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REVIEW ESSAY

The Spirit of Independence: Maurice Kenny's *Tekonwatonti* / *Molly Brant: Poems of War*

CRAIG S. WOMACK

Citizens of the Six Nations have long been known as keepers of tribal histories. The Tuscaroran Reverend David Cusick probably wrote the first native tribal history, his *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*, published in 1848. Cusick "turned back to the blanket" after becoming disillusioned with Christianity, as did the Huron convert Peter Dooyentate Clarke, a missionary who later disappeared after writing *The Origins and Traditional History of the Wyandots* in 1870. Other examples include Tuscaroran chief Elias Johnson's 1881 *Legends, Traditions, and Laws of the Iroquois* and Arthur Parker's many works. The famous wampum belts, which served as mnemonic devices to help pass on cultural, historical, and ritual information by word of mouth, predated these written accounts.

Contemporary poet Maurice Kenny's unique combination of historic and poetic faculties is an excellent addition to this body of tribal histories as well as to American poetry in general. The author's

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work, a twelve-year effort, is an example of incarnation: Kenny gives historical data a voice, a personality, a spirit. He demonstrates that what one can imagine is as real, as vital, as important as written history. The poet, through his creative vision, speaks to the silence of American history, which has reduced powerful women like Molly Brant, wife of Sir William Johnson and leader of forces against the Americans in the Revolution, to mere footnotes.

Kenny's poetry employs themes that are used also by other contemporary Native American writers. These themes include survival in a culture that has already declared native people vanished; the role of the past in creating the present; cultural decay and the shallowness of contemporary values; a universe infused with spirit that can guide and instruct those willing to listen; the ongoing presence of ancestors; and the reverence of language. As the narrator E. Pauline Johnson says in Kenny's poem "Generations," "My poems drum as a partridge drums on the earth; / they do not sing in falsetto."¹ The same can be said of Maurice Kenny, whose poems do not name the literati or contain pretentious literary allusions. Instead, he draws on the earth as text; the landscape and the natural world are the poetic tradition out of which he writes. In addition, he draws upon Iroquoian culture and history as well as both European written poetic forms and the oral tradition. In this he is consistent with many other contemporary Native American poets.

Kenny has written poems inspired by traditional chant and dances, influenced by what one critic calls "moments of intersection"² with nature and the past; his travels have inspired poems in which he recreates the spirit of place. As Andrew Wiget has observed, "Kenny sings of connections with the land and history, delighting in the smallest moments of being, which disclose in their sudden beauty and grace the oneness of all living things."³ His poems also deal with displacement and the difficulties incurred in returning home and creating home when separated from one's familiar landscape. Against such discomforting problems, however, Kenny invokes a continuous ceremonial naming of sacred elements of landscape. This naming demonstrates the possibility of living in relationship to the soil even when away from home, the potential for bringing home into exile through participation with nature. These feelings for the environment are not a mere romantic subjectivity. Carolyn D. Scott says, "The recurrence of these images produces not the tiresome pretentiousness of private feeling, but rather intimations one can recognize as

those belonging to home—the village fires.”⁴ In other words, the response to nature has specific ceremonial precedents among Kenny's people, the Iroquois.

What makes *Molly Brant: Poems of War* different from other historical accounts is that the author writes the poems from an insider's, rather than an outsider's, viewpoint. The poems provide an immersion in the past as complete as what James Welch accomplishes in *Fools Crow*. This recovery of traditional life differs somewhat from the aforementioned novel, however, in that Kenny keeps the past continually linked to the present and draws attention to Molly Brant's ongoing influence. Native authors have shown in their writing a sacred respect for ancestral voices; they have provided many portrayals of these formative influences and have discussed means in which they still speak; Kenny, however, has created a full cultural context for a historical figure. This work surpasses Kenny's earlier book *Blackrobe: Isaac Jogues* because of the depth he has achieved in presenting Molly's consciousness, personality, and philosophy. In addition to the portrayal of Molly Brant, the author gives voice to a number of other complex characters.

Maurice Kenny begins his history in a traditional manner, with an evocation of the sacred. Rather than beginning with Molly's birth, Kenny reaches back to legendary time, to earlier beginnings, as a traditional storyteller would. I use the terms *legendary* and *legend* because the author has expressed, in writing and in conversations, his preference for those words over *mythical* and *myth*. Kenny argues that stories have ongoing relevance and feels that the former terms express that sense better than the latter.

The poem “Te-Non-An-At-Che” names the elements of creation in order to show that all things begin with stories:

Water was first

Morning rolled
fog steamed
from mud
where pollywogs
wiggled.

And legends began

drop

drop⁵

Kenny links legends, dripping down through time, with water, the first element. Stories and creation occur simultaneously. A traditional oral historical sequence occurs in the poem. This progression begins with naming primordial elements, naming plants and animals, naming persons, naming the people's migration as they journey forth from the place of origin.

