In relating the hidden history of the ancient Indian phonology embedded in the Brahmi script, Tom Trautmann has given historians a new writing lesson—a new leçon d’écriture. His writing lesson diverges from the famous one that Claude Lévi-Strauss taught and learned among the Nambikwara. Provoked by the extraordinary incident of the Nambikwara chief’s mimetic performance of writing in order to assert his authority, Lévi-Strauss’s leçon was a reflection on writing as a sociological phenomenon. He demoted writing from a means of retaining, consolidating and furthering human knowledge to a technology for creating and maintaining differences in power. Linking writing with the rise of cities and empires, and the extension of power over large groups of people, the great anthropologist concluded that “the primary function of writing is to facilitate slavery” (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 299). In the midst of his Tristes Tropiques, Levi-Strauss’s leçon d’écriture was a lament for non-literate cultures who were succumbing to the power of writing and to the global monoculture of Western modernity; the leçon was also not without a hint of self-reproach for his role in that process. Trautmann’s historical essay, built on his profound knowledge of ancient Indian history and philology, confirms and contests some aspects of this anthropological lesson, but it also goes further, confronting some deep contradictions that Lévi-Strauss (fairly or not) has been charged with obscuring.

The power of writing is part of Trautmann’s story. The Brahmi script did arise in an imperial context, perhaps even out of an imperial impulse—if indeed Ashoka commissioned the script that he used in various edicts to promulgate the dhamma and to unify his subjects in the Mauryan empire. This new script, however, was organized according to a sophisticated phonological theory developed in the Vedic tradition of oral recitation and memorization. Just as Lévi-Strauss argued, the capacity of civilizations to produce and sustain knowledge does not in all cases depend on writing (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 298–99). Nevertheless, writing does bring about intellectual transformations in this story; writing was the vehicle for the preservation and astoundingly broad dissemination of a coherent set of phonological categories both eastwards and westwards, and through time up to the present. The arrangement of the Brahmi script encapsulated
and “concretized” the order of Indian phonological analysis, facilitating its travel. This phonological matrix was adapted to create a multitude of scripts in south and central Asia, new tools of philological analysis in ancient and medieval east Asia, and, of course, principles of phonological analysis that permitted systematic studies of etymology and therefore comparative and historical linguistics in the modern West.

Trautmann’s larger argument, however, is that this astounding history of Indian phonology has been hidden. Here he confronts problems of writing and representation that Lévi-Strauss elided. In Jacques Derrida’s reading (Derrida 1974: 101–40), the leçon d’écriture is a critique of ethnocentric assumptions about writing that nevertheless retains Western oppositions between writing and orality, between modern historical societies and peoples without history. This is, in Derrida’s view, an ethnocentric anti-ethnocentrism, in which the anthropologist ascribes to himself and to the West the capacity to introduce writing and its violence into a pristine and peaceful preliterate society, and thereby refuses to the Nambikwara the capacity for the linguistic violence of “writing in general”—the violence of differentiation through systems of classification and appellation (Derrida 1974: 110). One need not follow all the tortuous turns of Derrida’s reading to suspect that Lévi-Strauss, in bringing writing to the Nambikwara and then bringing back a lesson about the power of writing and about Western modernity, obscured other lessons that could have been learned and other stories that could have been told. Trautmann’s lesson, on the other hand, is intended to point out these very pitfalls in the modern regimes of historicity that we inhabit.

He does so not only by revealing a hidden past, but by revealing the past in the present. As Michel de Certeau and others have pointed out, it is a peculiarity of Western historicism to insist on a rupture between the present and the past (e.g., de Certeau 1988: 4–5). In modern Western history, all pasts are absent. The problem is that some pasts are more absent than others. Trautmann argues that the absence of the Indian past (in the form of phonological theory) is overdetermined; it has been obscured by a triple conjuncture: the theory-deadness of antiquity under the ideology of modernism; the theory-deadness of Asia under Eurocentrism; and the theory-deadness of the pre-colonial under post-colonial theory. In intellectual history above all, European modernity has occupied a privileged subject position: it is the agent that constructs theoretical insights out of the inert matter of the past and of the East. Even when this knowledge and its construction are submitted to a searching post-colonial critique, the East and its past remain curiously absent. This history quickly becomes, not unlike Levi-Strauss’s leçon, a story of “white men in the tropics.”

