

## Rhetorical Powwows: What American Indian *Making* Can Teach Us About Histories of Rhetorics

*Aya aya eewee mila kakoki, Malea Powell ween\_inki, Myaamionkonci, Ninti\_iteehi teepahki neeyola kakoki*

Good afternoon. My name is Malea Powell and I come from the land of the Miami. I'm glad to see you all today. Before I begin I want to take a moment and honor the indigenous peoples of this place – my ancestors, the Miamis upon whose lands this University now resides. I am grateful to be here, delivering this talk, along the banks of Waapaashiki, a place where the press of my ancestors feels thick and comforting. In that spirit, I want to offer thanks and respect to my elders for their teachings and their encouragement; what I do well is to their credit, what I do badly belongs only to me.

This is a story.

Some of you will have heard me tell parts of this story before, but I won't apologize for my repetition because they are part of the story too, part of the traditions that have carried each strand forward. Long before I ever read about how Lacan believes that repetition instantiates identity, I learned how repetition, overlap, accumulation, and remembering formed the community in which I lived through everyday tellings of the stories of who "we" were.

The project from which this presentation draws connects my historical research on American Indian alphabetic writings in English with contemporary American Indian material practices like wampum, beadwork, ribbonwork, and basket-making in order to construct a continuum of rhetorical practices in American Indian communities. I've been working on this project for more than a decade, now, and in addition to what I've learned about American Indian rhetorics, it's taught me many things about scholarship, about mentorship, about teaching, about disciplinarity, and about the discipline of Rhetoric & Writing Studies specifically. I want to spend my time with you today moving across some of those lessons & drawing together the strands of an argument about "doing" rhetorical history that I started rather contentiously during the Octalog at the Cs in

Louisville and showing how those strands have emerged from the larger methodological practices of this project.

So, I'll start with some fragments from that Octalog talk. The first, is what I called the fairly contentious and imprecise claim of my 7-minute contribution to that conversation:

"Our discipline's inclination to fetishize the text above the body, combined with a narrowness of vision that insists on connecting every rhetorical practice on the planet to Big Daddy A & the one true greco-roman way doesn't exactly build a sustainable platform for the continued vibrance of our disciplinary community."

The second claim, comes from the very end of that 7-minutes:

It's important to remember, here, that what our discipline has produced is what [Roy Harvey] Pearce would call "a certitude" about our destiny – a study of our own civilizing discourse that gives those who come after us "an enlarged certitude of another, even happier destiny – that manifest in the progress of American civilization over all obstacles" (xvii). How easy, then, it is to make the claim that our discipline has allowed "other" rhetorics space on the stage in order to study them in quite the same way – in order to produce a certitude about the strength of A single rhetorical tradition, dressed up and feathered by it's gradual incorporation of difference into that narrative of certitude. [For me,] [t]his certitude is a problem. It's a methodologically unacceptable way to theorize rhetorical scholarship because it keeps us trapped in genealogies of colonialism.

It's important to understand that I'm not arguing for us to make space for other rhetorics. Even at it's most radical, that multicultural story about "the history/histories of rhetoric/s" is a merely a complicated rhizome spreading out under the same path tread by THE Rhetorical Tradition, what I think of as "the narrow arrow," from Greece to the Americas. What I'm arguing here is that we have to learn to rely on rhetorical understandings different than that singular, inevitable origin story. We have to try harder to overcome the behaviors that sustain colonial discourse in our contemporary practices. Which means we need to theorize, and that theory can't always be directly tied to

classroom practices that are, again, usually an outgrowth of a paracolonial ideological state apparatus. We need to theorize, and that theory can't engage in textual fetishism – neither by relying on alphabetic print texts nor by textualizing non-alphabetic objects. We need, in fact, to move our conversations and our practices toward “things,” to a wider understandings of how all made things are rhetorical, and of how cultures make, and are made by, the rhetoricity of things.

So, what do I mean by this? That we have to “move our conversations toward ‘things’” in order to overcome the textual fetishism of our discipline? Let me show you what I think I mean in two parts: first, our almost unbearable inclination to textualize non-alphabetic objects; second, what might happen when we step away from a methodological reliance on “the text” as the measure of analysis.

