

9-Ellen Cushman-Final.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Ellen Cushman. Ellen is a professor of English and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Diversity, and Inclusion in the College of Social Science and Humanities at Northeastern University. She contributed a 1951 letter composed in Cherokee and written on Oklahoma State Penitentiary stationery to Hidden Literacies. This letter offers significance for its time and our own. To begin, I've asked Ellen to introduce herself.

Ellen Cushman [00:01:13] My name is Ellen Cushman and my role in the project is to discuss the Cherokee syllabary as it has shaped hidden literacy practices in the United States since around the 1800s, early 1800s.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:30] I asked Ellen to describe the piece she contributed to Hidden Literacies.

Ellen Cushman [00:01:34] It's a really interesting letter from a prison in Oklahoma, from Walter Duncan to Dolly Duncan, and it was written in 1951 a little bit later than what you might expect for this particular project which has focused on early American literacies. And I chose this because the sample of print, the sample of handwriting is so pristine in this and it's pristine in part because Walter was learning how to write with the Cherokee syllabary and he talks about that in the letter. And he was trying to communicate to his mom on the outside of this prison with the syllabary, which is really interesting. And so they're trying to work out how it is that he can communicate with her in the syllabary.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:26] Ellen explained the origins of the syllabary.

Ellen Cushman [00:02:29] It's an 86 character system developed by Sequoyah in 1821 and accepted by the tribal council in 1821. By 1951, it was fairly widespread. So there were educational projects that moved Cherokees into English even after allotment. It was very difficult. But some studies have suggested in the 1970s that Cherokee was still being used in the 14 county jurisdiction of the Cherokee Nation right up through the 1970s and 80s. And I trace a little bit of the use of the Cherokee syllabary in my book, so titled The Cherokee Syllabary Writing The People's Perseverance, and look at how it's how it was integrated into Cherokee life over those hundred some years. Hundred and fifty-some years.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:27] Ellen offered a really helpful explanation of the syllabary and its importance. And the ways is often obscured by a desire to compare it to the English alphabet.

Ellen Cushman [00:03:36] The question that I get most frequently that I feel like I continually need to educate people on is the ways in which the syllabary is not an alphabet. And when I say that, that's a really important moment for us to decouple how it is

that we approach writing technologies and how it is that we understand writing technologies because the syllabary works with its own instrumental logics. And when you understand those instrumental logics, you see how it is that at the very point of putting character or letter to the page, you are writing yourself as much as you are writing with that. Now, what does that mean? And this is the question that I wish people would ask me. What does it mean to write yourself with a writing technology? It means pretty much everything from how it is that you structure your everyday life to how it is that you come to value practices in your everyday life, to how it is that you understand the economies that circulate around those practices and how other people value them or devalue them. It matters a great deal to how it is that you bound particular kinds of knowledges and then value particular kinds of knowledges, and then it matters even beyond that to how it is that you structure your own understanding of yourself in this world and how it is that you understand others in this world.

Ellen Cushman [00:05:16] And so the alphabet has a way of disciplining us into and what Walter Mignola might call epistemic obedience to a particular kind of logic that are Western and hierarchical, and that those hierarchies then structure us socially and they structure our disciplines. And when that happens, we not only dehumanize everyone, but we also fail to see what it is that humanizes us all and what kinds of knowledges we all have. So the thing that I wish more people would ask is why are writing systems important, to begin with? Why do we care about them? And particularly, why are writing systems in languages other than English important? Because that kind of language diversity matters such a great deal now. Now, more than ever, we're losing languages at an alarming pace as English becomes the global language for so many people.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:26] These important questions, what does it mean to write yourself with a writing technology? And why are writing systems and languages other than English important, are really important for us to carry with us as we think with a letter written from Walter Duncan to Dolly Duncan in 1951 using the syllabary. Specifically, these questions help ground the letter and its historical importance.

Ellen Cushman [00:06:51] So it tells us about the historic moment. Several, several things. First and foremost is how Cherokee was being used as a code to have a private conversation between a son and a mother about what life in prison was like and what was happening in the day to day life there. And this is interesting because it's written on penitentiary stationery and there are very strict guidelines in English at the top of this document that says what kinds of communication are permissible using that paper, that penitentiary paper and how much communication can be, how much writing can be sent back and forth during a week. So it's very prescriptive and very limiting. But when they're writing in the Cherokee syllabary, they're actually able to, in a really lovely way, engage each other in an earnest conversation about what it was like to be a prisoner in that penitentiary. So historically, it shows how Cherokee has always been this way for us to speak with each other and encode knowledge in on our terms and encode our everyday lives in an on our terms. And so that's the message that carries through.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:20] The letter Ellen explores in her commentary is between a son and his mother. As Ellen notes, the letter violates the rules set out in the header of the prison stationery, discussing details of life behind bars. He mentions a favorable change in his prison job and passes along greetings from friends. At one point, Walter says of one friend, quote, He is, quote, really craving huckleberry pies and said of you to bring some. He's telling you to later adding, quote, We will be looking for you on Sunday. For Helen, this signals not just an accounting of his time or update on his living conditions but

