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Gerona's "Night Journeys: The Power of Dreams in Transatlantic Quaker Culture" - Book Review

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In her study of *Night Journeys*, Carla Gerona introduces a fascinating subject that has hardly been explored by scholars and historians before her: the 'dream-infused culture' (p. 3) of early America, and the Quakers' own distinctive contributions to this field of study. According to Gerona, dreams had a powerful hold on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century transatlantic world, with popular culture's widespread attention to dream interpretation and necromancy. In the author's own words, our understanding of the importance of dreams in this transatlantic world is 'crucial for our understanding of early American religious and cultural practices' at large (p. 17). With her particular focus on the Quakers, she draws from a largely untapped and impressive corpus of dream documents, considering nearly 300 dreams or visions recorded by transatlantic Friends in their spiritual memoirs, travel journals, diaries, letters, commonplace books, and other primary texts. Her interdisciplinary study—including ethno-history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, literary analysis, women's and gender studies, and even cartography—strives to interpret the dreams in their own cultural and historical context, although she admits that she ultimately cannot explain Quaker dreaming 'exclusively from their point of view' (p. 5). Overall, Gerona illustrates the wealth of material present in this heretofore neglected body of literature; she reads Quaker dreams as maps that guided Friends in their evolution and direction as a religious society; and she quite interestingly documents the shift from Quakers' seventeenth-century prophetic 'dreamings' to eighteenth-century 'dreamwork', indicating how this religious sect re-imagined and redefined its community through the power of dreams.

The transatlantic Quaker archives offer a wealth of material for connecting dreams to the study of religious and cultural practices in early America; indeed, as Gerona points out, 'no other church incorporated dreamwork so deeply in its everyday practices' (p. 93). It is important to note, first, that Gerona—like the Friends before

her—does not distinguish between dreams and visions. Rather, the focus is on what the Friends deemed important visionary experiences, and all of these are compiled in her sampling of 'night journeys'. The Quaker community was prolific in recording their dreams, for they perceived such visions as direct communion with God. At the beginning of the Quaker movement, such 'dreamings' were experienced and expressed as apocalyptic prophesying; replete with symbolic language, they promoted Friends' religious enthusiasm, often attacked political leaders, and addressed contemporary issues. Similar to their public tradition of prophesying, seventeenth-century Friends shared their visions and dreams quite often and in public. As for their ever-growing corpus of written dream accounts, the Quakers circulated these widely and inspired a transatlantic world of dreamers to inscribe and disseminate their visionary testaments.

Yet, turning to the eighteenth century, Gerona carefully documents how this religious society shifted in its expression and corporate interpretation of 'night journeys'. It is perhaps Gerona's most important contribution in her book when she analyses eighteenth-century Friends' own distinctive system for interpreting dreams and terms this 'Quaker dreamwork'. No longer confrontational or enthusiastic, this newly shaped corpus of dreams sought to regulate Quaker behaviour and self-discipline, was more introspective in nature, and focused on the individual (but extended to community-wide meaning). Censorship of dreams was carried out primarily by the elite few of the Second Day Morning Meeting (England, 1672) and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Overseers of the Press (Pennsylvania, 1709), who began to control the published and disseminated dreamwork of their religious society. As her study concludes, this print censorship managed to 'homogenize and standardise' dreams (p. 239), and its intention was to use dreamwork 'to project a distinct and idealised (though often ambivalent and conflicted) community' (p. 5). In many ways, this wave of censorship echoes the censorship placed on enthusiasm and prophesying in the seventeenth century, as documented by such scholars as Luella M. Wright in *The Literary Life of Early Friends, 1650–1725* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932). Gerona might have formed much stronger connections between these two censorial campaigns, with particular attention paid to the silencing of Quaker women and their visions. In effect, leaders saw dreams as 'powerful narrative tools' (p. 6) that could encourage—or enforce—unity among Friends. The interesting tension here was that dreams still allowed some prophetic or radicalised ideas to emerge, but were used ultimately—and controlled manipulatively—to promote conformity among its readers. By the mid-eighteenth century, Quaker dreamwork and communal interpretation was indeed 'a collective endeavour' (p. 28), with mass circulation of the endorsed, printed dreams to influence their readers accordingly.

