Personal narrative—the memoir form—appears to be growing in popularity as a contemporary publishing phenomenon. James Atlas observed in 1996 that “if the moment of inception is hard to locate, the triumph of memoir is now established fact. Consider the evidence: nearly two dozen memoirs are being published this spring, with more to come, supplementing the 200 titles—by one book review editor’s estimate—published last year.” In the intervening decade, Atlas himself transitioned from critic and journalist to memoirist and publisher of biographical works. As compelling as the memoir is to writers and readers today, it is a form that has a long history but that, thanks to the scholarly study known as the history of the book, is also finding a future for itself.

The flexibility of the memoir enables its writer to describe and reflect upon a particular series of events. When published, it takes advantage of a culture of publication that is comparable to the model of the dispersed, regional—often rural—printing office that might set in type and print a first-person account for its author to distribute and sell as part of a narrative performance (Fabian). The memoir is the genre of choice for authors representing cultures ranging from high and low and topics ranging from dark to light. Contemporary memoirs describe public lives and those of ordinary men and women, as the New York Times best-seller list for a recent week indicates. Of the top sixteen hardcover books (including “booklike objects”) listed, twelve are memoirs, among them those of Alan Greenspan, Clarence Thomas, and Valerie Plame.
Wilson; those of popular musical performers and other celebrities (read: sex, drugs, and rock and roll); and a story of the impact of an adopted elderly dog on a family. Additionally, ten of the top sixteen paperback nonfiction titles are memoirs. That the writers of many of these memoirs have appeared on other media “book talk” programs also speaks to the robustness of this speaking genre, especially as part of the circuit of publication, in our culture. When a memoir is selected as the basis for an interview, the moderator of the program can probe the author and the text for additional narrative and cultural reflection.

The collection of papers that follows indicates ways in which personal accounts have enough cultural currency to be a historical category as well. They attract literary scholars and historians who wish to recover and interpret aspects of past life and culture in fresh and exciting ways that might not, without close examination, be apparent. Recent scholarship that integrates personal narrative and memoir to create new histories of communication includes the work of Sandra M. Gustafson, Mary Kelley, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, among others. Gustafson takes notice of spoken performance as a category that cuts across race, gender, and class in *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (2000). By using and extending the scholarly methodology known as the history of the book and broadening its meaning, even as she identifies the changing meaning of oratory, Gustafson shows that forms of communication that at another time might have been passed over as powerful expressions are indeed episodes in which power can be identified. In *Eloquence Is Power*, she draws on a variety of memoirs to extend the definition of public speaking by ascribing to all oral and colloquial performance a value and power comparable to the traditional power of the printed page—the Bible, the law—and the function of literacy as these have been traditionally understood. The premise of Kelley’s *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* is that in post-Revolutionary and antebellum America public speech was a civic action that was not reserved only for male youth. Women’s education also included instruction in reading and speaking, which were used to the extent possible as entrees into the public arenas of civic life and the market economy. In *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*, Ulrich imagines a society in which the masculine world of politics and the
church is the backdrop to women’s handwork, interpreting activity with the shuttle and the loom and with the needle and woven fibers as creative expression that can be read as history. In each of these studies, the use of personal narrative helps break down the wall between the private and public spheres by extending the semiotics of reading and literacy into new arenas.