Maurice Kenny is a poet of concrete images, of vivid characterization, of realistic voices. When he employs symbols—blood and strawberries, for example—these work as recurring motifs that resonate with meaning because they have a place in the stories of his people, and they have a cumulative effect as they pile on meaning throughout the corpus of his work. Kenny is not an obscure symbolist. He believes in poetry as an oracular performance as much as a written form. Those who have heard him read know that, for him, poetry means movement, physicality, sound; the release of adrenaline and the pounding of the bloodstream. Kenny's poetry has a performative quality. For instance, one succinct poem, written in the French Jesuit Abbé Picquet's voice, simply reads, "Ah! / Behold / my dream."⁶ Picquet makes this proclamation as he gazes at the military fort he coerced Mohawk men into building. During an oral performance of this line, the listener witnesses Kenny becoming Abbé Picquet.

Kenny's presentation of poetry is consistent with oral cultures in which the storyteller becomes the story. Spoken words are, by definition, actions, not arbitrary symbols; thus, word and deed are closely related. This is the way stories can be passed on and remembered in the absence of written backups—by total emotional involvement of both teller and listener. Stories, then, are a re-experiencing of events. They come to pass in their tellings. The storyteller uses gesture, movement, voice modulation, sophisticated imitations of characters, and other techniques that all reduce the objective distance between listener, teller, and story. A complete identification between word and audience occurs. Maurice Kenny's use of repetition and parallelism gives his poems the rhythm of chant; and the purpose of chant, in oral cultures, is to aid listeners in remembering information passed down by word of mouth. Chant also has the larger spiritual purpose of creating being through language so that whatever is spoken of comes to pass. Kenny's poems convey an oral quality in another way—through the author's re-creation of the voices of Chief Hendrick, Aliquippa, Chief Cornplanter, and others.

Through these Iroquoian voices, Kenny captures the superlative oratory for which his people are known.

Maurice Kenny makes the historical treatment of Molly Brant and other characters particularly interesting by creating an imaginative dialogue between historical accounts and poetic voices. For example, in an excerpt from a historical text, Kenny records James Thomas Flexner, an American historian and biographer of Sir William Johnson and George Washington. Flexner comments on Molly Brant's capacity for violence.⁷ On the following page, Molly specifically addresses the accusation herself and denies it, stating that she loathes war and will accept it only as the last alternative for survival. She says, "I hate war, but love this earth and my kin more / than I hate battles and bravery. This / is my passion . . . to survive with all around me."⁸

For a poet who makes repeated claims not to be a storyteller, Kenny has demonstrated a strong narrative voice. Recently, he has experimented with short stories in *Rain and Other Fictions*; in the preface to that book, he says,

Never have I seriously considered myself a storyteller . . . I have always proclaimed that I am a singer of poetic song, and that my betters in fiction—Simon J. Ortiz, Peter Blue Cloud, Leslie Silko, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn—can out-spin me for tales. I have, however, occasionally pursued narrative in both story and one-act plays, not necessarily to spin a tale but more to delineate character. Narrative is a challenge. For me, it is a morning exercise as well, an exercise in ridding poetry of the statement of prose . . . The stories and one-act play in this book make a small bundle, and my clutch of narrative poems would make a smaller bundle, still.⁹

Yet Kenny's strongest previous works are *Blackrobe: Isaac Jogues* (1982) and *The Mama Poems* (1984). The former was nominated for a Pulitzer, the latter received the American Book Award. Both books focus on single persons—an ambitious and lascivious Jesuit missionary in the first case and the author's mother in the second. Both are books of narrative poems. In *Molly Brant: Poems of War*, the storytelling voice that the poet has been insecure about has risen to new heights of power.

The genius of the book is that Kenny creates voices that are lyrical and, at the same time, convincing as speech. A good example is the character George Croghan, an Irish immigrant, an important influence in the Mohawk Valley. The poet captures the

feeling of Croghan's concerns as settler, trader, and farmer, and represents them with a voice at once colloquial and poetic:

Unsung and I don't give a damn. Not medaled,
and I don't give a fart. No recompense, no spoils,
no vast acreage for valor, and I don't give a damn fart
for that either. I'm a woodsman. A father. A friend.
I till the soil, I arrow a bird, I shoot a deer.¹⁰

In this book, Maurice Kenny demonstrates more than ever that he has an ear for American speech and can create a wide range of voices. Examples of this diversity appear in the poems about Jennie, a Black slave held by William Johnson, and her daughter Juba. When the reader encounters Juba for the first time, she is repeating something that sounds like a ceremonial incantation concerning fire, and one wonders if Juba is practicing some kind of voodoo:

jumm jumm jumm jumm
fire jump fire jump
sprinkle beads onto these flames
jumm jumm jumm jumm.¹¹

Juba continues by chanting a spell-like incantation, and a lively scene is created of a girl ritualistically feeding a fire. In a later poem spoken in Jennie's voice, Kenny reveals that Juba is mentally unstable and that her father is William Johnson:

Some say Juba is his chile. Now.
She ain't right in the head. She jumm-jumms
most of the time. Now.
He don't come back anymore. I ain't no chile no more.¹²

Kenny captures a broad linguistic diversity in these poetic voices—Iroquoian orators, slaves, immigrants, French Jesuit missionaries, Mohawk women, as well as more contemporary figures such as Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson. He structures the book in such a way—as he did *Blackrobe: Isaac Jogues*—that multiple voices comment on the same person, and the characters are examined from many different angles. As with Juba, he reveals characters cumulatively, and their personalities fall together for the reader as the book progresses.

