

The Silence Before Drowning in Alphabet Soup

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The perspectives provided by the academic traditions of folklore and mythology, media studies, and studies in literacy, and, in keeping with oral tradition, the perspective provided by personal experience, are employed in this essay about differences in cosmologies between cultures that depend primarily on literacy and those that found their approach to knowledge on experience and oral mediation. Several concomitants of both orality and literacy are described with reference to the self, silence, and the cognitive act of abstract referencing. It is argued that schooling contributes to a priority of legitimacy of literacy, and that this denies the legitimacy of experience, which is necessary for learning.

Introduction

The comparison in this discussion is between cosmologies and contexts, not between groups of people. The argument is not about abstracted cosmologies and idealized cultural contexts, though, because the cosmologies affect real people, and that is really what this article is about. It is not an absolutely cultural-determinist argument. To speak or write of a culture based on orality and another based on literacy does not define indigenous cultures as simply "oral" and settler culture as uniformly "literate," with consequent attribution of cognitive properties or patterns to members of either culture.

The attachment of "oral" and "literate" to a distinction between cultures is a shorthand reference to two related things, history and legitimacy. For hundreds of years, knowledge and ways of knowing in most of settler culture (and longer, for some sectors of it) have included alphabetized, literate media. For thousands of years there has been an oral tradition in indigenous cultures. That is history. There is also a history of attitude here. Literacy and orality are valued and legitimized differently, and the difference in how we have valued those is part of our joint history. Schools teach literacy. There is no question that literacy is a good thing. The issue is the consequence of assuming that literate definition has priority.

This article is written from the perspective of a fourth-generation Irish-Canadian, deeply influenced by Judaism. I grew up next to the Ojibway reserve of Parry Island, Ontario. Into my teens I was guided in knowing the bush by an elder Ojibway woman and a grandfather who was a trapper. My father ran the supply store servicing the area's hunters and fishermen, and my mother taught me to read and told the Irish stories that had survived our immigration. This article is written from that perspective and from the perspectives provided by postgraduate training in the academic traditions of folklore and mythology, education (reading and language), and communication (media studies).

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Writing about oral cultures first requires accepting the irony of substituting the map for the territory. Employing the alphabet to describe cultures that do not use the alphabet is the requirement of this article. Writing about the cognitive complexities of oral cultures glosses over and ignores what the alphabet on the page cannot communicate. Writing is about seeing and believing in symbols that are substitutes for sensual reality. The page, decorated with permutations of the alphabet, cannot represent smell, taste, touch, space, the teachings of the six directions, and earth. Most importantly, the alphabet is incapable of representing silence.

A book, in other words, always has something to communicate. Even blank books beg for the inscription of words or pictorial representations. To read is in essence the entry point into an exclusively symbolic reality at the cost of the reality it represents. To get a divinity degree, a person reads theology. Having a divinity degree is more about mastering the language that describes divinity and less about knowing the divine. One of the names for God in the Judeo-Christian tradition is The Word. That Word was spoken for a long time before it was written down. In the history of that tradition, God speaks and can be heard, but is invisible except as symbolized in text. In somewhat the same way, orality is not easily given to literate description. Orality is made physically visible only through literate description and in so doing, removing "the ear from the page" (to borrow a phrase from Illich & Saunders, 1988).

Fundamental to literacy is the alphabet. Deciding to subject reality to representation in 26 letters reflects a decision that reality can be represented in 26 letters. Schooling, in the context of that decision, cultivates the ability to think in sentences, and to represent sentences structurally as grammar, the formal expression of which reflects this alphabetization of thought.

Orality, in its purest sense, is not about thinking as sentences and alphabets dictate. Schools ask for thought to resemble sentences rather than for sentences to resemble thought. In education, sentences, and therefore literacy, are techniques from which thought is assumed to derive and subscribe. In a literate culture, cognition and literacy are conceived of as functions of each other.

