



# Writing, Memory and Subalternity in the Early Modern World\*

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## Abstract

In this introduction to the *JEMS* collective volume *Subaltern Writing and Popular Memory in the Early Modern World*, the editors provide a historiographical and theoretical survey on the history of subaltern forms of literacy, as well as of popular modes of remembrance, mainly focused in the early modern period. While providing examples of the ways in which literacy has been carefully policed in different societies, giving way to structures of exclusion, it also points to the more or less fluid relation that common men and women from different backgrounds established with writing, occasionally using it to record personal memory and participate in the collective shaping of the past. The essay tackles the difficulty of recovering the written traces of common men and women, while surveying the ways in which this archive of subaltern writing and memory has been creatively constructed by subsequent scholarly interventions from very different disciplines, including anthropology, paleography, sociology, epigraphy, gender and sexuality studies, and social and cultural history.

**Keywords:** Early Modern Period, History, Memory, Subalternity, Writing

## 1. *Writing, Memory and the People*

‘The job of peasants, you might say, is to stay out of the archives’. With this famous dictum from his *The Art of Not Being Governed*,

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J.C. Scott (2009, 34) summarized the antagonism between writing and the people, between the documentary and record-keeping practices of state authority, on the one hand, and the livelihood and survival of subaltern groups in the premodern world, on the other. In a way, avoiding capture by writing – in the form of tax rolls, census, enclosure acts, police reports, muster rolls, or lawsuits – might have allowed working people, women, and other subordinate groups to lead better lives. Paradoxically, thus, their lives would be traceable in the memory of humanity only to the extent that they failed to escape the trap of the archive.

There is a lot of truth to Scott's witty provocation. For some working people of the past, historylessness and nonliteracy must have been reasonably preferable options. In his ethnohistory of upland Southeast Asia, Scott also proposes that literacy is not a one-way trip: it can be lost or purposefully forgotten. Some peasant peoples of the Southeast Asian mainland massif tell themselves, in the form of oral legends, that they once had writing, when they were a lowland, state-bearing people, but at some point – often in their flight from the valleys to the hills – they abandoned literacy, or it was stolen from them. The Akha people, for instance, used to tell that they once had writing, but in their flight from the Tai to the mountains, hunger made them eat the buffalo scrolls where they kept their communal memory and they thus forgot how to read and write. Orality, says Scott, has certain advantages, for 'the absence of writing and texts provides a freedom of maneuver in history, genealogy, and legibility that frustrates state routines' (220). Oral cultures, moreover, tend to be more democratic, less rigidly stratified by the distribution of cultural capital, freer from the authority of the written letter, more reliant on collective decision. Inasmuch as writing is a technology of statecraft and empire-building, nonliteracy may even be, for some groups, a conscious resistant strategy of state-evasion. Lévi-Strauss concluded, rather gloomily, that writing 'seems rather to favor the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind' (1968, 291). Whether we agree or not with Lévi-Strauss, it is hard to deny that for many subaltern subjects of the past writing meant more often than not taxes, punishment, and forced labor.

That antagonism between writing and the common people is real also in the medieval and early modern world. In medieval England, during the 1381 uprising, a chronicler said that those found with an inkwell would rarely escape the wrath of the rebels, who actively burned archives and documents (Justice 1994, 18). Erasing the written instruments and traces of their own oppression was in fact common in other premodern revolts. During the anti-fiscal revolt of Évora (Portugal) in 1637, 'forão trazidos ao fogo todos os livros reaes que servião aos direitos públicos, romperão as balanças donde se cobrava o novo imposto da carne ... Saquearão os cartórios, desbaratando papéis e livros judiciais' (Melo 1660, 31-32, quoted in Bouza 1998, 41, n. 63).<sup>1</sup> In Brittany, a revolt against the fiscal effects of stamped paper in 1675 and the outcry against seigniorial rights led again to the burning of documents seized from their *châteaux* (Bercé 2020b, 123-124). During the sack of Rome, some common Spanish soldiers used the writings of a humanist scholar who had written about them, literally, as toilet paper (Martínez 2016, 38-39). Some Diggers and Levelers, Christopher Hill showed in *The World Turned Upside Down*, occasionally aimed at classical languages: 'For the radicals Latin and Greek had been the languages of the Antichrist, as they were the languages of the universities, law, medicine, the three intellectual élites' (1975, 355). In Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part II*, rebel Jack Cade instructs to hang a clerk 'with his pen and ink-horn about his neck', for he cannot be 'an honest plain-dealing man' if he knows how to read and write (Wood 2013, 256). In many ways, it is not only that the people do not need the writing technologies of the lettered class to build

<sup>1</sup> (all the royal books of law were set on fire, the scales on which the new meat tax was levied were broken. They ransacked the registry offices, destroying papers and judicial books). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

and preserve their memory. It would in fact seem to be the case that their memory is in frontal opposition to literacy, writing and the class oppression that both seem to signify.

