

PEKKA HÄMÄLÄINEN, *The Comanche Empire*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 512 pp.

GAIL D. MACLEITCH, *Imperial Entanglements: Iroquois Change and Persistence on the Frontiers of Empire*. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011), 344 pp.

KARL-HERMANN HÖRNER, *Die Natchez: Staatenbildung am unteren Mississippi?* (Neck-enmarkt: Novum Pro, 2011), 238 pp.

ANDREW H. FISHER, *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity*. (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2010), 320 pp.

Sovereignty and agency have advanced to become central terms in Native American and Indigenous Studies. With different emphases, both center Native people and peoples as agents in political, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual terms that value, defend, and enact a particular form of autonomy and self-determination in respect to colonial powers or the U.S. settler nation-state. At the same time, particularly the notion of agency draws attention to how Native American nations do not simply occupy positions of resistance, adaptation, or cooperation, but are active in deploying different and variable strategies in maneuvering colonial impositions as well as in shaping the histories of the Americas from first contact to present-day U.S. in ways that are easily effaced by narratives of Euro-American progress. While these foci on autonomy, on the one hand, and active participation in the making of American histories, on the other, suggest different approaches to Native American histories, cultures, and politics—also indicative of differences in disciplinary approaches, since sovereignty is more firmly situated in cultural and literary studies as well as social and political sciences, agency more prominent in history—there is also a significant overlap between these terms. Most importantly, both analytic perspectives share the concern of lifting colonially imposed misconceptions of Native American peoples as apolitical, ahistorical, passive victims of Euro-American progress or unwitting collaborators to their own demise. A look at four selected works in Native American history then not only indicates the varied relations and tensions between forms of sovereignty and agency in practice and thought, but also should help to illuminate the breadth of these concepts and their historical variability. Centering sovereignty and agency in this Native

history review essay thus aims at illuminating both the diversity of Native peoplehood and selfhood as well as the complex relations to European colonial powers and the U.S. settler nation-state that these works explore. Reviewing these four books with this emphasis further aims to add new perspectives to their respective individual reception. At the same time, it seeks to show how these four studies can be seen as indicative of a wider spread focus in Native American histories on formations of sovereignty and agency in different contexts that further point to the diversity of the political lives of North American Indigenous nations in relation to non-native invasion and occupation past and present.<sup>1</sup>

Of the four books, Pekka Hämäläinen's *The Comanche Empire* (2008) offers the most radical version of Native sovereignty and agency in its widely noted formulation of an Indigenous imperialism: it outlines the establishment, growth and organization of a Comanche empire from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Already the introduction "Colonialism Reversed" makes clear how it seeks to upend received notions of imperial expansion and Native resistance by outlining how the Comanches were not simply a "daunting barrier of violence to colonial expansion" (1) but formed a power through which "European imperialism not only stalled in the face of indigenous resistance; it was eclipsed by indigenous imperialism" (2). Comanches thus "built an imperial organization that subdued, exploited, marginalized, co-opted and profoundly transformed near and distant colonial outposts, thereby reversing the conventional imperial trajectory in vast segments of North and Central America" (3). Both subduing other Native nations and European colonial powers, this Indigenous empire dictated the terms of politics, confounded European expectations and sought expansion and control, extending outward from its center of gravitas in the American Southwest.

Throughout the book, Hämäläinen is dedicated in his rich historical narrative to outline

<sup>1</sup> A further notable work in this regard is for instance Joel Pfister's *The Yale Indian: The Education of Henry Roe Cloud* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) specifically through its focus on individual agency which then opens up toward a communal dimension of activism and intellectual sovereignty.

the specific features of the Comanche empire in order to strengthen the claim of an Indigenous *imperialism* and to argue for the distinctness of an *Indigenous* imperialism. According to Hämäläinen, the primary trademark can be seen in its flexibility and decentered political structure, as it was not “a rigid structure held together by a single central authority” nor “an entity that could be displayed on a map as solid block with clear-cut borders” (3-4). The decentered political nature made it difficult for Spanish, Mexicans and Texans from mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century to establish a stable relationship with the entire nation, since, for example, a peace agreement with one band, acting mostly autonomous, did not hold sway over another, leaving Europeans exposed to unexpected attacks. In addition, Comanches saw “trade and theft not as mutually exclusive acts but as two expressions of a broad continuum of reciprocity” so that time and again Europeans experienced a “policy of alternating raiding and trading” (82).