Recent studies such as these suggest that the trajectory of scholarship on literacy may at one time have been too dependent on the concept of progress represented by the printing press. They challenge the role of this powerful and fixed technology as a replacement for the more ephemeral forms of speech and manuscript and introduce the idea that material objects can also be read. To test notions such as these, Gustafson built on her interest in the changing meaning of eloquence by envisioning a conference that would be part of a series sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society’s Program in the History of the Book in American Culture. She developed a call for papers for a conference titled “Histories of Print, Manuscript, and Performance in America before 1900.” Of the conference she wrote: “The verbal arts in this period manifest a strikingly rich pattern of development and change. From the wide variety of indigenous traditions, through the initial productions of settler communities, to the elaborations of colonial, postcolonial, and national expressive forms, the shifting dynamics of performed, manuscript-based, and printed verbal art capture critical elements of rapidly changing societies. These three varieties of linguistic media competed with, complemented, and shaped one another in unpredictable ways that have only begun to be described.” The papers reproduced here in revised form were originally presented at the conference, which was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, during 10–12 June 2005. These essays imagine a modern history of the manuscript and the spoken word without privileging the printing press, while still affording it a transformative role in the evolution of texts. The authors address performances of religion and government, race and gender, poetry, theater, and song. Their studies are based on texts—intended for reading silently or aloud—maps, recovered speech, and pictorial sources, including an early technology for viewing images at home. In the absence of printed words that can be attributed to an actual speaker, scholars consider other documentary evidence. In a particularly rich instance, Joycelyn Moody describes her search for evidence
of the speech of enslaved women that uncovers instead the practice of creating text that purports to speak for others. These papers transport the reader to such locales as the parlor and the stage, the schoolroom and the battlefield. The evidence is visual—wall maps and house furnishings; it is aural—performances on the banjo, performances of civil war songs, performances of poetry for special occasions; and it is intended for reading—poems circulated as manuscripts, unpublished plays, letters published in newspapers, poems published in magazines, belletristic novels, notes from reading copied into a commonplace book. The reader is asked to take account of the sounds and semiotics evolving from a complex series of interchanges between string and finger; between performers, some of whom are black and others white; between printed songsters and oral traditions; between poets with identities masked by decorous eponyms. Also offered for consideration are the technologies and semiotics of the wall map and of the stereopticon, a novel apparatus through which the viewer can see (read?) images. The authors ask readers to engage with bibliographical tools in new ways—to consider evidence of publication in microform or electronic media, manuscripts that have political “heft” without appearing in print, and bibliographical sequences of oral, manuscript, and print publication. And in a concluding essay—the American Antiquarian Society’s annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book, a series intended to set forth new trends or developments in the history of the book—Sandra Gustafson offers a view of media as being constantly refreshed and changing. As each of the essays in this volume shows, media, even when they appear to be fixed, are reflections of dynamic, cumulative, expansive, and eloquent experience.

— Among these papers offering a fresh and fruitful reinterpretation of the power of speech and expression are several that make substantial reference to oratory and oral practices. They portray conversations, theatrical speeches, reading aloud from specially prepared manuscripts, public lectures, instruction, singing, and poetry reading as recorded and as presented for performance in print and manuscript. These studies stretch the evolving, already capacious, definition of oratory, which can refer to either an act or a place. In medieval times, oratory was connected with
personal prayer—referring to the divine act of hearing earthly prayer or to a place set apart for that purpose. By the nineteenth century, oratory was once again associated with the public speaking of ancient Greece and Rome, but this time in a uniquely American way. These classical democratic or republican civilizations were hailed as exemplary models of political communication with a form of address readily adaptable to public speaking and reportage in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

The place of speech in oratorical public culture is vividly shown to be an American tradition by Gustafson in *Eloquence Is Power*. Oz Frankel builds on the concepts that bind orality with government in his description of the official reports of the branches of the government as communications between the officer making the report and the report’s recipient. Frankel bases his discussion on “orature,” which he defines as “a communicative category that straddles the divide between literature and orality” by incorporating speech and manuscript into printed reports. In his account, printed government reports are embedded in a sequence of actions that might begin and conclude as a spoken performance. Frankel describes the legislative practice as a performance continuum extending from the preparation of the report from notes into an approved text with commissioned illustrations to its delivery as both a print publication and, frequently, an oral event. Frankel envisions these performances as triggering a further series of actions as part of the report’s dissemination, one of which is reading the report without having been a participant at its presentation or public reading. Though Frankel notes the rules of official reportage could be deployed in ways that diminished the effectiveness of government communications, his identification of the potential dynamism of this form enables it to be considered with the other religious, theatrical, and literary narratives making up this volume.

