A History of the Khipu

This book begins by proposing a theoretical model that reconciles orality-literacy studies and media theory to avoid the specious dichotomization of societies into those with and those without writing. The more relevant issues are the ways in which a given society distributes semiotic functions among the various media that it employs and the forms of economic and political integration within which such media function. This theoretical model then informs a history of the Andean khipu from pre-Columbian times through the first 120 years of the colonial period. The first half of the book examines early Andean media and their socioeconomic and political contexts, culminating with the emergence of Wari and subsequently Inca khipu. The second half of the book documents and analyzes the continued use of khipu by indigenous individuals and communities in their interactions with Spanish officials, chroniclers, and priests. The study corrects many common misconceptions, such as the alleged mass destruction of khipu in the late sixteenth century. Even more important, it highlights the dialogue that occurred in the colonial period between the administrative and historiographic discourses of alphabetic Spanish and those of native Andean khipu genres.

Galen Brokaw is Associate Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University at Buffalo. He has previously taught at Lafayette College and as a visiting professor at Harvard University. Brokaw has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University. His articles have been published in *Latin American Research Review*, *Colonial Latin American Review*, *Centennial Review*, the *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, and other journals.

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GALEN BROKAW

University at Buffalo

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Preface

This project originally grew out of research on the native Andean chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, who claimed to have relied on the Andean khipu in the composition of his *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. Most of the published analyses of the alphabetic portion of Guaman Poma's text have tended to focus on the way in which it participates in the discursive space of European culture. In my research on Guaman Poma, I attempted to broaden this perspective by examining the indigenous dimension of his discourse. One part of that project identified a discursive structure that characterized both Guaman Poma's history of the Inca Empire and that of another text that claimed to be a direct transcription of khipu. As I investigated this topic further, I became more and more interested in the khipu itself. Rather than publishing my study of Guaman Poma as a book then, I completely reconceptualized the project by inverting this relationship. In the new study, Guaman Poma's text would still figure in the analysis, but the primary focus would be the khipu. This new project was to consist of two sections: the first would contain a series of chapters dealing with theoretical issues related to writing and alternative forms of communicative media; the second section would present several textual analyses of colonial texts derived in one way or another from khipu. These texts would include Guaman Poma's *Nueva corónica* and other chronicles but also numerous other published and unpublished documents from the colonial Andes. After completing many of the initial drafts for the chapters of this project, it occurred to me that I ought to include a chapter on the history of the khipu at the beginning of the book to provide a context that would ground the theoretical arguments and textual analyses. At the time, I was familiar with the few short historical studies that had been published by Carlos Assadourian, Carmen Loza, Tristan Platt, and Gary Urton, and I suspected that my chapter would do something similar. However, what I thought was going to be a short historical study that would serve to contextualize the main themes of the book soon became so long and thematically varied that I had to split it into two chapters. These two

chapters then turned into four, at which point it became apparent that the historical portion of the project required a book of its own. I also realized that the historical research had important implications for the theoretical discussions that formed part of the original project. Rather than returning to the original manuscript, then, I decided to finish the historical research first, most of the results of which constitute the present book.

The title of this book identifies it as "historical," but it is an interdisciplinary project. Given the general move in academia toward interdisciplinarity, it is becoming increasingly, although perhaps not yet completely, unnecessary to justify such work. Throughout the process of conducting this research, presenting the findings at conferences and symposia, and sharing drafts with colleagues, it has become very clear that scholars from different disciplines often engage in, and conceive of, interdisciplinary work in different ways. In addition to, or perhaps because of, the fact that academic disciplines delimit their fields of inquiry at least partially in relation to other disciplines, they tend to have different notions of what constitutes evidence for particular research questions, and they employ different methodologies and different styles of argumentation. Moreover, even where fields of inquiry may overlap, they tend to ask different types of questions. My own graduate training at Indiana University was very interdisciplinary in nature, including history, anthropology, and linguistics; but I was based primarily in a department of literary and cultural studies. The University at Buffalo where I currently teach is also a very interdisciplinary environment, but I am still based in a literary and cultural studies department. I situate myself in this regard not in an attempt to preempt any criticism of the theoretical perspectives or methodological approaches that inform this book, but rather to help clarify my relationship to them. I am sure that my own form of interdisciplinarity is inflected by the institutional position in which I was trained and from which I teach and engage in research.

