In 1829, William Apess, a Pequot and schismatic Methodist minister, pondered a small but significant philological puzzle. “I thought it disgraceful to be called an Indian,” Apess wrote, “and I have often been led to inquire where the whites received this word … I could not find it in the Bible, and [had] therefore come to the conclusion that it was a word imported for the special purpose of degrading us.” Robert Lawrence Gunn’s Ethnology and Empire reveals Apess’s “inquiry” as a minor literary anticolonial counterpoint to the much larger philological, ethnological, and literary development of knowledge about “Indians,” knowledge that undergirded US colonialism and territorial expansion in the early and mid-nineteenth century.

Drawing on borderland studies, performance studies, and Native American studies, as well as intellectual and book history and a range of postcolonial and post-structuralist theory, Ethnology and Empire meticulously details some of the ways that philologists, ethnologists, and writers worked hand in glove with politicians and military officers to help establish US intellectual authority over Native Americans. Gunn’s first chapter considers the development of comparative grammar, its complex relationship with the emerging field of ethnology, and the significance of what he suggestively calls “interracial speech acts” in, among other places, James Fenimore Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans (1826) and The Pioneers (1823) (45). Gunn’s second chapter turns to one of his book’s central and most fascinating subjects: the functions of Native American sign languages, including Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL), in “scenarios of expeditionary encounter” (13). The third and fourth chapters consider the value of PSIL for the writing, speeches, and political/military organizing by Tecumseh and John Dunn Hunter, including Hunter’s interventions in the captivity-narrative genre. Finally, in his last chapter, Gunn focusses on John Russell Bartlett and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo to offer a meditation on the fashioning, imposition, and instability of ethnological distinctions between races, literary-critical distinctions between genres, and the work of borders and borderlands.

Ethnology and Empire offers remarkable insights throughout. For example, Gunn persuasively argues that PSIL and other Native American sign languages enabled Native resistance to US colonialism by facilitating pan-tribal organizing and disrupting philological attempts to impose familiar linguistic structures on Native expressive systems. Then, connecting Native and disability studies, Gunn explains how philological and ethnological accounts of sign language’s violation of Euro-American norms of bodily deportment helped make sign language itself into a racialized signifier of Indian emotionalism. Gunn’s more speculative claims, such as Tecumseh’s incorporation of sign language into his speeches and treaty negotiations, are punctiliously framed and elaborated. Indeed, one of the pleasures of Ethnology and

Empire is Gunn’s ability to sit with the Gordian knot, drawing a series of thoughtful conclusions from intrinsically ambivalent evidence.

Another, related pleasure arises from Gunn’s interweaving of detailed literary-historical readings with crisp theoretical interventions. In particular, Gunn’s application of postcolonial and post-structuralist theory to nineteenth-century American literature (part of a growing body of scholarship on Native textualities and cultural exchange) helps address long-standing gaps in debates about the public sphere, race, and embodiment. At different points, Gunn employs various theoretical models for “institutionalized networks” (rhizomes, loci, routes, constellations) and demonstrates, in concrete terms, their value, first, for his particular object of study; second, for borderlands and transhemispheric studies more generally; and third, for American studies as a whole (7).

It is hard to fault so ambitious and successful a book, but Ethnology and Empire (or its sequel) would benefit from more sustained attention to gender and religion as categories of analysis. Gunn already draws on Laura Romero and others who consider the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality, but Gunn’s innovative methods and materials merit further reflections on, and potential modifications of, their claims. For example, a more specific consideration of phonological accounts’ repeated troping of the “laughing” or “noisy squaw” could shed additional light on the gendered and racialized dynamics of embodied oral performance. This would also enable a dialogue with classic feminist treatments of embodiment in the laugh of the “madwoman” or the “Medusa,” and feminist psychoanalytic engagements with Saussurian linguistics. These could help establish additional historical connections between the theoretical models and the history of philology, ethnology, and US colonialism that Gunn traces.

Gunn seems more ambivalent about religion as a category of analysis. At times, Ethnology and Empire explicitly turns away from religion, “leaving to one side the theological dimensions” of John Pickering (32) and “subtracting the element of divine intercession” from Cabeza de Vaca (59). Even if we could just subtract religion and stir, though, other moments in Ethnology and Empire show why we shouldn’t. For example, when Gunn considers the religious and spiritual aspects of Tecumseh’s earthquake prophecy or Peter Du Ponceau’s private notebooks, he makes rich connections between nineteenth-century religion and contemporaneous aesthetic and philosophic projects. Gunn could more firmly ground these aesthetic and philosophical concerns within the religious discourses upon which Tecumseh and Du Ponceau drew. More sustained attention to religion would also help reveal the religious implications of accounts of Indian “enthusiasm” and show how the first chapter’s elegant account of the theological foundations (and theoretical implications) of the “philology of race” (7) – especially philological dissent from emerging ethnological support for racial polygenesis – resonates in later chapters’ accounts of Native sign languages and nineteenth-century US imperial projects.

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