Public speaking for the civic good was, as Kelley discusses, integrated into the school curriculum in the new republic, specifically in such texts as *The Columbian Orator*. This anthology, which included political essays, poems, and dialogues for reading, reading aloud, and memorization, valorized by its title the centrality of public speech in the new democracy. The *Orator* was one of a genre of widely used schoolbooks from which reading and public speaking were taught in the first
quarter of the nineteenth century to both white and black students. Joan Newlon Radner’s essay in this collection reveals the discovery of a charming practice in the long history of public speaking: its integration into a form of small-town, wintertime recreation that took place comfortably after hours in the district school. The links between oral reading and speech as a style of pedagogy were beginning to weaken by the end of the nineteenth century, so that the form of self-improvement represented by this cache of materials that Radner discovered is an even greater surprise: a body of manuscript newspapers created as part of a rural lyceum movement. The price of admission to these events was a written contribution and group participation, providing opportunities to comment on a local issue or relationship. The “performance of the paper” was an event at which young people met to listen to a reading of topical manuscripts presented in the format of a local newspaper. These surviving manuscripts present an unexpected outcome demonstrating a way in which school textbooks concerned with matters of citizenship had created a space for a recreational and social opportunity to flourish and for public speaking to transfer from the schoolroom into daily life.

Another form of dialogue, but through literature, is identified by Angela Vietto in her location of Sarah Wentworth Morton’s body of work within a series of literary dialogues, private correspondence, and her social standing in Boston political circles. Vietto highlights the poetic praise that Morton lavished on the work of Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray and the collaborative style of writing that emerged in the hitherto frequently dismissed New England world of letters. Information that Morton gleaned from correspondence about Native Americans with military leaders of the early republic grounded her early poetry and prose in the republic of letters. The tables were turned on Morton when a tragic domestic situation resulting in the suicide of her husband’s mistress became the basis for two other literary works, including William Hill Brown’s Power of Sympathy, but took a further, somewhat ironic and dialogic, twist when Morton authored Ouâbi; or The Virtues of Nature (1790). This tale blending her own experience as part of a love triangle with the distinctive Americanness of a Native American theme was published by Isaiah Thomas, the founder of the American Antiquarian Society. It is intriguing to imagine that his celebrated interest in Native Americans as representatives of America’s
antiquities might have been informed in part by publications such as this one.

Essays by Matthew P. Brown and Phillip H. Round describe the declaration and interpretation of the word of God as performances by both speakers and hearers that enhance the relevance and meaning of scripture. In his essay “Hand Piety; or, Operating a Book in Early New England,” Brown, describing the practice of commonplacing, suggests that scripture in its codex form nurtures discontinuous literacy. A reader, either clerical or lay, who keeps a commonplace book copies quotations for later reference. In this view, reading is a mechanical operation that is combined with sensory experience. Brown offers the image of the hand that operates the book complementing the piety of the heart. Once the hand skill was demystified, a reader might create a personal text by copying texts for private devotional use into a commonplace book that might also, as appropriate, become notes for later incorporation into a sermon or other public speech. In Brown’s account, the book, with its tooled binding and contents that might be referred to at random and in a fragmentary way, was a sensory object from which other meaningful patterns in addition to those of the printed words of text might be woven.

The Puritans and their descendants through both white and Native missionaries also sought to map a Christian faith onto the Native psyche. Brown’s nuanced explanation of how a meaningful devotional culture was created suggests the flexibility of a written cultural tradition and its somewhat surprising adaptability to a culture that measured literacy in terms of its oral, pictographic, and material expression. Essays by Phillip H. Round and Hilary E. Wyss probe the Native perspective on whites’ efforts to educate them and use of literacy to measure their acculturation. Native response to the Bible presented the missionary Samuel Kirkland with a dilemma: a Native spirituality already existed, the Indians said, because the “Great Spirit gave us a book,” but not a printed document such as the white missionaries wished to promote. Round shows that this tension between spiritual literacy inscribed in hands and hearts, fluency in one or more Native languages, and literacy in written English was a central theme of missionary labor, particularly as Native missionaries challenged white missionaries working in their communities. The Native missionaries Samson Occom and Joseph Johnson each navigated the divide between the two cultures. Able to acquire literacy and,
as Native missionaries, to create audiences for copies of printed books including Bibles, worship books, primers, and spelling books, and for paper on which to copy and distribute texts, they created for themselves a mediating role in the early republic even as their lands were being dispossessed and their communities were being fragmented.