(I call this next section) *The Unbearable Seduction of the Textual: or, how I came to understand my own methodological incompetencies.*

In *Writing Without Words*, Walter Mignolo and Elizabeth Hill Boone fashion themselves as literacy theorists as they set out to “confront th[e] common definition of ‘writing’ [as visible speech] and our notions of what constitute writing systems” (3). In the introduction to the volume, they claim, “Writing specialists have constructed the history of writing to result in modern alphabetic systems. In these histories, indigenous American systems lie either at the beginning of or outside the developmental sequence” (5). And while I agree with them on this point, and on their further insistence that we have to “examine these points of view” in order to “point up the unconscious bias toward Western European culture that seems to drive them,” I am troubled by the degree to which they struggle to turn what I would call systems of making into systems of writing. An example, Boone, in her essay in the volume entitled “Writing and Recording Knowledge,” struggles mightily. She employs linguist Geoffrey Sampson’s 1985 work on writing systems as a foundation upon which to build a new theory of “writing” in order to understand visual systems of recording and communicating information in PreColumbian American cultures. Two of the

categories that Boone finds particularly useful are what Sampson calls “glottographic” and “semasiographic” systems of writing. Glottographic systems are those that “represent speech,” frequently thought of as “visible speech,” and that “compose the traditional definition of writing” (Boone 15). Semasiographic systems are those graphic systems of communication where marks communicate meaning directly within the structure of their own system” (15). In semasiographic systems, Hill claims, ideas get conveyed “independently from language and on the same logical level as spoken language” (15). Other scholars (like Archibald Hill, 1967) would call these “discourse systems” which utilize graphical systems with their own internal structure and conventions. According to Sampson, there are two kinds of semasiographic systems -- iconic and conventional. The easiest example to give of an iconic semasiographic system is with this <SHOW DRYER SLIDE>. The meaning-making system here, while translatable into language, has a logic that isn't dependent on a specific alphabet or language. Conventional semasiographic systems work through notational structures that are relational and arbitrary <SHOW MATH/MUSIC SLIDE>. I don't raise the example of these two categories of semasiographia in order to endorse Boone's argument or to engage in the logic that holds Sampson's theory together. I raise them in order to show the path that Boone travels in order to get readers thinking about material objects that clearly are structures of recording and communicating but that don't quite fit any semasiographic categories. <SHOW QUIPU SLIDE>

**Quipu** or **kipu** (sometimes called talking knots) were recording devices used in the Inca Empire and its predecessor societies in the Andean region. A quipu usually consisted of colored spun and plied thread or strings from llama or alpaca hair. It also consisted of cotton cords with numeric and other values encoded by knots in a base 10 positional system (Wikipedia).

Boone struggles mightily to argue that this – quipu – is writing. That it's just a form of writing that she doesn't yet understand. Her art historian description: “the quipu is not known to have any phonetic component. Created of cotton and wool cords that were colored, spun, twisted, and knotted in different ways and combinations, Andean quipus hold and convey knowledge separate from language. No quipu have been translated to date” (20). Boone's dependence on the anthropological accounts of quipu – a dependence typical to her disciplinary training -- that claim

it as an ancient practice for which there are no current translation mechanisms is the first problem in her very honorable struggle. Quipu-making is a continuing practice among the indigenous ancestors of Incans alive today; there are tribally-held workshops for learning how to engage in the practice of quipu and knowledge about the meanings of ancient quipu is held within tribal communities in the Andes. Boone's ability to see the continuance of the knowledge-practice is, at the very least, severely hampered by her desire to see quipu as writing.

Now, it might seem that I'm picking on Elizabeth Boone just a little bit, so I want to implicate myself in the claims I'm making here about her dependence on disciplinary training. <SHOW QUIPO/WAMPUM COMBO SLIDE>

In the earliest versions of this "textual powwows" project, I claimed:

Though fruitful work has begun in establishing theoretical frameworks through which American Indian writings can be analyzed and theorized as rhetorical texts, much of that work ignores one of the most significant sites of rhetorical production for American Indian people – that of traditional textual forms like wampum, beadwork, quillwork and ribbonwork. If, as Scott Lyons and myself have claimed, "rhetorical sovereignty" and "rhetorics of survivance" are useful theoretical frames for the print-source writings of American Indian peoples, then both frames should serve non-print "texts" as well since sovereignty and survivance could hardly be narrowly limited discursive practices in the daily lives of Native peoples.

