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 **Family Politics and Anglo-Mohawk Diplomacy: The Brant Family in Imperial Context**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Family Politics and Anglo-Mohawk Diplomacy:

The Brant Family in Imperial Context

Elizabeth Elbourne

This article analyzes the ways in which some members of one prominent, highly controversial, and much-mythologized Six Nations family, the Brants, used marriage politics and gender relationships over time to pursue individual and collective benefit in their relationships with the British in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century northeastern North America. I focus first on Koñwatsiãtsiaiéñni or Mary (“Molly”) Brant, the partner of British Indian Superintendent William Johnson from the late 1750s until his death in 1774, and later a key ally of the British during the American revolutionary war. I then consider the family political strategies of the descendants of both Koñwatsiãtsiaiéñni and of her brother Thayendenegea (Joseph Brant), and their performance of gender roles between the mid-eighteenth century and the 1830s. Here I use the term performance to suggest the contingency of gender roles and the public, performative element of conformity to gender norms.¹ More pointedly, however, I also want to point to the necessity for First Nations interlocutors of the British to act out roles with political implications in the effort to communicate appropriate familiarity with British meaning systems. If Mary Brant presented herself as a wealthy hostess, and Joseph Brant presented himself as a courteous warrior who spared women and children, for example, such roles had political meaning in different cultural contexts, and their performance required a degree of self-consciousness.² The necessity for performances that could be read in different cultural contexts was sharpened by the fact that Mary Brant’s partnership with Johnson was part of inter-related family and military alliances as well as being an individual relationship. It is consonant with this that Molly Brant played an important and very public, diplomatic role in Mohawk-British relations.³

Joseph Brant was also a very important interlocutor of the British. He was a prominent British ally during the American revolutionary wars, leading war parties against rebel settlements in the northeast.⁴ At enormous personal cost and amid great controversy, many Six Nations warriors, including Brant, ultimately fought (however reluctantly) on the side of the British against settler rebels, although the Oneida supported the Americans. The Six Nations lost more than whites from the war’s

rapid turn to guerrilla warfare, scorched earth tactics and war on civilians along the frontiers of First Nations territory. After the definitive loss of their lands in upper New York, following settler conquest, episodes of ethnic cleansing and the betrayal of British cession of Six Nations land to the Americans, two separate Six Nations groups relocated at Quinte Bay and along the Grand River in what is now Ontario.⁵ Joseph Brant led the group that settled in Grand River, becoming embroiled in controversy over the community's right to sell land. He also later attempted to organize a political union among northeastern indigenous communities to resist, unsuccessfully, the American takeover of their lands.

In what follows below I will suggest that as the Mohawk became far less significant militarily to the British in the aftermath of the loss of American independence, and as the British administration reneged on previous promises, the politics of marriage and sexuality shifted. Mary and Joseph's children made marital alliances that had a political dimension: five of Mary Brant's six daughters in particular all married fairly high-profile white men, even as the family tried to preserve the claims to chieftaincy of male descendents, in a move that might have been part of the reconfiguration of chieftaincy in the early nineteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, the families tended, however, ultimately to assimilate into either the "white" or the "Six Nations" communities, as British relationships with indigenous peoples were increasingly pushed to the side of white consciousness. The example illuminates the central role played by women in fostering British-Iroquois networks, ways in which both Iroquois and British gender norms were manipulated at times of crisis, and the centrality of family relationships and familial metaphors to diplomacy, warfare and the painful Iroquois effort to adjust to British and American colonialism.

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