There is an historical and ontological primacy to orality as a concomitant of cognition. If orality reflects how a mind in fact behaves, it is vital to recognize the veneration in which silence is esteemed in oral cultures. Keeping in mind that the alphabet records only sounds, literate people regard silence as time unrepresentable in print or writing, and as an absence of meaningful sound. Writers, unlike storytellers, do not use silence because the structure of print will not allow silence. Nor can time be alphabetically represented without description of its actualization. However, not making sounds does not imply absence of thought. Silently thinking like a moose, or with a moose, means having an identity with the moose—it is a nonsemantic reference—and the spell of being in mooseness is broken upon thinking in alphabetic language. Unfortunately, silence in education is conceived of primarily as the absence of words, rather than as a belonging to realms of stillness and the unsayable. In the realm of the unsayable and in the silence of the human voice, oral culture still hears, smells,

touches, and tastes the wind, waves, and rain. Thought is not constrained to be lexically referential. Self-reflective conceptual thought, in silence and unmediated by symbolic representation, is constrained to refer to the physical self in physical context, the context of the Earth; the constraint is that no matter how abstract the flight, or how many levels of metaphor or abstraction, the physical self in physical context is the point of return.

Self-reflective conceptual thought that is mediated by alphabetized thought can displace the physical self, and the reflexivity can remove focus from the physical self to a conceptualized, symbolized self. With the physical self objectified and removed from this discourse of one, "self"-reflection can lead to a kind of conceptual looping, with no anchor to the world. One thought inevitably leads to another as surely as one literate sentence compulsively leads to another. This need not be considered bad but is surely a psychic attribute of symbolic environments.

Take, for example, contemporary people arising from sleep and turning on the television, so flickers of technicoloured light fill the room while accompanying background noise creates an ambient and habitual atmosphere of chronic hyperstimulation in the home. This hyperstimulation becomes subsequently manifested in things like Walkmans, vision processed through psychedelic tinted sunglasses, and neon clothing. Together they create a portable and prophylactic aural and visual hyperstimulation that cancels unmediated reality by emulating the electronic environment. This preference for replicating hyperreality is, in part, coming to terms with urban reality itself as a hyperreality. Which is to say, that the experience of reality as a mediated experience is preferential to accepting the sensual experience of *experience* on its own terms. This is a roundabout way of saying that reality as a perceptual, sensual experience is preferred when it is boosted into a mediated and therefore conceptual experience. Why else would joggers listen to a Phil Collins tape, dress in neon yellow, and wear purple sunglasses, unless the experience of running was somehow enhanced by these accoutrements? Marshall McLuhan (1964) was right when he said that media creates consciousness in its own image.

Like literacy, there are aural and visual hyperrealized stimulations that are homogeneous and universal signals. Michael Jackson tapes are essentially the same no matter where in the world they are played. Similarly, the essence of Karl Marx's thought is understood by adherents in Cuba as thoroughly as in Albania. Point being, when thoughts derived from literature race through the mind, or when our ears are busied by musical distractions, and when this becomes the predominant experience, the immediate physical environment becomes displaced as primary. Earth no longer serves to centre us and to nurture our place within nature. Earth becomes taken for granted as the point of departure from which we blast off into orbits of distractions from the guiding forces of the Earth. We launch imbalanced and complex expeditions that prevent us from knowing the Earth and ourselves, because we would otherwise be compelled to listen to the Earth and know ourselves. Distraction breeds distraction.

If oral cultures are conceived to be composed of people who are primarily aware of their immediate physical environments, it is because their sensual acuity is highly developed, because of this requirement of oral culture: however many levels of symbolized representation we employ, unmediated physical experience of the environment is the point of return. Oral cultures recognize abstraction for what it is: abstraction. Oral people must be good listeners, seers, smellers, feelers, and tasters. Their experience of reality is acute because their senses work together harmoniously and equitably. They are not lost in mediation.

Aboriginal, and therefore primarily oral, attention to nature or sensual reality, has created complex and elaborate understandings of the elements of earth, sky, water, and living things. By putting nature in mind and mind in nature, aboriginal culture conceived of silence and the unsayable. It did what alphabetic culture could not. Through alphabetization, the experience of silence has meant silent reading and therefore looking at words rather than the experiencing of the things words describe with the five senses. Oral culture can be conceived of as the resistance against seeing the written representation of things as complete and genuinely conceived without using all the senses. Alphabetization is the acculturation and preference of conception over perception. So alphabetization is also the displacement of local knowledge through the force of universal curricula.