At that point, the project was guided by a single 2-part critical question: To what extent are contemporary Native makings like beadwork & basket-making a textual declaration of rhetorical sovereignty? how do these texts contribute to survivance? In the public presentations of this project, I would carefully work through a series of images of these material "texts" – a quillwork cardinal, a moose-hair embroidered mocassin – and ask a more particular series of questions:

So, beyond the regular "museum-ese" with which Native artifacts are regularly catalogued and identified, how would we start to speak about this text? Or, more specifically, how would we do a rhetorical analysis of this non-alphabetic text? What kind

of cultural knowledge would be necessary to even begin? What sorts of analytic categories would be appropriate to use? What might it mean for us to **begin** with texts like these – quillworked, ribbonworked, beadworked, embroidered – as a way to think about the textual production practices of Native peoples on this continent **instead** of starting, always, with the alphabetically-produced texts to which we've already grown so accustomed?

I'm not saying, here, in pointing towards my own problematic methodological orientation to these things, that these were the "wrong" questions – in fact, they are still substantially the questions I'm asking, only with a radical shift in terms of theorizing the objectness of the makings. In fact, these questions – and the way I was asking them – are what changed my sense of what it means to do scholarship in American Indian rhetorics because, in asking them this way, I started to arrive somewhere else. In my relentless focus on the thing as a text and my insistence on interacting with it as "writing," I came to believe quite the opposite. This is not a text, the practice of its making is not "writing." What I've come to understand is that textualizing "things" makes them institutionally recognizable and useful to "us" academics but this process of transformation frequently allows us to miss the point of how these things are used, how they mean, elsewhere. I am interested in that elsewhere – in the systemic order and ritual practices of our everyday lives. In the rhetoricity of things, you might say. Further, to say that a thing is not a text does not mean it doesn't "mean," that it can't be "discerned," that it doesn't "signify." There is a space between textualization and discernability/signification, a place where story and thingness meet. We don't have to turn this wampum strand into a text in order for it to have meaning – its presence invokes meaning, it's part of an entire structure of meaning that isn't necessarily textual but that is nonetheless a discourse available for us to learn from.

So, what is this "thing"? <SHOW SOLO WAMPUM SLIDE> This strand of wampum represents The Iroquois Confederacy. Chiefs of the original five nations are represented by the 50 strands, each of these strands are bound together showing the strength of unity among the chiefs. The longer of these strands is named for the 7th Onondaga chief Hononwiyendeh, who is appointed keeper of all other records of the league. During the American Revolutionary war a Mohawk

warrior named Dewaserageh (Two Axe) was the keeper of this particular wampum circle. He took this and other wampum and placed them in a brass kettle that he buried beside the Osagundaga creek which runs into the Mohawk river. It stayed hidden there until the revolutionary war was over. Mohawks returned and dug it up and carried it with them to the Grand river lands where it was used to renew the council fires of the five nations. The circle was then returned to the hereditary keeper and the Haudenosaunee as a body continues to this day.

So, what happens when you try to step away from the disciplinary practices of turning a thing into a text? **<SHOW BASKET SLIDE>** "Things" (and here I'm using "thing" in a fairly specialized way that comes from Thing theorists like Michael Taussig and Peter Schwenger) – things like these clearly confound even the most inventive scholars. Not only do they not participate in the glottographic project of portraying "visible speech" that European colonizing cultures found so important – what Walter Mignolo calls "the war of the alphabet," these objects also don't seem to have clearly identifiable graphical or notational markings (CITE), they clearly aren't "written" even in the semasiographic sense. The status of their signification, then, makes them seem fairly mysterious for me, and I consider myself to be a pretty inventive scholar. It's almost as if they've been left out of a possible contribution to our understanding of rhetorical production because they lack notational markings to "read" in order to see how they "make" rhetoric. It seems to me, then, that the failure here lies in us, the scholars, not in the things themselves. My contention about these baskets, and about other things like them, is that they don't have notational markings because they are notational in and of themselves. They are always already rhetorical, just like conventional "written" alphabetic print texts. In fact, the more time I've spent working on establishing a continental sense of "American" rhetoric, the more convinced I am that including pre-invasion objects in our construction of rhetorical traditions is essential to telling a story about American histories of rhetoric that began at least 14,000 years ago and that continue today.

