself has historical consequences. Comparison is not only a scholarly device; it may be even more compelling for practitioners whose primary aims are not academic or analytical. After all, religious history is not just a story of revelations, inventions, or developments within isolated traditions; it is also one of constant encounters between traditions, involving imitations, inversions, prohibitions, and refusals. All of these encounters depend on people's capacity to see something they might make sense of, or find compelling, or even repugnant, in what strangers are doing. Neither the Sumbanese diviner nor the Berti healer would find the activities of New Yorkers on Good Riddance Day utterly alien. It is precisely this recognizability that helps explain the vigilance with which certain traditions must guard against 'fetishism', a vigilance, after all, which implicitly acknowledges that material things manifest an appeal to which one might otherwise succumb (Keane 2007; Pietz 1985). Anthropologists and historians may rightly be wary of the political and epistemological risks that comparison poses. But people of all sorts are comparing all the time, and it behooves us to take seriously not just their desire to find something recognizable in alien practices, but also the conditions that make that recognition possible.

#### NOTES

This essay has benefited from discussions at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton, the University of British Columbia (Department of Art History), University College London, the Michigan Institute for the Humanities, the Danish Research School of Anthropology and Ethnography, the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, the Michigan Linguistic Anthropology Workshop, and George Washington University (Institute for Ethnographic Research), as well as from detailed comments by Peter Brown, Caroline Walker Bynum, Susan Gal, Matthew Hull, Paul Johnson, Michael Lempert, Stephan Palmié, Susan Philips, and Adela Pinch. I am grateful as well to input from Matthew Engelke, Finbarr Barry Flood, Ellen Muehlberger, James Robson, and two very astute and helpful anonymous reviewers for the journal. In view of the speculative nature of this essay, the usual disclaimers certainly apply: I alone am responsible for any errors and excesses.

<sup>1</sup> This is a subset of the even broader topic, people's inventive appropriations of the materiality of language. This materiality includes phonological and other formal features of speech, and is taken up by everything from puns and poetry to political book-burning. For an overview of the topic in religious contexts, see Keane (1997).

<sup>2</sup> The history of texts, literacies, and reading practices is, of course, inseparable from political power (Bauman & Briggs 2003; Collins & Blot 2003 – Ginzburg [1980] offers a classic case of reading against domination, Cody [2009] an insightful account of the power relations surrounding the signature). But since their connections are neither straightforward nor, I think, determinative, for purposes of this brief essay they are kept analytically distinct. I will also have to bracket the topic of reading practices (see also note 11).

<sup>3</sup> I owe this image to Silverstein (2003a). There, however, the concept is used with reference to the more specific topic of translation between languages, rather than the movement along the whole range of semiotic modalities that I am interested in here. Silverstein's central concern, in that essay, is with the reconstruction of pragmatically *analogous* indexical presuppositions and entailments across different linguistic systems. Although indexical constancy across contexts plays a role in my account of transduction as well, I chose here to emphasize shifts in the materializations that semiotic forms may take, and the consequences of those differences – which may include shifts in emphasis between denotation, indexicality, and iconicity. For another use of the term 'transduction', in Science and Technology Studies, with an emphasis on emergence, see Mackenzie (2002).



<sup>4</sup> The concept of affordance was introduced in Gibson (1977).

<sup>5</sup> There is a vast literature on the difficulty, impossibility, or political risks of defining 'religion' across contexts. My treatment here is limited, and based on an earlier attempt to bring the analysis of materiality to bear more directly on the question (Keane 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Divination seems to invite comparison to writing in very different contexts; parallel claims are made by Afro-Caribbean practitioners, for example (S. Palmié, pers. comm.). For the relation of bone oracles to the origins of writing in China, see Li (2008) and Smith (2008).

<sup>7</sup> A good account of Sumbanese haruspicy is provided in Kuipers (1990).

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for stressing this point. Indexicality refers to signs insofar as they are directly affected by their objects: for example, by causality (smoke indexes fire) or proximity (the exit sign indexes the door out). The concept of indexicality is useful for, among other things, situating signs in a world of space and time, and drawing attention to the role of inference (in contrast, say, to pre-existing conventions and rules for interpretation, a point emphasized in Gell 1998). For a thoroughgoing development of indexicality for social analysis, see Silverstein (2003*b*). Iconicity refers to the way in which a sign is linked to its object by resemblance: for example, as in diagrams or onomatopoeic sounds.

