Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Queequeg’s Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature; Roberta Ulrich, American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006; Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture: Native American Appropriation of Indian Stereotypes.

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From the outside, it seems insane that a major sports team in the world’s only superpower should, in 2014, continue to bear a racial slur as its name, and this despite protests from people of colour, former players, Senators, Congressmen and even the country’s president. Yet the Washington football team (I follow the practice of several newspapers and sports broadcasters in avoiding the offensive term) continues to claim that it is “honouring” the Indigenous peoples of the United States by using a word associated with violence and savagery. Meanwhile, a seemingly unstoppable wave of American celebrities proudly tweet photographs of themselves wearing sacred regalia, the
eagle-feather headdress reserved for the most honoured warriors (that’s actually “honoured” rather than the Washington version), as though it were a children’s dress-up costume. This, again, despite increasingly organised and vocal activists loudly pointing out the offense. Three recent books in American Indian Studies, working on very different periods and dealing with very different materials, between them offer a partial roadmap of the way that this cultural blindness arose, and give some idea of the enormous losses, both intellectual and personal, caused by European colonisation of the Americas.

2 Working with perhaps the most difficult subject of any of the books under review, Birgit Brander Rasmussen sets out to change a significant historical understanding of the pre-Columbian American peoples. Whitestream settler mythology, as she easily demonstrates, has invested a great deal in the idea that these peoples had no systems of reading and writing, and thus were trapped in a permanent present without access to information storage and retrieval. The investment of European colonizers and in particular the Catholic Church in such a trope can be seen in one of the greatest acts of cultural barbarism ever carried out, the deliberate burning of the Mayan codices in the 16th and 17th centuries. (Centuries on, the wounds from this act of cultural genocide are still raw, as could be seen recently from the tens of thousands of Indigenous activists fooled by an “Onion” style spoof news story claiming that the codices had been found.) Entire systems of legal, historical and religious recording were erased, and the erasure used to justify the colonial enterprise. Indigenous nations are still routinely described as having been “pre-literate,” supporting a narrative in which they have exchanged sovereignty for, among other civilizational benefits, the ability to employ the written word.

3 Rasmussen undertakes to try to reverse this act of erasure: no easy thing, given how thoroughly the settler nation succeeded in its task. This, inevitably, involves the hardest sort of critical investigation, a reading of texts which are not there. She uncovers a wealth of material to suggest that many groups who have been assumed by scholars to be non-literate may indeed have had forms of writing that have now been lost. For example, Mi’kmaq peoples were recorded as taking notes in charcoal as early as 1652, part of a system of writings used among many peoples of the northeastern seaboard and now almost entirely lost. The
Huron, as described in 1636 by Brébeuf for the Jesuits, already used terms for writing and seemed entirely at ease with the concept, while missionaries also saw Abenaki children making mnemonic guides in characters drawn on birchbark. Such notes are usually referred to as pictography, and have in the past been dismissed as an earlier stage of an inevitable progress towards alphabetical script. Rasmussen produces many examples of 18th and 19th century scholars describing such Native American picture-writings as hieroglyphics, in some ways placing them as ancient – and therefore outmoded – as the Egyptians in relation to Europeans. Hieroglyphs were also at the time untranslated and considered by some to be untranslatable, creating a sense of absolute distance between Indigenous and settler systems of thought.

In a masterly survey of writing systems, Rasmussen makes the case for a far broader understanding of the idea of literacy. While it may suit the self-understanding of peoples who utilise an alphabet to portray alphabetical text as the summation of human lexical evolution, there are few reasons for such a privileging. Semasiographic systems, which employ graphic signs or other representational devices to “refer to larger chunks of information such as ideas or concepts and [combine] these signs to create narrative” (22), are capable of communicating extremely subtle ideas. Equally, many systems presumed to be entirely semasiographic may on closer examination turn out to combine “phonetic and logographic elements” (23), thus much more nearly approaching a glottographic (sound-based) writing system such as the Roman alphabet than was previously appreciated. In short, by privileging what Rasmussen – following the 1645 usage of Haudenosaunee representative Canassatego – calls “pen and ink work,” scholars have radically underestimated the potential of not just the Mayan script, but also the birchbark pictographs of the northeastern tribes and the Plains Indian “winter counts.” More, Rasmussen argues, we should also consider such non-script forms of recording as the wampum beads of the Six Nations, the quipu (knotted cords) of the Quechua and tattoos in various Pacifica cultures – most importantly, Polynesian. As can be seen from these examples, though she sets out her book as being focussed primarily on the literacy of North American peoples, the task perhaps inevitably keeps spilling outwards to become fully hemispheric.
In a book laden with historical insight, Rasmussen tries to recover not just the usage of these alternative systems, but also the ways that they may have impacted on European (and subsequently Euro-American) cultures. A small example, traced over a few pages, comes in the form of Longfellow’s appropriation of Gaagigegaabaw (George Copway)’s transcription of Ojibwe writing systems in his epic poem *Hiawatha*, an appropriation that was naturally enough uncredited. Rasmussen’s analysis of the ideological function of Longfellow’s distortion of his original sources is particularly keen, showing the settler poet as literally rewriting history to have a single Ojibwe culture hero invent writing, making “pictography idiosyncratic, temporally unique, and the genius and short-lived invention of a single individual” (47) – an individual, moreover, who predicts and welcomes the coming of Christian missionaries. As she notes, foregrounding such moments of exchange has the potential to reconceptualise our understanding of American literature and textuality per se.

