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*Making Relatives: Indigenous Kinship Governance and Early Moravian Missions*

This paper interprets eighteenth-century Moravian missions in the American Northeast through Indigenous frameworks of kinship and governance, foregrounding the intellectual, political, and relational labor through which Indigenous people shaped early missions. Reading Moravian archives alongside Indigenous theories of relationality, diplomacy, and governance, I argue that missions were not simply sites of Christian conversion but negotiated kinship and political formations embedded within longer histories of Indigenous collective life. I call these processes “kin-versions”: the incorporation, negotiation, and transformation of Indigenous and European actors within overlapping networks of kinship, obligation, and Christian affiliation.

Indigenous leaders approached Moravian settlements as potential partners in existing networks of diplomacy and kin-making, while early missionaries and Moravian leaders—often attentive to Indigenous forms of communality—initially accommodated and participated in them. Mission membership and participation were embedded in the maintenance of obligations across families, clans, and village networks. More broadly, the paper demonstrates how relationships with missionaries—like those with colonial officials and neighboring nations—were understood as politically consequential relations of kin-making, through which Indigenous peoples navigated colonial and Christian projects. Practices of mutual adoption, the integration of Indigenous kin—including children—into the Bethlehem community, and missionaries’ marriages to Indigenous women, for instance, demonstrate how mission life was structured through Indigenous expectations of reciprocity, responsibility, and relational continuity.