In order to demonstrate the possibilities for this kind of rhetorical work, I want to talk briefly from one of the strands of my research on "making" that comes primarily from the work I've done as

part of the "Carriers of Culture" project. In 2005, Michigan State University Museum and the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage launched a project to bring attention to the living Native basket traditions of North American and Hawaii. The first sponsored event of the project was a demonstration gathering and exhibit in 2006 at the 40<sup>th</sup> annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC where 75 North American indigenous basketmakers gathered on the National Mall. From that project, I want to focus on one tradition, one maker, a single case-study that will allow me to trace some of the theoretical and methodological complexity that exploring the rhetoricity of things might bring both to discussions about American Indian rhetorics, and to the more contentious discussions about the histories of rhetoric that I started with today. I also want to model my own processes of imagining "theory" in these material practices in the hopes that it will be useful to others who are committed to pushing the boundaries of rhetoricity and history in order to craft new narratives of our discipline. Finally, I hope to be able to convince you that these practices of making are theoretically and methodologically central to building a more complex and flexible understanding of all rhetorical practices.

The "maker" I'm going to focus on today is Robin McBride Scott <SHOW PHOTO SLIDE>. Scott, a mixed-blood Cherokee, is an award-winning multimedia artist, presenter, teacher, and community member. In addition to the dozens of workshops and public school presentations that Scott does each year, she also sits on several advisory boards, including the Advisory Board for the Oklahoma Native American Basketweavers Association and the Curatorial Advisory Committee for the Smithsonian Museum's Carriers of Culture project. She has been artist-in-residence several times for the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art in Indianapolis; was one of 18 invited artists for the "Frybread and Roses: the Art of Native American Labor" exhibit -- the first event held in the Ho-Chee-Nee Chapel after its renovation at the Cherokee Heritage Center in Talequah; was one of the 75 invited Carriers of Culture demonstrators, and in 2008 was named a visiting artist and scholar-in-residence at the NMAI -- an honor that required her not only to provide letters of support from leaders in her own Tri-State Native community but also to plan a public engagement project -- hers was two-pronged: rivercane workshops sponsored by the Oklahoma NABA and a series of summer youth



workshops for the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma for whom she is a research consultant for recovering their rivercane traditions. Scott's understanding of rivercane comes from being both a scholar and a maker; she is especially known for recovering ancient patterns and techniques and making them available to contemporary weavers. So, for example, not only did Scott provide all the weaving illustrations for Jackie Carlson's important book Flowing Water: Weaving a Cherokee Doubleweave Basket, she has spent years studying rivercane traditions, reading archeological survey reports for a mention of cane objects, sorting through museum collections, examining and spending time with ancient rivercane mats, baskets, and fragments <SHOW COLLECTIONS SLIDE 1 -- mat: SHOW COLLECTIONS SLIDE 2 -- baskets>.

Okay, now let's start where I'd ask my student to start. Let's take this "thing" -- this miniature rivercane burden basket <SHOW MINI BURDEN BASKET> -- and begin. It has clearly textual/readable features which can be explained both aesthetically and anthropologically. For example, according to Sarah Hill, burden baskets can be as large as 3 feet high with a square base and a circular, flaring rim, commonly holding the equivalent of about 3 bushels of corn. <SHOW SLIDE OF CHOCTAW BURDEN BASKET> These baskets are tied to the body by a tumpline that encircles the basket's neck and crossed the bearer's shoulders, resting the large basket on her back to evenly distribute whatever is being carried. But there's more to "this" than that. Beyond utility there's another story.