To that end, she devotes the central three chapters to particularly fruitful sites of textual interaction. The first sees French and Haudenosaunee diplomats negotiating a peace treaty in positions of fairly equal power, and hence making a sincere effort to both understand and also incorporate each others’ textual systems into a hybrid form. The “pen and ink writing” of the French seems dangerously divorced from the specific realities of the situation to the Haudenosaunee, while the intricacies of wampum-based writing systems are equally challenging for the French to understand. Yet the equal privilege given to wampum by these early French negotiators provides a context for understanding the appeal to wampum belts in present-day courts. Equally, in the next chapter, Andean *quipu* are shown to have had far greater functionality than simply being a means for statistical recording. Don Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s now celebrated – though until recently almost lost – manuscript is analysed not just as recording a failure of cultural exchange (as previous readings have had it), but also as representing in itself an attempted merger of European script and quipu methods.

In the final and most ambitious chapter, and the one from which the study takes its name, Rasmussen turns her attention to Queequeg in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, asking what the unknown Polynesian text, copied from the harpooner’s body onto the surface of his coffin, could
possibly represent. Treating tattooing seriously as an alternative textual site, Rasmussen shows Melville’s acquaintance with the abstract forms of various Pacific tattoo cultures, such as te vehine na’u ("my little wife"), a checkerboard design found both in Polynesia and on Queequeg’s chest. While Melville himself presumably could not read the language of these tattoos, his familiarity with them lends much power to the image of the shipwrecked Ishmael clinging to this form of text as the only way to stay afloat in the mid-Atlantic. Although, as elsewhere in this study, Rasmussen is occasionally guilty of covering well-rehearsed debates as though they were revolutionary new questions, her re-reading of Melville’s imagery is nonetheless thorough and convincing, of a piece with an extraordinarily impressive work which will leave readers thoroughly convinced of the need for much more archival and multilingual work on the roots of American literacies.

If Birgit Brander Rasmussen’s study is an inspiring reconceptualization of the pre-Columbian and early colonial period, Roberta Ulrich’s American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006 provides a much grimmer history. Ulrich, a retired journalist, has done an excellent job of assembling the data on the final push by the settler state to erase Native sovereignty in the United States for good. Just as the burning of books and the erasure of writing systems from the historical matter was all part and parcel of the colonial effort to reimagine a populated continent as virgin territory, so, Ulrich argues, “Termination was the post-World War II version of what had been the goal of European immigrants [...] from the time the first of them settled [...] kill the Indian” (3). From an unceded land base at the close of the frontier period of 138,000,000 acres, Dawes Act allotment had already caused a dwindling to just 52,000,000 acres in forty years. These lands were held on reservations, governed by tribal authorities in a system created piecemeal through government-to-government treaties, treaties that had already been broken multiple times. Forced assimilation programmes such as the boarding schools were seen as having virtually completed the disappearance of Native cultures.

With this backdrop, the American authorities began moving towards ending, or “terminating,” all remaining vestiges of government-to-government relationships. Their logic was based on rhetorics of inevitable progression, and often
coached in expressions of concern for Native citizens whose tribal wealth was too often administered on their behalf by a corrupt Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and equally corrupt tribal governments. The stew of disparate treaties and federal laws made on the hoof were held by Congress to be holding back the prospects of individual American Indian people, and pressure therefore began to dissolve all treaty relationships. Opposed by Indians and non-Native experts on the situation, albeit to little effect, the US government in the late 1940’s through to the early 1960’s pressured the BIA to work out ways to withdraw federal supervision and thus eliminate tribes once and for all as economic and sovereign entities. Although much admired for other actions during his career, the clear villain figure here is Senator Arthur V. Watkins, who pursued Termination with a mixture of vigor and near total unconcern as to the effects that such laws would have on peoples whose entire economies were premised on federal support, treaty-guaranteed exemption from state taxation, and tribal governmental control of land resources.

