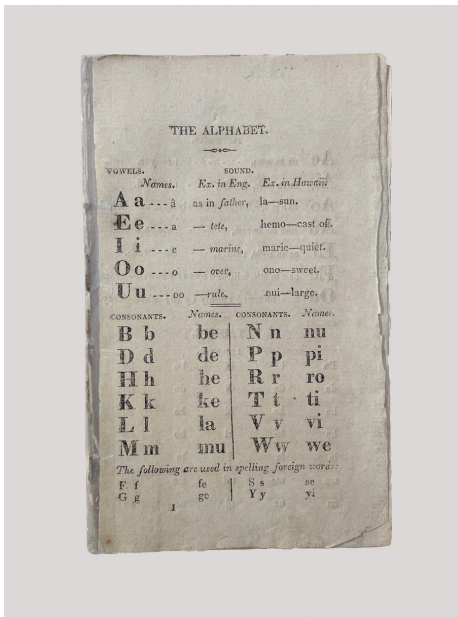
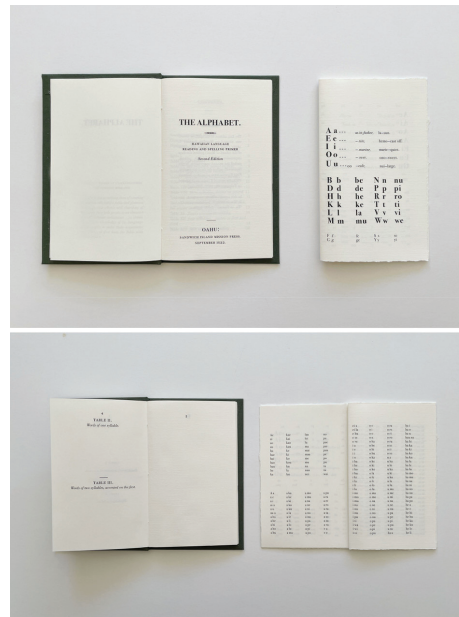


# Bookmaking as a Means of Bibliographic Study



The Alphabet, 1822, Second edition



A reflection on paratext

Jill Misawa Axelson

In my work as a graphic designer, I have been passionate about the subtleties of typography and the power and poetry of visual images that can be orchestrated in service to their content, authors, and receivers. I wondered how a deeper understanding of information and story – its history, collection, organization, access, and use – might inspire further insight into the relationship between content and form or new work altogether. Because of this, I decided to pursue graduate studies in Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

I was eager to enroll in a “History of the Book” course taught by Professor Bonnie Mak during my first term. In the first week of class, we read several essays on bibliography. D.F. McKenzie’s lecture and essay, “Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts” (1999) expanded my elementary understanding of bibliography – more than a list of sources – as a discipline that studies both texts as forms and the people who, and processes that, are involved in its creation, transmission, production, and reception. This resonated deeply because I draw on those very details in my design work to inform and define the incremental, typographic, and image-making decisions for a piece of text.

Reading McKenzie’s essay flipped my design-lens to see into a parallel, bibliographic world.

For the final project for the course, I explored concepts from McKenzie’s essay through research into the history of a book and through form making. I selected a book called *The Alphabet* which was introduced to me during my volunteer work at the Hawai‘i State Archives by State Archivist Dr. Adam Jansen. This book’s petite and delicate nature piqued my interest. I only later learned it is a reading primer – one of the first printings of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language) in a written form using the English alphabet – printed at the Sandwich Isle Mission in 1822.

What follows describes three of my artistic explorations or “new books” (to use McKenzie’s term). Each new book presents the same text of *The Alphabet* in a different visual format in order to show how form affects and effects meaning and to reveal a particular aspect of *The Alphabet*’s bibliography. These examples show aspects of its form, processes, and production.

## First Encounters – A Reflection on Paratext

*The Alphabet* is a delicate, petite, unbound leaflet. There is no conventional cover or back cover and no indication of an author, date, or place of publication. The header and some

section titles imply that it is a language learning tool; however, this book lacks some of the conventional paratext that would inform an initial approach and understanding. In Gérard Genette’s words, it is somewhat in a “naked state.” (Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean. “Introduction to the Paratext.” *New Literary History*. Spring 1991).

Paratext consists of all the content and features of a book other than the main text – illustrations, title page, subtitles, publishing date, edition statements, notes, typography, etc. Genette describes paratext as a threshold and “a zone not just of transition, but of trans-action.” Paratext offers a liminal space before we enter and engage with the text. It offers a space for decision making (whether or how to approach the text), functions as a wayfinding tool (how to understand the relationship between the whole, parts, and sections), and serves as a host (to introduce and help one get acclimated). Though not the “main event,” paratext’s structures facilitate and enable a deeper reading of the text.

In encountering *The Alphabet*, I reflected on both my relationship with, and the text’s relationship to, paratext. *The Alphabet* has almost no paratext and this absence evokes questions: *What is this? Why was it made and by whom? When and how was it printed? How was it used? Is its absence intentional? How may that suggest function and intended lifespan of the text? The speed of its creation? Did a person serve in that paratextual role – introducing and mediating a relationship between text and reader?* Each thread of paratextual information is a potential point of access and can expand our contextual grasp and approach of the text at hand.