<sup>9</sup> For the cultural elaboration and political implications of the idea that a person's thoughts are hidden inside the body, see the essays in Rumsey & Robbins (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere he writes about the ordinary experiences of speech quite directly to talk about access to spirit: '[J]ust as we hear with our bodily ears audible words and understand something spiritual, so through bodily sight we come to spiritual contemplation' (quoted in Louth 2002: 207).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine famously registered his surprise on first encountering silent reading, a reminder of the historicity of any phenomenology of the written word (see Augustine 1999; Stock 1998). More generally, it has been argued that the experience of inner speech was transformed by the advent of widespread literacy, and eventually, of silent reading (see, e.g., Boyarin 1993; Olson 1994; Silverstein & Urban 1996; for the classic general arguments about the consequences of literacy, see Goody 1977; Ong 1982). For all the importance of reading in scriptural traditions, given a strong emphasis on divine transcendence, it can also raise serious worries about mediation. The limit case is perhaps that of the Friday Masowe Apostolics of Zimbabwe, who refuse to use the Bible precisely because of the way its mediating role seems to place it between the faithful and direct contact with God (Engelke 2007). Much of the discussion of reading centres on the cognitive capacities of readers, the referential and denotational functions of language, or problems in the storage and transmission of information. Although these are certainly not irrelevant to the discussion here, they open out onto so many additional directions of inquiry that I have chosen to bracket them for the purposes of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> For foundational readings in language ideology, see Kroskrity (2000); Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity (1998).

<sup>13</sup> We might also include here movement across social and geographical space, a crucial conceptual as well as practical feature of evangelical religion (see, e.g., Coleman 2000; Harkness 2010; Robbins 1998), in addition to the shift in semiotic weight from the denotational to indexical or iconic noted above.

<sup>14</sup> For an especially insightful discussion of the role played by the sheer materiality of documents in the functioning of an urban bureaucracy, see Hull (2012).

## REFERENCES

- AUGUSTINE, ST 1999. *The confessions of Saint Augustine* (trans. E.B. Pusey). New York: Modern Library.
- BAUMAN, R. & C.L. BRIGGS 2003. *Voices of modernity: language ideologies and the politics of inequality*. Cambridge: University Press.
- BEHREND, T.E. 1996. Textual gateways: the Javanese manuscript tradition. In *Illuminations: the writing traditions of Indonesia* (eds A. Kumar & J.H. McGlynn), 161-200. New York: Weatherhill.
- BELTING, H. 1994. *Likeness and presence: a history of the image before the era of art* (trans. E. Jephcott). Chicago: University Press.
- BOYARIN, J. (ed.) 1993. *The ethnography of reading*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CODY, F. 2009. Inscribing subjects to citizenship: petitions, literacy activism, and the performativity of signature in rural Tamil India. *Cultural Anthropology* 24, 347-80.
- COLEMAN, S. 2000. *The globalisation of charismatic Christianity: spreading the gospel of prosperity*. Cambridge: University Press.
- COLLINS, J. & R.K. BLOT 2003. *Literacy and literacies: texts, power, and identity*. Cambridge: University Press.
- DERRIDA, J. 1976. *Of grammatology* (trans. G.C. Spivak). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- EISENLOHR, P. 2009. Technologies of the spirit: devotional Islam, sound reproduction and the dialectics of mediation and immediacy in Mauritius. *Anthropological Theory* 9, 273-96.

- EL-TOM, A.O. 1985. Drinking the Koran: the meaning of Koranic verses in Berti erasure. *Africa* 55, 414-31.
- ENGELKE, M. 2007. *A problem of presence: beyond scripture in an African church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GELL, A. 1998. *Art and agency: an anthropological approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- GIBSON, J.J. 1977. The theory of affordances. In *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: toward an ecological psychology* (eds) R. Shaw & J. Bransford, 67-82. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- GINZBURG, C. 1980. *The cheese and the worms: the cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller* (trans. J. Tedeschi & A. Tedeschi). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- GOFFMAN, E. 1981. Footing. In *Forms of talk*, 124-69. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- GOODY, J. 1977. *The domestication of the savage mind*. Cambridge: University Press.
- GRAHAM, W.A. 1977. *Divine word and prophetic word in early Islam: a reconsideration of the sources with special reference to the divine saying or hadith qudsi*. The Hague: Mouton.
- HARKNESS, N. 2010. Words in motion and the semiotics of the unseen in two Korean churches. *Language & Communication* 30, 139-58.
- HULL, M. 2012. *Government of paper: materiality and urban bureaucracy in Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- JAKOBSON, R. 1960. Closing statement: linguistics and poetics. In *Style in language* (ed.) T. Sebeok, 350-77. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- JOHN OF DAMASCUS, ST 1994. *On the divine images: three apologies against those who attack the divine images* (trans. D. Anderson). Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- KEANE, W. 1997. Religious language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26, 47-71.
- 2003a. Self-interpretation, agency, and the objects of anthropology: reflections on a genealogy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, 222-48.
- 2003b. Semiotics and the social analysis of material things. *Language and Communication* 23, 409-25.
- 2007. *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2008. Evidence of the senses and the materiality of religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) Special Issue: The objects of evidence: anthropological approaches to the production of knowledge (ed.) M. Engelke, S110-27.
- KROSKRITY, P.V. (ed.) 2000. *Regimes of language: ideologies, politics, and identities*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press.
- KUIPERS, J.C. 1990. *Power in performance: the creation of textual authority in Weyewa ritual speech*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- LI, M. 2008. Conquest, concord, and consumption: becoming Shang in eastern China. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.
- LOUTH, A. 2002. *St John Damascene: tradition and originality in Byzantine theology*. Oxford: University Press.
- 2007. *Greek East and Latin West: the Church AD 681-1071*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- MACKENZIE, A. 2002. *Transductions: bodies and machines at speed*. London: Continuum.
- MESSICK, B. 1993. *The calligraphic state: textual domination and history in a Muslim society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- OLSON, D.R. 1994. *The world on paper: the conceptual and cognitive implications of writing and reading*. Cambridge: University Press.
- ONG, W.J. 1982. *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen.
- PIETZ, W. 1985. The problem of the fetish, I. *Res.* 9, 5-17.
- RAHMAN, F. 1994. *Major themes of the Qur'an*. Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica.
- ROBBINS, J. 1998. On reading 'world news': apocalyptic narrative, negative nationalism, and transnational Christianity in a Papua New Guinea society. *Social Analysis* 42, 103-30.
- ROBSON, J. 2008. Signs of power: talismanic writing in Chinese Buddhism. *History of Religions* 48, 130-69.
- RUBINSTEIN, R. 2000. *Beyond the realm of the senses: the Balinese ritual of Kekawin composition*. Leiden: KITLV.
- RUMSEY, A. & J. ROBBINS (eds) 2008. Anthropology and the opacity of other minds. *Anthropological Quarterly: Social thought and commentary Special Section*, 81, 407-94.
- SCHAPIRO, R. 2007. Times Square shredder gets rid of bad memories on Good Riddance Day. *New York Daily News*, 29 December (available on-line: [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/2007/12/29/2007-12-29\\_times\\_square\\_shredder\\_gets\\_rid\\_of\\_bad\\_me.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/2007/12/29/2007-12-29_times_square_shredder_gets_rid_of_bad_me.html), accessed 24 October 2012).
- SCHIEFFELIN, B.B., K.A. WOOLARD & P.V. KROSKRITY (eds) 1998. *Language ideologies: practice and theory*. Oxford: University Press.
- SCHIMMEL, A. 1970. *Islamic calligraphy*. Leiden: Brill.