The burning of books and documents, however, was not necessarily an all-out war against the written word in general. As Justice has shown for the English revolt of 1381, the insurgents specifically targeted documents related to taxing and royal revenue, as well as the lords' manorial records. That is, they attacked 'the writing by which power was exercised' (1994, 44), the legal instruments of their own subjection. University libraries and church service books were spared. 'The insurgent animus against the archive', Justice says, 'was not the revenge of a residually oral culture against the appurtenances of a literacy that was threatening because alien and mysterious' (41). Rather, the destruction was selective, carefully planned, and tactical. They aimed at recreating the documentary instruments of law, custom, and memory. 'Familiarity, not ignorance, bred the rebels' contempt of official culture, and that contempt was entirely provisional; they were ready to use its language, and even to practice its exactions, in the name of their project' (Justice 1994, 64). What they wanted was in fact to replace one documentary culture with another better aligned with their interests.

If the permanence of the document could have certain disadvantages for the working classes of preindustrial societies, it also provided a powerful mechanism of community building. Writing was a malleable instrument to preserve history, identity, and to defend themselves in the present. For a few decades now, in fact, scholarship on popular forms of writing and remembrance have painted a complex and vexed relationship between literacy and the people, as well as between writing, agency, and memory. In *From Memory to Written Record*, Michael Clanchy (1979) explored how writing, particularly in the form of charters and other legal instruments, became an increasingly familiar presence in the English countryside during the late Middle Ages. The borders between orality and writing are not as impermeable as we once thought, and historians and anthropologists of literacy have suggested an oral-literate continuum (Goody 2010). In one of the most substantial recent interventions – and one that is at the root of the editors' thinking about this collective volume –, Andy Wood argued that, in contrast with this seeming hostility to the written word, 'There was a dynamic interplay between literacy, orality, memory and custom' among the poor and middling sort of early modern England (2013, 50).

Let us consider an example of this complex and dynamic interplay between writing, orality, and memory in the early modern period. After the defeat of Castile's Comunero revolt in 1522, emperor Charles V was determined to completely root out its memory. In this case, it was the king who repeatedly ordered to burn all documentary records produced by the rebels. In Toledo, the house of Juan de Padilla and María Pacheco, the main leaders of the popular uprising, was razed to the ground. 'Derribaron las casas de Juan de Padilla hasta los cimientos, aráronlas y sembráronlas de sal, por que la tierra o suelo donde había nacido el capitán de tantos males que se habían concertado y fraguado no produjese aun yerbas silvestres' (Sandoval 1955-1956, Book IX, ch. 28).<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the devastated property a stone was planted 'adrón, con un letrero que contaba su vida y fin desdichado'<sup>3</sup> and denigrated the memory of the insurgents. The result of the royal attempt to control the memory of the rebellion through writing was somewhat paradoxical, for the empty loft would forever be called 'plaza de Juan de Padilla' by the people of Toledo. The name of the most popular leader of the uprising would be carried on by the power of writing amplified with local memory and oral tradition. And indeed, invoking the very name of

<sup>2</sup> (They tore down the houses of Juan de Padilla to the foundations, flattened them and sowed them with salt, so that the soil where the captain of so many evils had been born would not even produce wild herbs).

<sup>3</sup> (with a sign that told of his life and unhappy end).

Padilla, whether orally or in writing, would suffice in later years to call the people to rail against injustice (Castañeda Tordera 2008; Bouza 2013; Merle 2017). In this and other cases, such as the Neapolitan uprising of 1647,

the conflicts raised by public lettering resulted in acts of *damnatio memoriae*. The destruction or substitution of certain inscriptions, images, statues and symbols, whether in religious conflicts, anti-seignorial revolts or revolutions of greater political significance, was a way of actively intervening in the memory and the re-signification of public spaces. (Castillo Gómez 2020, 322)

## 2. *Defining the Subaltern*

To engage with this topic effectively, it is crucial first to define the social actors that will be the focus of our reflection. The socio-political concept of the ‘subaltern’ finds its origins in the work of Antonio Gramsci, who explored this concept in his *Quaderni dal carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*), penned between 1929 and 1935, as well as through the letters he authored while incarcerated. Guido Liguori notes that Gramsci initially applied the term to a description of the army’s junior officers; subsequently, from the third notebook onwards, he used it to set the subaltern classes against the ruling class; and ultimately, he endowed the term with a cultural dimension (Liguori 2011 and 2015). In a letter dated August 8, 1933, to Yulca (Julia), Gramsci deliberated on who would explain to his son Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book he had recently sent them. He doubted his wife’s suitability for the task, believing she would assume a subaltern rather than a dominant role, expressed in the first person:

In general, it seems to me that you put yourself (and not only in this connection) in a subaltern rather than a dominant position. That is, you assume the position of someone incapable of historically criticizing ideologies by dominating them, explaining and justifying them as a historical necessity of the past; of someone who, brought into contact with a specific world of emotions, feels attracted or repulsed by it, remaining always within the sphere of emotion and immediate passion. (1994, vol. II, 318)

According to Gramsci, subaltern groups are those historically sidelined from political, economic, ideological, or cultural power, typically commandeered by those wielding ‘hegemony’, or the ruling class. For Gramsci, the ruling class is singular, whereas subaltern classes are plural. ‘The history of subaltern social groups,’ he stated, ‘is necessarily fragmented and episodic’; thus, ‘by definition, subaltern classes are disunited and cannot become unified until they are able to form a “State”. Their history is thus entwined with that of civil society, representing a fragmented and discontinuous aspect of civil society’s history’ (1975, vol. III, 2283 and 2288).

While Gramsci’s thesis predominantly addresses social class, a cornerstone of Marxist thought, he did not shy away from integrating reflections on gender, albeit not yet articulated through a feminist lens. In the *Quaderni*, he parallels the history of women with that of subaltern groups, arguing that ‘“machismo” can, in a sense, be equated to class dominance’ (2286). Earlier, in a critique of a 1917 performance in Turin of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Gramsci focused on the dominant position women occupied within the bourgeois family structure. He lauded Nora Helmer, the play’s protagonist, for her bold decision to leave her family in search of self-identity, thereby escaping the ‘hypocrisy of sacrifice’ that bound women to their husbands, families, or those in need (Gramsci 1917). This vision of women’s emancipation aligns with a conceptualization of subalternity that, while rooted in class, also acknowledges the gender dimension.

Thus, subalternity embodies a state of marginalization and subservience across class, gender, and race dimensions, among other forms of dominance. While women are subjected to various forms of patriarchal violence, this notion does not erase the class disparities among them, particularly in relation to written culture, which is the object of the present volume. These disparities elucidate the unequal access and appropriation opportunities historically available, highlighting that despite shared gender, the experiences of women from noble or bourgeois backgrounds significantly differ from those of peasant or working-class origins. Certain exclusions universally affect all women, yet others are distinctly shaped by class-based discrimination.

### 3. *Subalternity, Gender and Written Culture*

Regarding subaltern individuals (both male and female), it has been argued that their condition stems from being deprived of their own voice, as the ability to convey their own experiences would entail leaving behind their subaltern status. This was the thesis put forward by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), which has had a significant impact in the field of postcolonial studies and beyond. These propositions directly challenged intellectuals and members of the academic community, questioning their ability to speak on behalf of and to represent the subaltern. Although this issue is central to Subaltern Studies (Beverly 1999), it is our intent to consider the capacity subalterns have had historically to embrace writing, to make use of it, and even to transmit a certain memory of themselves and their communities.

The active denial of access to literacy is a key factor in explaining the social evolution of writing and its conceptualization as a knowledge restricted, to a greater or lesser extent, to the ruling class. This is supported by the following excerpt from the *Epistola directa ad inclitum et magnificum virum dominum Petrum Fernandi de Velasco Comitem de Haro* by Alonso de Cartagena, written after 1442 (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Mss/9208). In it, the Bishop of Burgos attempts to convince his friend, the Count of Haro, that divine will has determined that knowledge to be distributed according to different estates so that each can better fulfill their role:

It is not possible, among such a multitude of people, that all dedicate themselves to the study of books; nor would it be convenient for the republic, for the full and prosperous governance of which many, or rather infinite, trades, arts, and industries are necessary. To spend the time of those who practice these trades [i.e., the laborers] in the study of the sciences would indeed be very harmful (Cartagena post 1442, 5v, quoted by Lawrance 1991, 86).

An illiterate peasant is preferred over a learned one, which is not unlike the view held by British slave owners in the seventeenth century (and later), who were terrified at the mere thought of a literate Black population. Hence their firm opposition, especially in the American colonies and notably in South Carolina, to King Charles II of England's decree in 1660 ordering that indigenous people, servants, and slaves in the British colonies be instructed in Christian doctrine (Cornelius 1991, 13).