Back around the time that the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 20<sup>th</sup>, two Cherokee men -- Swimmer and John Ax -- told ethnologist James Mooney (Myths of the Cherokee) a much longer version of the story that I'm about to tell -- this is how fire came to the Cherokee peoples:

In the beginning there was no fire, and the world was cold until the Thunders sent their lightning and put fire into the bottom of a hollow sycamore tree which grew on an island. The animals knew it was there because they could see the smoke, so they held a council to decide how to get to the fire. Every animal that could fly or swim was anxious to go after the fire. Raven went first, because he was so large and strong, but the heat from the fire scorched his feathers black and he got frightened and came back. Screech-owl went next but the hot air nearly burned out his eyes (which is why they are red to this day) and

he, too, got frightened and came back. Then the Hooting Owl and the Horned Owl went over together but the smoke nearly blinded them and the ashes carried by the wind made white rings around their eyes and they barely made it back. Then the snakes tried -- both the little snake and the great climbing snake tried but both were burned black and failed to bring fire back with them. The animals held another council to see who else among them was brave enough to go. Everyone was surprised when the little Water Spider volunteered; she's the one with black downy hair and red stripes on her body. <SHOW SPIDER 1> Since she can both run on top of the water as well as dive to the bottom, she'd get to the island for sure but the animals were worried about how she would carry the fire back since she was so small. "I'll handle that," she told them, and she spun a thread from her body and wove it into a small bowl which she fastened on her back. Then she crossed over to the island and through the grass where the fire was still burning at the bottom of the tree. She put one little coal of fire in her bowl, and came back with it, and ever since we have had fire, and the Water Spider still carries the bowl on her back to this very day.

<SHOW SPIDER 2> Clearly there's a connection, then between the utilitarian story told by anthropologists and the spiritual story of the water spider who literally wove her body into a basket in order to bring fire to the world. What I do want to emphasize is that this isn't a simple connection between different kinds of stories -- the kind told by anthropologists who study Native cultures & the kind told by the members of Native cultures who are studied. Nor is there a simple, coincidental, connection between the idea of burden baskets and this actual miniature. <SHOW MINI SLIDE 2>

It isn't that we tell stories about a basket, or that the basket TELLS a story, it's that it is MADE of story, it IS story; and one of the reasons that things like baskets are significant for understanding Native rhetorical traditions is because as things they provoke, create, and prompt the stories that tell us who we are in relation to one another. They instruct us about our responsibilities to each other, and to the land. What I've come to understand is that while a thing like a rivercane basket

or a mat can certainly be textualized and "read" in the same way we "read" texts, they should not be held to the narrow affordances of texts. They are more than texts. They stand as proof of storied practices that are also performances, occasions, events, rhetorics. The "thingness" of rivercane weaving is theoretical in that it inaugurates for its practitioners a series of habitable stories that connect the land to the body to the People across artificial temporal distinctions like "past," "present," "future." These connections reveal a rhetorical relationship in which a material discourse spins out from the bodies of Cherokee women who are situated at the intersection of the spiritual and the everyday in the overlap between ancient originary events to the present moment in which they live. And this connection is there for time immemorial -- it can't be broken, only forgotten and remembered. As Hill points out, rivercane baskets and mats "have both meaning and reason" (xix). They can be both authors and objects of rhetoric. A big claim, maybe. To think about how to explore it, I want to briefly follow some of basket's stories out into the discursive network where they live.

Origins in the land. The ancient peoples who are ancestors to present-day Cherokees migrated from the Northeast thousands of years ago and settled in the Southern Appalachian mountains. At 200 million years old, this is the oldest chain of mountains in the world. They contained the greatest number of tree species in North America and more than in the whole of Europe. One of the most important plants in this ancestral environment was the rivercane <SHOW CANE SLIDE> which grew along almost every Southeastern waterway in huge stands 10-12 feet high, so dense that sometimes neither the ground nor the horizon could be seen. Rivercane is a rhizome, and its roots laced together so firmly that it literally holds the soil together and once protected against flooding and erosion. The outer sheath of rivercane is encrusted with silica and forms a hard covering that is easily "ten times more resistant to breaking or tearing than woods of the same weight (Hill 45). Because of this, woven rivercane is "naturally resistant to water and fire damage" (44).