These are important provocations, and I readily endorse Trautmann’s call to scholars of antiquity to explore those deeper histories that lie in
the blind spots of modernism and Western ethnocentrism. But there is an additional ramification to his three-part lesson in the case of ancient Greece, one of the two classical civilizations on which Western exceptionalism is so often founded. That privileged patch of antiquity, for better or for worse, cannot be pronounced theory-dead just yet. To be sure, Trautmann is probably right with respect to the field of his chosen example. Unbeknownst to most modern scholars, classical philology has been informed to some extent by an ancient Indian phonology that was mediated (and concealed) by modern comparative philology and especially Indo-European studies. There were also ancient Greek grammarians who had, at least for a time, considerable influence in European linguistics. Their terminology and categories have been used to describe Greek phonology (and that of other languages), but I think it is fair to say that in the long run the phonological concepts of Dionysius Thrax have not been as consequential as those of Pāṇini, and both have receded (or have been pushed) back into the mists of time as mere sources and material for modern linguistics and philology.

On the other hand, in so many other fields—from mathematics to political theory to poetics—the ancient Greeks are not nearly as theory-dead as ancient Indian thinkers. Examples could be cited endlessly, and the modern interlocutors of the ancient Greeks need not be a list of various self-appointed guardians of Western civilization. Marshall Sahlins can take issue with the historical thought of Thucydides (Sahlins 2004); Ranajit Guha can begin a critique of Hegel’s world history with a definition from Aristotle (Guha 2002: 7); Derek Walcott can engage with Homer as a coeval, as a fellow poet (Walcott 1974; Greenwood 2005: 71–73, 84–85). That moderns can invoke ancient Greeks as if present and obtain from them the universal insight of theoria, is a symptom of the dominance of the Western intellectual tradition across much of the global academy. Even for subaltern historians who endeavor to work outside the categories and metanarratives of the West, “Europe remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories” (Chakrabarty 1992: 1), and the ancient Greeks are believed to be the originators of that theoretical capacity. Trautmann

1. The Greek Grammar by Smyth (1920, 11), for example, divides the stops into three orders: smooth, middle, and rough, i.e., ψιλά, μέσα, δασέα. The system is inconsistent, since the first and the last categories refer to unaspirated and aspirated stops respectively, but the middle refers to voiced stops. These categories are derived from the Greek grammarians, including Dionysius Thrax (c. 170–90 BCE; the work preserved under his name, however, may have been subject to later redaction). The overall system in Dionysius’s work (also that of Dionysius of Halicarnassus) is much less coherent than the Indian system, in part because it set out to classify the letters of an existing alphabet (see Dionysius Thrax, Ars Grammatica 9–14; on the limitations of Greek phonology in general, see Lepschy 1994: 9–15). The works of Greek grammarians were, nevertheless, influential in Europe and even beyond (see, e.g., Law and Sluiter 1995: 73–148).
himself has remarked on Hegel’s refusal of theory to all but Greece-Rome-Europe, and Dipesh Chakrabarty has cited the example of Husserl’s 1935 Vienna lecture in which he assigned to Greece the birth of universal science and theory, explicitly distinguishing it from the “mythical-practical” worldview of the Orient, including India and China (Chakrabarty 1992: 3; Husserl 1970: 276–85). The *theoria* of the Greeks has been kept very much alive, and has been used repeatedly to distinguish the West from the rest.

In the case of Greek *theoria*, therefore, the “past in the present” is an acute problem for Western historicism. As I mentioned above, it is a recurrent (if much criticized) habit of historicist thinking to objectify the past as separate and distinct from the observing subject and his or her lived moment in the present. The classical past, however, persists precisely through the mediation of innumerable cycles of interpretation and selective appropriation in a series of present moments. Historicism allows those categories and values founded in the classical past (e.g., democracy, scientific rationalism, theory, historicity itself) to have a universal, natural-scientific standing in the present by screening the operations of hermeneutic circularity. This process, in which the objectified past gives solidity and endurance to values, categories, and boundaries in the present, has had various consequences, but let me very briefly mention those that are most relevant to Trautmann’s themes. Greek ideas about the differences between themselves and the peoples of Asia were repeatedly invoked in the age of modern European colonialism in order to set a definite and apparently natural limit on those peoples who could be thought capable of self-government, even within a liberal vision of empire (see, e.g., Grote 1846–1856: 12.358–59).2 Conversely, Edward Said traced the origins of Orientalism back to a founding moment in ancient Greece, thus making the East an eternal complementary opposite to the West in European thought (Said 1978: 55–58). Historians of the classical past have absorbed these lessons of Said’s *Orientalism*, and have examined (more and less critically) relations between the Greeks and other civilizations through the lenses of modern eurocentrism, imperialism and colonialism—yet another turn in the hermeneutic circle.3 Redeployed in the past, this metanarrative of real and intellectual domination has had the same obfuscating effects that Trautmann describes in his essay: the Greeks (as Europeans) are the active subjects of history, generating theoretical insights (as well as misrepresentations) in handling the passive matter of

