Response to Thomas Hamm and Shannon Cragio-Snell

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I thank both Shannon Craigo-Snell and Thomas Hamm for their careful reading of *Gentle Invaders*, and for their gracious and scholarly reflections that include further questions for expanding this study. In addition, historian Hugh Barbour should be acknowledged for first turning me toward the archival materials of the Southland enterprise, which became the book’s central and most successful nineteenth-century account of Quaker experimentation with race relations.

As Hamm quickly notes, a major concern of *Gentle Invaders* revolves around the question: “Why, historically, have there been so few black Quakers?” My uncovering of articles, letters, journal entries and official reports of the work of women laboring to develop schools for and with African Americans before and after the Civil War culminates in the missionary zeal of the Southland Friends School and Meeting planted near Helena, Arkansas. There, on that battlefield for political, financial, educational and spiritual equality, Alida Clark noted, analyzed, and critiqued for over two decades the deeper issues and challenges that blocked the development of true religious partnership between Quakers and people of color during and after Reconstruction.

My findings highlighted the growing unease among weighty Friends who met to dispense extravagant amounts of money to underwrite humanitarian aid and to support substantial educational endeavors, while also confessing a profound incongruity in imagining the recipients of their charity as being welcomed into meetings for worship, let alone able to understand the “refinements” of Friends’ worship and spirituality. As Clark, stationed out in the dusty cotton fields near Helena, Arkansas, would write, “Many good people profess to believe that the colored people are too emotional and impres-sible ever to become Friends…a thorough and deep work of grace is just the same in the heart, no matter the color of the skin.” (*Friends’ Review*, Vol. XXIV, July 22, 1871, p. 763)
Hamm extends the race and religion issues with new findings emerging from his partner study with students at Earlham College on Quakers and African Americans in the Old Northwest from 1800 to 1860. A striking example of his contradictory evidence is the work of Elijah Coffin to abolish slavery, and at the same time, create an independent black nation in the deserts of America. Most ironic of my findings, as Craigo-Snell notes, was Friends’ funding of the ministry of Charles Schaeffer, whose efforts resulted in over a hundred black Baptist congregations established with over 11,000 members. This irony was certainly not lost upon Alida Clark, as she prophetically called for Friends to establish “black yearly meetings” all across the postwar South.

H hamm points out, however, that Friends were consistent in their complacency. They showed no more interest “in attracting black converts than they did in making Friends of the Irish or Germans or other European immigrants.” Yet, there was a singular missed opportunity that Friends intentionally chose in deciding not to share their faith with blacks. Years of sacrificial labors with the Underground Railroad resulted in granting Quakers the priceless status of being worthy of the black community’s faith and trust. African Americans had incorporated into their songs and stories the presence of Friends along the pathway to freedom. The corporate decision to turn energies and monies toward ministry work among native-American Indians eventually brought an end to the sporadic but important Quaker experiments with African Americans after Reconstruction. And the decision to explore mission opportunities in other countries also redefined and redirected Friends’ intentions toward people of color in America into the twentieth century.

In Craigo-Snell’s challenge to resist domesticating the accounts or personalities of those educators and ministers who accepted the call into uncharted territories, she succinctly highlights the transformational power of the Holy Spirit at work within Friends women and through their labors. These women, born into and spiritually nurtured by a radical faith community that was and is proud of its fascinating history of empowering women to leadership positions, became independent-minded thinkers and doers of Truth. As opposed to the gender restrictions placed by other Christian groups, these Quaker women were liberated by their heritage rather than limited by it. Conversely, they were more interested in responding to the needs of the times rather than reproducing copies of their ancestors’ visions of Truth. The energy that enabled early Friends to withstand devastating seventeenth-century English state persecutions flowed
through the veins of these sojourners laboring for equal educational access in profoundly hostile environments.

The most hardy of these Friends were not as interested in managing others as in being faithful to the movement of the Spirit in their midst—in the midst of grinding poverty, ignorance, and continued racial hatred and persecution—in the midst of begrudging and at times violent community reactions—in the midst of unsettling, sweeping economic shifts—and in the midst of lukewarm, suspicious acceptance into Quaker fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

Craigo-Snell’s desire for more analysis is valid. I have often wondered what might come from a dissertation approach to the material at hand, rather than a master’s thesis. A more thorough understanding would certainly require a broader knowledge of the cross-disciplines of public education, African American and women’s studies. She and Hamm both remarked upon my defense of the racial attitudes of nineteenth-century Quakers, against Jean Soderlund’s criticism in chronicling the resistance of Friends to encourage black monthly meetings and to identify and support the spiritual strengths surely evident in gifted and intelligent African Americans emerging from Friends’ schools prior to the Civil War.

However, recent visits to my childhood home in Southampton County, Virginia, continue to leave me stunned at the depth and intensity of racial prejudice in the year 2001. I contend again that the desire of nineteenth-century Quakers to grapple at all with monumental racial issues that continue to divide post-modern families, communities, economic and religious structures still place nineteenth-century Friends as far advanced in race relations when compared with other Christian denominations. That Friends in Indiana would publish a racially sensitive primer for both black and white students in the early 1800s is indicative of the desire of Friends to promote the dignity of the human soul, whatever color of skin it happened to dwell therein.

Has any other Christian movement prior to the twentieth century, equaling the historic position of Friends, officially recognized a white woman and a black man as ministers of the Gospel, members of the same worshipping fellowship, and encouraged and released them to travel in the ministry together? Alida Clark and Daniel Drew ministered around and about the Arkansas countryside from the 1870s
through the 1890s as great change agents in the lives of the people who heard and heeded their messages. Yet Clark would write with increasing cynical concern of the devaluing of competent and promising young women of color by their own people, by Friends, and by the American culture at large. She would surely not have been surprised that, by 1925 after Southland Friends Meeting was laid down, only African American men had been recorded as ministers of the Gospel.

It was as much a spiritual challenge then as it is now as modern Friends desire to thrive, yet face increasing membership decline, meeting losses, and reduced effectiveness. There is still “a great people to be gathered” for Truth in this nation that grows increasingly religiously diverse and even hostile to Christian tenets.

Our local high school in High Point, N.C. (with a population of around 85,000) includes students who speak over two dozen primary languages in the home. Dozens of permanent teaching posts go unfilled in our county schools. The educational venture is complicated, challenging, and for many a daily grind. Our meeting and another local Friends meeting have expanded our own school ministries in recent years, and the desire for Friends’ educational approach is increasing. Friends might yet combine passionate zeal for evangelism with the advancement of the mind to create new responses and alternatives as communities welcome the return of smaller faith-related schools for meeting educational goals.

If we hovered on the brink of racial wars at the close of the 1860s, which some scholars believed would have resulted in the complete annihilation of whites and blacks, surely the faithful call to work to improve race relations by Friends made a difference in each and every community, north or south, where Quaker schools were present. And, just as surely, faithful Friends today might continue to build bridges of understanding, healing, cooperation, and mutual respect throughout an American society that is more complex in its racial diversity and division than ever before, despite great legislative changes for equality. And, of course, American response to racial problems presents models for other nations struggling with overwhelming health, economic, and educational crises.

The stories in Gentle Invaders hopefully will inspire modern readers, both men and women, to be open to the pull and nudging of the Holy Spirit in their own lives of service. The dramatic witness of these women will hopefully continue to enthrall readers and create models of faithfulness for future change agents, whether through preaching, teaching, or social ministries.