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With every new book written on Native New England, the main theater of action is further transferred away from Boston and toward seats of power in Indian country. And appropriately so. Scholars increasingly recognize that whatever we might think of as “New England” was little more than a fragile association of towns and outposts perched on the edge of a massive continent replete with diverse and powerful Native nations.¹ New England was Indian country for most of the seventeenth century, and the sizable populations of Narragansetts, Mohegans, Pequots, Wampanoags, and (farther west) Mohawks demanded careful navigation by the English of Indian politics and presence during the first half century of colonization. Given these demographic realities, colonial magistrates and traders well understood the real power wielded by a bewildering array of Native leaders.² And the Niantic and Narragansett sachem Ninigret, Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman argue, was at the center of this complex world of Native political and military power as “arguably the most influential Indian leader in southern New England during his era” (xi). Through the eyes of Native power brokers such as Ninigret, the course of the seventeenth century looks far less stable than the relative simplicity of two major colonial wars (the Pequot War and King Philip’s War) might imply.

At its core, this book is a sympathetic political and diplomatic biography of this important sachem who has rarely received adequate historiographical attention. Born in approximately 1600, Ninigret provided

¹ This argument is made most recently and forcefully in Katherine Grandjean, American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England (Cambridge, Mass., 2015).

leadership during the tumultuous years between the permanent arrival of Europeans in the region in 1620 and the end of King Philip’s War in 1676, when he died. Throughout, Ninigret placed himself at the center of regional diplomatic activity, emerging as an important sachem of both the Niantics and the Narragansetts by midcentury. The Indian war club—which Ninigret adopted as his mark—on the cover of this book evokes the book’s thesis: “True to his signature, Ninigret was often a war club in politics: solid, directed, and deadly” (85). Ninigret’s rise to power emerged out of the complicated politics of intertribal contests for local hegemony and negotiation with English presence. It was largely due to a slight vacuum of leadership within the Narragansetts—created in part by the 1643 execution of the popular and effective Narragansett sachem Miantonomi by the Mohegan sachem Uncas—that Ninigret was able to assert power in the 1640s. In the thirty years that followed, Ninigret pursued an incessant and creative series of campaigns to bolster his own position in the region. On the English side, this meant diplomatically placating the United Colonies (Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Connecticut) sufficiently to avert war without really giving them what they wanted. And like other powerful sachems, Ninigret attempted to entice or force smaller Native groups into tributary submission and alliance in a network that extended from Rhode Island to Long Island (New York), eastern Connecticut, and southern Massachusetts. Additionally, Ninigret quickly learned the power of appealing directly to the English monarchy. This led to the formal submission of the Narragansetts to the king (whereby they could claim the status of royal subjects, on equal footing with the colonists) and direct appeals to London in times of trouble (as in the early 1660s petition to Charles II to deal with the Atherton Company claim to Narragansett lands), a tactic used by dozens of Native communities in the colonial period.³

By looking at decisions and processes through the eyes of Native leaders, Fisher and Silverman show that events that have been historically interpreted as capitulations to an expansive colonialism were instead calculated efforts by Ninigret and other Narragansett leaders to accomplish their own ends through English resources and actors. This focus on diplomacy among Native people sheds greater light on the motivations for Native actions in particular circumstances. Like the other regional Native power brokers, the Narragansetts did not see themselves as pawns of colonial governments. Such was the case with the selling off of key Narragansett lands to Rhode Island speculators and the Atherton Company of Massachusetts from 1657 to 1660, a transaction that was, in fact, an attempt by Ninigret to gain financial and political support for his ongoing campaigns against Uncas, as the negotiation

of terms between Ninigret and English land speculators makes clear (“we should constantly send English soldiers with theirs against Uncas” [91]).

One of the many interpretive benefits of this book is that it situates King Philip’s War in a much longer time frame of political negotiation, regional territorialism, and commerce. Although historians have focused on the tense relationship between the Wampanoags and Plymouth Colony in the years leading up to 1675 (particularly the humiliation of Metacom in 1671), Fisher and Silverman show that the United Colonies had been worried and preoccupied from the Pequot War in the 1630s onward about the possibility of Native uprisings. Every few years a new alarm was raised regarding reported Indian conspiracies. Ninigret was often behind rumors of allied uprisings (involving various combinations of the Narragansetts, the Montauketts on Long Island, the Mohawks, and, later, the Wampanoags) in 1647, 1653, 1654, 1659, and 1669, in addition to other minor scares and incidents. Unlike his Wampanoag counterpart, Metacom (King Philip), Ninigret’s main purpose in the mid-seventeenth century was to secure his own power rather than to oust the English. In part, this was a stroke of realpolitik genius, which opened up a little-discussed third option for Natives during King Philip’s War—namely, studied neutrality—leading to an open break between the Niantics and the Narragansetts after the English raid on the Narragansett stronghold in December 1675. Viewed through Ninigret’s eyes, then, King Philip’s War was both a civil war and the end of a particularly productive era of Indian diplomacy and autonomy in southern New England.