A common complaint about the interdisciplinarity practiced in literary and cultural studies is that it does not provide the kind of methodological rigor required to produce the same kind of knowledge as the more traditional social sciences do. For "literary" cultural studies, then, the interdisciplinary dialogue often tends to be one-sided: erstwhile literary scholars rely on historical, anthropological, and sociological research to inform their cultural-studies projects, but the reverse is not nearly as common. Even radically interdisciplinary cultural-studies research that focuses on objects and practices other than literature may often exhibit an interest in, or an emphasis on, issues that are tangential to the traditional interests of the social sciences. I would argue, then, that the problem is not one of methodological rigor but rather of disciplinary differences about what constitutes relevant or even interesting knowledge of the particular objects, practices, or phenomena under study. My sense is that these differences

derive in large part from the fact that interdisciplinary scholars working from the discipline of literary and cultural studies draw from a long tradition that does not view interpretive analytical work as necessarily an attempt to make definitive statements about the object of study. In fact, these fields often celebrate the inherent ambiguity and polysemy of language and other signifying practices. With the exception of some branches of anthropology that have been influenced by many of the same theoretical perspectives as literary and cultural studies, the social sciences tend to engage in work that aspires – whether explicitly or implicitly – to more objective and definitive knowledge claims.

These disciplinary differences do not always necessarily enter into conflict. In fact, I would suggest that they can, and often do, complement each other. In a field where the status of knowledge in a particular area may not be sufficient to allow further advances using the traditional methodologies of the social sciences, methodologies developed in the humanities offer the opportunity to flesh out or call into question what is known, to produce further knowledge, and to explore possibilities for further investigations. The difference has less to do with the rigor of the methodology than it does with the nature of the knowledge produced. Furthermore, the combination of these methodologies is not new. Even the most rigorously scientific archaeological research, for example, rarely, if ever, produces knowledge that does not involve conjectural or speculative interpretation; and this type of interpretation has much in common with the interpretive methods of the humanistic disciplines.

However, even a cursory comparison between archaeological and cultural studies publications reveals that these two disciplines place different emphases on distinct modes of research: archaeological research has traditionally dedicated more time and space to the description and documentation of its object than it has to interpretation. This is not a criticism of the discipline, and it does not mean that interpretation is not an essential feature of archaeological research. In fact, even the description of archaeological sites and objects inherently requires a certain level of interpretation, and publications in archaeology are not limited to empirical analyses. But the very nature of the field demands a great deal of description and documentation before more comprehensive interpretation can take place. Cultural studies, in contast, originated in the analysis of more "historical" phenomena for which different kinds of evidence is available and about which much more is known beforehand. Thus, the interpretive and theoretical dimensions of cultural studies projects often seem to predominate over empirical description. For a practitioner of cultural studies, then, traditional archaeological research can often seem to get bogged down in the minutia of physical description, whereas for an archaeologist, cultural studies can often appear to be ungrounded in empirical evidence and hence

somewhat superficial. This is an admittedly broad generalization that does not capture all the nuances of each discipline, but I would argue that it accurately describes some of their general tendencies.

This study engages with archaeological research but also with anthropology and history. The topic and the temporal range of this book require an interdisciplinary dialogue. The execution of this project would be impossible from within the boundaries of a single discipline. Previously, the comparison and contrast between archaeology and cultural studies is useful, because they occupy different ends of the scale indicating the traditional ratio of empirical description to interpretation and theorizing or the degree to which these activities are integrated. Anthropology and history would probably fall somewhere in between. Again, this classification carries no implication of value, effectiveness, or legitimacy. In many ways, discipline-specific methodologies have developed in response to the particular constraints inherent in their disciplinary objects or time periods.

The first several chapters of this book deal with Andean cultures prior to the conquest. Thus, I rely extensively on archaeological research to construct a history of the Andes with an emphasis on the relationship between the development of socioeconomic complexity and the emergence of secondary media. I attempt to present a history of several Andean polities in the service of both a larger theoretical argument about the development of secondary media in conjunction with the emergence of socioeconomic complexity and a hypothesis about the origins of the khipu. The second section deals with the history of the khipu in the colonial period, and thus it relies on the analysis of colonial documents. In both cases, much of this history is conjectural and speculative, and it is informed by certain theoretical premises that I set forth in the Introduction and revisit throughout the book. In general, the project focuses on a particular set of questions without regard to the limitations of the disciplines within which I primarily work at the institutional level. I have attempted to construct a history of the khipu by drawing from, and contributing to, a number of relevant disciplines. I am sure that other scholars will point out the extent to which my methodology, interpretive framework, or theoretical foundation may entail a lack of rigor or a flawed logic from the perspective of a particular discipline. And this is as it should be. Such a dialogue will contribute not only to our knowledge of the history of the khipu but also to the interdisciplinary mode in which this history must be constructed.