The center of attention, and an omnipresence in all the poems, is Molly herself. Through his creative act, the author has estab-

lished a strong relationship between himself and Molly Brant, evident because the poems are so convincingly and lovingly rendered. This makes the book an interesting addition to the poet's corpus, since the Jogues poems reflect a certain enmity toward the central character, whom Kenny depicts as the culture slayer.

An important consideration in evaluating Molly's personality and actions is the fact that she frames her identity within the context of an oral and communal culture rather than as a lone individual. In the poem "I, Tekonwatonti," Molly's actions, especially with regard to warfare, are predicated on the effect they will have on her community rather than on political loyalties to the British, French, or Americans:

I,
I,
Tekonwatonti, I
no, we.¹³

In switching from *I* to *we*, Molly subjugates her individual needs to the needs of the community.

Another poem that reflects this communal identity is "Prayer for Aroniateka/Hendrick," an expression of mourning as well as thanksgiving, based on the Mohawk Condolence Prayer. Those who are grieving at the death of a longhouse chief offer this prayer to ease their sorrow. Kenny's poem, a prayer for Hendrick after his death in the battle of Lake George in 1755, shows that an individual death is a group concern. The narrator of the poem is the communal *we*, the voice of the community, which calls upon a powerful assemblage of ancestral voices to honor and aid Hendrick:

We come with his father and his father and his father
father and his father and his father
father and his father and his father
father and his father and his father
father and his father and his father

until the memory no longer contains his father
father and his father and his father
to the morning sky woman fell
with birds from the highest sky
to the turtle's back
and brought his father and his cousin
the twins of the sky¹⁴

Molly recognizes that her very survival depends on sticking to her blood, adhering to communal ties. After William's death, when she and their eight children are turned out of Johnson Hall, she says,

We'll contend. Take less, perhaps.
We won't starve. A roof
remains over our heads.
We stand in a circle.¹⁵

Molly's tendency to see herself as *we* rather than *I* provides an important context for her becoming a woman warrior after she learns of George Washington's vow to wipe the Mohawk off the face of the earth. As a clan mother responsible for the safety of the community, Molly regards the danger to her people as a personal threat.

"I, Tekonwatonti" is the first of seven consecutive poems that give voice to Molly's memorable personality. The sequence of seven poems is significant, of course, because of the sacredness of the number seven in relation to the cardinal directions and the realms of earth, sky, and water.

The poem "Picking Gooseberries" places Molly in a legendary context of multiple voices in dialogue, arranged on the page like the text for a play. Molly converses with Blue Bird, Black Bird, and Red Bird about women's concerns and, more specifically, about William's demands. It is the talk of women at ease among themselves, out of the earshot of men. In his poems and in conversations, Maurice Kenny often has depicted berry-picking as an important time for socialization, gossip, jokes, and storytelling, and "Picking Gooseberries" is a wonderful addition to that association. Berries, especially strawberries, are central images for the poet: In Iroquois storytelling, the Little People, who lived in a quarry without meat, took in Ragged Boy, who shared game with them. They, in turn, gave him the gift of strawberries and stories to take back to the people. When he returned to his community, he found that his people had moved and were starving, and the strawberries and stories restored them to health.¹⁶

Throughout the body of his work, Kenny associates berry-picking with blood—from the pricked fingers of the pickers. In "What the Chroniclers Did Not Record," the narrator says of Molly, "[S]he gathered summer berries, stained cheeks / with their blood" ¹⁷ Of Doris in *The Mama Poems*, the speaker recalls,

Girls were raised /
to work, to carry water for the laundry, wash dishes, scrub
floors, /
shake the tick in the morning wind, scythe the grasses, and
bend, bend, /
forever bend in the berry fields where you bled profusely on
the fruit. /
Your face and gingham spotted with your first knowledge,
your first /
lesson. You were never able to wash the blood away. It stuck,
hard /
and dark to your cheek, your hands¹⁸

By associating Molly with berry-picking, Kenny links her to the contemporary women of power who recur throughout his poetry. The omnipresent blood imagery creates a simultaneity of past, present, and future. Blood, in the sense of bloodline, connects ancestors with those in the present, as well as those to come. A major theme in the book, which comes to the foreground in the last two sections, "Women/Memory" and "Epilogue," is Molly's continuing existence, in the landscape and in her contemporary progeny. In the poem "Generations," E. Pauline Johnson contrasts William's diminishment and Molly's continuance. She proclaims Molly to have the stronger life, which lasts and continues to speak to people. She associates both Molly and William with blood: Molly in a positive way, because her blood is connected to the earth; William negatively, because his blood is associated with growing smaller:

