

University of New Hampshire
University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

English Scholarship

College of Liberal Arts (COLA)

3-1-2011

Jean O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* and Ann Morrison Spinney's *Passamaquoddy Ceremonial Songs: Aesthetics and Survival* [Book Review]

Siobhan Senier

University of New Hampshire, siobhan.senier@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/eng_facpub

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Review of Jean O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* and Ann Morrison Spinney's *Passamaquoddy Ceremonial Songs: Aesthetics and Survival*. *New England Quarterly* 80:1 (March 2011): 178-181.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts (COLA) at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England. By Jean M. O'Brien. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Pp. xxvi, 279. \$70.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.)

Passamaquoddy Ceremonial Songs: Aesthetics and Survival. By Ann Morrison Spinney. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. Pp. xxiv, 258. \$39.95.)

Readers familiar with Jean O'Brien's first book, *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650–1790* (2003), know what a scrupulous researcher and eminently readable historian she is. Continuing her research into New England's systematic erasure of indigenous people, O'Brien turns her attention from the more materialist documents that reveal how Indian lands were stolen incrementally—deeds, transfers, and sales—to a more ideologically transparent genre: local histories. This study focuses on the southern three states, which have been so successful at installing themselves as the seat of U.S. national origins, and on the years 1820–80, a period encompassing both national obsession with Indian removal and regional efforts toward termination and detribalization.

O'Brien has read hundreds of these town histories, written almost exclusively by white, middle-class, Protestant men; and watching her set them up to damn themselves is like watching Jon Stewart's pastiches of FOX News. Like Stewart, O'Brien exposes the propagandists as amusingly illogical but disturbingly tenacious. She identifies four main trends, beginning with what she calls "firsting": the numbingly predictable script that established Europeans as the first inhabitants, the first to marry, the first to be born, the first to build churches—even the first to do laundry in a given location. Second is a consistent "replacement narrative"—expressed through monuments, commemorative historical events, and place names—exculpating settler colonials and ensconcing them as the rightful heirs to the land. Third, these histories created "a New England thickly populated by 'last' Indians" (p. 113), as local historians obsessively enumerated, celebrated, lamented, and fabricated the individuals they claimed were the "last" Indian of a particular tribe or town. The fourth, and maybe most provocative, tendency O'Brien identifies in all these histories is an unwitting recognition that Indians continued to exist. O'Brien mines these admittedly unlikely texts for evidence of local acknowledgement of tribal presence, tribal land base, and self-governance—evidence that yields what she calls a "geography of survival" (p. xxiv).

Stereotypes of vanishing Indians are nothing new; other commentators have thoroughly deconstructed them in film, fiction, and poetry. O'Brien's study of local histories is particularly useful, however, because the genre has such consequences for indigenous peoples' current recognition struggles throughout the world, especially poignant in New England. How is it, O'Brien repeatedly puzzles, that New Englanders cannot see the Native people living among them? How can they trumpet the idea of Indian disappearance and acknowledge their Indian neighbors virtually in the same breath? The answer, she concludes, is that "Indians can never be modern" (p. xi). In developing ideologies of racial and cultural purity, once Native people appear to be "mixed," they are conveniently alleged to be gone.

Ann Morrison Spinney, meanwhile, shows persuasively that New England's Native people can, indeed, be modern. Spinney's focus is on the northern part of the region; she has worked with the Passamaquoddy of Maine, particularly as they have reconstructed their historic alliance with other nations of the historic Wabanaki Confederacy: the Penobscot of Maine, the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet of Maine and Canada, and the Abenaki of northern New England and Canada. Like *Firsting and Lasting*, Spinney's book adds to the growing literature on indigenous history and culture in New England, but *Passamaquoddy Ceremonial Songs* makes an original contribution by bringing ethnomusicology into the scholarly conversation.

Introducing readers to this less familiar discipline while still making a clear argument—that Passamaquoddy ceremonial song and performance structures have close ties to Passamaquoddy linguistic and political structures—is a tall order, but Spinney patiently describes her methodologies and sources as well as the cultural contexts for the songs she has transcribed and collected. The songs fall into three categories: Welcoming Ceremonies, Ceremonies of Peace and War, and the Marriage Ceremony and Social Dances. In tribal parlance, Spinney explains, a "song" is an entire performed experience, not an abstraction or ideal text; thus, she gives the thickest possible description of the songs' ethnohistorical records and contemporary interpretations by Passamaquoddy people as well as analyses of their lyrics, melodies, instrumentation, and choreography. She offers fascinating discussions of how Passamaquoddy singers use ethnohistorical sources (considered by some scholars and tribal members to be corrupt) in revitalizing their traditions as well as how Passamaquoddy performers understand ceremonial songs' and dances' ability to materialize Native unity.

Whereas the local historians explicated by O'Brien would deny Indians the ability to change and adapt, Spinney shows that flexibility and accommodation are in fact ways of *being* Passamaquoddy. Like O'Brien, she is mindful of contemporary federal recognition struggles, noting that "[p]ersistent political practice is a requirement for recognition" and that the Passamaquoddies "have accomplished this in part through ceremonies of song and dance signifying alliance" (p. 3). Taking this argument even further, she shows that, whether in private tribal contexts or "Indian Day" celebrations open to the general public, Passamaquoddy musical practice maintains its continuity through an aesthetic of extemporization. This has parallels, she argues, to Passamaquoddy language, which is characterized by long compound words made by adding and shifting components, and to Passamaquoddy political structure, which was traditionally based on highly fluid, contingent, and malleable alliances among groups.

Both of these books provide useful new information that researchers as well as general (including tribal) readers are sure to consult for years to come. Both, furthermore, exemplify ethical scholarship. O'Brien shows how a Native historian may read the past to understand the political realities tribes face in the present; Spinney shows how respectful non-Native ethnographers can cooperate with tribal communities to promote preservation and sovereignty.

Siobhan Senier, *an Associate Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, is the author of VOICES OF AMERICAN INDIAN ASSIMILATION AND RESISTANCE (2000) and editor of a forthcoming anthology of writings by indigenous people from New England.*

Missionaries in Hawai'i: The Lives of Peter and Fanny Gulick, 1797–1883. By Clifford Putney. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 218. \$34.95.)

Clifford Putney's biography of Peter and Fanny Gulick demonstrates an extensive amount of primary and secondary source research. The title, however, is misleading. This volume is less about Peter and Fanny Gulick as individuals than about their position as founding members of the greater Gulick family, which persisted in its commitment to building Christian religiosity and character development throughout the world. The senior Gulicks raised a total of six surviving sons, who followed their father into the ordained ministry and missionary field, and one daughter, also active in