As Scott points out:

Our ancestors relied on the canebrakes for every aspect of daily life. Men made blowguns, arrows, spears, atlatls, knives, fishtraps, flutes, turkey calls, and torches from

cane. Homes were constructed by weaving the splits of cane in between wooden posts (called wattle) just like weaving a giant basket. Cane stems and leaves were used for holding the clay together that plastered the wattled walls of their homes. Most beds were made from lashing whole pieces of cane onto a wooden frame. Corn cribs were built up off the ground using whole stalks of cane for the floors and walls. Women split and wove cane into cradleboards, baskets of every shape and size for food processing, storage, harvesting food, carrying water, and even made doublewoven lidded baskets for burials. Mats were woven to cover floors, beds, to serve as wall coverings, and even for roofing. ... As a Cherokee, getting to walk into the canebrakes is like getting to come home after being away for a long while. (12/14 blog)

Making. Making a rivercane basket or mat is a long, difficult process that begins with the preparation of the cane itself. First the cane, and the snakes who live in the cane, must be honored and gifted in the appropriate ways, only then can the cane stalks be gathered -- they're cut with a long knife like a machete, <SHOW CANE CUTTING SLIDES 1 & 2> and immersed in running water to stay green. Each cane stalk must be trimmed, smoothed, and split. Practiced weavers use the knife only to initiate a cut and pull the split down the rest of the stalk. Scott tells students that the cane teaches you to pay attention to it -- its split edges are sharp and the knife used to initiate a split is even sharper. Splitting cane requires patience, focus, and a committed relationship with the material. <ROBIN SPLITTING CANE SLIDE> After the cane is split, the sticks are thinned; when that's done, the final remaining fibers and pith must be scraped away. In the end, what remains is a pile of thin, pliable splints of approximately the same width, ready to be tied into circles and can be dyed. Traditional dyes are made from plants: ripe pokeweed berries (pale red), oak galls (dark red), anjelia leaves (green), sumac roots (brown), butternut bark (black), black walnut leaves and hulls (brown), bloodroot (red), and yellow root (yellow); Cherokee weavers have traditionally chosen red, brown and black for their basketry designs.

There are many, many, many other stories in this discursive network that I can't do more than hint at here -- the stories of each of the plants used for dye, the stories about the tools themselves --

first stone and flint, then steel -- and their making, the stories that would be told during the actual making of a basket or mat -- the winter stories or the summer gossip. And all I have time to tell you about how to actually weave those splints into baskets and mats is that the 2 techniques for weaving rivercane -- diagonal twill and diagonal double twill plaited -- also called doubleweave -- are some of the oldest basket making techniques in the world. They are also some of the most difficult.

Clearly, more stories here -- most of them present in every rivercane basket or mat, each of them made of story, each of them an object that prompts tellings, and in those tellings creates, and recreates, extrapolates and articulates, the community. This basket "means" outside the boundary of my ability to analyze or theorize. I offer explanations, and in doing that, I tell a story that I hope begins to inaugurate a habitable scholarly space in which to live. So, yes, some of you are saying there's a lot of context here. My point is that it's not "just" context. In her book, *Oratory*, Lee Maracle claims: "There is a story in every line of theory. The difference between us and European scholars is that we admit this, and present theory through story" (7). In every line of theory, there's a story. The basket becomes an intersection of history and creation, a constellation of epistemology and existence. In thinking about how to surface the discursive network out of which "things" make meaning, I think it's crucial to move our conversation away from traditional, parochial academic approaches and move towards a wider understanding of how all made things are rhetorical, and of how cultures make, and are made by, the rhetoricity of things. In order to do this, we have to be willing to go beyond our fixation with text and textualizing. Even if our goal is to investigate the history of textual production on this continent, we must situate that investigation in the wide array of material practices that did not -- that do not -- constitute texts. As Thomas Schlereth reminds us "meaning is not an intrinsic property of words; rather, meaning is a process that words sometime facilitate." And, as scholars engaged in this meaning-making endeavor, we also have to find a way to do what millions of indigenous peoples have done before us, to theorize the world around us -- the land, the things that grow there, the animals that live there, the humans that inhabit it, and the spirits that linger in it -- and

to make that work meaningful, not just as scholars, but as tradition-bearers, of the rhetorical traditions of this continent.