Regarding women, at the end of the seventeenth century, Nicolás Antonio included in his work *Bibliotheca Hispaniae sive Hispanorum* (1672) an appendix titled *Gynaeceum Hispaniae Minervae sive de gentis nostrae foeminis doctrina claris ad bibliothecam scriptorium* (vol. II, 337-347), written around 1648, in which he denounced their exclusion from study as a male strategy to keep them away from any form of power: 'Hence, [women] have encountered this more unfair fate of ignorance and exclusion from all disciplines, if not from the usurpation by men, who, to maintain their command, have always kept women away from the instru-



ments of command' (Antonio 1672, 337; see also Luna 1996, 37-38).<sup>4</sup> Without dismissing the significant development of female writing in the early modern period, for which there is a constantly growing body of scholarship, Nicolás Antonio's words reflect a reality shaped by the cultural discrimination women have faced throughout history.<sup>5</sup> His reflection can be linked to the assessment made in the 1970s by Italian linguist Giorgio Raimondo Cardona regarding the history of writing as a male prerogative, considering the dominance men have exercised over it, not only in Western culture: 'Where writing is not a common heritage, it is very difficult for women to write. Indeed, a woman who writes can seem an absurdity, a contradiction' (1987, 95).

In pre-industrial European societies, the dominant patriarchal and Christian discourse closely monitored the relationship between women and written culture, authorizing or disavowing readings and writing exercises based on whether they reinforced or deviated from their moral education and the social role assigned to them, as can be traced in moral treatises, confessor manuals, educational texts, and even the fictional literature of those centuries, within what Isabel Morant called the 'discourses of the good life' (2002).<sup>6</sup> In this framework, women were expected to read what was permitted and to write primarily within the private sphere, which did not prevent some from overcoming these barriers and even effectively intervening in public opinion, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although these were generally literate women of aristocratic and bourgeois origin (Landes 1988; McDowell 1998; Villegas de la Torre 2012; van Elk 2017).

Both among them and among subaltern men, the relationship with writing and reading must always be analyzed from the tension between coercion and subversion, between the norms that try to enclose imagination and the individual freedom to transgress them. Thus, we encounter men and women who defied silence and left a memory of their lives, a testimony of their creation, or traces of their intervention in various matters, from the most domestic to others of public dimension.

#### 4. *The Common People in the Archive*

'The document is not merely unsold merchandise from the past; it is a construct of the society that produced it, shaped by the power dynamics within that society'. These words by medieval historian Jacques Le Goff underscore that written documents are never neutral. They are, fundamentally, the product of 'a conscious or unconscious assembly of the history, era, and society from which they originated, as well as of subsequent periods during which they continued to exist, perhaps overlooked, during which they were still manipulated, even in silence' (Le Goff 1982, 452 and 454). Aligning with this perspective, Italian paleographer Armando Petrucci remarked that 'dominance over memory and oblivion, as social practices, is predominantly political and constitutes a fundamental aspect of the control and governance of an advanced society' (2002, 116). Paul Thompson experienced this directly in his research on the written remnants of subaltern classes. He discovered that the private

<sup>4</sup> (Unde ergo sibi contigisse iniquiorem hanc imperitiæ a sortem, et sequestratæ ab iis omnis disciplinæ, nisi ab usurpatione virorum, qui, ne minus imperent, ab instrumentis imperandi foeminae arcuere'). The manuscript of this text is kept at the Biblioteca Nacional de España (Mss/7343).

<sup>5</sup> To avoid overburdening this introduction with bibliographic references, we refer to the recent synthesis by Plebani (2019), where mentions of Italy are complemented with others of France, England, Spain, or Germany, a rarity in other approaches to female writing in early modernity that are much more geographically focused, as is the case with much of the Anglo-Saxon and French scholarly production.

<sup>6</sup> On women and reading in early modern Europe, see Snook 2005; Gagliardi 2010, 25-71; von Tippelskirch 2011.

correspondence archived in England revealed a stark imbalance: it was substantial in the case of letters exchanged among landlords but almost non-existent for the epistolary interactions of the common folk (Thompson 1984, 54).

As outlined at the start of this essay, as the ultimate embodiment of the power of writing and written memory, archives predominantly highlight the ruling class, institutions, and those in positions of power across political, economic, religious, or cultural domains. They also influence historical practice and the formation of collective memory and national identity, as pointed out by J.M. Schwartz and Terry Cook: 'Archives – as records – wield power over the shape of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, [shaping our understanding of ourselves] as individuals, groups, and societies' (2002, 2). They added that the professional conduct of archivists, far from being neutral and objective, involves active decisions that impact the preservation, organization, and interpretation of archival collections, thereby influencing social memory (2-3).

