

TO THE EDITOR:

Rey Chow charges Derrida with racial stereotyping, caused by his “lack of information about and indifference to the workings of” Chinese (70), when he takes the Chinese written character to be a fundamentally nonphonetic “ideogram.” This sensational accusation has already been reiterated without qualification by the credulous coordinator of the special issue of *PMLA* in which Chow’s essay appears (Giles Gunn, Introduction, 116 [2001]: 23–24) and thus threatens to become academic doxa. Yet all the ignorance of and indifference to scholarly detail are on Chow’s side. She utterly misstates the import of Derrida’s remarks on the ideogram; then she cites in refutation of Derrida’s purported Eurocentrism a Western scholar who admits that the interpretation of the Chinese character as an ideogram or “ideograph” is one of which the Chinese themselves are “almost universally convinced” (John DeFrancis, *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems* [Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1989] 114) and who for his own part judges Chinese writing “a mess” as a phonetic system (DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* [Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1984] 262), an “extremely,” indeed “abysmally,” bad example of a phonetic scheme (130, 129) comprising “an outsized, haphazard, inefficient, and only partially reliable syllabary” (*Visible Speech* 107) that lay about as a “disorderly conglomeration” until “Western scholars” reduced it to some sort of order (*Chinese Language* 93) because “the Chinese seem to have almost a penchant for avoiding simplification and standardization” (119).

Both Derrida and DeFrancis realize that Chinese writing includes phonetic as well as nonphonetic elements. The question is which one predominates. Derrida notes that Chinese writing “included phonetic elements very early” yet “did not reduce the voice to itself” but “incorporated it into a system” that is “largely [NB: not “essentially”] nonphonetic” (*Grammatology* 90). DeFrancis, by contrast, argues that despite its “extreme inefficiency,” the Chinese writing system is “basically” phonetic (110). This debate over what Chinese writing “largely” or “basically” might be is, contrary to Chow’s simplistic conclusiveness, extremely complex and a matter for continued disagreement among scholars; what is clear is that DeFrancis’s concurrence in the view that Chinese writing is “surely without inferiors” (*Visible*

Speech 159) follows from precisely what Derrida has analyzed as logo- or phonocentric teleologism. If Chow is going to accept DeFrancis’s evaluation of Chinese as basically phonetic, she had better explain how she means to evade the judgment of inferiority that, for DeFrancis and for the history of logocentrism that Derrida criticizes, inexorably follows.

Nothing could be more unthinkable for deconstruction than the naive notion of the ideogram that Chow attributes to Derrida and that he rejects as an “inadequate concept” (*Grammatology* 83). Derrida identifies in Leibniz as the “Chinese prejudice” or “European hallucination” the belief that Chinese writing has a “nonphonetic essence” (79) that “wrenches it from history” (77)—the very belief that Chow, conflating in her phrase “hallucinating China” (70) the terms Derrida uses to criticize Leibniz, claims to locate as the blind spot in Derrida’s reading of the ideogram. As the most casual reader of the *Grammatology* ought to know, there is for Derrida no sign of any kind that can be “shorn of grammar, syntax, sound, history” (Chow 72) because all signs are loci in a system of *différance*; that is practically Derrida’s only point in the first half of the *Grammatology*. His suggestion that Chinese civilization developed “outside logocentrism” does not mean, as Chow bizarrely claims it does, that Chinese writing is free of *différance* (“an unmediated correspondence between sign and referent” [Chow 72]): to be outside logocentrism is precisely *not* to believe in freedom from *différance*. The illusion of such freedom, according to Derrida, arises from the belief, rooted in the teleology of phoneticism, in “the exteriority of writing to speech, of speech to thought, of the signifier to the signified in general” (*Grammatology* 82). Since writing is, in his view, not external to speech, it follows on the one hand that no writing, Chinese included, can be either what Chow calls “mere graphicity” (70; a writing from which speech is absent) or a purely phonetic writing (a writing absolutely subordinated to speech): “phoneticization [has] never been omnipotent but also [. . .] it has always already begun to undermine the mute signifier” (*Grammatology* 89). To reject logocentrism is thus to think that writing already inhabits speech and vice versa, that the signified is already a signifier and vice versa—that ideas themselves are no more than signs that, far from having any transparent relation to things, depend on the

grammar, syntax, and historical conventions of language. (Cf. Chad Hansen in "Chinese Ideographs and Western Ideas," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 [1993]: 373–99, whose argument owes nothing to Derrida's ideas but powerfully corroborates them.)

Derrida's claim that Chinese writing is largely nonphonetic implies its "stigmatization" (Chow 70) only if one assumes that phonetic is better and therefore that to say China did not do what the West did—develop a "basically" phonetic writing system—is to stigmatize China. The attempt to have Chinese writing recognized as phonetic, unless more rigorously theorized than Chow has so far done, avoids having China "typecast" as "difference" (71) only by acceding to a me-tooism that validates non-Western cultures by the standards Western culture has set (a form of a more general problem in identity theory I analyze in ongoing work as "civilizationism"), as though those are the only standards there are or could be. Chow is of course free to espouse whatever standards she wants; but the example of DeFrancis does not allay the suspicion that the standard of phoneticism leads in the opposite direction from Chow's avowed purpose. And, for purveying such a badly reasoned, transparently false accusation against Derrida, made worse by the smug, gratuitous slurs she has mixed in—such as the claim that it is "a foregone conclusion" that Derrida would of course repeat ahistorical stereotypes (70)—Chow owes him an apology. As, indeed, do the editors of *PMLA*, who should consider the gravity of publishing accusations of racial stereotyping and review such accusations more carefully than they have done in the present case.

Henry Staten
University of Washington

Reply:

There are paperback editions of *Of Grammatology* that do not indicate the source of its cover picture of oriental "ideographic writing." Mine happens to be one of them. Readers of *PMLA* can check theirs. Since his copy was like mine, Stanley K. Abe, following good scholarly practice, made an inquiry with Johns Hopkins University Press in October 1997, when he was writing his essay for *Boundary 2*. As of 23 April 1998, in a memo sent by William Sisler to Abe, the publisher was unable to identify the source of the picture.

Since my essay was published in *PMLA* in February this year, Abe has informed me that, at his insistence, Johns Hopkins University Press did eventually find the source of the picture, though by then his essay had already gone into production at *Boundary 2*.

Although it is not critical to my argument in the essay, the source of the picture was indeed unknown to me until now. Insofar as I was, for my purposes, relying on the copy of Derrida's book that I own, I was not doing anything different from what Arnd Bohm did. We both assumed, incorrectly it turns out, that there was only one version. Bohm is, however, far more unhesitant than I in discrediting others before he has done his research about a simple empirical fact.

Are not Derrideans supposedly responsible readers of all texts, rather than just Derrida's text? Henry Staten's attack on my work is an anxiety attack. His key symptom: the repeated allegation (in the first and last sentences of his letter) that I accused Derrida of being a racist. I did not. Read my essay.

Rey Chow
Brown University