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Beaux Gestes: Nonverbal Communication, Native Americans, and French Colonization

Eloquence Embodied is a must-read for anyone who enjoyed Alejandra Dubcovsky’s Informed Power: Communication in the Early American South (2016). In it, communication in colonial America occupies once again center stage but, this time, Céline Carayon focuses on its nonverbal (or embodied) manifestations. For the sake of clarity, the author defines “nonverbal” as “bodily movements and signals that were consciously and specifically mobilized by participants to express discrete concepts and messages to clearly identified ‘others’” (p. 18). Taking up such an understudied and intimidating research project is ambitious in its own right, but the geographic and chronologic-al scope of Carayon’s work is no less impressive. While the author focuses on embodied communication between French and Native Americans, she looks at the topic from a trans-hemispheric perspective. In the process, she demonstrates her command of an untypically broad array of sources produced from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in a vast area stretching from Canada to Brazil, including the circum-Caribbean region.

In contrast to the numerous studies that have stressed the flaws of intercultural communicative strategies in colonial America, Eloquence Embodied argues that “rather than being defined by incommunicability and incapacitating linguistic barriers (a ‘Babel of tongues’), colonial America was the site of rich intersections between effective traditions of embodied expressiveness” (p. 7). As a result, kinetic communication facilitated the exchange of information in the early contact period but, as Carayon shows, it still remained in use long after French and Native Americans had acquired the ability to communicate with words.

Eloquence Embodied is divided in three parts containing two chapters each. In the first section, entitled “Signs of the Times,” Carayon provides an overview of nonverbal practices in Indigenous America and in France since these traditions would constitute the framework for embodied communication during the contact period. In the first chapter, the author takes up the arduous task of documenting such practices in Native America. Faced with a dearth of direct indigenous evidence, she adopts a multidisciplinary approach that has become the hallmark of New Indian History. In this chapter, Carayon displays her skills as a historian. Drawing from an impressive number of primary sources that she has read meticulously, she deftly juxtaposes material written at different
times and places to tease out patterns of indigenous nonverbal communication. Even though, as she points out, “French colonial chroniclers were particularly sensitive observers and evocative writers of communication events and nonverbal aspects in cross-cultural settings,” the process of textualization has nonetheless dimmed the visibility of this information—when it has not totally erased it (p. 12). Yet Carayon is able to recover the evidence by judiciously interrogating the material and analyzing it scrupulously. In doing so, she shows that seemingly familiar primary sources can still divulge new insights. This chapter reveals that, while unequivocal evidence of sign language is rare (p. 102), nonverbal forms of communication were widespread in the Western Hemisphere by the time of contact. Not only did the need for trade and diplomacy in a linguistically diverse world require it, but in Indigenous America, formal signs and gestures were also an integral part of oratory. As she concludes, “the sophistication and variety of indigenous nonverbal strategies, in fact, permitted more than satisfactory exchanges in early America” (p. 104). In chapter 2, the focus shifts to early modern France. Poring over a multitude of texts ranging from antiquity to the seventeenth century as well as more recent works in disability studies among others, she demonstrates that gestural communication occupied a prominent place on this side of the Atlantic, from the highest echelons of society to its lowest.

As Carayon shows in the second part of her work, entitled “Signs of Change,” these traditions gave Natives and newcomers a fortuitous tool to communicate before they could achieve linguistic proficiency. Switching to a chronological structure, she first surveys the intercultural use of signs during the early phase of contact, particularly along the St. Lawrence River in Canada and the St. Johns River in Florida. Several important points emerge in chapter 3. First, embodied communication allowed the participants to share information effectively, contrary to what postmodern skeptics have assumed. Second, mutual reliance on gestures had a lasting impact on French-Indian relations. Not only did recognizable signs of friendship help alleviate the innate uneasiness arising from the novelty of contact, but embodied communication was critical for the French to forge close ties with their indigenous counterparts. Third, the information the newcomers sought out with signs dovetailed in a coincidental way with preexisting Indian conventions used in interpolarity relations. While the French interpreted some signs, for instance, as evidence that Native Americans rejoiced at their arrival, such practices were not spontaneous. They were instead part of a well-established diplomatic repertoire in Indigenous America. Unbeknownst to them, the French, as Carayon insightfully points out, “were made to obey strict Indian protocols and to ‘dance’ to a formal Indian choreography involving calculated movements through meaningful spaces, elaborate discourses involving conventional words and signs, and the symbolic exchange of touch between individuals” (p. 177). Carayon demonstrates that, from the earliest moment of contact, the newcomers were instantly drawn on “native ground,” to take up Kathleen Duval’s concept (The Native Ground, 2006). Seemingly recognizable signs could therefore be deceiving since the participants invested them with meanings that were culture-specific. At the dawn of contact, for example, Native Americans interpreted the visitors’ gestures in the context of their diplomatic repertoire. But this trend contributed to heighten tensions when the former noticed what they interpreted as incongruities between the gestures of the French and their seemingly dissonant behavior.