If I open a vein, I shall fill this hanky with valley earth
Molly brought to Canada, dragging
her children along by the hairs on their heads,
not with his bones and blood that she left (against her will)
in that shallow grave near the river.
He's only a dab of blood on this hanky.¹⁹

The claim that Johnson's blood has minimal influence is a damning statement, coming from a traditional culture that reckons kinship back many generations. The very last poem in the book, "Old Coyote in the Adirondacks," contrasts William's waning power with Molly's continuing influence today, even on nonhumans. The poem describes a coyote singing "on the curve / of his hill."²⁰ It does not say what song the coyote sings as it "enter[s] /

the night,"²¹ but the poem's silence is suggestive. Its placement at the end of the volume strongly implies that it is Molly's song the coyote sings. The penultimate poem in the collection backs up this assertion. In the midst of the cultural loss, destructive technologies, and waste depicted in "Sitting in the Waters of Grasse River,"²² the creative elements that survive, such as Coyote, such as E. Pauline Johnson, such as Maurice Kenny, continue to sing Molly's song. This perpetual song in the natural world counterbalances the obliteration of native women's voices from written American history. The poem entitled "Beth Brant, 1981: Letter & Post Card"²³ establishes a relationship between women warriors from the past and contemporary women warriors, who use words. The poems move back and forth between past and present, and Molly's life dramatizes the fact that responsibility for language precedes action; thus contemporary native writers utilizing language for survival have an affinity with warriors from the past, who spoke and fought. Beth Brant, the contemporary Mohawk poet and fiction writer mentioned in the title of the poem, is a blood descendant of Molly.

Kenny depicts Molly as a woman in a community of women with strong voices; in Iroquoian culture, women have powerful positions in the longhouse and a strong influence on the political and social life of the nation. In her book *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, Barbara Graymont states,

The practice of matrilineal descent gave women a unique position. Each clan was entitled to a certain number of chiefs, and the matrons of the clans could appoint and depose these chiefs. The white wampum belts which indicated the hereditary names of the chiefs were kept by the women. When a chief died, he did not pass his title on to his son, for titles were hereditary only in the clan; the son belonged to his mother's, not his father's clan. The chief's title would be inherited by one of his brothers or one of his sister's sons, or another male member of his clan matron's lineage.

The mothers also had much influence with the warriors. During the American Revolution, Mary Brant [another name for Molly], Mohawk widow of Sir William Johnson and herself a clan mother, was able to sway the wavering warriors and keep them loyal to the British. The women, usually through a warrior chosen as their speaker, could always make their wishes known in council. Even an esteemed white woman living in Indian country could exercise unusual prerogatives, as did the Tory Sarah McGinnis when she

prevented a wampum belt bearing news of an American victory over the British from going farther than her village. When the council could not agree on a certain issue, they referred the problem to the council of clan mothers. Among the Iroquois, the women thus had greater status and more control over the affairs of their nation than did the women of the European countries and their colonial settlements.²⁴

In Maurice Kenny's poems, Molly's boldness, her flouting of English tradition in her marriage to William, and her prodigious ability to learn white culture while remaining quintessentially Mohawk make her a singular personality. George Croghan, an Irish immigrant who became influential among the Iroquois, says of Molly in one poem,

She knew how to hoe and how to sew.
She could command servants and an army.
She could birth a child and scalp a Frenchman.
She could dine the governor and hunt mud frogs
or snap a turtle's neck before presenting his soup.
Nothing was beyond her accomplishment, her reach.²⁵

Molly's gentility and beauty are offset by a savvy and a refusal to be possessed like the white women of William's class. In spite of her access to white culture, she maintains a strong relationship with the earth and a spirit-based view of the universe. She combines the two cultures in creative and powerful ways. In "Flight," a poem about her exile after the American Revolution, Molly says, "I left my son's placenta in leaves / tied with wild grapevines."²⁶ This description of the return of life-giving tissue from Molly's own body to the soil strongly dramatizes her relationship with the earth. In the same poem, Molly goes on to say,

I carried a small packet of soil,
earth rich and dark in claim,
moist from women's sweat working fields of squash,
still firm from feet dancing in celebration,
warm with William's footprint,
vibrant with Hendrick's oratory.
I fled.²⁷

The passage shows Molly's recognition of the power of the earth to absorb human activity and to carry spirit voices. She carries a packet of earth to a new place, in a poignant attempt to bring home

into her place of exile, to carry with her that which forms her, the most fundamental part of her identity. Molly's pain results from leaving behind part of herself in the landscape, the place where her kin and her ancestors lie buried. Kenny closely ties the soil to memory and culture: "A people who do not remember: / *rain which falls upon a rock.*"²⁸ Rain that falls on a rock does not penetrate the soil; forgetting one's culture involves forgetting the place from which one comes, the soil beneath one's feet. The clan mother Aliquippa says,