Indicating another dimension of their “fluid and malleable” version of empire, Hämäläinen emphasizes how Comanches entertained a flexible notion of empire when it came to claiming clearly marked territory. The Comanche empire dominated the Southwest before American imperialism entered the landscape and could coexist with it for a short while, because the Comanches were not so much interested in officially drawn borders but in the area they controlled by action. In accordance with an idea of Indigenous imperialism in relation to land, Hämäläinen argues that to the Comanches the usage of land and its resources equaled dominion and rule over it, not the official entitlement to its possession. In this respect, especially New Mexico and northern Mexico were not so much political autonomous entities for the Comanches in the early nineteenth century but de facto the “subjugated hinterland” (182) of their empire exploited for its resources, which in turn suggests how the Comanches’ perceptions and actions created different “geopolitical structures” (182). Finally, the Comanches also demonstrated flexibility as to whom to include in their imperial population. Through the establishment of literal and metaphoric kinship ties, they integrated captives, both members of other Indigenous nations and Europeans, in Comancheria, making use of both practices of enslavement and adoption. Thus instead of erecting strict, racially motivated barriers

on account of which to exclude other people, the Comanches incorporated these outsiders when it suited their needs and strengthened their overall position.

On all of these grounds, Hämäläinen’s study concludes, the Comanche empire did not conform to European notions of political sovereignty, structure and interactions, thus making it difficult for any colonial power to develop a coherent strategy of actions towards them, while the Comanche evaded any attempts at being controlled or contained. Their ultimate demise, then, in Hämäläinen’s narrative, is consequently not solely orchestrated at the hands of a powerful imperialist U.S. settler-nation state seeking expansion aggressively and confronting the Comanches with greater force than any previous opposing power. The U.S. success is also so overpowering because the Comanches were already weakened, partly by their own expansionist efforts and their sheer size which aided diminishing the natural resources on which they subsisted. As a massive equestrian power, the damaging effect on the Prairie grass in turn hurt the nourishment of the grazing bison which in addition was gradually overhunted and over-exploited for its meat and hides, the latter being an important factor in the Comanche economy. Making a compelling case for the extent of Native agency of both a cooperative and hostile nature, with beneficial as well as disadvantageous effects for the Indigenous nation, Hämäläinen points out “the full potential of Indigenous agency, its positive, negative, predictable and unpredictable dimensions” (360). He manages to narrate history as an open-ended process whose results only appear predetermined in hindsight and, doing so, portrays the Comanches as sovereign agents significantly shaping a distinct region in a particular historical period, as well as being contributors to their own collapse partly as a consequence of their far-reaching and thriving empire.

Only in passing does Hämäläinen himself offer a possible comparative perspective as to whether other Indigenous nations can be said to have had similar imperial aspirations or successes, leaving any further development of this thought to the reader. Thereby, he also invites criticism that once again the Comanches are painted as an exception instead of suggesting that their version of Indigenous imperialism can be regarded as a paradigm that could change the perception of historical

Indigenous-Euroamerican/settler relations in general by adding another facet to the spectrum of Native sovereignty and agency. Interestingly, though, in a comment on Jon Parmenter's recent history of the early Iroquois (*The Edge of the Woods: Iroquiuua 1534-1701*, Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2010), Edward Countryman observes that "Iroquois were participants in and in many senses masters of the developing colonial situation, dealing with it in ways analogous to Pekka Hämäläinen's Comanche" (350),<sup>2</sup> solidifying a comparative ground while also already testifying to the impact of *The Comanche Empire* by assuming familiarity with its argument.

In her study on the Iroquois, *Imperial Entanglements*, Gail D. MacLeitch does not present their reach of agency on equal footing with Hämäläinen's Comanches. Instead of building an empire of their own, the Iroquois Confederacy, as her title demonstrates, is entangled in the growth and ongoing consolidation of the British Empire in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The Seven Years War becomes the lens through which she observes the ties to the British power growing stronger in ways that both opened up opportunities for Iroquois agency while also eroding their autonomy and sovereignty in the long run. While none of these processes were swift and unchallenged transformations, as MacLeitch is quick to point out, but gradual changes and incremental shifts, the Seven Years War still provided a "catalyst" which motivated "forces that would undercut the situation of the Iroquois in the late colonial period" (9). MacLeitch makes clear that to different degrees the Iroquois nations found imaginative ways to adapt to the new situation, engaging in a "burgeoning market economy" (205), modifying perceptions of gender and ethnicity, using the war as a means to enhance their status as allies for the British. The eventual results, however, were ambivalent, as these adaptations to new circumstances also destabilized and gradually eroded traditional ways of living and perceptions. The Iroquois found their political influence waning and racial attitudes hardening in a British empire for which the acquisition and securing of territory became an ever more central feature to the imperial enterprise, particularly so after the war.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Countryman. "Toward a Different Iroquois History." *William and Mary Quarterly* 69.2 (2012): 347-360.

