

In Search of The Word of the Other: Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in Canada.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**In Search of “The Word of the Other”:
Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in
Canada**

Germaine Warkentin (bio)*

On the fifth of July, 1645, a canoe arrived at Trois-Rivières in New France, bearing in it, as Marie de l'Incarnation relates, "a Frenchman clothed like a savage" and three Natives.¹ The Frenchman was Guillaume Couture, who had been captured in 1642 with the Jesuit father Isaac Jogues. Like many other such captives, he had been adopted into the Mohawk nation and was now being exchanged. Of the three Natives, one was an Iroquois captive who had earlier been set free by the French, and the other two were diplomatic emissaries. Of those, the most important was clearly Kiotsaeton ("the [End Page 1] Hook"), a man of immense presence completely covered with *porcelaine* (that is, whelk and quahog-shell) beads. What appeared to be his decorations were in fact "wampum," belts and strings of worked shells that functioned as ritual and communicative artifacts among the Iroquois and certain other nations of eastern North America. During the years after contact, wampum also served as the economic exchange medium used in trade with what Euro-Canadians contemptuously thought to be an expiring race; for the Iroquois, however, the customary employment of wampum was as a mnemonic artifact in diplomatic encounters,² and it was in this way that Kiotsaeton was about to put it to use. As his canoe approached the shore, he mounted its bow and made a sign that all should attend to him.

The scene itself is full of cultural nuance: on the shore the French Governor, the Jesuits, some of the Huron converts, and a few early settlers; in the canoe a Frenchman who had become an Indian, the former captive, and two representatives of the Mohawk Foreign Office. The mode of discourse that Kiotsaeton was about to exploit in his negotiations was something the Europeans were prepared for, not only by their own Renaissance symbolic and gestural repertoire (literary, rhetorical, ecclesiastical, diplomatic³) but by their already well-developed knowledge of "the customs of the country." For us, however, the event is complicated by the different modes of discourse and textual representations in which it has been transmitted. First, there is a printed Jesuit *Relation* by Fr. Barthélemy Vimont, who was present at the

meeting.⁴ Second is the manuscript letter from which I have already quoted, written to her son by the famed Ursuline nun, Marie Guyart, Mère Marie de l'Incarnation. Details in her letter absent from the printed *Relation* suggest that before writing she had seen a draft of Vimont's account; in actuality she may not even have been present. Third, there is Kiotsaeton's deployment of the wampums, which invites us to consider *his* mode of discourse, though we can only know that through the reportage of the Europeans. What is it they saw, how did they tell us about it, what trace of the Natives' practice can we detect beneath the European accounts, and what has all this to do with the history of the book in Canada?

Three different levels of textual discourse distinguish the history of the book as it has developed in what an old cartographer once called "the North part of America."⁵ In the case of Kiotsaeton's embassy, the one most obvious to the book historian is the printed octavo volume, published in Paris by Sebastien and Gabriel Cramoisy in 1646, in which Father Vimont's account of Kiotseaton's arrival first appeared. Second, and by no means to be overlooked since Harold Love's ground-breaking *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (1993), is that of the manuscript, not only the drafts of the Jesuit's *Relation* but the letter from Mère Marie, which crossed the ocean to her son, Dom Claude Martin, to be printed in its turn **[End Page 2]** in his 1681 edition of his mother's correspondence.⁶ Most difficult to understand in terms of the history of the book, however, is the semasiographic or sign-oriented level of discourse, in the material form of the wampums, the belts of shell...



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