Memory
does not die under autumn leaves, crisp and brown;
memory is on the wind, the shine of stars,
the echo of song and story told winter nights.²⁹

Kenny brings out Molly's natural acceptance of inexplicable phenomena and mystery in the poem "The Lights Are Always Near."³⁰ Here Molly lovingly explains that no one needs to fear the supernatural. The English mistake Molly's traditionalism for witchcraft, and they blame her for all the problems in the colonies: barrenness, drought, and war. Her husband William, however, recognizes that natural elements, not witchcraft, define Molly:

Yes, I laugh.
True, you are a witch, alchemist
of September apples, red and savory
in the bin of the springhouse;
you are the bite of cider,
the bitter of bush cranberries,
the smart of fire rising under
your kitchen kettles . . .³¹

This continues Kenny's custom of fusing characters so closely with the natural environment that there is no separation between their physical bodies and the elements of nature. Previous poems such as "Mulleins Are My Arms" and "Legacy" have emphasized the internalization of nature within the body of the speaker. This breaks down the division under which Western thought has labored for so long—the difference between an internal view and an external view of the physical world, the opposition of flesh and spirit. The fluidity of Maurice Kenny's work makes it seem natural for a human to speak for

rocks and trees and water, because humans are composed of such elements themselves.

The poems can also be viewed as war literature, since they show the effects of war, not only on warriors but on a culture, on the landscape, on creation, on all one's relations. Molly fights against the extermination promised by George Washington. Barbara Graymont says,

The expedition against the Six Nations would be one of the most carefully planned campaigns of the entire war. General Washington, fully aware of the significance of the Indian-Tory devastations on the frontier, wanted to remove the menace once and for all A strike against the Indians would humble them and perhaps cause them to ask for peace. Total destruction of their villages and crops, even if it did not pacify them, would make them a greater burden to the British and divert foodstuffs required by the British army to the support of the Indians.³²

Graymont points out that the Iroquois did not have the luxury of remaining neutral during the war. She writes that "for over a century [prior to the Revolution] the Iroquois had been accustomed to thinking of the English as one people—the children of the Great King beyond the sea."³³ No matter who they sided with, the Iroquois would face repercussions, and "because of both historic economic dependence and geographic contiguity, they could not withdraw completely, ignoring the whites and their quarrel."³⁴ Graymont has documented that the colonists often employed barbarous methods of warfare. She reports that American troops led by Colonel Goose Van Schaick lay waste an entire Onondaga village, killing twelve and taking thirty-three prisoners, most of them women surprised in a cornfield. The Onondaga reported that the soldiers raped the women in spite of General James Clinton's earlier written warning: "Bad as the savages are, they never violate the chastity of any women, their prisoners. Although I have very little apprehension that any of the soldiers will so far forget their character as to attempt such a crime on the Indian women who may fall into their hands, yet it will be well to take measures to prevent such a stain upon our army."³⁵

Molly understands the unavoidable connection between war and loss, no matter what the justification:

wolf
clan

paints red
for war
paints black
for mourning³⁶

A loss is incurred the moment the decision is made to go to war, requiring ceremonial recognition of grief even before the first bodies fall. Even though Molly aligns her warriors with the British, she feels no great loyalty to their cause. She recognizes that the political power brokers do the talking, while young men and their families do the bleeding: "The rebels will win, and we lose, / not the redcoats; we, we the people, / the 'real people' will lose."³⁷ The phrase *we the people* is ironic in that, in the United States Constitution, these same words exclude the native peoples who predated the loyalists and colonists. During the Revolution, these "real people" are the true losers, and their fight, against biological and cultural extinction, has much higher stakes.

As a leader, Molly accepts responsibility for the death of her warriors: "In death their blood / will scar my hands forever," and "the loss will be too great / to bear."³⁸ She must avoid unnecessary waste of life, while at the same time protecting and insuring the survival of her people and culture. Thus, she prays,

Give me good sense
so I may not waste
a single drop of the blood
of these young and brave
who fight for England now
but truly for the survival
and strength of the Longhouse.³⁹

In a poem entitled "Molly: Passions," Molly summarizes her philosophy of war. She particularizes her viewpoint by first naming those elements of creation that make life worth living: "Yes, oh yes, passions for blackberry / blossoms, the clank of deer bones winning games, / river water sluicing against canoes . . ."⁴⁰ Molly will accept war only if it is the sole alternative to seeing her relatives wiped off the face of the earth: "I hate war, but love this earth and my kin more / than I hate battles and bravery. This / is my passion . . . to survive with all around me."⁴¹ She fights for the very thing that has created the Mohawk people: the land, which

contains their stories and their dreaming of themselves, "for a long march to defend our priceless birthright / to new dawns and darkneses, our old stories / and old songs."⁴² Finally, Molly fights not only for humans but for the spirit and substance of the land and the creatures that occupy the land, against their potential destroyers:

Who would not
". . . defend her mother's womb."
All around me is my mother's womb.
I lay claim to it.
This is my passion: life. And the right
to all it holds: blackberry blossoms,
marsh iris, the growl of bear at night,
light rising and falling upon our lodges,
the rivers that bathe us and slack our thirst,
and that old plum tree flowering winter with snow.⁴³