2. Though the comparison between Rome and Britain was more frequent—indeed, almost constant—in later British imperialism (Majeed 1999; Vasunia 2005), the Greek past also had a significant place among those British thinkers who imagined a reformed, more egalitarian relationship between Britain and her white settler colonies (e.g., E. A. Freeman (1886); see further Jenkyns 1980: 333–34; Bell 2006: 742–44).

3. For an assessment of the implications of Said’s work for Hellenists, see Vasunia 2003.
the East. The voices and agency of other peoples disappear in metanarratives of Western modernity.

The dynamics of the past in the present differ in the case of classical civilizations, but Trautmann’s essay provides important insights. As he points out, a new approach to recovering hidden histories cannot be an equal and opposite reaction to the predominance of modernity and the West—it must avoid reifying what it seeks to challenge. Trautmann’s history provides two lessons of this sort that I believe are particularly fruitful for those historians in the complex position of investigating the West’s classical past in the present. In the first case, his history shows that enduring, widely disseminated knowledge may be more heterogeneous than it appears in the historical metanarratives of modernity and the West, since it is often produced in conjunctural moments. These conjunctures, moreover, do not always follow predictable patterns. The encounter between literacy and orality, for example, takes a somewhat surprising form in Trautmann’s writing lesson. The Brahmi script was created out of a Semitic alphabet and an Indian phonology; it was generated at the conjuncture between Indian civilization and literate societies further west. In this particular case, the theory of an oral culture transformed the “more advanced” technology adopted from a literate society; an oral culture, in other words, taught subsequent ages how to write. Even in the modern colonial situation, as Trautmann has shown through his examples from British India, the production of knowledge must be understood as conjunctural and not just as a process of Western domination, appropriation and reformation. In order to avoid this kind of monological narrative, historians of antiquity must examine more closely what Marshall Sahlins has called the “structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1985: xiv, 125, 152–53) in which knowledge is produced, transformed and propagated dialogically across cultural and linguistic borders, across regions, and through time.4

The other lesson that I find especially productive can be summed up simply: other cultures, other theories.5 As Derrida (1974, 110) complained of Lévi-Strauss: “How can access to writing in general be refused to the Nambikwara except by determining writing according to a model?” The same could be said of Hegel’s refusal of theory to peoples outside the continuum Greece-Rome-Europe. In this regard, the example of the Brahmi script reveals that theory can be codified or encapsulated in forms other than the metalanguages and literary genres that are recognizable to Western traditions. Relatively concrete bodies of knowledge such as an alphabet, or a list of words in an Old Babylonian cuneiform text, can be used to infer the presence of an abstract analysis that was

4. This is an argument I have pursued with regard to Herodotus’s historical thought (Moyer 2002; Moyer [in press]).

5. To expand on a phrase from Sahlins 1985, x (“Other cultures, other historicities.”)
never written down, but could perhaps have been elaborated through the exegesis of living teachers. Another example from the “exact sciences” is the use of Babylonian mathematical schemes for predicting planetary motion. Alexander Jones’s analysis of epoch tables preserved on papyri from Egypt dating from the first to fourth centuries CE has shown that ancient astronomers of the Roman period used the Babylonian Systems A and B to calculate the positions of the planets long after Hellenistic Greek astronomers had developed the kinematic models made famous by Ptolemy’s *Almagest* and *Planetary Hypotheses* (Jones 1999: 19–33). Were it not for the discovery and analysis of these tables, the enduring contributions of Babylonian astronomical theory would continue to be eclipsed by the preeminence of Ptolemy’s works in subsequent ages. The science embodied in tables or lists—*Listenwissenschaft* as it is known in the study of Mesopotamian civilization—is but one example of the different forms of theoretical knowledge whose deep and consequential pasts might be revealed by ancient historians alert to the obfuscating effects of the present. Trautmann’s writing lesson has challenged us to find others.

**Works Cited**


