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Gest Fellowship Proposal

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Quaker Soundways in Early America

The work I would like to do as a Gest Fellow is an inquiry into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Quaker soundways. The proposed research is a crucial component of a broader dissertation concerned with how early Americans — indigenous, African, and European — expressed their attitudes and beliefs about sound and how they interpreted and valued their audible worlds during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By 1800, the soundways of many Anglo-Americans had changed enough so as to become much more recognizable to us, with vision playing an increasingly dominant role at the expense of the audible. Much of the significance of that shift is tied in with the "literacy hypothesis:" namely, that print and literacy change how people conceive/perceive their worlds, with "oral/aural" cultures becoming literate and thus more "visual."

The Society of Friends, with their reliance on the "inner light" rather than "the word," appear to have been leading the way in regard to that shift, yet their ambivalent attitudes toward print, literacy, authorship, speech, and silence point to something more complex. Much of the literacy hypothesis is concerned with the effects of media on those who use them. Quakers, however, considered *themselves* to be the medium for God's message, which led to a valuation of the senses, particularly sound and vision, that differed from other North Americans in interesting ways.

Print, literacy, and education were all encouraged, but always in a way that focused on some practical aim. Elizabeth Hudson found reading to be an intriguing, but dispensable skill, one that bordered on being a flaw. William Penn opposed an empty education that made one a good speaker, and preferred teaching children the visual skills of making shapes and drawing, while adults ought learn things like surveying. All of these favor the visual at the expense of the audible.

Yet speechways were important to Quakers. Richard Bauman, in *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-century Quakers* (Cambridge, 1983), appraised the radical and important linguistic experiment encompassed by Quaker soundways. While silence implied the shortcomings of speech in representing the message of the deity, it also indicated the importance of sound, a very real and powerful force not to be employed without careful consideration. Much work has been done on "oral" cultures, but often it is of little use to historians, the assumption being that it is either undocumentable or exists in an ahistoric state of nature. Often, the term "oral" is used as a foil for "literate" cultures, with associations about

"civilization" and "savagery" following closely in tow.

The current project replaces the narrow focus on speechways implicit in that notion of oral culture with a broader notion of soundways, for which there exists an unmined vein of documentary evidence. In doing so, it becomes possible to learn more about those most often categorized as "oral:" women, Native Americans, African Americans, and the "lower sorts." But elites such as George Keith, Increase Mather, William Penn, and Thomas Jefferson, embedded as they were in a world of letters, lived in an audible world based on beliefs about sound that were radically different from our own.

My project contributes a way of documenting the soundscapes in which oral — and literate — cultures were situated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Early America. I have already undertaken primary research focusing on New England, New York, and creole Africans in Jamaica and the South Carolina-Georgia lowlands. I plan to extend the study to include the Chesapeake and Delaware regions, and have already begun examining published sources from these areas. The Quaker portions of this research promise to be particularly rewarding, especially with regard to the issue of oaths, as discussed below. In addition to the dissertation, I intend to write a separate essay on this fascinating subject. The prominence of women among Friends and the well-documented relationship between Quakers and Pennsylvania Iroquois and Delaware Indians offer invaluable comparative perspectives to research that I have already completed in other regions.

I have five questions with which to interpret early American soundways. Each of the questions can be answered with particular sets of documents. The questions are carefully constrained and have already been tested on primary materials, making it possible to efficiently cover the sources listed here in the allotted month of the Gest Fellowship. The first three questions consider parts of the audible world that are not reducible to printed or written language (though like any event, they can be described in it). The last two make it possible to fully situate "oral culture" within its aural context.

(1) *How did seventeenth- and eighteenth- century North Americans express their attitudes and beliefs about sounds that had no visible human agents, such as thunder?* During the seventeenth century, stock wonder tales and sermons passed back and forth across the Atlantic as well as within congregations. In this genre, thunder was the "Loud-speaking voice of God." Often its sound was deadly, while those who were hit by "lightning" tended to escape with their lives. Melodies were heard in earthquakes, and strange sounds at sea were considered, like all sounds, to have a source in

some willful creature, whether man, God, demon, or animal. These sounds were carefully attended and considered as tangible forces in the world in a way that faded in the eighteenth century. Haverford has several items in this genre that I need to consult in order to complete this section of my work, including the only one known to be authored by a woman, namely Dorothy White's *An Alarm Sounded to England's Inhabitants, but More Especially to England's Rulers: with the Voyce of Terrible Thunder, Sounded from the Throne of the King of Eternal Glory* (London: 1661). Another item in the collection that I need to consult is the anonymous seventeenth-century broadside entitled *The Dreadful and Terrible Voice of God Uttered from the Throne of His Justice: as the Voice of a Mighty Thunder, and as the Voice of Many Waters Rumbling*. I have already checked through the dozen or so New England "thunder sermons" as well as published wonder tales and the correspondence around them with the results indicated above.