Sir William Johnson, an Irish immigrant to the colonies who was appointed superintendent of Iroquois affairs in 1746 and who enlisted Mohawk warriors on the British side against the French, married Molly in a tribal ceremony but not according to British law. In the poem entitled "Sir William Johnson: His Daily Journal," William explains that he falls philosophically between George Croghan, who believed in land acquisition through forceful moderation, and George Washington, who supported total extermination of those who occupied the land. William feels sympathy for the Mohawk, since he has Mohawk sons and thus a vested interest in the people's survival. However, he does not become a member of their community, and he posits value in his individual ownership of parts of the Mohawk Valley. William acts like a traditional only in order to gain advantages in trade. He displays genuine affection for Molly, but he does not love her enough to allow her to get in the way of land acquisition. In keeping with the incipient agrarian tradition of his time, William sees no value in the wilderness until it is turned under by the plow:

Truly, do I thirst, tremble at the sight
of unclaimed woods, woods which do not echo
the sounds of an ax striking bark;
earth unplowed, seedless, a womb virgin
having borne neither phallic plow nor fruit.⁴⁴

This avowal of the virtues of a tamed landscape extends to his view of women. Just as William advocates penetration of the soil, he also values women in direct relationship to their fruitfulness:

Ahhhhh! Woman, I'll round thy belly to a hundred sons.
Woman and land: the earth is a fallow woman,
its portals dark and mysterious, yielding the zenith
in stratospheric music which men only hear
when eyes are closed, chest and thighs sticky
in lustful sweat, mucilaged to the fat of her
scented flesh, writhing in groans, tendering
her to orgasm⁴⁵

William comes across as a buffoon in this poem, and Kenny's hilarious performance of the piece with a macho Falstaffian bravado is highly memorable. Women and earth, according to William, do not have a fundamental integrity of their own apart from their usefulness to man. William seems both excited and threatened by Molly's power, a power not atypical for an Iroquoian woman but anathema from a British standpoint. He misinterprets Molly's abilities as an overbearing masculinity:

Molly, I nearly said,
man like man: Cut my tongue, couple my hands
to be the step for your boot to mount the black gelding,
to ride off, possibly to die as I would die
for these acres of woods and field, for this flag,
the crown.⁴⁶

The strong castration image, suggested by the black gelding and by William as bootstep for Molly's mounting, implies that William fears this woman who can entertain aristocracy *and* lead warriors, yet he seems titillated by her manly qualities as well.

Although Molly plays a warrior's role, Kenny gives no indication that she has a warrior's spirit or a masculine sexual identity. In many cases in traditional cultures, a man or woman who had a homosexual orientation would have a matching social role that the tribe nurtured, accepted, and considered a part of the person's spiritual identity. The community saw such persons as powerful individuals who should be treated respectfully. Although Kenny was the first native author to publish an essay on the role of the berdache—he was concerned that much of this information had been purposely hidden by white anthropologists—he gives no

indication that Molly is one of these two-spirited women (a person who can see from both the male and female worlds). Molly's warrior role seems to be borne strictly out of necessity. She states that she loathes war, and, if not for the threat of imminent extermination, she would have nothing to do with it. In addition, in Iroquoian culture, it was a norm for women to be closely involved in warrior activities. Graymont cites several instances of other Iroquoian women in battle; of the influence of women on warriors, she says,

The women had significant influence with the warriors and could frequently make or break a war party by their support or disapproval of the warriors' enterprise. It was the women who provided the warriors with moccasins and charred corn pounded into meal and sweetened with maple sugar for their journey. The women also had the power to veto a war declaration by withholding these supplies.⁴⁷

Further, Molly's natural proclivities do not seem inclined toward a masculine role. In fact, Molly's natural femininity makes her male role as a warrior all the more striking. The Seneca clan mother Aliquippa explains women's reasons for involvement in the French and Indian War:

Women warriors. We assumed we fought
for freedom, our land, earth, for the joy
of dawn and the rest of dark night.
We were told the French would burn
our villages, decimate our children,
mutilate the prowess of our men.⁴⁸

Aliquippa goes on to say that women, as clan leaders, maintain serious responsibilities for leading men and instructing them in communal maintenance:

Were we
not the leaders of our clans, obliged to prod
the men to hunt or war to feed and protect
the village our hands constructed, our wombs
populated, our minds furbished?⁴⁹

Thus, powerful women like Molly and Aliquippa, responsible for the welfare of the community, must defend it, if necessary.