To further explore this relationship between text and paratext, I created two “new books” of *The Alphabet*. The first features just the paratext (much of it supplied from my research) as a more formally bound book and the second features just the main reading text of the primer in an unbound format similar to the original. This physical exploration highlights the symbiotic and multiplying relationship of text and paratext and, personally, offered further reflection on related concepts of about-ness and is-ness; data and metadata. *How does each read on its own? What does each offer? How do they comprise the whole?*

## Seeing Sound

Creation of a written system for a spoken language was something I thought much about



Seeing sound, 1

before this project. Developing a written system for 'ōlelo Hawai'i using the English alphabet involved categorizing and consolidating sounds into visual symbols. Discrepancies over what was heard ("ka" or "ta"? "la" or "ra"? ) spurred much back-and-forth conversation via letters, reports, meetings, and votes. The process of translating one mode of expression into another – of moving sound to sight – is not evident in just a single edition of *The Alphabet*. The black, inked letters of this second edition might suggest a sense of finality and fixity. In fact, it was a single time stamp documenting a

four-year process of adapting the English alphabet's twenty-six letters to the Hawaiian alphabet of twelve. Each printed edition, approximately nine total, reflected a system in flux.

My next explorations emphasized the orthographic process and the acoustic qualities and ambiguities of spoken language that were encountered. First, I made a non-print version featuring letterforms that were cut out by hand and removed from the paper. The letters create windows of negative space, no longer inked positives on paper. Akin to a vocal chamber, they are a void through which waves can move. As light moves through these open letter spaces, illuminated and shadowed letterforms appear blurred, amorphous, distorted. Ambiguities of visual shape move us toward illegibility, we may strain to discern what we see. *How does this mimic the process of discerning what was heard? Do less defined letters help convey ambiguities of sound?*

A larger challenge of the orthographic process were the sets of consonants whose pronunciation seemed less distinct from one another: K and T; L, R, and D; B and P; V and W. This second exploration uses pencil to suggest impermanence – the letters in *The Alphabet's* second edition still awaited future erasure or increased definition. The letterforms are made up of small dots that represent the gathered, acoustic data – a collection of sounds spoken now collated into visual symbols. Like bird murmurations, consensus creates shape. The forms of those consonants in question also allude to the sound of their alternate oral expressions. The *v* has echoes of the *w* and vice versa; the *ti* has a trace of *ki*.

Doing research into and exploring *The Alphabet* revealed the process of translating

acoustic to visual. Its text provided a framework for these new books which express that deliberation visually – that lack of surety of sound even as it was made concrete in ink on paper.

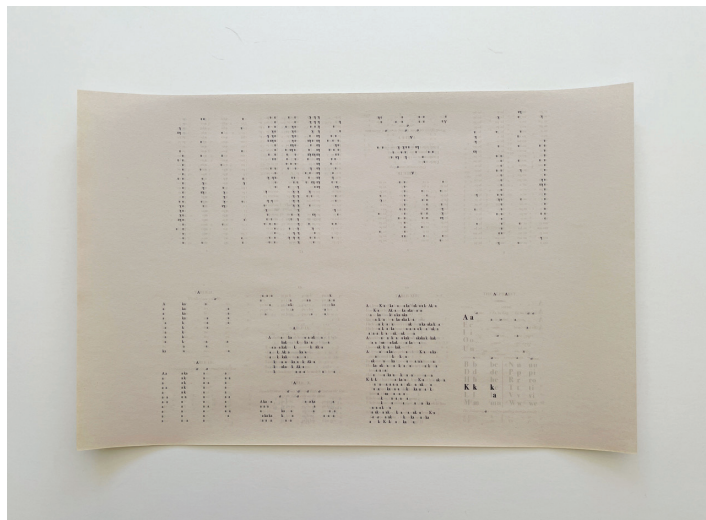
## Letter Frequency

Today we can summon a seemingly infinite supply of characters by mere taps on a keyboard. However, character frequency – quantities of type – and the physical ability to access more was a concern for *The Alphabet's* press operator, Elisha Loomis. The Sandwich Isle Mission was equipped with an eighteenth-century, second-hand Ramage press and some fonts of type that traveled through Boston and the Kingdom of Hawai'i over a 154-day journey – about five months of travel by sea. (Thomas Marshall Spaulding, "The First Printing in Hawaii." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*. 1956.) This equipment was the initial press set-up available for the first printings featuring the Hawaiian alphabet.

According to Alembic Press, there were standard schemes for a typical set of type for English language typesetting. The schemes show quantities of moveable type for each character. *The American Printer* (5th edition, 1870) states, for example, a full bill of type, eight hundred lbs Pica would have six hundred capital As and 8,500 lower-case. While Loomis's supply may have varied from this, the problem he encountered with the English scheme when applied to the Hawaiian language was that "to be fully useful for printing Hawaiian text, a font needed four thousand additional As and three thousand additional Ks." (A. Grove Day and Albertine Loomis. *Ka Pa'i Palapala: Early Printing in Hawai'i*. 1997.) The frequencies of certain



Seeing sound, 2



Letter frequency

sounds within ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i naturally begged for a new scheme – its own. More Ks and As would need to be ordered and make the journey to the Pacific.

This new book exploration highlights the print production perspective of *The Alphabet*. It presents an unfolded, uncut press sheet on which all occurrences of the letters K and A are printed in black, and all other characters are grayed. Their frequency – 473 of the letter K and 1,283 of the letter A – make up nearly 25% of the printed characters in this signature. (According to an entry on “letter frequency” on

Wikipedia, this is usually less than 10%.) This new visual treatment of the same text draws attention to *The Alphabet’s* print production technology; the physical limits of printing in a different language, especially when a supply of letters needs to cross expanses of land and ocean.

In *Figuring the Word* (1998), Johanna Drucker remarks on text’s binary qualities: “... writing’s visual forms possess an irresolvably dual identity in their material existence as images and their function as elements of language.” This series of explorations endeavors

to show how the same text (as language) presented in different, visual forms (as image) can be used to reveal the sociology – the people, processes, and tools – of a particular text, *The Alphabet*. I hope this exploration of bookmaking as a means of bibliographic study provides a few interesting insights into this book as well as an artistic space for reflection on the role of form in making meaning.

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