In reconstructing Ninigret’s diplomatic world, Fisher and Silverman have read closely an impressively diverse array of sources to understand the kinship networks and political dynamics of the era. Although the many points of tension from 1640 to 1675 will not be new to students of Native New England, this book does provide additional texture and context to these events, largely arguing for Ninigret’s overlooked centrality in all of them and, more generally for the importance of intertribal diplomacy. Smaller events that were perhaps glossed over in prior works come through in greater relief when viewed from Ninigret’s perspective, such as the August 1647 meeting in Boston between the United Colonies commissioners and Ninigret and his entourage on the heels of yet another rumored uprising. In Boston, Ninigret successfully bought time to pay the required wampum tribute and he also scored a key diplomatic victory for the Narragansetts by obtaining the release of several children of high-ranking Narragansetts. Throughout these and other negotiations, Ninigret leaned on alliances with local colonists who were also slightly at odds with the leaders of the United Colonies.

_Ninigret_ is, of course, most easily comparable to _Uncas: First of the Mohegans_, by Michael Leroy Oberg. Both books cover roughly the same chronology (1620–80), region (southeastern New England), and topic (a

New England sachem). On the surface, Ninigret and Uncas seem to represent two divergent ways of handling colonialism: one through outright accommodation and the other through resistance and subversion. But a close reading reveals what historians of Native New England have often shown—namely, that accommodation and resistance were merely two means to the same end of cultural preservation. Uncas and Ninigret both had the concerns of their respective communities at heart, even if their dealings with colonial officials looked different. And although Ninigret is more focused, concise, and accessible, Jenny Hale Pulsipher's *Subjects unto the Same King* still stands as the more robust and more inclusive diplomatic history of early New England.

While the authors have crafted a readable and informative narrative (complete with maps, a timeline, and a glossary of key people and places), the book's framing raises some important questions. Though Indian sachems were vital (and biographies of them are relatively rare), to focus on an Indian male leader such as Ninigret has the unintended effect of simply perpetuating colonial Anglo-European views of Indian political power as vested solely or primarily in particular sachems. Native leadership structures and diplomacy were diffuse operations and often involved the leadership and intervention of Native women, something that this book recognizes but does not pursue. The closer one looks at Native communities (and the more one deems insufficient colonial insistence on legitimizing particular Indian male leaders), the more Native women emerge as important power brokers and diplomatic negotiators between Native nations. The Narragansett sunksquaw Quiaipen (Ninigret’s sister), Weetamoo, and Awashunks, for example, all of whom make (brief) appearances in these pages, played important leadership roles in this era, often capitalizing on kinship ties and inherited authority, albeit in ways that were not as visible to or recognized by colonial officials. These Native female leaders also frequently—although not always—sought to bridge communities and build ties in ways that would avert intertribal strife and avoid war. Fisher and Silverman suggest that Ninigret’s old age made him wary of warfare by 1675 (in contrast to the younger Metacom), but is it possible that gender was another axis (in addition to age) when considering whether or not war was seen as the solution to the scourge of colonialism? 5

The book also ends on an oddly pessimistic note regarding Narragansett history after Ninigret’s death. Perhaps this is partly because

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Ninigret is esteemed so highly in these pages that later Narragansett leaders pale in comparison. While it is surely true that Narragansett sachems such as George Augustus Ninigret and Tom Ninigret contributed to the erosion of tribal land holdings and were not seen as entirely competent by the Narragansetts or colonial leaders, this narrative of eighteenth-century decline minimizes the dynamism and ongoing diplomacy exhibited by Narragansett political and religious leaders—all of which was undoubtedly more difficult in the decades following King Philip’s War.

These minor critiques aside, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of Indian diplomacy in southern New England between the Pequot War and King Philip’s War. Students of colonial New England will find the nuanced understandings of Native community and kinship networks illuminating, and scholars of early America at all levels will discover in its pages a model for a Native-centered interpretation of on-the-ground colonial diplomacy.