In many interesting ways, both William and Molly resemble characters in earlier works like *Blackrobe* and *The Mama Poems*. Kenny depicts the two male figures, William Brant and Isaac Jogues, as being out of balance in terms of their sexual appetites. Jogues is attracted to the boys in the Mohawk village where he proselytizes. The poems show him casting furtive glances at the young men. This, in and of itself, would not create a problem in traditional Mohawk culture, which, generally speaking, accepted sexual variance with much more tolerance than contemporary society does. However, Jogues, an outsider in every sense of the word, loathes the traditional ways of the people and spouts words of Christian damnation in response to Mohawk sexual practices. The poem "Hoantteniate"⁵⁰ implicitly suggests that Jogues is involved sexually with his adopted Mohawk brother (at least, this reader interprets the poem that way). The poem shows a softer, more loving side of Jogues, but when he sees the same expression of sexuality among the people, he finds it abominable.

In the *Molly Brant* poems, Kenny depicts William's relationships with women as equally unbalanced. George Croghan says of him,

He was profligate, Will was, and she courted
his desires salaciously. She was young and ripe,
ripe as the yellow pear hanging on his front yard tree.
She was young, she was full of ginger, mustard;
Will was lecherous, a woman masher, taken too early
from his own mother's teat⁵¹

William's lust takes the form of relationships with his slaves and myriad other women and includes bigamy. William purchased Catherine Weisenberg as an indentured servant from a Mohawk Valley farmer. The author states in the prologue that William, in blatant denial of his tribal marriage to Molly, "married Catherine the night she died and legitimized their union and children."⁵² Kenny indicates that "certain historians have hinted that Johnson may have fathered some two-hundred children, including Juba [a slave], by various women."⁵³

Further, a similarity exists in the tension between Sir William and Molly in this book and between Doris and Andrew in *The Mama Poems*. In both cases, adoring women devote themselves to men who behave sometimes lovingly and sometimes

scandalously and rapaciously. Just as William is profligate and views women as valuable only in their usefulness to men, Andrew also can be cruel:

No doubt he gave you a rough time,
probably whacked you once or twice.

.
.
.
and I've heard it said he'd pinch
a waitress' buttocks, never refused a bed.
He taught you how to drive his car
and promptly took the Ford away.
He'd buy you a new dress and grumbled
if you wore it. He even upbraided you
for buying a pound of butter
at fifteen cents a pound.⁵⁴

Andrew, like Jogues and William, seems to take advantage of the women in his life. (Jogues unfeelingly used Wolf Mother, the Mohawk woman who adopted him.) However, Andrew has qualities the speaker admires. In the context of the poems and in interviews, the author has described how his father provided a link to Mohawk culture and, in fact, rescued him in his teenage years when he got into trouble and risked being sent to a reformatory. It is difficult not to apply these autobiographical statements to *The Mama Poems*, since the author himself has chosen to begin the collection with a biographical statement about his mother. In the poems, Kenny states that the last word from Andrew's mouth is "Doris" and that he carries a snapshot of her until his death.⁵⁵ So the male-female relationships in *Molly* and *The Mama Poems* involve a kind of love that stings yet endures, that remains healthy in some ways and disturbing in others.

Kenny presents the tension between William and Molly in a scene that is both taut and playful. William is seated before her. Knife in hand, she plucks his hair for battle:

No, no,
I won't take too much,
my knife is sharp.
You don't trust my knife?
I wouldn't yank it from your scalp.⁵⁶

These relationships that grind against one another seem to have a kind of passion and vitality caused by the very elements that make them disturbing. If nothing else, each partner is so memorable to the other that they carry each other's spirit with them to the grave.

In *The Mama Poems*, Doris, like Molly, has prodigious talents and can transcend male/female roles:

Your qualities were never baking,
but when you rolled up the sleeves
and baited your own hook,
or cleaned a mess of trout
or string of November rabbits
even when we demanded you darn
socks or heal blisters, fight
a cold⁵⁷

The Mama Poems end, as do the *Molly Brant* poems, with the speaker's realization that the lives of powerful women transcend death through their ongoing presence in the land:

I believe in echoes now,
in earth that holds you. I believe in a bird,
its flight, though I'm not sure which one, hawk
or seagull; the cedar near your grave, and the lake
not far away that you feared from childhood.⁵⁸

It seems, then, that Maurice Kenny brings vitality to his presentation of characters by drawing on relationships that are familiar to him and infusing this personal background into his poetry. The overall effect is compelling; what is particularly interesting is that it fits a larger cultural tension. The author begins *The Mama Poems* with the Mohawk version of the Iroquois creation story, which reports a strong male-female tension:

Right-handed Twin came naturally from his mother, the
daughter impregnated by the West Wind, of Sky-woman.
But his brother, Left-handed Twin, impatiently sprang early
from his mother's armpit and killed her from his unnatural
escape from her body.⁵⁹

The matricide in the legendary story comes up in an interesting way in "On the Staten Island Ferry," from *The Mama Poems*:

You brought me here when I was ten

...

A friend suggested I write
a novel of how I wanted to push
you off the ferry into the wake . . .
fall like Sky-woman fell from the old world.
My friend said impatience cured
curiosity, but I don't think novels
cure pain nor intention of guilt.