To find a model for this practice, I want to go back to Robin McBride Scott for two things: her theory and her practice. In terms of understanding Scott's theoretical approach to her work, I offer a quote from her blog:

I learned about rivercane by going to the old baskets and mats. Our elders say to go back to the original source of the knowledge. The baskets, still retain the knowledge of our ancestors. I listened to what the rivercane had to tell me and that is how I learned. It is the ancestors who have gone before who left behind their knowledge, woven lovingly into the old baskets and mats. They have been by teachers. The rivercane in their hands has guided me. Basketry and weaving has always been an extension and reflection of our ancestors experiences through time. ... Our weaving tradition offers so much more than the prospect of "making money" from selling weavings. Our traditions offer us ... that deep, undeniable connection to the past of our ancestors. ... [they] create an unbroken flow of cultural information that is so essential for giving our youth a deep sense of self that will help them find strength through the trials and tribulations that they will encounter in the "outside" culture. ... I have realized that being in the presence and studying these ancient cane fragments and their patterns that I am learning a new yet ancient "language." (9/14 blog)

Clearly, Scott's methodology for learning the "language" of rivercane is near total immersion -- harvesting, processing, weaving, teaching. Her theoretical entrance into this methodology is through a linguistic and ancestral relationship to the materials and practices of making out of which baskets are created.

So, given all the emphasis I've put on the actual materials used in rivercane traditions, the second thing I want to draw from Scott might seem surprising to you. Be patient, though, because I think this is maybe the most tangible deliverable for our discipline. During a research-and-harvesting trip through Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi a few years ago, Scott came across an

ancient triangular fragment of a rivercane mat that held a pattern (and a technique for creating that pattern) that she'd never seen before. Scott spent time with the fragment, took a photograph, she sketched it, studied it, listened to it, prayed. Then she began to try and weave the entire mat, based on what she'd learned from the fragment and extrapolating theoretically from her knowledge and experience -- she told me, "I want to see what it looks like. I can see it in my head but I want to see it with my hands." While this is clearly a demonstration of the success of Scott's immersion approach to knowledge-making, it's also something else. <SHOW FRAGMENT SLIDE 1> and SAY SOMETHING ABOUT HER USE OF MATERIALS.

Because of the solidity of her imbrication in the traditions of rivercane, and her intimate access to the teachings provided by those ordinary materials, Scott is able to use other materials to test out her theoretical knowledge about rivercane. It's this use, in the deCerteauian sense, that seems significant to me. It's a practice, a rhetorical practice, that can be traced out across other kinds of makings -- from Alexander Blackbird's and Sarah Winnemucca's use of their own history & language & culture in order to make a book -- a text, a thing -- that argues for the rights of their people <SHOW BLACKBIRD/WINNEMUCCA SLIDE>, to Scott Shoemaker's use of traditional ribbonwork to re-make a future for one of the rhetorical practices of his people <SHOW RIBBONWORK SLIDE>, to Charles Eastman's makings of story in books that made him "the most famous Indian of his time" <SHOW EASTMAN SLIDE> and that highlighted the cost of so-called civilization even for those presumed to be the civilizers, to Robin Scott & Bonita Nelson's contemporary engagement in makings that both preserve and re-create traditional rhetorical practices <SHOW ROBIN/BONI SLIDE>. We could call this a lot of things -- using the "available means"; exercising "rhetorical sovereignty"; engaging in rhetorics of survivance. Whatever we call it, I don't want us to lose sight of what I see as the "heart" of the teachings provided to us by "things" -- that is, we have to engage in the same kind of embodied, committed participation modelled by these makers if we want to theorize the rhetoricity of things and to weave that rhetorical understanding into what we already believe that we know about the rhetoricity of texts. Only then will we be able to glimpse the fullest picture possible of "our" rhetorical traditions.

I'm going to stop here and leave the rest for our larger shared conversation. Kikwehsitoole  
neewee – respectfully I say thank you to my relations.

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