In addition to stock tales and sermons, journals and travel accounts provide further evidence of Early American soundways. Diaries and journals consistently mark thunder and lightning storms. Some of them, like Samuel Sewall's, were kept long enough that changes over time could be found, with a seventeenth-century emphasis on thunder gradually yielding to lightning in the eighteenth. I have already examined two Quaker travel accounts as well as a number from New England and the Chesapeake. In keeping with expectations about a people focused on the inner light, and whose first governor spoke for them in his preference of visual learning over word-learning, the two eighteenth-century Quaker diaries that I have examined so far favor visual terminology over audible in most cases. In "Peckover's Journal" (he was an English Friend traveling through North America in 1742 and 1743), a meetings is described as having a "dark Spirit" and "thick cloud" over it, punctuated only at the end by the "sun of righteousness." The Philadelphia Quaker Benjamin Mifflin's diary shows a similar preference for the visual. What I need to complete this set of my research is access to earlier Quaker journals, particularly Elizabeth Webb's, which to my knowledge is only available in Haverford's Quaker Collection.

(2) *How did they express their attitudes and beliefs about non-vocal human sounds such as bell ringing, or instrumental music?* In order to answer this question I need evidence of soundways concerning instruments of sound of all sorts. This would include musical instruments, but not be limited to them. One place I will need to check is in the first three folders of the "Indian Committee accounts, bills, receipts, etc." 1776-1929 (AA16. PYM), which contain references to gifts and other goods brought to various Indian settlements. Creeks and Choctaws often requested drums, which

were considered dangerous by the British negotiators and denied. I want to find out if similar patterns hold true in non-military situations. References to musical instruments are often made in passing in journals, which I would be examining for other purposes anyway. Material culture provides another avenue of research in Haverford's collections. The two seventeenth-century paintings of Quaker meetings by Egbert van Heemskerk may provide clues to the acoustic space in which meetings took place. The illustrations of Anthony Benezet teaching African-American youths, as well as the illustration of his house (both in folder 2 of the Benezet Papers Box) may also prove interesting, though their late date (1850) may mitigate against relying on the reconstructions too heavily. Finally, the hexagonal shape of Quaker schoolrooms serve as an interesting contrast to a feature New England meetinghouse architecture, the "sounding board" placed on an angle over the minister's head in order to amplify the voice. The eight sloping panels of the roof to the hexagonal schoolrooms serve the same acoustic function as did sounding boards, but for everyone in the room rather than a single hierarchically placed speaker, the minister. I would like to search for more information on this acoustic feature in the Penn Charter Shool's early papers.

(3) *How did they construct and respond to extralingual (e.g. grunts) or paralingual (e.g., singing, intonation, and stress) human sounds?* Two issues are of particular interest here. The first is Governor Keith's response, in the 1680s, to Increase Mathers' attribution of "howling" and "railing" to the Quakers (actually the sect in question were Ranters). Such non-linguistic vocalizations were associated with "otherness," and to a degree, with a lack of civilization. Often such descriptors were used to describe the speech of creoles and Native Americans as well as Ranters. The second issue is the Algonkian practice of making captives — regardless of their ethnicity and languages — sing a song of identity in the face of torture. I would like to know whether there were Quaker reports of similar practices, whether violent or not, among the southern Iroquois and other Indian nations with which the Quakers had contact.

(4) *How were the meanings of spoken language established, negotiated, and governed, both individually and societally?* This is the core section of the work I would like to complete as a Gest Fellow. From the mid-seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth century, Friends refused to take oaths, deeming them a sort of command for God to obey the will of humans. In New England the courts were divided, with some favoring the Anglican demand for oaths and others favoring the Quakers' refusal to voice commands to God. After a period of persecution, the issue died down in the eighteenth century because of a declining importance on the weight of words.

British authorities were content to accommodate Quakers' beliefs by working out an alternate system early in the eighteenth century. The oath gradually became a symbol rather than an action for non-Quakers, but even as late as 1776, the Friend Thomas Redmond had difficulties with the revolutionary government of Pennsylvania for refusing to swear a loyalty oath, for which he was imprisoned. Considered together, Haverford and Swarthmore possess the most complete documentation of this long-running controversy and its implications for North America, with nearly two hundred items related to oaths and the refusal to voice or be bound by them. In addition to its role in my dissertation, I will write a separate essay for publication on the oath controversies based on this research.

(5) *In transcribing from speech to manuscript and to print, what changed?* The answers to this question become interesting in light of the Friends' belief that *they* were God's primary media rather than human-made print or voice or writing. Human-made media were thus construed as somewhat insignificant and works were published in many different forms. Speeches were written down and circulated, some finding there way from letters in to print. The key documents here are texts that exist in more than one form, such as the manuscript versions of Anthony Benezet's "Observations on Indians" that he circulated prior to its publication, and the various copies of Yearly Meetings that were sometimes made.

I plan on completing my dissertation by Spring 1998. I hope to bring the work into print as a book after that, along with publishing several articles, including the one on oaths mentioned above. I am also exploring the possibility of creating a CD-ROM hypertext version with sound. A Gest Fellowship would providing the financial as well as intellectual means to complete this critical component of my work on a graduate student's limited income. I have done as much of the work as I can from a distance, using the Internet and the Evans Microfilm collection, but the opportunity to work with Haverford's manuscript and rare books collections that a Gest Fellowship would make possible would greatly aid me in achieving the best possible results in my primary research. I hope you will consider my application.