There is a difference between oral cultures and literate cultures in the way that the Infinite is conceived of. That difference is related to the way that microcosms are systematically contextualized within infinitely larger systems. Literate cultures standardized the idea of God (representable by the printed word; metaphorically, "The Word") and with this concept celebrated their monotheism. Literate cultures could not accept the idea that the Sacred was allied with and manifested in the natural environment, for that deconceptualized God for literate cultures, and alienated the infinite from the word. Movable type even removed the concept of God as picture, and standardized Him as printed word. The biblical God is a concept that can have currency worldwide because, like the alphabet, it is portable. However, many biblical proselytizers seem to insist that knowing religion is primarily knowing religious semantics. It would be inconceivable to them that a person can be taught about the Infinite and sacredness by the bush. Oral cultures, on the other hand, can recognize the way that the biblical God deals with creation, because of their knowledge of their ecosystem. They know—from sensed experience of the environment in microcosm—many properties of infinitely greater systems and domains.

From the specific meanings gained through understanding the bush, the oral mind created principles for recognizing infinity, the totality of all things in totality. This is immensely distinct, as Ivan Illich and Barry Saunders (1988) note, from literate knowing deriving "Infinite meanings without specific meanings" (p. 122). The understanding of microcosm as preliminary to understanding macrocosm is a common sense transition and, while centring the knower, reminds him and her of the great wisdom of being centred. As Jo-ann Archibald (1990) notes in a recent article quoting Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota Nation,

The Lakota was a true naturalist—a lover of nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth, the attachment growing with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power.... For him, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; he can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him. (p. 74)

To fathom the transition from one microcosm to macrocosm is to ponder awe and wonder; it is to be silent, tranquil, and reverential in knowing the sacred. The enormous centredness learned by the elder from lessons of the earth allows the elder to know when to talk, and further to know when to listen and when another person is ready for these lessons. Perhaps this is the reason oral cultures recognized the auspiciousness of silence, for silence was the space between stages of development that kept the stages from blurring together. Books and electronic media place all information within the scope of the reader, and require no elder to judge preparedness for the next step in spiritual development. Thinking about written religious education is all the more curious when one considers that the oldest writings of the Middle East are accountancy records (Gelb, 1952). It is no wonder God first entrusted his words to a worthy listener and wrote his own tablets.

When sacredness and the infinite were first graphically represented, they apparently were not initially conceived of digitally—in letters or numbers—but ideographically in pictographs. With the evolution of the alphabet, the sacred became digitally represented and was eventually formalized as text. For the Egyptian, whose hieroglyphic or ideographic concept of divinity was not digital but analogical, the holy of holies was the chamber in the depths of the Great Pyramid where complete silence prevailed. This room was the architectural equal of Zen no-mind, a place where the coursing of the blood could be heard and perhaps the coursing of the universe.

Silence may describe a kind of nonconceptual cognition. Many thinkers have tried to express that observation in words and it is a precept of several traditions. Allan Watts warned, "To hear anything other than itself the mind must learn to be quiet," (1958, p. 5). Perception may be similarly argued to be nonconceptual. Jamake Highwater (1981), in his influential *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America*, argues that perception is not limited by the senses, but rather that the entire body is an organ of perception independent of the literary domain. Similarly, bodily knowledge in Western culture is historically addressed in Morris Berman's (1989) *Coming To Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West*. The no-mind of Zen is the dismissal of alphabetic consciousness. Oral minds are not bridled by conceptual thought as thoroughly as minds that are exclusively dominated by books and the built environment because they admit to the legitimacy, both of the concept—the abstraction—and to the return to the sensual, physical experience. The conceptualized experience is not the "real" one. In other words, this is not to say that oral minds are not conceptual thinking minds, but rather that in learning the lessons of thinking as the forest thinks, the oral mind is not divisive nor abstractly self-reflexive like literate minds, which seem ever attempting to heap more commentary upon smaller aspects of symbolic reality.

For example, books are written on books written about books and in our own lifetimes we can witness the information explosion caused by the computer which has doubled the amount of recorded knowledge every ten years. The forest, and the oral mind which lives within it, pay attention to where and what it is now—orality is sensual life and its recognition. Oral cultures are more likely to have reflection implosion rather than information explosion.