The Klamath tribes in Oregon were particularly hard hit by Termination. Rather than the years of training and economic development that would have been required for the Klamath to change their entire way of living, the federal government used their economic independence against them to argue that Termination could take place in a relatively short time frame. Single payouts to individual tribal citizens terminated the federal government’s role, after which Indians faced high unemployment, deep emotional trauma at the destruction of their tribal autonomy, and environmental devastation as woodlands that had been forested sustainably were turned over to federal control, resulting in heavy logging, drainage and the loss of hunting and fishing grounds. Though the Klamath chapter ends with the hopeful story of the courageous Edison Chiloquin’s thirty year defiant defence of his land in a tepee, it also includes desperate statistics such as the plummeting life expectancy of the Klamath: down from 46 in 1961 to just 39.5 a decade later. A tribe that had operated on a largely cash-free and sustainable basis was thrust with little warning into capitalist society. Stories such as these pile up in a study told in chapters organised by tribe. The Menominees, the Siletz, Coushattas, Catawbas, Utah Paiute: each group was almost destroyed by a cruel policy devised by ideologues of the colonial enterprise, convinced of their own rectitude and simply unable to conceive of the mindset of elders who had never had to pay taxes, negotiate with banks, manage money or
sell their goods in the open marketplace. Ulrich builds a dossier that, for all the calm style with which she tells the story, should be devastating to anyone who still believes in the automatic beneficence of the free market.

Ulrich has been writing about these stories for many years, and marshals her evidence effectively. The book is divided into two halves, with the first half being dedicated to the termination of each tribe and the second to each tribe’s battle for reconstitution and re-recognition. Nothing attests to the failure of termination policy so well as the fact that in almost every case it has been largely undone in court or by the passing of new laws. Ulrich certainly does not pretend that all is now rosy: the tribes are still deeply affected by the legacy of Termination in the forms of unemployment, disrupted cultures and what amounts to a form of PTSD affecting swathes of the population. Nonetheless, the stories that she tells do end on a hopeful note – American Indians are taking back control of their own destiny, while the federal government seems more willing to work with them as opposed to deciding their futures for them. The legality of the old treaties and the utility of the government-to-government arrangements has been tested past the breaking point and proved to be, for the moment at least, the best hope for the future of America’s tribal peoples.

The somewhat uncatchily-titled *Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture* sees Maureen Trudelle Schwartz mapping out a new zone of conflicting ironies. Dealing with what Robert Berkhofer in the 1970’s called in his study of the same name *The White Man’s Indian*, she discusses the widespread stereotypes of Native peoples prevalent in US culture. Warrior, spiritually gifted shaman, proto-environmentalist, traditional, guardian of ancient knowledge, naturalist and healthy eater, the stereotype Indian is familiar from commercials such as the Iron Eyes Cody-starring anti-trash adverts on the 1970’s, or from the films of Oliver Stone, or from a million other possible examples. Indeed, large sections of Native American activism and Native American Studies scholarship are given over to exploring the formation of these stereotypes, their origins in European Noble Savage myths (which pre-date the discovery of the Americas). Recent studies in this field include Philip Deloria’s masterly history *Playing Indian* and the excellent blog *Native Appropriations*.

Schwartz, by contrast, examines the ways that Native Americans themselves are re-appropriating such imagery and making it work to their commercial advantage. In a
period when tribally-controlled businesses have grown to be major international concerns, it is no surprise that some choose to make use of easily accessible images to explain their products and to market them to outsiders. As anyone who has visited a tribal casino or reservation gift shop will know, the offence taken by activists at images promoted by those such as Dan Snyder’s Washington team is not necessarily replicated all over Indian Country: dreamcatchers made in Taiwan and horrifically clichéd 19th century Cowboy and Indian imagery abound. Schwartz begins with an examination of the American Indian Movement’s deliberate adoption of warrior imagery to aid in their protests, a collective façade of traditionalism made deeply ironic when one considers the urban origins of many AIM members. She then moves to Native attempts to prevent the commercialization of spirituality in such products as Medicine Man juice beverages and Natural American Spirit Cigarettes, both examples of non-Native products that attempted to take control of Native spiritual symbols to market their product. Having established this confrontation, the following chapters show various Native owned enterprises entering fully into the game, marketing Cherokee Bottled Water or Tanka energy bars with simple and comprehensible imagery.

Though her research is excellent, and the wealth of examples useful to other researchers in this field, I have to admit to finding the analysis in Schwartz’s study somewhat superficial. This might be because the overarching idea of a hegemonic EuroAmerican culture that structures her study is a somewhat blunt tool for discussing the 800+ tribal nations of the US, each of which (as Ulrich’s study bears out) carry different histories and, even when confronted by similar actions by settler institutions, react differently to different provocations. In the context of the re-appropriations she discusses, and given the background of rising tribal economic power, it seems an error to use hegemonic culture as a way into this discussion, where capitalism (mentioned on only two pages) would seem to provide a more fruitful heuristic. What we seem to see in many of her examples is a culmination of the processes described in Ulrich’s book, of tribal peoples adjusting to late capitalist conditions while trying to reconstitute their core social practises and values. Too often, however, Schwartz’s analysis does not seem to progress far beyond simply noting that the re-appropriation has taken place, and that we cannot as yet say what this means for the future of
Native American cultures. What we can see from these very different books, however, is the enormity of the task facing Native nations determined to decolonise, from the loss of so much cultural information, to the destructive effects of deliberate federal neglect, to the postmodern assault of the spectacle.