

## Comment on Book Review

Katarzyna Mikulska

In his review of *Indigenous Graphic Communication Systems: A Theoretical Approach* (Mikulska and Offner, eds., 2019), Jesper Nielsen (*Latin American Antiquity* 31:444–446, 2020) constructs a critique based on two fallacies and an unfamiliarity with advances in the field. First, he constructs a strawman by erroneously identifying the purpose of this volume as an attempt to establish “semasiography as a cornerstone concept for future work” (p. 444). The book’s introduction does discuss semasiography, but it also clearly states that its focus is on how “the graphic communication systems of indigenous America worked” (Mikulska and Offner, p. 13). It explains that “some authors participate in the theoretical argument [regarding semasiography] . . . , while others do not” (p. 13; my emphasis). After attributing this purpose to the volume, Nielsen criticizes its chapter authors for failing to fulfill it. The essays by Daniele Dehouve, Katarzyna Szoblik, Christiane Clados, Janusz Wołoszyn, Gordon Whittaker, Juan José Batalla Rosado, Miguel Ángel Ruz Barrio, and Michel Oudijk do not even mention “semasiography.” Loïc Vauzelle and Angélica Baena refer briefly to comments on semasiography by Boone, Wright-Carr, or me, but their arguments do not focus on this concept. Of 13 authors, only four—David Wright-Carr, Jerome Offner, Stanisław Iwaniszewski, and I—explicitly employ the concept of semasiography.

The second fallacy is Nielsen’s related reliance on an assumed value of “grammatology.” His concern with semasiography seems to stem from the mistaken idea that it stands in opposition to grammatology. He argues that ancient American graphic

communication systems are better served by “solid and well-established categories in grammatology” (p. 445) but fails to say what these categories are. “Grammatology,” referring to a science of writing, was introduced by Ignace Gelb in 1952 in the very same book as “semasiography.” Semasiography is a grammatological concept that is more well established than grammatology itself.

Nielsen’s critique appears to be motivated by a desire to maintain a strict division between glottographic and nonglottographic systems, but this is not the way writing systems work, neither those from Mesoamerica nor our own. The advances in the field include not only Janet Berlo’s introduction of the notion of embedded texts more than 30 years ago but also Roy Harris’s more recent call for a theory of writing that would focus on ways of codifying meaning, rather than typologies, and James Elkins’s deconstruction of the notions of “pure notations, texts, and pictures.” These theoretical works allow us to understand systems as theoretical constructs whose essence lies more in modes—to use Simon Martin’s term—or mechanisms of encoding meaning in a visual medium. Today, as Stephen Houston and Andréas Stauder (“What Is a Hieroglyph?,” *L’homme* 233:9–44, 2020) recently argue, “Human writing practices . . . extend beyond the mere instrumental representation of language” (p. 25), and because “the urgent need to defend phonic decipherments is now diminishing” (pp. 13–14), we can fortunately explore new approaches (such as the notion of series or the operational principles/mechanisms of encoding) and certainly readjust older concepts.

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