MacLeitch's analysis is notable in the ways it shifts focus in regard to some of the classic works considering the history of the Iroquois confederacy, in that it puts less emphasis on military history and public policy. Instead, she puts more attention on issues of gender, race, and participation in a market economy, and thus narrates more pointedly a cultural history of Iroquois peoples in its confrontation and entwinement with Empire. This shift also registers, however, how changes and forms of resilience are experienced and enacted on an every-day basis, and how this level of the quotidian helps to constitute, in equal terms with military and diplomatic history, what Audra Simpson has termed in another context the "political life" of Indigenous peoples, specifically the Kahnawà:ke Mohawks, within and in tension to imperial formations.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, MacLeitch's account is very nuanced and constantly strives to maintain the balance of "change" and "persistence," as stated in the title; for instance, she states: while the Iroquois peoples in British North America achieved under new circumstances "a formulation of new cultural identities," these were "a product of both coercion and agency" (211). In this situation, agency is available to the extent that the imperial world offered options; "acts of self-determination" are still possible but have less relevance for the assertion of political status than the definitions "by more powerful groups in British North America" (244); and autonomy can be eroded through the exercise of limited agency by creating stronger dependencies on the British empire that, at the same time, became less dependent on the Iroquois confederacy. Thus: "The Iroquois had not become a colonized people, but they were no longer truly sovereign either" (245). At times, such an insistence on differentiation, oftentimes formulated in such a give-and-take rhetoric, might seem frustrating. However, even if MacLeitch's narrative of change and persistence—and the potentially complicated relationship between agency and sovereignty—is also one of weakening political status, it is not one of decline. Her final statement is clear when she emphasizes the "presence and ongoing resilience" (247) of the Iroquois peoples in their existence within, ongoing engagement with, and one might add,

<sup>3</sup> Audra Simpson. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke UP, 2014.

in Audra Simpson's term, interruption of an imperial formation, now institutionalized as a settler colonial nation-state.

In contrast, the eventual decline and near eradication of the Natchez people in the 1730s is more of a point of departure for Karl Herrmann Hörner's *Die Natchez: Staatenbildung am unteren Mississippi?* (2011), in which he reconstructs mostly pre-contact Natchez social, political, and cultural structures. The subtitle naming the possibility of state formation already points to the most striking aspect of the version of sovereignty and agency Hörner presents in his monograph. Largely, Indigenous Studies scholars emphasize that Native forms of sovereignty were articulated in terms distinct from, or at least not reducible to, European notions of statehood. Hörner, however, asks whether Natchez pre-contact forms of strongly hierarchized and centralized governance (especially in comparison to many other Indigenous societies), developed through ongoing institutionalization and secularization from kinship-based systems to statehood, as understood in European political thought.

While this is clearly the central question of his study, the book is structured in a way that it only centers on this question towards the end. The first half situates the study in a number of academic fields and debates, pertaining to models of social organization, archaeology, and ethnology, and provides a brief historical overview of the North American South-East until the near-eradication of the Natchez in the 1730s by the French. The second half largely details social organization, political structures, and the role of religion of the Natchez in precise but fairly descriptive terms, in which the link to the argument could have been made stronger. Thus, the central question of the book is only directly addressed in the last chapter, "Anfänge eines Natchez-Staates," in which the centralized social organization, state-like structures as well as the institutionalization and secularization of political life are named as evidence that the Natchez—before increasing colonial pressure—had begun to develop from a kinship-based system to a centralized state formation. Interestingly, Hörner argues that the more de-centered, flexible, and kinship-oriented forms more prominent in times of greater colonial contact and conflict are indeed the result of colonial pressures. He suggests that reverting to these forms preceding a stricter hierar-

chization and centralization might have been seen as a way of making the Natchez less vulnerable to assault than, as he states, the more complex formation of beginning statehood. In this, the book makes the noteworthy observation how forms of governance interacted with modes of agency and could have been modified to maintain agency for an Indigenous people in situations of adversity with colonial powers.