Thus, we encounter a genuine archival conflict between the selected and transmitted documentation and that which is overlooked, destroyed, or disregarded, marginalized for not aligning with the interests of the powerful or the prevailing historical narratives. As archives serve the State, the Church, the nobility, and various institutions and corporations, they tend to perpetuate a form of documentary elitism. They illuminate the written traces of some, typically the elites, while obscuring those of others, notably the subaltern classes. However, this does not preclude the existence of traces from these groups (Castillo Gómez 2021), albeit often because there were numerous administrative and judicial instances in which their members were compelled to produce written documents to identify themselves, verify salary receipt, claim an inheritance, submit a petition to authority, or execute a will.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, the involvement of the subaltern might have been limited to signing, a significant act of assertion and visibility in itself (Fraenkel 1992), or to drafting brief texts. Yet there were instances where literacy skills were demonstrated through letters, account books, memoirs, libels, or fully autograph claims. Arlette Farge observed that the working classes, while 'less adept at wielding the written word' that 'does not mean that they lived without constructing representations of themselves,' concluding that 'The archive has many resources in this vein, and you need only take the trouble to look for them' (2013, 102). Despite poverty and deprivation, illiteracy, and the popular distrust towards writing, archives and libraries offer very diverse testimonies to bring us closer to the written memory of those from below.

Although not referring to the early modern period, one of the key moments in the valorization of subaltern writings as legitimate historical documents, and the consequent concern for their preservation, was the search for letters from Polish emigrants in the United States. Led by sociologists from the Chicago School William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the result of this research project was published in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which appeared in five volumes between 1918 and 1920, and included the gathering of 764 letters by common people of peasant origin. When Znaniecki returned to Poland, he prompted the Institute of Sociology in Poznan to organize a contest of 'worker memoirs' in 1921, which saw some continuity in subsequent decades (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976).

While these important precedents should not be overlooked, scholars tend to situate the emergence of new forms of historiographical attention to the writing and memory of the subaltern in the 1960s and 1970s. Amid the rise of quantitative methodologies linked to demography and sociology, in 1963 French historian François Furet contended that 'the quantitative study

<sup>7</sup> For the French case, an excellent exercise in this direction is the work coordinated by Yves Marie Bercé (2020a).

of past societies' was the sole method to reintegrate the 'lower' classes into history (1963, 459). Years later, Carlo Ginzburg challenged this view as it doomed these social groups to remain silent (2019, xxii).<sup>8</sup> In the same decades, several British historians, proponents of the 'history from below' approach (Thompson 1966), included threatening letters from peasants and workers in their studies. Eric Hobsbawm and Georges Rudé (1968) occasionally studied some such letters, signed by the legendary Captain Swing, which peasants sent to rural landowners during the agricultural revolts in England in 1830. E.P. Thompson employed similar testimonies more extensively in his research on peasant and proletarian protests in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (1977). Nevertheless, Hobsbawm later mentioned the difficulty of understanding the thinking of the lower classes based on their own testimonies rather than their actions, given that 'for most of the past people were generally illiterate anyway' (1985, 67).

### 5. *Writing and Subaltern Memory*

The written evidence of the subaltern classes is notably rarer the further back we look, among other reasons because, even in societies with high literacy rates, the continuous use of writing and reading has been 'restricted to a very narrow elite of the population, typically belonging to the upper-middle bourgeoisie' (Petrucci 1978a, 41). Excluding graffiti, which traces the written presence of common people back to Ancient Rome (Funari 1989; Garraffoni 2022), the engagement of subaltern classes with written culture becomes increasingly visible in late medieval Europe. This period saw the spread of vernacular literacy and the emergence of professional avenues that required writing skills. A variety of individuals – traders, craftsmen, some peasants, and certain women – adopted the pen and paper to write personally, or through intermediaries, letters, account books, memory books, or *libri di famiglia* (family books). Essentially, these were characterized by a textual hybridity, blending accounting entries, family milestones, and notable historical events.

James Amelang notes that 'the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era witnessed a significant increase in the writing and circulation of what might be termed the literature of personal experience' (1998, 119). This was represented by a diverse array of texts that could be classified as autobiographical or ego-documents, such as strict autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, family books, spiritual autobiographies, personal chronicles, travel writings, and autobiographical fiction, not overlooking other genres where popular autobiography found a place (account books, correspondence, technical and trade books, and even the many political and religious pamphlets by humble authors that proliferated in England during the revolutionary decades of the 1640s and 1650s (28-41).