illustrates the community of which he's a part in the prison. As Ellen writes in her commentary, quote, The friendly way they address Walter's mother and familiarity they have with her suggests that Walter has found a small community of what literacy scholar Deborah Brandt may call literacy sponsors in the penitentiary. Sponsors support the reading and writing of those in institutions when such sponsorship might produce a benefit for the sponsor. His prison friends may be helping him write letters using the syllabary and help place him in a better job in the penitentiary. In return, they looked forward to huckleberry pies from Walter's mother.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:37] As Ellen explains, quote, This group of Cherokee men were finding ways to support each other with gifts that carried with them implicitly the obligation of reciprocity. End quote, Walter's use of the syllabary helped him thwart censorship rules to be transparent about his experiences by using Cherokee to hide his text from guards who may have been unable to read it. As Ellen argues in her commentary, quote, What remains illegible to the guards who might have read this letter was an entire system of support that extends beyond the prison and coheres in and through the Cherokee language. The ability to describe their positions and reveal their exchange systems in this letter seems particularly telling in light of the context of this being a trustee system in a maximum-security prison.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:26] I want to return to the questions Ellen offered at the start that helped guide us through this letter and Ellen's work more broadly. What does it mean to write yourself with a writing technology and why are writing systems in languages other than English important. To better understand this, I want to have Ellen explain the larger project of which this letter is a part.

Ellen Cushman [00:10:49] So there are over 2000 manuscript pages in various archives around the country written in the Cherokee syllabary. And one of the things that I learned from writing my book was that it was very pedagogical to be writing with a script because it had some particular logics, visual logics, semantic logics that could begin to unlock for people who used it. And it was a very interesting adoption of this writing system. It's an 86 character system, so it's very complicated. You know, we have 26 letters in the alphabet, the Roman alphabet, but this is an 86 character system and one would think that would be very difficult to learn. But in point of fact, it took only about three to five years for the entire tribe and all of our peoples to become literate in Sequoyan and were able to read and write in Sequoyan. And what's so interesting about that is that they were doing this without print or mass education. All right. And so imagine how that spread like wildfire. And what was it that made it possible to spread that quickly? Well, that was the topic of my book, that question. How did this spread so quickly? What were the logics of its creation? Is there anything there that we can still find useful today as a heuristic for learning the language, for continuing our language perseverance efforts? And these documents then came to my attention during that study and I realized, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could use the lexical data sets, the lexical information, the words in these documents that we may not even know anymore to be able to build out what we know about our language.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:45] This project will not only preserve the histories of the Cherokee language, but provide a site for learning the language today.

Ellen Cushman [00:12:52] Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could use the lexical data sets, the lexical information, the words in these documents that we may not even know anymore to be able to build out what we know about our language? But more importantly, wouldn't it be wonderful if these manuscripts could be a point of discussion and learning for all of us

English speakers because so many of us are, in the Cherokee Nation, so many of us aren't, and all three of the Cherokee nations were born and raised with English. So what if we're using these documents as a place where I could come together with language teachers and scholars and learn the language and practice the language. And so really, we're seeing this archive as serving multiple purposes for multiple user. And this is one sample of a document that will be in that archive.

Mary Mahoney [00:13:45] Ultimately, this letter and the archive of which it will be a part, get at vital ideas for Ellen as both a scholar and a member of the Cherokee Nation, which both motivates her work and her incredible sensitivity in handling these texts.

Ellen Cushman [00:14:01] I think I'll speak to what this piece represents because it's just a small sample of all of those manuscripts that are there waiting for us to interact with them and help our peoples and our language persevere and help us learn more about our culture, more about specific words, more about everyday life in Oklahoma and in other areas. And what this means for me as a literacy scholar is a really important lesson in how it is that reading and writing can be agentive for the people who use it. And it is a type of skill that naming skill, that ability to to make sense of this world, using your own words, using your own technologies for describing, for thinking through and narrating, for recording understandings. So some of these manuscripts are just incredible accounts of words that were important or incredible accounts of instructions for how to hold various kinds of everyday ceremonies at various places. We're not using any culturally sensitive documents. At some point we might have those included, but they will be very restricted in their access because it's just not appropriate for everybody to have that. But we will have many of these documents, open access with our partner archives and institutions that housed these documents.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:51] For more information on Ellen's scholarship, listeners can explore her current research. In addition to the digital archive, her research also includes two edited collections, landmark essays on Rhetoric's of Difference, with co editors Damien Barka and Jonathan Osborne, and Literacies Acritical Sourcebook with coeditor Christina Höss and Mike Rose, her sole authored books of the Cherokee syllabary. Writing The People's Perseverance and the Struggle and the Tools, oral and literate strategies in an inner city community were based on activist qualitative research with her tribe and urban community members in upstate New York.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:34] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to Hidden Literacies for more information on Hidden Literacies and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.HiddenLiteracies.org.