What I found most provocative in Gerona's study were the moments where she illustrates Friends' resistance to such censorship, as they managed to break through any imposed constraints. As the author indicates, seventeenth-century dreamings and eighteenth-century dreamwork all held the potential for people to speak out with divine authority—and no matter what censorious limitations prevailed, the dreamers were still heard, due to the Quaker belief in one's ability to experience and share direct communion with God. As a result, women Friends spoke politically through

the veil of dreams, and women ministers and mothers articulated their dreams to help shape the moral values of their children and communities. During the Revolutionary years, dreams presented the arena for even the disenfranchised (such as slaves) to turn private visions into public declarations. By the mid-eighteenth century, reading and writing about dreams was considered a meaningful spiritual practice among many Friends, and dreamwork was all but a prerequisite for a minister's expression. By the end of the eighteenth century, many Friends kept or copied 'vision books', which were private collections of Quakers' remarkable dreams—yet another channel to assist their own spiritual journeys. In effect, dreams became an effective platform for influencing others on contemporary issues such as slavery, changing gender norms, and Native American Indian relations and helping readers to imagine a more just and equitable world for all people in early America. As the author notes, even such early Republic visionaries as Thomas Paine and Charles Brockden Brown were born out of this culture and tradition that explored socio-political issues through dreamwork. Of particular interest is Gerona's note that the tradition of recording dreams in early America became much more popular after the Revolutionary War and break with England.

Friends' dissemination of influential dreamwork did not end in early America, as Gerona further discusses. Despite the Society's leaders' ever-growing distrust of eighteenth-century dreamers (particularly those who held reformist agendas), this prophetic tradition persisted into the nineteenth century—and, I would add, might even exist to this day. Compelling in Gerona's study is the way in which she shows Quaker dreamwork offering its audience a space for stretching the boundaries and breaking out of prescribed Quaker norms and practices. Whereas Friends upheld simplicity and discipline in the eighteenth century, for example, Gerona speaks of the sensual and rich, symbolic expressions inherent in their dreams—which, we must not forget, were quite popular and widely consumed and read. As she delineates, there were anarchic dreams, homosocial dreams, night time intimacies—all stretching Friends' ways of envisioning and imagining, shaping, and redefining their place in the world.

'Dreams had the definitive authority of God, but they also required creative human interpretation', Gerona writes (p. 176). In early America, these nebulous 'night journeys' served different purposes for different Friends but ultimately assisted the religious society in constructing an identity for themselves, individually and as a group, and thus demarcating their relationship to each other, their nation, and to their transatlantic world. Even today, these dreams remain mysterious, as we peer at them and attempt to understand through our twenty-first-century post-modern lens. While Gerona offers a largely ethno-historical perspective, she invites her readers to offer other critical maps of interpretation: 'perhaps this large trove of Quaker dreams might inspire others to explore psychoanalytic angles' (p. 253). The possibilities seem endless when exploring dreamwork, and there yet remain myriad other visions in transatlantic archives to be discovered and deciphered. What we learn from Gerona's study, above all, is that dreams were indeed plentiful and powerful in early America, and that Quakers contributed a great deal to this early American phenomenon of

dream interpretation. As narrative tools and maps, such dreamwork still has much to tell us about the Quaker diaspora and its surrounding world of transatlantic dreamers. Gerona's own map is complexly designed, weaving together several disciplines to scrutinise and understand this religious culture. She succeeds in offering many thought-provoking perceptions about early America and leaves a great deal for future readers to consider, as she invites us all to take part in the study of this newly tapped archival treasure.

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