Wyss’s essay complements Round’s by seeking out evidence of women’s literacy in Native communities. She identifies girls among the students at Indian schools, an indication that coeducation was an accepted practice. Its benefits, whatever the girls’ need for writing might be in later life, included the possibility of instruction in domestic arts, but it is in Native domestic arts that Wyss—following Ulrich—crafts an expanded definition of Native women’s literacy. Bodily markings, wampum, and woven and decorated baskets and mats bespoke a continuing Native culture paralleling whites’. The depiction of the two influential households of Mary and Samson Occom and Molly and Joseph Brant reveal the semiotics of Native expression. By keeping an Indian-style home, Mary, a literate Montauk who persisted in following Native customs in speech, dress, and foodways, challenged her husband to retain his Native identity by putting him in a position where he had to continuously make transitions between his adopted English manners and practices and the Indian manners of domestic life with his chosen partner. Molly Brant, Indian wife of the powerful William Johnson, created a public performance of Iroquois culture that reflected the Iroquois-English alliance without diminishing her matriarchal power. Imagining the dynamic of the blends in these households allows a more informed consideration of Native women’s domesticity as part of the critique of Indian-white relations, despite the absence of written or printed texts authored by these women.

Joycelyn Moody takes a different, more theoretical, approach to this “silence” on the part of women. When she set out to recuperate the speech of enslaved women, her efforts to find references to women’s spoken words were thwarted by the discovery of the formulaic nature of such writings. Using the first person, she describes her research plan of “examining literacy and narrativity among nineteenth-century African Americans” with the expectation of finding stories dictated to abolitionists. At the American Antiquarian Society, she searched “for transcribed bondwomen’s voices” in the kinds of sources that other authors
represented in *Cultural Narratives* have found so compelling: “abolitionist broadsides, church periodicals, private diaries, Christian magazines for youth, song and hymn lyrics, and black-owned newspapers.” The silences she encountered resulted from both the well-meaning abolitionists and black women themselves, leading her to note the cogency of Katherine Clay Bassard’s claim that nineteenth-century black women (authors included) distrusted not only literacy as a mastery over language but language itself. In her reading of some enslaved women’s dictated narratives, Moody comes to the “troubling” conclusion that these women may have purposefully *not* pursued literacy despite a desire to exploit the currency it gave them among reading Americans.

Accounts of slavery based on field interviews, some taken down in shorthand, by the abolitionist and reformer James Redpath were used in the production of reform discourse when presented in newspapers and published in book form. The sources used by James Redpath as certain indicators of truth and described by Susan S. Williams in her essay are interviews with ex-slaves written as letters to the newspaper editor. But these interviews fall short in Moody’s view, as they give voice to few women. “That is,” Moody concludes, “by at best mediating and at worst silencing black women’s voices in antislavery periodicals, abolitionists used black women to buttress the status quo of all women’s sociopolitical subjugation, which depended on the maintenance of separate gender spheres.”

Listening for evidence of communication between blacks and whites, Philip F. Gura finds that the banjo provided a medium for cross-cultural communication that took place, not through words, but through hearing and copying the performances of fingers on frets and strings. These performances are behind the tutor books that regularized fingering notation so that the folk practice of banjo playing could be adopted for performance by the musical mainstream and, he shows, mainstream music adapted to the banjo. These American sounds, once set down and printed, could also be integrated by European classical composers into other written musical forms evocative of American experience.

— As might be anticipated, the traditional elements of the history of the book—orality, manuscript, and print, including the tools of bibliography—play an important role in the scholarship reflected in the
papers in this volume. But the ambivalence toward each of these categories of analysis, as expressed by Moody and Wyss, for example, cannot be overlooked, suggesting that other categories have become equally relevant as the history of the book has taken a more cultural turn. These are performance and semiotics, two categories that are foundational for many of the papers that follow. For example, David S. Shields describes the value accorded to face-to-face communication in the seventeenth-century American colonies as part of the negotiation of what constituted good performance. In the first half of the eighteenth century cultural authority in the colonies was still fluid, and before the lines hardened the circulation of belletristic verse in manuscript or print was considered a mark of regard in seeking political or social favor. Martin Brückner picks up the baton with his discussion of the performative semiotics of two contemporary oversized wall maps whose presentation possibilities were recognized by the merchant who acquired copies for sale in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin. When hung as emblems of empire in the Philadelphia State House or Assembly Hall, they would function “as custom-made artifacts informed by personal interest and British America’s emergent media landscape.” Underscoring Brückner’s point about the semiotic rather than way-finding properties of maps are two satirical prints dating from 1775 that are both reproduced in this volume.