However, there are also problems with Hörner's argument of the Natchez developing toward and back away from statehood before then being eradicated. The major problematic lies in the way he classifies different forms of political and social organization, associates them with progress or regress, complexity or simplicity. While Hörner's narrative of development and regression can be linked to a plausible historical trajectory, it becomes highly problematic by his additional equation of de-centered, kinship-based forms of governance with simplicity, centralized forms with complexity (and furthermore seeming to understand kinship largely as literal, instead of also fictive and metaphorical). Moreover, he identifies an increasing complexity with a movement toward statehood in the European tradition; a model of political and social organization which is only articulated via reference to European political and social theorists. The implication is that the Natchez political system is more complex the more it can be read, under a European lens, as a state, while the kinship-based structures within the Natchez, or constitutive of many other Indigenous polities, are inherently simpler and cannot acquire the same political reach or efficacy as a state-formation. Thus, Hörner claims that only institutionalization and secularization, i. e. depersonalization, can constitute a unified political system that is effective across states and entire empires in ways that a kinship-based system cannot; a claim that remains largely unsupported and falters especially in light of Hämäläinen's account of the Comanche practicing a decentralized, kinship-based Indigenous imperialism.

In this imposition on European (and Eurocentric) models for the analysis of Indigenous political formations, the book unfortunately does not reflect the current status of Native American Studies or the writing of Native American histories. This problem might be linked to a second issue, since the research drawn on for the book mostly dates from de-

cares until the 1970s, with only a few exceptions of more recent scholarship after 2000; if much of the research has thus been done at an earlier time, the manuscript should have been revisited for publication in 2011 more thoroughly. This might also have helped in integrating more recent perspectives on Native histories and politics. Without the underlying current of a progress/regress, complexity/simplicity dichotomy, the book could have made its point about the characteristics of Indigenous pre-contact settlement in all of its socio-political differentiation, and changing modes of agency and sovereignty under the impact of colonial pressure, much more convincingly. Finally, while the focus of the book is explicitly on pre-contact Natchez and thus puts an emphasis on the near-eradication of the Natchez in the 1730s, it is still important to note that this, as Noel Edward Smyth as recently put it, is not “The End of the Natchez.”<sup>4</sup> Hörner follows a tradition of Natchez histories, as Smyth outlines, of concentrating on pre-1730s history to the extent of suggesting that Natchez history effectively ends at the hands of French colonial power, and thus omitting the existence of the federally recognized Natchez nation in Oklahoma, as well as state-recognized Natchez communities in South Carolina. There are continuities, then, that might speak to the successful adaptations of Natchez socio-political formations as well as their ongoing struggles in the face of colonial forces, as Hörner describes it for the much earlier period, in situation-specific terms that are not reducible to questions of more or less complexity.

While all four histories thus implicitly or explicitly also point to questions of Native presence today, Andrew H. Fisher’s *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity* is the only book selected for review which traces the history of off-reservation communities in the Pacific Northwest from the 1850s to the present. The Columbia River Indians, Fisher declares at the outset, are nei-

ther “a cohesive aboriginal group nor a federally recognized tribe” (5). Instead, they are “the product of social and political processes triggered by Euro-American colonization.” A loose set of communities “living between the Cascade Rapids and Priest Rapids” (5), they refused to be moved during removal to the reservations of the tribes they were assigned to, and developed an identity whose sense of autonomy and sovereignty was strongly connected to “resistance to the reservation system, devotion to cultural traditions, and detachments from the institutions of federal control and tribal governance” (5). As they do not register in the U.S. legal framework as a tribe, were never recognized as such, but still insist on understanding themselves as a tribe, Fisher designates them a shadow tribe: “Cast by the imperfect light of federal policy and dimly perceived by the colonial gaze” (6), they sometimes disappear when they appear identical to the recognized treaty tribes, but their contours appear most strongly once their interests do not align, and the Columbia River Indians insist on their existence as an independent tribe.

Precisely through this focus on the constructed quality of “tribes,” Fisher adds to, and complicates, Native histories of agency and sovereignty. First of all, he clearly states that “the U.S. government did not give Native Americans their identity any more than it gave them land or sovereignty” (11). However, the desire to integrate Indigenous peoples in a legal framework which could recognize sovereignty without troubling U.S. authority led the federal government to establish manageable political categories for Indigenous peoples, while political and cultural identification were expected to adhere to these categories. Fisher thus continues that “in the process of seizing land and abridging tribal sovereignty, the United States attempted to simplify and standardize indigenous forms of social and political organization to suit its own purposes. In doing so, federal policy and law triggered the formation of new tribes” (11). In this context, tribes are not simply the natural political units of Indigenous peoples endowed with sovereignty. Instead, tribes appear as designations that are partly produced by U.S. authority, and whereas its agents liked to imagine U.S. authority as absolute, its limitations come to light particularly in the instances in which the effort to translate “indigenous forms of social and political categories” into tribes as

