The following proposal is for an incomplete panel, including the proposed paper described on the second page.

Panel Proposal:

“Talking Books: Alphabetic Literacy in Colonial Encounters”

The representation of a person previously unfamiliar with European literacy attributing the power of speech to European writing has been famously identified by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as a “trope” characteristic of Anglo-African slave narratives. However, such depictions also appear in various European relations of encounters with indigenous peoples in the Americas, from New France to Peru; according to Samuel Purchas, the early modern British compiler of colonial relations, “want of Letters hath made some so seely as to thinke the Letter it self could speak, so much did the Americans herein admire the Spaniards, seeming in comparison of the other as speaking Apes.” Thus, ethnohistorians have investigated the question as to how Native Americans really did perceive European literacy. This panel proposes to bring together the several threads, and invites contributions discussing representations of first impressions of European writing, from any colonial context, and from any disciplinary vantage point.
The fourth chapter of Henry Louis Gates’s landmark *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) presents analyses of five eighteenth-century Anglo-African narratives that he claims are threaded through with a “signifyin(g) chain” composed of episodes depicting representations in which persons unfamiliar with writing naively attribute the power of speech to books. “The trope of the talking book,” Gates declares, “is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition” (131). Gates’s work catalyzed a great deal of scholarship on these narratives, especially ones by Olaudah Equiano and John Marrant, and scholars typically refer to the depicted first encounters with books in terms of Gates’s “trope.” Additionally, some scholars have borrowed this concept to refer to representations in earlier colonial narratives, such as John Smith’s account in his *Generall Historie* (1624) of the Powhatan Indians awed reaction to a note that he sent to Jamestown. The proposed paper focuses on Quobnah Ottabah Cugoano’s 1787 recounting of the infamous confrontation between the Inca Emperor Atahualpa and the book-wielding Dominican Frair Vicente Valverde in Cajamarca. Gates argues that Cugoano’s use of a non-autobiographical representation demonstrates “that the Talking Book is a trope, rather than a quaint experience encountered by the narrator” (151). My study follows leads that Gates ignores, to the discourse concerning books in Methodism, and to the ethnohistorical scholarship on Native Americans’ perceptions of alphabetic literacy. It concludes that the “talking book” doesn’t specifically pertain to the Anglo-African tradition, that it is not necessarily a “trope,” and that the “signifying chain” that Gates reconstructs is at best a narrow simplification of a complex network of influence and intertextuality.