



Beth Brant (Degonwadonti)

Biography

Beth Brant is a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from the Tyendinaga Mohawk Reservation in Ontario, Canada. Her paternal grandparents moved from the reservation to Detroit, Michigan, where Brant was born in 1941. Her mother was white (Irish-Scots) and her father was Mohawk. Because her mother's family disapproved initially, at least, of her marriage to an Indian, the Brants went to live with the father's family in Detroit.

The racism experienced from her mother's side of the family may have been one of Brant's first experiences with it. Addressing racism is one theme that appears often in Brant's writing. In the essay "From the Inside Looking at You," from *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (1994), Brant asserts "when I use the enemy's language to hold onto my strength as a Mohawk lesbian writer, I use it as my own instrument of power in this long, long battle against racism."

Brant did not begin writing until 1981, when she was forty years old. The story of how Brant came to begin writing is significant to another theme found in all her writings: being Native. It speaks to her Mohawk heritage and, on a larger scale, her respect and beliefs in the connectedness of land, spirit, people and animals. Brant tells the story in the essay "To Be or Not To Be Has Never Been the Question," which also appears in *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (1994). It is well worth repeating in depth.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1941
- * Self-identifies as a Mohawk Indian, lesbian, feminist, writer, and activist
- * *Mohawk Trail* is her first published book of poetry

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According to Brant, she was driving through Iroquois land with her partner, Denise. As they were driving, an eagle “swooped in front of our car. . . He wanted us to stop, so we did.” Brant then got out of the car and faced Eagle: “We looked into each other’s eyes. I was marked by him. I remember that I felt transported to another place, perhaps another time. We looked into each other for minutes, maybe hours, maybe a thousand years. I had received a message, a gift. When I got home I began to write.”

Brant was published the same year she began writing, an incredible accomplishment as any writer who wants to be published would recognize. The accomplishment is made somewhat more incredible by the fact that Brant dropped out of high school at the age of 17 so does not have the “advantage” of a traditional Euro-American education. But any lack of “proper training” is more than made up for in Brant’s abilities as a writer. Her “gift,” as she calls it, has won her several awards and honors. In 1984 and 1986, Brant was awarded grants from the Creative Writing Award from the Michigan Council for the Arts. The Ontario Arts Council awarded her a grant in 1989. She was honored by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991. In 1992 Brant earned an award from the Canada Council Award in Creative Writing.

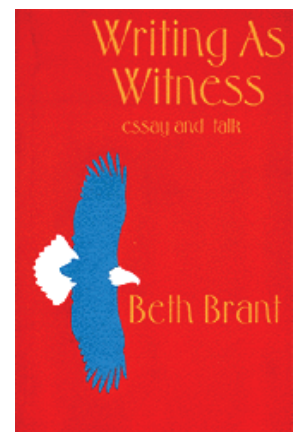
Brant is multifaceted, both as a person and as a writer. As a person, Brant is identifiable as a Mohawk Indian, a lesbian, a mother, a grandmother, an activist, and a feminist. When Brant dropped out of high school at the age of 17, it was to marry. She had three daughters and then became a grandmother. Her marriage ended in divorce after fourteen years. In another essay in *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk called “Writing Life,”* Brant describes her marriage as being lived out “in anger, violence, alcohol, hatred.” The marriage was very abusive.



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In 1976, Brant met Denise Dorsz, the woman who was to become her partner. As of 1994, Brant and Dorsz had been together for eighteen years. In the essay “Physical Prayers,” which also appears in *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*, Brant offers a glimpse into her own discovery of being lesbian: “In my thirty-third year of life I was a feminist, an activist and largely occupied with discovering all things female. And one of those lovely discoveries was that I could love women sexually, emotionally, and spiritually - and all at once.” Brant goes on to write that being lesbian makes her a more complete person, “and a whole woman is of much better use to my communities than a split one.”



Brant is as complex of a writer as she is a person. As a writer, Brant is the author of poetry, short stories, essays, and critical essays, in addition to being an editor, speaker, and lecturer. Brant’s first book, *Mohawk Trail* (1985), is a collection of poetry, short stories and essays - many of which are autobiographical. Brant’s second book, *Food and Spirits* (1991), is a collection of short stories. As is the case with Brant’s other works, the main characters in these stories are all Native, most are women, and all face adversity in one form or another.

In 1994, Brant published another collection, *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*. The contents of this book include essays and writings that are based on (or were the basis of) speeches or lectures she has given. It is in this collection of writings that the themes, style, and issues most important to Brant are well represented. Several of the essays and “talks” from the book have been mentioned throughout this essay. Other writings in the book include the essay “Anodynes and Amulets.” Here, Brant discusses racism through the exploitation of Native American spirituality. The essay is a criticism of the “new-age” religion, which Brant suggests has stereotyped/idealized Native Americans, in addition to “borrowing” some Native spiritual aspects. Brant writes, “I long for a conclusion to the new-age religion, and in its place, a healthy respect for sovereignty and the culture that makes Nationhood. We do not object to non-Natives praying with us (if invited). We object to the theft of our prayers that have no psychic meaning to them.” In short, *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* captures the essence of Brant and her work.



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In addition to her own writing, Brant has also been the editor of several books and collections. As an editor, Brant is known for her groundbreaking achievement for the book *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women*, first published in 1984 as a special issue of the periodical *Sinister Wisdom*, then published in book form in 1988. *A Gathering of Spirit* was the first anthology of its kind. It involved all Native American women -- from contributors to editor -- and it brought Brant national recognition. Other editing projects for Brant produced another collection of Native writings in *I'll Sing Til the Day I Die: Conversations with Tyendinaga Elders* (1995), and an issue of the annual journal *Native Women in the Arts: Sweetgrass Grows All Around Her* (1996), co-edited with Sandra Larounde.

In addition to her own publications and editorial projects, Brant's poems and stories have appeared in a wide range of books, such as *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988), *Best Lesbian Erotica 1997* (1997), a new book edited by Linda Hogan, Deena Metzger, and Brenda Peterson, *Intimate Nature: The bond Between Women and Animals* (1998), as well as in numerous magazines, periodicals, and other anthologies that are Native, feminist, and/or lesbian in content.

The opening quote for this essay captures much of what Beth Brant and her writing are about. Brant is able to take her complexities as a person and turn them into honest, straightforward writing that comes in several forms: stories, poems, essays, short stories, even lecture notes. Her themes are often about Native peoples, women, lesbians and gay men, and family, and she often addresses issues such as racism and homophobia with a directness that cannot be ignored.

There is one more aspect of Brant's writing that has not yet been discussed here. It is the idea that words are sacred. In the Preface to *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*, Brant begins by writing, "In putting together this collection. . . I hope to convey the message that words are sacred. . . because words themselves come from the place of mystery that gives meaning and existence to life." Brant not only believes words are sacred, but in the essay "Writing Life," she states that writing is medicine: "I was able to use writing to heal a wound that was very deep and festering. I was angry - writing brought me calm. I was obsessing about the past - writing gave me insight into the future. I was in pain - writing cooled the pain. . ." To Brant, words are sacred, and writing is healing. These are fitting sentiments for a person who was instructed by an eagle to write.



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