<sup>4</sup> Noel Edward Smyth. “‘The End of the Natchez’? A Genealogy of Historical, Literary and Anthropological Thought about the Natchez Indians since the Eighteenth Century.” *Native Ground: Protecting and Preserving History, Culture, and Customs. Proceedings of the Tenth Native American Symposium*, ed. Mark B. Spencer. Durant: Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 2013. 55-72.

manageable categories fail, and in which indigenous people do not feel bound in their actions, day-to-day practices, sense of self and community to the tribes to which they, according to federal policy, ostensibly “belong.” In the case of the communities that refused to leave the Columbia River and came gradually to identify and eventually to organize themselves as Columbia River Indians, this increasing sense of autonomy could trigger tensions both towards the federal as well as tribal governments. To the present, they have regularly confounded and frustrated colonial figures of authority such as Indian agents as well as irritated the recognized treaty tribes when those felt that non-treaty “tribes” challenge their sovereignty, as manifest in government-to-government relations and treaty rights.

Fisher traces the history and fluid identity of the community that sees itself as a tribe even when they were never recognized as such through apparently well-established stages of US-Indian policy: removal, assimilation, self-determination, conflicts over treaty rights and environmental changes. At every step, however, his focus on the off-reservation communities at the Columbia River that began to understand themselves as the Columbia River Indians produces insights that run counter to received understandings of these periods and policies. While being clear about the assault launched on Indigenous people by the federal government through many of these policies, the resilience and resistance of the off-reservation Columbia River Indians highlights their limitations, possible unpredictable outcomes, as well as avenues of agency available beyond the terms of federal recognition. Just to name a few examples: Although intended as such, removal was not complete, and reservations could figure for Native people as simply one place to live during their seasonal rounds, and not as a permanent place of habitation and containment. Similarly, refusal to participate in U.S.-Indigenous warfare could be an indication of Native identity that did not seek alliance with the U.S. but detachment from both federal and tribal governments. Also, allotment in the time of the Dawes act had disastrous consequences for Indigenous communities throughout the U.S., but it allowed communities off-reservation to obtain land on the public domain, or receive allotments on the reservation. At the same time, they did not necessarily become assimilated agriculturalists, but used the land for lease

as financial resource when fishing and other seasonal activities did not provide sufficient earnings, or in order to gain a stronger say in reservation-tribe affairs as “official residents.” Finally, Fisher sheds new light on the struggle over fishing on Puget Sound in the 1960s, one of the best known instances of defending treaty rights in this period, by pointing the focus to the discussion within tribes to which extent treaty rights such as fishing were subject to tribal regulation. Columbia River Indians, for instance, seeing fishing as their ancient right regardless of tribal regulation and as necessary for their livelihood, insisted on continuing to fish even when treaty regulations forbade it, thus challenging the recognized sovereignty of the treaty tribes (that wanted to demonstrate they could control their tribal members so as to minimize state incursions) at the same time as they felt they exercised a sovereignty of their lifeways that extended beyond and was not reducible to administration by federal or tribal governments. The times when these disputes were taken to court reveal both the limits of agency available for tribes lacking federal or state recognition, as well as motivated the off-reservation communities to officially organize themselves in the form of the Mid-Columbia River Indians Council.

In these and other instances, Fisher adds fascinating facets to ideas of Indigenous agency and sovereignty; and while his narrative ends on an open and uncertain note about the continued existence of this shadow tribe, history has shown the ability of the Columbia River Indians to resurge whenever they felt their integrity or interests threatened. Fisher is certain however, that the history, present, and open future of the Columbia River Indians has a lot to teach us about Native American histories—and towards the end of this review essay, this can also be said to hold true for all of the four books discussed.

In their considerations of dimensions of agency and sovereignty, they bring to the fore a variety of Indigenous social and political formations either in dominance of colonial powers, in entanglement with them, in adaptation to colonial pressures, or at odds with the legal fictions imposed by the U.S. settler nation-state. These formations are neither reducible to positions of resistance, adaptation, cooperation, subjugation or to the processes, possibilities and problems of recognition. What these books—and the more widely

spread trend in the writing of Native histories they serve to represent in this review essay—can offer, each in its own way, is to present a version of what Audra Simpson has called the “political life that, in its insistence upon certain things—such as nationhood and sovereignty—fundamentally interrupts and casts into question the story that settler states tell about themselves” (2014, 177). To conclude, I want to submit that particularly in the ways

these histories are able to add some stories while complicating and interrupting others, their perspectives on the political lives of agency and sovereignty from early contact to the present has not only something to teach us about the history of Indigenous North America, but also its present as well as its open and unpredictable futures.

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