Literacy, on the other hand, is ideational and is always at least once removed from the experience of reality. Illich and Saunders (1988) seem to have described the tension between the "we" which describes the oral reflection implosion and the "I" of literate information explosion when they say

The alphabetization of silence has brought about the new loneliness of the "I," and an analytic "we." *We* is now one line in a text brought into being by communication. Not the silence before words but the absence of messages in a chaos of noises." (p. 123)

I do not claim that the grandfathers who knew the land did not resort to abstract words or representations, but Edmund Carpenter (1972) described the osmosis between world and word knowledge thus, "Once they venture to tell of the outer world, geography gives way to cosmography" (p. 13). The abstractions of oral cultures are derived from knowing reality; there is not a chaos of noises in the bush, for each sound is a lesson of the earth. Literate abstractions are derived from knowing symbols about reality. The chaos of noises is the inability to find meaning in the cacophony of the technological roar in the built environment. Answering the eternal questions of who are we, where did we come from, and where are we going, is difficult in both oral and alphabetic cultures. However, finding the answers in libraries or cities can lead to mechanistic explanations. Science tells us that we are here because of a cosmic explosion and live on a rock that will be destroyed before long when the sun explodes. Capitalism and materialism advise us that in the meanwhile we should be comforted through producing and consuming goods. This explanation of our beginnings sustains hopeless and desperate behaviour because it is a poor metaphor, unable to communicate the wisdom of earth. Jo-ann Archibald (1990) offers a sustaining story drawn from Crowfoot's knowing the earth; he says, "From nowhere we came: into nowhere we go. What is life? It is the flash of the firefly in the night. It is the breath of the buffalo in the winter time. It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset" (p. 74). Culture out of contact with the earth becomes a stranger to the comforting lessons of wisdom and mystery that inform everyone living in sensitive relationship to the earth.

Orality brings you face to face with your traditions while literacy encourages privatization of conception and substitutes verisimilitude of description in language as appropriate substitution for reality. Literacy implies not only that symbols can represent knowledge but that symbols *are knowledge*. This puts the onus on people to always make sounds in order to be considered wise; silence is unworthy. Yet in silence we ultimately hear the earth and ourselves, and confront the immensity of what cannot be said, what cannot be translated into sound. Sounds and words ask us to explore what we already know and rarely ask us to explore what we cannot and do not know except in terms of what can be said.

Alphabetized minds insist on speaking themselves. They work on the idea that human sounds are better and wiser than either the language of the spirit or silence. Alphabetized minds are not inclined to hold their tongues and pens and keyboards, and to say nothing. On the page, saying nothing means having nothing to say. Since alphabetic thought enshrines only the sounds we can make, alphabetized minds compulsively make these sounds. Alphabetized culture has virtually ceased, except in jest, in the story, and in the poem, to venerate the sounds of rolling thunder or the west winds of autumn; and when we do we rarely accord them a presence of wisdom in our writing and talk, for they are not human sounds. What if the world, as it well could, ceased to have anything but the sounds of alphabetized minds and machines communicating as books or tapes or televisions or computers?

It is alphabetized minds that do not see that every thing on the land is connected to every other thing, because sentences and books and even sight itself select and present things in isolation for examination. In oral cultures, hearing and smell, senses that are inclusive rather than selective, incorporate everything in their presence. Living in sensitive relationship with the land means oral cultures knew the land through all of their senses. Furthermore, there is little opportunity to mistake the map for the territory because oral cultures are surrounded by the things their words can and cannot symbolize. Overdependence on conceptually segmented sight as the sense most worthy for understanding the world isolates things and processes and becomes habitual in its repetitive and reinforced knowing of the world as a purely visual phenomenon. Alphabetized minds are mediated minds and prefer to write about the sunset, or photograph it, or interpret it in guitar riffs. These are preferred to experiencing the sunset on its own terms.

Alphabetized and mediated minds want to wring images and words from a sunset that is grandly illiterate. Ultimately these symbols come to assume greater importance than the sunset itself. One need only watch people in cars going to view sunsets to see how the image of the sunset occupies them more than the experience of the sunset. Once the sunset is on film it is transported into living rooms to be replayed as evidence that people were there. Mediated minds attempt to become closer to nature by spending more time in front of televisions witnessing on the screen what they originally experienced through the lens they used to experience the sunset in the first place.

Education conceived in terms of the words and images we can wring from these experiences asks us to busy ourselves always, and to displace silent and still experiencing of the earth. Alphabetized culture sees and hears itself experiencing the images and language about nature rather than experiencing nature itself; a sort of "this is me doing this" attitude is encouraged. Our meditations become the creation of images and records testifying that we were there and that we saw something. It is memory externalized. The great difficulty, of course, is that there is no elder teaching the story of the sunset. Videotapes are memory without mind and are at least for literate minds far sexier presentations than storytelling. Recording these experiences on film removes us from nature by making our presence there only a reference to the recorded event.