Through this literature of personal experience, subalterns not only reinforced their familial and social ties but also made interventions in social memory, as many of these texts also ventured into history, offering a perspective from below on the events of their time, some known firsthand and others through different means, including oral transmission or gazettes and newssheets. A veritable testament to this memorialist orientation is the 'diary' of Joan Guàrdia, a peasant from Santa María de Corcó (l'Esquirol), supplemented with notes by his son Antoni Joan. Initially described by the author as a 'book of blank paper for writing accounts and my dealings', it soon transitions from accounting entries to family notes and accounts of the year's

<sup>8</sup> On the occasion of receiving one of the Balzan Prizes in 2010, Ginzburg reiterated in his speech that 'in any society, power relations condition access to documentation and its characteristics,' which means that 'the voices of those belonging to oppressed and/or minority groups usually reach us filtered through external, if not hostile, figures: chroniclers, notaries, bureaucrats, judges, and so on' (2011, 11).



significant events, plagues and famines, festive celebrations, and notably, the War of the Reapers, the Catalan revolt against King Philip IV (Pladevall i Font and Simon i Tarrés 1986, 31-120).<sup>9</sup>

Many of these texts are autograph manuscripts, though there are also instances where they were written by another hand or even dictated. For instance, the spiritual autobiography of Margarida Altamira, an illiterate woman from a humble mountain village family, who was judged by the Holy Office of Barcelona in 1681 after being denounced by a neighbor for baptizing an illegitimate child twice (Amelang 1990, 207-208). During the interrogation, she recounted ‘discurso de su vida’ (the story of her life) as happened in many other cases, forming a sort of oral autobiographies or *trazas de vida* (Amelang 2011; Lorient 2023b).

Besides these texts, preserved in many cases in family archives, in the early modern period there was a remarkable strain of writings from ordinary people that was filed in judicial and police records as legal evidence. Arlette Farge’s exploration of eighteenth-century French police archives yielded a series of works that, in addition to approaching the life of the Parisian populace, recovered the voices of some common men and women, as recorded in personal documents that were seized by the authorities (1994, 2007 and 2019). Among these are parchment bracelets placed on the wrists of corpses – also men and women – with brief descriptions of the person, even though many of the individuals carrying these identity notes were illiterate (Farge 2003). Like her, Natalie Zemon Davis has written memorable pages about women on the margins (1995), as well as a model study on the narrative power of pardon petitions addressed by ordinary people to the French king during the sixteenth century (1987). Indeed, at that time, one of the resources the archive offers for the written memory of subaltern classes lies in the petitions directed by commoners to rulers and institutions seeking some favor, especially as they recounted their lives and devised various narrative strategies to convince or move the recipient of the plea (Würgler 2001; Nubola and Würgler 2002; Nubola and Würgler 2004; Santiago Medina 2019; Waddell and Peacey 2024).

For the French Ancien Régime, the police records of the Archives de la Bastille, stored in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, have become formidable repositories for locating the written traces of many infamous lives (Dutrav-Lecoin and Muzerelle 2010). In other contexts, inquisitorial and judicial archives, both civil and ecclesiastical, serve this same purpose. During the early modern period, it was common for these proceedings to incorporate documents seized from the accused as evidence. Thus, a significant portion of the letters from ordinary people unearthed for the territories of the Spanish monarchy comes from inquisitorial and civil judicial archives (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999 and 2014; Martínez Martínez 2007; Usunáriz 2015).<sup>10</sup> In addition to these types of documentary series, the personal correspondence of emigrants to America has been located within administrative files processed by the Council of the Indies, in the form *autos de bienes de difuntos* or *cartas de reclamo* (proceedings for the distribution of inheritances; letters of claim) on behalf of relatives residing in the Iberian Peninsula (Otte 1976; Macías and Morales Padrón 1991; Fernández Alcaide 2009).

Moreover, while there are some testimonies in the countryside, it is indisputable that subaltern writing is an urban phenomenon through and through, thanks to the significantly higher literacy rates. The memory of the people in the early modern world is unmistakably marked by the sharp divide between the country and the city.

<sup>9</sup> For the Catalan memory books, we refer to the *Memòria Personal* website (<<http://www.memoriapersonal.eu/>>, accessed on 1 February 2024), which features descriptions of a wide array of these items and includes digital reproductions of several of them.

<sup>10</sup> See also the epistolary corpus edited as part of the *P.S. Post Scriptum project, A Digital Archive of Ordinary Writing (Early Modern Portugal and Spain)*, led by Rita Marquilha (<<http://teitok.clul.ul.pt/postscriptum/>>, accessed on 1 February 2024).

Most of the writing done by the common people served a pragmatic purpose, such as testifying or teaching, and does not conform to literary standards. They are the work of ‘écrivants’, not ‘écrivains,’ to use Barthes’ useful distinction (1983, 182). This differentiation is applicable to many subaltern texts from the early modern period, characterized by a desire to ‘leave a trace’ that does not necessarily conform to the standards of the prestigious realm of literary creation (Fabre 1993, 11).