This morning the sun hangs
in the eastern sky and the moon
sits in the west. They eye each other,
jealous siblings never
willing to share a dandelion
nor rib of venison. As I could not do
without a mother we cannot do
without their argument.
They'll continue contesting
on such mornings as this, and I
will continue pleased that you
had not been swallowed in the ferry's wake.

...

My father took me home again.⁶⁰

The poem begins with the line about the boy's mother bringing him to the ferry and ends with his father taking him home. In the midst of all this ambivalence, the poem alludes to the legend about Left-handed Twin accidentally killing his mother, and it seems to suggest that the story that informs the poem actually keeps things in balance: "As I could not do / without a mother we cannot do / without their argument." In fact, the legend seems to help the speaker deal with his feelings and provides a cathartic release for his hostilities. The analysis here is not an attempt to be psychoanalytical, but, since the author himself raises these issues in the poems, it makes for an interesting comparison. In the whole body of work, one sees this kind of tension often: Wolf Mother protecting Jogues against the leaders of the Bear Moiety, who want to kill him;⁶¹ sibling, parental, and masculine and feminine tension in the poem "Sometimes . . . Injustice" in *The Mama Poems*;⁶² Molly with the knife to Sir William's scalp in *Molly Brant*. If anything, because of their consistency in all three books and the way they hearken back to legendary stories, these themes strengthen the poetry and broaden the author's vision, depicting

vital, passionate, sometimes disturbing relationships between men and women.

In addition to these interesting personal relationships, *Molly Brant* reminds us of those persons who suffered under both banners—the Union Jack and the star-spangled one. The poems suggest that, in addition to honoring George Washington as father of our country, we must acknowledge other names for the first president if we wish to invoke the liberating power of truth. The Mohawk called him “town exterminator” because of his policy of total annihilation. Cornplanter, in 1790, had this to say to George Washington: “When your army entered the country of the Six Nations, we called you Town Destroyer: and to this day when that name is heard our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers.”⁶³

Maurice Kenny’s poetry demonstrates that, in order to understand historical figures like Washington, we need to know all their names. Contemporary people can heal the wrongs of the past only by creative empathy, not by “putting the past behind us.” Cultural memory—accessible through the imagination and brought to life in this body of poems—rather than cultural amnesia provides our best hope for survival. Lying and covering up, not truth-telling, threaten democracy. Traditional cultures have great potential in contemporary society because of the power they attribute to the word as a force for change. Further, the creation of new stories that take into account modern circumstances is as important as the maintenance of old ones. Traditions can be carried forward into the present by imagining, remembering, telling. Seneca clan mother Aliquippa prophesies,

Again
we will eat succotash, drink soup.
Singers will stand and sing, our daughters will
pick strawberries, wild and red, from the meadows.
Our men will thank the deer for his flesh.
Wolf will trot the old mountains
and the elders lead us in prayer.
We will have forgotten nothing.⁶⁴

Maurice Kenny and Aliquippa have shown us a way of taking back our own history.

NOTES

1. Maurice Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant: Poems of War* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1992), 181.
2. Michael Castro, foreword in Kenny, *Humorous And/Or Not So Humorous* (Buffalo, NY: Swift Kick, 1988).
3. Andrew Wiget, *Native American Literature* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 112.
4. Carolyn D. Scott, "Baskets of Sweetgrass: Maurice Kenny's *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* and *I Am the Sun*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 7 (Winter 1983): 10.
5. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 143.
8. *Ibid.*, 145.
9. Kenny, *Rain and Other Fictions* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1990), 9-10.
10. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 80.
11. *Ibid.*, 88.
12. *Ibid.*, 90.
13. *Ibid.*, 62.
14. *Ibid.*, 106.
15. *Ibid.*, 125.
16. Kenny, *Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems 1956-1984* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1987), 139.
17. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 168.
18. Kenny, *Between Two Rivers*, 137.
19. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 182.
20. *Ibid.*, 196.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 194-95.
23. *Ibid.*, 52-53.
24. Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 13.
25. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 119.
26. *Ibid.*, 157.
27. *Ibid.*, 158.
28. *Ibid.*, 130.
29. *Ibid.*, 179.
30. *Ibid.*, 69.
31. *Ibid.*, 72.
32. Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, 193-94.
33. *Ibid.*, 1.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 196.
36. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 135.
37. *Ibid.*, 141.
38. *Ibid.*, 146.
39. *Ibid.*, 147.
40. *Ibid.*, 144.

41. Ibid., 145.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 91.
45. Ibid., 92.
46. Ibid., 95–96.
47. Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, 21.
48. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 176.
49. Ibid., 177.
50. Kenny, *Between Two Rivers*, 130.
51. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 118.
52. Ibid., 202.
53. Ibid.
54. Kenny, *Between Two Rivers*, 144.
55. Ibid.
56. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 101.
57. Kenny, *Between Two Rivers*, 145.
58. Ibid., 160.
59. Ibid., 135.
60. Ibid., 147.
61. Ibid., 117–23.
62. Ibid., 141.
63. Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, 192.
64. Kenny, *Tekonwatonti/Molly Brant*, 179.