In chapter 4, Carayon shifts to the first half of the seventeenth century. After the ephemeral colonial initiatives of the 1500s, the French had spawned weak but viable outposts in the Western Hemisphere that fostered the development of close and sustained relations with the locals. Nonverbal codes had by then become more syncretic, incorporating elements of traditions from both
sides of the Atlantic. While signs continued to be critical in French-Indian relations, Carayon underscores an interesting paradox: “The accumulated wisdom gained by the French and indigenous peoples through nonverbal codes in the early phases of encounters allowed them to maintain strong alliances while creating an environment rife with anxiety over the deciphering of subtle signs of betrayal” (p. 238). As she argues, the French were in a rather uncomfortable situation: their colonial success depended on indigenous hosts whom they innately distrusted. Bolstered by the impression that they had mastered embodied communication, the French began to scrutinize the body language of their interlocutors in an attempt to read their “true” intentions and confirm their suspicions. Native Americans were no strangers to this practice, either. As Carayon puts it: “Because both groups were highly versed in these nonverbal codes, the slightest departure from custom could be interpreted as a warning that some conspiracy was unfolding” (p. 247). Fluency also had the potential to exacerbate tensions because the participants were often tempted to manipulate signs for their own benefit. What emanates from this analysis is a picture of French-Indian relations in the first half of the seventeenth century that is unusually but convincingly complicated. In a counterintuitive way, familiarity more than misunderstandings contributed to generate instability between Natives and newcomers. But familiarity could just as well foster the development of close bonds between individuals. “The seventeenth-century French Atlantic”, Carayon points out, “was a space marked by the constant intermingling of personal bonds of trust, collective deceptions, and acts of violence, all founded upon similar embodied behaviors” (p. 238).

The last part of the book continues to be full of surprises. In this section, Carayon pushes on toward the later part of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, at a time when greater verbal fluency provided French and Native Americans with a new communicative tool. But, as she explains in chapter 5, reliance on words was not accompanied by a proportional abandonment of signs and gestures, a phenomenon she then proceeds to elucidate. In Indigenous America, verbal and embodied means of communication were intricately connected, and linguistic mastery entailed the incorporation of nonverbal elements since “the performance of the words and the words themselves are one and the same process of expression” (p. 346). In fact, their concomitant use was *conditio sine qua non* to communicate eloquently, convincingly, and authentically. But other factors contributed to the persistence of embodied communication. Carayon’s close examination of ethnohistoric sources, for instance, suggests that the Jesuits’ comprehension of indigenous speeches still relied on the interpretation of their interlocutors’ signs even when they claimed verbal fluency (pp. 330, 346). As is the case throughout the book, this chapter is punctuated with insightful observations. For example, Carayon points out that the Jesuits, who have contributed to our current linguistic knowledge by preserving dead indigenous languages for posterity, were not as fluent as previously believed. Due to their education, they assumed that the acquisition of foreign tongues hinged on two pillars: vocabulary and grammar. Thus they purged the languages they recorded of nonverbal elements that were an integral part of the communication process. After all, “the best French student of Indian languages or Indian student of French was, not the one who mastered grammar and syntax, but the one who could perform the speech in adequate nonverbal cultural terms” (p. 356).

By the time chapter 6 opens, over 350 pages are in the rearview mirror and Carayon is still not “à bout de souffle.” In this final installment, she amplifies a point that is somewhat of a leitmotif in the book. She challenges Richard White’s assumption made in *The Middle Ground* (1991) that in order to communicate with each other, Native Americans and French colonials had to “adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of
creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings” (p. x). From a historiographical standpoint, she joins the growing list of historians who, in the past fifteen years or so, have questioned White’s model (see for example, The William and Mary Quarterly’s 2006 “Forum: The Middle Ground Revisited”). According to Carayon, by the early 1700s, French and Native Americans had become part of “community of interpretation” (p. 366). They had developed a hybrid communication system based on elements that had originated on both sides of the Atlantic but had, by then, been integrated in a syncretic process so as to drastically minimize instances of misunderstandings as described by White. “At the same time,” she concedes, “misunderstandings remained important at a deeper, epistemological level” (p. 367). As she explains, quite insightfully, the French could not grasp that, for Native Americans, the synergy between verbal and nonverbal communication in public settings was not just narrowly performative. It was actually transformative since it reshaped the participants’ identity, among other things.

For all its strengths, Eloquence Embodied is of course not flawless. The breadth of the study and the abundance of information are very impressive but, ironically, I wonder if the book should not have been more rigorously streamlined. To be fair, as Carayon admits, “the nonverbal eludes strict definition” (p. 19), but it seems that, at times, some of the material is not clearly related to the larger points she is trying to convey. Considering her significant reliance on the works of the Jesuits, I was also surprised that she did not use Lucien Campeau’s excellent Monumentae Novae Francia instead of Reuben G. Thwaites’s Jesuits Relations. Yet, despite these minor points, Eloquence Embodied remains an excellent work that will not fail to stimulate research interests.

Note


Relations and Allied Documents (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1898).
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