- 1994. *Deciphering the signs of God: a phenomenological approach to Islam*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- SILVERSTEIN, M. 2003a. Translation, transduction, transformation: skating 'glossando' on thin semiotic ice. In *Translating cultures: perspectives on translation and anthropology* (eds) P.G. Rubel & A. Rosman, 75-105. Oxford: Berg.
- 2003b. Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language and Communication* 23, 193-229.
- & G. URBAN (eds) 1996. *Natural histories of discourse*. Chicago: University Press.
- SIMMONS, S. 2008. Mezuzah: the inside story (available on-line: [http://www.aish.com/literacy/mitzvahs/Mezuzah\\_The\\_Inside\\_Story.asp](http://www.aish.com/literacy/mitzvahs/Mezuzah_The_Inside_Story.asp), accessed 24 October 2012).
- SKEMER, D.C. 2006. *Binding words: textual amulets in the Middle Ages*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University.
- SMITH, A. 2008. Writing at Anyang: the role of the divination record in the emergence of Chinese literacy. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- STOCK, B. 1998. *Augustine the reader: meditation, self-knowledge, and the ethics of interpretation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- WIENER, M.J. 1995. *Visible and invisible realms: power, magic, and colonial conquest in Bali*. Chicago: University Press.
- ZURBUCHEN, M. 2000. *The language of Balinese shadow theater*. Princeton: University Press.

## L'écriture des esprits : matérialités du langage et action religieuse de la transduction

### Résumé

Le présent article est un essai spéculatif sur des possibilités comparatives. Il examine quelques contextes religieux très éloignés dans lesquels une relation chargée de puissance, transcendant les différences ontologiques (par exemple entre les humains et le monde des dieux ou des esprits), est médiée par des opérations agissant sur la matérialité du signe écrit. Celles-ci ont habituellement pour effet de matérialiser quelque chose d'immatériel ou de dématérialiser quelque chose de matériel. Elles peuvent cependant aussi impliquer d'autres activités exploitant les propriétés physiques de la parole écrite, laquelle peut être persistante, transportable, périssable, aliénable, etc. Une fois écrites, les paroles divines possèdent une qualité et une forme éminemment matérielles. Elles apparaissent sur un support physique, ce qui les rend durables tout en les exposant au risque d'être détruites. Tout ce qui peut arriver à un autre artefact peut aussi leur arriver. Les pratiques que je nomme « écriture des esprits » soumettent la parole écrite à une transformation radicale, profitant de sa matérialité même pour la dématérialiser, même si ce n'est que pour la rematérialiser ensuite sous une autre forme (telle que le corps d'une personne). De nombreuses pratiques de ce genre cherchent à susciter ou commander à des puissances religieuses au moyen d'une transduction entre modalités sémiotiques ; ces activités matérielles aident à rendre réalistes, ou tout au moins facilement imaginables, des forces qui transcendent l'expérience.

Webb Keane is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Signs of recognition: powers and hazards of representation in an Indonesian society* (University of California Press, 1997) and *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (University of California Press, 2007), and co-editor (with Chris Tilley, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer) of *Handbook of material culture* (Sage, 2006).

Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 101 West Hall, 1085 S. University Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, USA. [wkeane@umich.edu](mailto:wkeane@umich.edu)