It is not going too far to say that mediated minds conceive of their behaviour as images in reference not to the place where they are, but in reference to how they will be recorded. One need only watch the behaviour of tourists playing to the camera or rock climbers in neon Spandex conceiving of themselves as images, behaving as though they were movies or photographs of themselves doing something so spectacular that they deserve to be filmed. Photographic culture conceives of itself as a narcissistic spectacle, one step beyond the writer as conceptual observer and two steps beyond the oral mind, that does not remark upon itself to itself, and lose itself in the remark.

The representation of reality has been a crucial issue in Western education since Socrates decried to Plato the effects of the technology of literacy on true learning and memory, "Your instruction will give them only a semblance of truth, not truth itself. You will train ignorant know-it-alls, nosey nothings, boring wiseacres" (Illich & Saunders, 1988, p. 26). Illich and Saunders add to this debate the origin of the idea of representing reality through the technology of writing, "Appropriate description of reality began as a jurisprudential method before it became the foundation of the natural sciences" (p. 36). The alphabetization of thought became the institution of education, yet the effects of the alphabet on nonalphabetic oral cultures have until recently been rarely discussed. Literacy has been made visible because the age of electronic imagery brought it to light. Traditional orality and its connection to the earth are the best defence against the effects of both the alphabet and electronic imagery, and may arise as a respected art form. Literacy, like orality subscribes to the proverbial wisdom of Marshall McLuhan (1964) who said that he didn't know who discovered water, but that we could be sure that it wasn't a fish. We discovered what literacy was only when it arrived and when it is on its way out. If nothing else, literacy has warped the oral conception that truth resides within, as interior, by favouring truth and belief on the page as outside, or exterior to the spirit and mind. This reconceives the wisdom of silence as the quality of the know-nothing and the ignoramus. Illich and Saunders (1988) point out the effect of the transition to literacy

My oath is my truth into the twelfth century.... Only in the thirteenth century does Continental canon law make the judge into a reader of the accused man's conscience, an inquisitor into truth... Truth ceases to be displayed in surface action and is now perceived as the outward expression of inner meaning accessible only to the self. (italics added, p. 85)

Literacy is biased toward absolutism. Under its influence reality is conceived as singular, because it is represented as singular. In oral cultures reality is composed of many realities in balance and unison, and is known by one's ability to become these realities. Oral reality does not favour print because its economy of expression appears to circumvent lengthy analysis and logical argument. The tremendous economy of expression of oral stories encourages silent reflection on its truth and therefore blesses the listener with a resonant silence as familiar and thankful as the quiet of the earth. The map is incidental to an unalphabetized culture able to silence the mind to hear the territory. As Neihardt (1979) quotes Black Elk, remembering a childhood experience of healing. Black Elk reflects

on the vision which at nine years of age established the ontology that would transcend the realm of written symbols:

Also, as I lay there thinking of my vision, I could see it all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body; but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me.

I am sure now that I was then too young to understand it all, and that I only felt it. It was the pictures I remembered and the words that went with them; for nothing I have ever seen with my eyes was so clear and bright as what my vision showed me; and no words that I have ever heard with my ears were like the words I heard. I did not have to remember these things; they have remembered themselves all these years. It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I know that more was shown to me than I can tell. (p. 49)

Alphabetization has threatened the silence required to know the world on its own terms and so to explore its delicate balance. The technology of the alphabet does for the mind of the observer what a swarm of bees does for a picnic, the letters will not leave the mind alone. Tremendous authors have written powerful words, yet for all of their power these words can and often do lead away from the centring influence of the earth.

As teachers I believe we must be aware of the effects of both alphabet and media, and we must encourage reflection, stillness, quiet, and sensory awareness to compensate for the compulsive mind created by the map. In Eastern culture, Zen Buddhism and Yoga are potent techniques for quieting the mind and spirit in highly populated lands no longer easily able to experience nature. Native oral culture on the land was a balance of words and the things they represent—aware that balanced senses were necessary for the representation and, more importantly, the experiencing of reality. Native oral culture prevented the cultural mistake that happens when learning occurs under the domination of the eye's appreciation of the visual symbol alone—believing the symbol and the thing it symbolizes are one. It is imperative to again know the territory as did our grandfathers, before the traditional balance and power in perception was subjected to the solipsism of conception. Before drowning in alphabet soup.

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