In broad terms, the written output of the subaltern classes reveals a compelling need to write that transcends the traditional frameworks used to interpret more literary activities. Its male and female authors navigate an ambiguous realm between orality and literacy, between being literate and semi-literate – that is, at the juncture where they first encounter writing and its complexities, rules, limitations, and mysteries. However, it is crucial to understand that this does not mean we should view these texts as mere transpositions of spoken language.

The characteristics of popular writing display common traits that, remarkably, tend to persist across centuries (Bartoli Langeli 2000). They reflect an inexperienced or unskilled graphic competence, marked by elements such as discontinuous letter formation, the use of generally large letter sizes, an inability to maintain regular alignment, uncertain penmanship, irregularities in text layout, and uniform lettering regardless of their position in the word. Alongside these graphic peculiarities, there are morpho-syntactic features that give the texts a continuous, uninterrupted flow reminiscent of spoken language, and lexical aspects, notably significant dialectal and colloquial interferences (Marquilhas 2000, 230-266; Castillo Gómez 2002, 26-28; De Caprio 2019). Frequently, popular practitioners perceive writing as an uncommon experience and describe it as something inappropriate and restrictive, as if they were encroaching upon a field not meant for them.

### 6. *Graphic Mediations and other Subaltern Writings*

When we explore the subaltern’s relation with written culture, it is essential to consider instances of graphic mediation. This phenomenon is particularly notable in the early modern period, when writing became entrenched as an instrument of governance and legal authority. In such contexts, even those unable to read and write found themselves compelled, for a myriad reasons, to engage with writing.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in September 1539, María Díaz, a laundress; Juan de Salazar, a cook; and Pedro, a barber – all employees at the Colegio Mayor de San Ildefonso in Alcalá de Henares – when required to issue receipts for their salaries, did not turn to family or acquaintances likely as illiterate as themselves. Instead, they sought out the more accessible *licenciados* and *bachilleres* (graduates) of the college (Castillo Gómez 1997, 314-319). Similarly, Maddalena Grattaroli, a widow from Bergamo who settled in Rome’s Trastevere neighborhood, operated a grocery store with her nephew’s help. To manage her accounts, she used a booklet, a common practice among merchants since the thirteenth century, where clients, suppliers, and transporters, alongside her nephew, recorded transactions with her, an illiterate woman, from 1523 to 1537 (Petrucci 1978b). Moreover, between 1512 and 1576, wet nurses employed by the Hospital of Valencia used delegated writing to draft and sign receipts for their services (Gimeno Blay 1993).

The study of the practice of ‘writing for others’, as Petrucci put it (1989), opens up a rich field of research, especially because it includes in the history of writing those who are most marginalized (Lyons 2014). Naturally, delegated writing is not always a result of illiteracy but can also stem from a lack of knowledge about the rules governing the drafting of different types

<sup>11</sup> Regarding illiteracy from 1750 onwards, see Lyons 2022, particularly the chapter on the ‘Literary culture of the illiterate’ (79-98).

of documents, especially when these are intended to have legal or administrative value. When a document requires greater familiarity with writing protocols, the search for effectiveness, as in drafting a letter of supplication or petition to the authorities, or adherence to notarial practice, this mediation fell on writing professionals: notaries endowed with public trust and scribes, often with offices in squares and public spaces.<sup>12</sup> Yet finding such professionals could sometimes prove challenging, as evidenced by Inés de Carvallar's difficulty in March 1574, indicated by her sister Beatriz's explanation in a letter from Mexico City: 'Inés asks for forgiveness for not writing due to the lack of a notary' (quoted Otte 1988, 85).

This scenario also highlights the textual negotiations between illiterate subalterns or those unfamiliar with the intricacies of written and legal culture, and the professionals who filled these gaps or were responsible for legally validating documents. While traditional views relegated notaries to mere representatives of power, recent research has reevaluated their role as intermediaries (Nussdorfer 2009), emphasizing their capacity to mediate on behalf of subalterns' interests (Herzog 1996; Burns 2010). Thus, notaries serve not only the powerful but are accessible to all, reflecting subalterns' petitions and suggestions to safeguard their interests (Albornoz and Argouse 2017).