I should make it clear that this project does not attempt to forge a completely new interdisciplinary space within which to operate. Many other scholars have contributed to opening up this interdisciplinary space in Andean studies and in Latin American studies more generally. In the process of conducting the research for this book, I have very conscientiously solicited feedback from scholars from other disciplines. I have profited

immensely from dialogues with scholars in history, anthropology, archaeology, art history, and literary studies. It would be impossible to produce a comprehensive list of all those who have contributed in one way or another to this project, but I would mention Rolena Adorno, Marcia and Robert Ascher, Bob Bradley, Carrie Brezine, Gordon Brotherston, David Castillo, John Charles, Tom Cummins, Alan Durston, Bill Egginton, Paul Firbas, Sabine Hyland, David Johnson, Jongsoo Lee, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Mónica Medelius, Jeffrey Quilter, Rocío Quispe-Agnoli, José Rabasa, Alejo Rojas, Frank Salomon, Gary Urton, and Nicolás Wey-Gómez. During the 2006–2007 academic year, I learned much about Andean art and archaeology through my participation in the Andean Art History and Archaeology Group at Harvard University led by Gary Urton, Tom Cummins, and Jeffrey Quilter. Gary Urton's extensive work on the khipu over the last fifteen years has helped raise the profile of khipu studies and push it in new directions. He has been an incredibly generous colleague and friend from whom I have learned a great deal. The community of scholars in Peru have also been extraordinarily welcoming and helpful. Marco Curatola and Juan Ossio of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and Carmen Arellano Hoffman, the director of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú, have been generous hosts and valuable interlocutors. In Peru, I also enjoyed the support and intellectual and social companionship of Alejo Rojas, Monica Medelius, José Carlos de la Puente, and the late Hugo Sánchez. Herb Klein, the editor of the series of which this book forms a part, and Frank Smith from Cambridge University Press provided valuable feedback on the manuscript. Bob Bradley and John Charles read initial drafts of Chapters 1 and 7, respectively, and Frank Salomon, Jeffrey Quilter, Sabine Hyland, and Alan Durston all read the entire manuscript. I revised the manuscript extensively in the light of their insightful comments and critiques. Even in cases where I disagreed on certain points with the critiques offered by friends and colleagues who read the manuscript or listened to lectures, their comments invariably helped me refine the presentation of my arguments.

In the course of the research for this book, several museums generously allowed me to examine their khipu collections: Manuela Fischer at the Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin, William Wierzbowski at the University of Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Peña at the Buffalo Museum of Science, and Carmen Thays Delgado and her staff of the Textile Department at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú. During several research trips, I also profited from the generous help offered by the staffs of the Peruvian National Library, the Departmental Archives of Cuzco, the National Archives of Peru, and the General Archives of the Indies in Seville. A National Endowment for the Humanities Institute fellowship exposed me more directly to archaeological work and to a wider variety of

Andean archaeological sites. At the University at Buffalo, research grants from the Baldy Center, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the McNulty Chair held by Dennis Tedlock allowed me to travel to Peru to conduct research, and the Julian Park Fund paid for the color images included in the book. During a visiting research fellowship at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University, I was able to complete comprehensive bibliographic research related to the khipu and Andean studies more generally. A research fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies funded in part by the Social Science Research Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities allowed me to take time off from teaching to dedicate to research and writing.

Although the historical project presented here is in a sense twice removed from my original dissertation research, my graduate mentors at Indiana University have influenced it both directly and indirectly in many ways. I benefited immensely from conversations with Arlene Díaz, Edward Friedman, and John McDowell. I was particularly fortunate to be able to work directly with Gordon Brotherston and Kathleen Myers, both specialists in colonial Latin American studies who have been constant intellectual interlocutors, generous mentors, and friends since the beginning of my graduate studies more than fifteen years ago. They have both pioneered different kinds of interdisciplinary work from the institutional position of literary and cultural studies. Brotherston's work, which deals with both pre-Hispanic and colonial indigenous traditions, has been particularly inspiring as it relates most directly to the nature of my own project. I can only hope that this book will make a similar contribution to the kind of interdisciplinary space he and many of the other scholars mentioned here have pioneered.