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The Identity Dilemma in Loyalist Transatlantic Networks

After the American Revolution, countless exiled Loyalists referred to America as "my country" or "my home" in correspondence with family and friends in the United States, using unexpected expressions coming from individuals who had left that country out of loyalty to the British Empire. Likewise, many who remained in the United States but were considered "Loyalists" during the war continued to express sympathy, longing, and affiliation with the British Empire, even while residing in the United States. This cross-national crisis in identity raises a key dilemma for historians of Loyalism, and for historians of identity in the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolutions. Once the guns were silent, the peace treaty signed, the armies disbanded, and the borders drawn, who should be considered a Loyalist? How perpetual was the status, how tied to rhetoric and emotional attachment, or how tied to physical residence?

This dilemma comes from research for my dissertation, "Among Strangers in a Distant Climate: Loyalist Exiles Define Empire and Nation, 1775-1815," which uses ten Loyalist family networks to trace the transatlantic refugee community's construction and later fragmentation. In so doing, I examine how Loyalist agency in determining their own identities allowed them to create and politicize a diaspora community. This diaspora helped shape political, economic, and social developments in both the British Empire and the United States.

By examining family networks, I reinterpret the Loyalists' role in the postwar Atlantic. Currently, Loyalists are all but left out of studies of the Early American Republic—through recent scholars have brought them into the war itself—and are assigned subsidiary roles in studies of the changing British Empire. Those who focus on the Loyalists often disconnect exiles

from any ongoing interaction with the United States. These divided interpretations impede scholars from studying the aftermath of Revolution as a sort of reconstruction, following a civil war—which I argue that the Revolutionary War was. I will overturn this divided understanding of the Loyalists and use networks to link individuals in the United States and the British Empire together, long after American Independence.

My project uses families with correspondents in the United States and at least one outpost of the British Empire to analyze and digitally map how the Loyalist community crossed national lines. This community was alienated from the new states (through persecution) and the old empire (through neglect), leading exiles to turn inward to other Loyalists. Linked through correspondence networks, they formed new communities in between the states and the empire. Using this foundation, I examine several crucial issues that preoccupied both high politics and local discourse in the revolutionary Atlantic: trade, reintegration into the United States, the restructing of the British Empire, and slave abolition debates. Within these broad issues, I examine the complexities of loyalty, family relations, and understandings of citizenship and subjecthood. It is through this ongoing transnational connection that my dilemma emerges, as the Loyalist networks blurred when the delineation of who should be considered a Loyalist was no longer clearly drawn by active warfare.

This dilemma is intricately tied to my study of Loyalist identity. The Revolution's Loyalists had identities that were not wholly American or British. Refugees had to create a new diaspora identity as they struggled to work through the issues of exile while Loyalists in America had to re-create their identities to find peace in the United States. Exiles' understandings of British identity and rights were conditioned by their pasts in the thirteen colonies. In the American colonies, colonists had perceived citizenship as both contract and allegiance, not

immutable obedience from birth as a subject. Loyalist exiles soon realized that their ideal of being British clashed with a reality that was characterized by hierarchical subjecthood in an increasingly centralized empire. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Loyalist formed networks based on shared experiences and loyalty, but changed over time as the meaning of loyalty and Loyalist became less clear.

Central to analyzing the changing relationship between Loyalists in America and Loyalist exiles is the ability to define who was, and who remained a Loyalist, a problem that forms the root of my proposed dilemma. Many individuals identified as Loyalists during the Revolution, but chose to remain in the United States and brave the wrath of their Patriot neighbors. Most of these persons were able to regain citizenship and full political, legal, and property rights in the early republic soon after the Revolution. Despite making peace with America, many still sympathized with the British cause and regretted the course the Revolution had taken.

To outline the chronological parameters for this problem, Loyalists began fleeing America early in the war but assumed that they would soon return home. Most early exiles firmly believed that Great Britain would rapidly suppress the rebellion. At this point, Loyalists both at home and in exile still assumed all colonial residents were British and did not need to separate their American heritage from their British allegiance. Confusion in identity and citizenship status emerged with Britain's defeat, as exiles tried to create new homes in corners of the British Empire that did not always embrace new Loyalist settlers, and Loyalists in the United States tried to determine their own future allegiances.

Exiled Loyalists fled to other British colonies, where they were treated with hostility by new neighbors who did not perceive a shared imperial identity with the refugees. Officials in Nova Scotia referred to Loyalists as "refugees" or "Americans"—only occasionally as

"Loyalists"—and complained that exiles' demands for resources and shelter surpassed their sacrifices for the Empire. Rejected from these societies, Loyalists turned inward to their own communities, forming new settlements and networks separate from local populations, but tied to old homes in America.

After the 1783 Treaty of Paris failed to guarantee Loyalists' personal and property safety, exiles began to feel dual alienation within the Empire, both from other imperial subjects and from the London government. The Treaty merely "recommended" to the States that Loyalists be treated gently and their property returned, which they saw as a gross affront to their rights. Samuel Quincy, a New England Loyalist in Antigua, wrote to family in Boston that the treaty violated "all justice propriety good government or national character" and reflected poorly on both the American and British governments.[1] They demanded compensation for their loyalty. The British administration responded by granting some Loyalists "charitable" pensions, framed as imperial generosity rather than as debts owed for Loyalists' sacrifices. The British administration also restricted their political involvement throughout the Empire. The exiles began to blame the British government, not just the American Revolution, for their suffering.

In addition, Loyalists formed trade communities throughout the Atlantic World, including with the United States, which circumvented ties of empire and nation. Scholars estimate that only 10% of Loyalists fled the United States, and those who stayed set up trade networks—often illegally—with loyalists abroad. But where do we draw the line in referring to "former" Loyalists as members of a transatlantic Loyalist community? Or are they simply remaining connected to former Loyalists in order to expand their oceanic business networks—without ideology, loyalty, or identity very intricately involved?

[1] Samuel Quincy, Antigua, to Hannah Quincy, 24 September 1784, Quincy Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS).

While trade shaped economic bonds with America, many Loyalists also began to consider permanently returning to the United States. The hatred that characterized Loyalist-Patriot wartime passions cooled and Britain continued to restrict colonial politics. With increased fluidity between colonies and states—most Loyalists could safely return to past homes by 1790, at the latest—more questions of loyalty and identity unfolded. Loyalists could choose to return to America and become active participants in politics or remain more politically passive as imperial subjects. Exiles' connections with Americans (including former Loyalists) brought these issues to the fore. Divided families weighed past and present allegiance along with economic and political gains as they debated where to set up permanent homes.

In order to illustrate this dilemma, I propose to bring in a few selected letters between Loyalists abroad and residents (former or present Loyalists) of the United States. I will choose letters from networks specifically connecting New England to Canada and the British Caribbean. By looking at the language, shared thoughts, and discussions that they had in the ensuing decades, I hope to explore the uncertainty that accompanies discussions of allegiance, loyalty, and identity in the reconstruction period that followed the American Revolution.

Though this dilemma is larger than a few letters, examining a few will lay out many of the intellectual and emotional processes associated with identity formation, and hopefully open up a discussion about the use of the term Loyalist. As it is not a fixed or eternal status for anyone, we must consider the past condition, identity, and location of an individual at a given moment to understand loyalism. Correspondence will allow me to examine the inner workings of individuals, and debate how to classify loyalty and "Loyalists" in peacetime. This, more broadly, will impact the way we study the relationship between America and the British Empire during this civil war's reconstruction.