As Juliet Fleming observed while studying graffiti in private English houses at the beginning of the early modern period, 'paper was not necessarily the most obvious, or suitable, medium for writing' (2001, 10). Therefore, in exploring a subaltern history of writing, it is also essential to consider what was written on walls. Whether on the ephemeral surfaces of street walls or within various buildings (churches, convents, prisons, castles, private homes, palaces), alongside the testimonies found in chronicles, biographies, and other texts, it is possible to trace the written appropriation by common writers.<sup>13</sup>

Many (more men than women) left their mark by inscribing their names on walls, often followed by a date; some merely recorded the passage of days with marks, especially in prisons. Among the textual graffiti, some served a notarial or chronicling function, documenting specific events; others express the author's religiosity through prayers and devotional annotations. There are also examples that testify to a mix of cultures and religions, such as those preserved in New Spanish convents; and those that used walls to express criticism or allegiance to authority, whether through the slogan 'Viva el rey' and the effigy of Philip IV drawn in the bell tower of the Church of San Salvador in Cocentaina, Alicante, or the 'fueresse oliveros' (down with Olivares!), presumably referring to the Count-Duke of Olivares, inscribed at the entrance of the Hospital de Santa Creu in Barcelona, likely during the Catalan revolt against Philip IV (1640-1659). And, of course, we must not forget that the walls also bore drawings of objects, figures, scenes, and symbols of great variety (crosses, crucifixes, representations of the Virgin and other religious figures, clothing, weapons, plans, etc.). These captured forms of popular religiosity, battles, everyday scenes; various expressions, in short, of the popular memory of the time.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Instances of delegated writing and the presence of writing professionals in public spaces have been documented in various locations across Europe and the Hispanic world. Among others, such activities were recorded at Largo do Pelourinho Velho in Lisbon (Bouza 2001, 72-73), in front of the Palace of Justice and near the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris (Métayer 2000), and, within the Hispanic realm, at least around the cathedrals of Granada and Seville (in Seville, also in the Corral de los Olmos), in the Plaza del Ayuntamiento in Toledo, in front of the Church of San Salvador in Madrid, and in the main squares of Málaga and Lima (Castillo Gómez 2010, 365-369).

<sup>13</sup> On Graffiti and wall writing as a major cultural phenomenon in medieval and early modern Europe, see the recent collection of essays published in the *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, vol. 9, edited by Raffaella Sarti (2020).

<sup>14</sup> On common writers' modern graffiti, see Castillo Gómez 2023, who provides an extensive bibliography.

## 7. Conclusion

In 1968, Jack Goody noted that for at least two millennia, most people in the world, particularly in Eurasia and Africa, had lived in neither fully preliterate nor fully literate societies, 'but in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups or individuals who could read and write. They lived on the margins of literacy, though this is a fact that many observers have tended to ignore' (4-5). Goody's observation is a useful reminder that social memory was preserved, shaped, and disputed both orally and in writing; both with 'acts of authorship' (Amelang 1998, 50) and 'insurgent literacy' (Justice 1994, 13-66) and through delegated writing; by carefully engaging with the world of the letter and by irately setting fire to paper and parchment.

Moreover, it is not always illiteracy, deprivation, and oppression that explains oblivion. Official history certainly erased the memory of riots and other acts of subaltern defiance. Similarly, in the realm of orality, we could retrace 'a systematic attempt by the authorities to sever the autonomous circuits of folk discourse and to deny ... heterodox stor[ies] any social site where [they] could be safely retold and interpreted' (Scott 1990, 126). But how much history a people wants to remember is many times a purposeful decision. 'How much history a people have, far from indicating their low stage of evolution, is always an active choice', said Scott in a different work (2009, 237). Forgetting is, paradoxically, a constitutive aspect of memory. Just as narrative requires ellipsis, the social transmission of collective memory requires selection and erasure. After a popular rebellion in early modern England, for instance, the townsfolk was divided between those who wanted to hang on to the memory of the insurrection, and even mobilize it, and those who wanted to just forget and avoid the consequences of being at all associated with it (Wood 2007). And a few decades after Castile's Comunero uprising, one opponent could claim that it was their enemies that 'wrote [about it] so that the memory of so great a blunder is not lost' (Martínez 2021, 253). Times of commotion always gave way to conflicting responses by the common people in dealing with the past, both orally and in writing (Wood 2007, 209).

In a famous passage from Plato's *Phaedrus*, the Egyptian god Theuth, 'the father of letters', came to god Thamus, king of all Egypt, to offer him writing, an 'elixir of memory.' After having considered it, Thamus rejected Theuth's gift, for he found that writing would actually have about the opposite effect, 'for this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory.' Interestingly, the story depicts a god-king depriving his subjects of the technology of writing, as if it were an allegory of some historical forms of exclusion effected by the unequal distribution of literacy and cultural capital. In fact, Thamus suggests that this 'elixir not of memory, but of reminding' would lead people to 'read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant' (Plato 2014, 562). Writing could be an elixir or a poison for memory. But in any case it was dangerous when improperly administered. Despite Thamus' attempt, and as we have suggested earlier, common people would in fact embark in the Promethean task of appropriating writing and using it to give shape to their own notions about the common past, to defend or dispute custom, and ultimately to write, against all odds, their own history.

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