Two authors have chosen the theater as the venue for their analysis of the relationship of print to performance. Katherine Wilson traces the performance and publication history of *Nick of the Woods*, a melodrama adapted from a popular novel of 1837 for stage production. As such, it existed in a handwritten manuscript, then a series of actors’ sides—cues leading into an actor’s speeches—and stage managers’ promptbooks, all of which, though in print, yield performances illustrating what Wilson describes as “variables of the era.” The theater is an ideal venue for understanding the fluidity, rather than the fixity, of the acted script in performance and the challenge documented by Wilson of crafting a readable text for publication and possible performance long after *Nick of the Woods* left active repertory and the customs of its performance had faded away. These efforts described by Wilson exemplify the enthusiasm of playwrights and others for “theatricalizing culture,” described by Jeffrey H. Richards as emblematic of the second quarter of the nineteenth century.
Interest in the theater could take forms other than a published script. An author could be fascinated by the dramatic form and write plays that were cultural commentary rather than intended for performance, as did Mercy Otis Warren or Judith Sargent Murray. Plays published as dramatic pieces for performance by students were written in the style mirroring the emerging professional theater in Boston by the Reverend Charles Stearns, who made subtle shifts in gender and language to support his claim that these texts were moral tales for performance by youth. By achieving publication for these texts, Stearns identified the school stage as a theatrical space. For St. George Tucker, despite the intensity of his efforts to have his texts performed or published, playwriting was amusement for an amateur well informed about the theater, yet unsuccessful in achieving production. Richards suggests that unperformed plays are an indicator of fascination with theatrical performance that may have been more prevalent in the early republic than the history of the stage would indicate.

Another medium that has received attention as a venue for its spoken performance is poetry, the subject of a recent study by Joan Shelley Rubin. The relationship between the literary periodicals of the late nineteenth century and the poetry that they published and whose recitations they promoted is the performative nexus central to Ingrid Satelmajer's essay. This essay also connects to other studies in this volume for which texts intended for public performance in a variety of formats are the object of analysis. These include Frankel’s performative interpretation of government reports and essays by Moody and Radner in which periodicals are sources for spoken events. Coleman Hutchison’s account of the circulation of the Civil War song “Dixie” takes a slightly different angle, especially when he documents the attempts in 1904 to fix the lyrics of that anthem for all time. To the circuit of voice, manuscript, and print associated with songs Hutchison offers the category of the variant version, one that might never have been printed but had a life in performance and possibly manuscript. The payoff here, of course, is that Hutchison’s analysis of the culture of revisionism encapsulated in the variant verses echoes the trajectory of the evolving memory of the Civil War described from other sources by historian David W. Blight (Beyond; Introduction; Race).
— Each of the authors in the following collection has chosen a moment of eloquence or a cultural artifact to interrogate, using the tools of the history of the book. The studies included in the following collection take as their starting point some quite traditional sources in history-of-the-book scholarship. Among them are publications, such as the Bible, novels, newspapers, periodicals, play scripts, songsters, music tutors, and maps, as well as manuscript letters. A more unusual source might be the technology of the stereopticon viewer and its images. But they read their chosen sources from a particular perspective to show their role in the emerging cultural narrative of the United States before 1900.

As in our imaginations we cross the American terrain from east to west and north to south, we are introduced to individuals and groups inhabiting those spaces and we hear their stories, many for the first time. Some of these stories were found in new places, for example by searching electronic media and nonprint forms of textuality. The essays in this collection describe the vibrancy of the emerging media of early America. This is the subject of Sandra Gustafson’s concluding essay, a reminder that openness to novel technologies of manuscript and performance is essential. “Regardless of whether they are ‘old’ or ‘new,’ media are never static. They change internally, and they change in relation to one another. . . . Even more striking than the creation of new modalities of manuscript in the age of print is the exuberant emergence of performance media in the early United States.”

WORKS CITED


