



Interview with Sarah Eyerly

James Skidmore: My name is James Skidmore and I'm the Director of the Waterloo Center for German Studies, an institute at the University of Waterloo that promotes research into all aspects of the German-speaking world. To further this mandate, we've established the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize to recognize first-time authors whose scholarly work provides a substantial contribution to our understanding of German-speaking society. The shortlist for books published in 2020 has just been announced, and it is my great pleasure to interview each of these six finalists about their work. Today I'm speaking with Sarah Eyerly, author of *Moravian Soundscapes: A Sonic History of the Moravian Missions in Early Pennsylvania*, published by Indiana University Press. Sarah is Associate Professor, coordinator of Musicology and director of the Early Music program at Florida State University. Her research interests include performance practice, sound studies, German studies, Native American and Indigenous studies, and the geohumanities. Sarah, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

Sarah Eyerly: Thank you so much. I'm really honoured to be here.

JS: So let's unpack the title of your book, *Moravian Soundscapes*. First, who were the Moravians?

SE: The Moravians were a German Church community that formed around the estate of count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Saxony in the 1720s. Saxony at that time was right on the border of the Habsburg Empire, and members of the Unitas Fratrum, a Protestant group who were being persecuted by the Habsburgs, had actually come across the border and saw a sanctuary on Zinzendorf's estate. And, together, those refugees and Zinzendorf and some of his nearby Lutheran congregates formed a new Church, which they called the Renewed Brethren's Congregation or, as it came to be known in English, the Moravian Church.

JS: And what brought them then to Western Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s?

SE: Well, the Moravian Church actually sent missionaries out all over the world. They were the largest Protestant missionary enterprise in the 18th century in locations as far as Sri Lanka; they were in Algeria and South Africa, of course the British Isles in Greenland, along coastal Labrador, all the way south, through North America, along coastal areas, particularly British colonies and down into the Caribbean and Suriname in South America. So they came to Pennsylvania in the 18th century with the idea of opening a mission community among Delaware and Mohican peoples who are living in that area.

JS: So they'd come to proselytize, they'd come to be missionaries in the New World?

SE: Yes. They were some of the first Europeans really to settle along what at the time was the Pennsylvania-New Jersey border and what is now called the Lehigh Valley area. They were also some of the first Europeans to journey into the more interior parts of Pennsylvania and going westward toward the Susquehanna River.

JS: Okay. But the other part of the title is "Soundscape." So what is a soundscape?

SE: A soundscape is a sound environment for any particular place that you might be. If you just take a moment to listen to the sounds that are around you, [you'll see that] we're immersed in sound throughout



our entire life. In fact, we never know what silence is because our own bodies actually resonate with sound. And so, understanding how those sound environments impact us and our experiences of life is important for understanding life in the present day, and it's also important for understanding how people approach their lives in the past.

JS: I've never thought of our bodies resounding; although I have to admit, whenever it's around meal time my body resounds, I hear my stomach. That's interesting that you speak of the body as being an organ of sound. But why do we need a sonic history of Moravian missions or Moravian communities?

SE: Well, the Moravians are a really interesting community to study in terms of their religious practice related to sound. One of the ideas that Zinzendorf promoted, [which] he called the theology of the heart, was very much an idea that the emotional life of each Christian should be the centre point of their experience of faith; and sound was very much a part of how that was lived out. So Moravians sang hymns, for instance, throughout the whole day, not just in special times where they would gather for worship services. People would greet each other in song on the street; they would sing while they were doing daily tasks. They would also sing as a form of personal meditation. And there was actually a kind of a liturgical cycle akin to a monastic liturgical cycle that ran throughout the whole day from six o'clock in the morning until nine or ten at night, and hymns were a part of that. So these were people who really lived in sound and who sang out their faith, and so understanding their communities from that standpoint is really important.

JS: When you say they would greet each other with hymns, [was it] hymns that they all knew or would they try to speak but in musical tones?

SE: That's a great point. I like to consider it like a sung form of glossolalia. Glossolalia is speaking in tongues or, in other words, responding to the inspiration of the divine in the moment; that you sort of allow the divine to speak through you. And what the Moravians were doing is trying to cultivate that type of relationship with God, where God's voice could literally sing through them, gifting messages that were important for the community at any particular point in time. So a lot of these hymns were improvised. People actually studied poetry and how to compose poetry and how to do rhyme and meter, and they also studied music and music composition and music theory, so that they could actually learn how to improvise new music and text as a way of allowing God to sing through them.

JS: And would they ever speak to each other?

SE: Yes. I imagine there was a lot of speaking, and I suppose that is another important form of sound that we encounter throughout our lives. We sound out on messages to each other through speech as well. But I was just particularly interested in a religious community that would encourage people to sing as a regular part of their life in a way of actually communicating with each other.

JS: Yeah. That's so different from our own experience today, of course. I think that's really wonderful just to contemplate that. In your book, you write that the Moravian communities existed as much in sound as they did in space. That's a lovely turn of phrase. And I'm wondering: with such a lifestyle, if I can call it that, does that affect the identity of a community or construct the identity of a community?

SE: Yes. I think there is a direct tie [between] communal and social identity and sound. And that's one of the things I wanted to explore in the book's second chapter, which is called "Friends and Strangers," and really revolves around the Moravian community that was founded at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I wanted



to understand how people heard their community and how they understood whether they belonged within it or whether they were a stranger to it, apart from it, by listening.

SE: I had a doctoral student who was working with me here at Florida State University, and we did a couple of years of field work around Bethlehem, really just walking the land and understanding that place; both buildings and structures from the 18th-century community that still exist, and also mapping the ones that are no longer present. We did some acoustic studies then, so singing and using historic tools and musical instruments and recording their sounds and then making decibel readings at various distances from those sound sources, to understand how far the sound of that community travelled. Because, like a lot of European diaspora communities, sound was one way that you understood whether you were within the community or outside of it. If you were within the sound boundary or you could hear the community, you were still within the human space. But when you're outside of that sound boundary, you are no longer within that space.

SE: And we also wanted to understand how people used singing. This is a very complex hymn tradition that took a lot of time to learn, so people had to actually be initiated into it. They had to learn. So, if people could sing like a Moravian, they could demonstrate that they were really a part of the community. But travellers [or] visitors to the community could not participate in that hymn tradition, and thus they would not have a way of saying "I belong within the community" but would be peripheral to it or stranger to that community.

JS: In other communities, belonging might be determined by say, faith or belief. But with the Moravians, this singing element or this sound element was central to being able to belong.

SE: Yes. I think people could really hear whether someone belonged there or not. It was a really important way of understanding social and religious identity.

JS: What's wonderful with your book is that you've created a companion website where you've uploaded a lot of your recordings and you've used the ArcGIS software, or the online version, to create maps and to give people a sense of place and of sound in the community of Bethlehem. I wanted to play just a minute of one of your recordings from your website and then have you comment on it. I'll just queue up that.

SE: Yes. Absolutely.

JS: All right, so here it is. It's from the Gemeinhaus common area, and I'll play a minute of it. [sound]

JS: I love how we start with just the sounds of nature, if I can say that, the birds and the bees and what have you, and then we hear the voices or the murmurings of some people, and then that hymn begins. Can you tell us a little more about just that recording, what we're hearing?

SE: I think [we have to cultivate] the ability to understand what it would have sounded like to stand in this common area, which is a little grassy area between three sides of a building that kind of surrounded [it]; and then across the street there's kitchens where Moravian sisters would have been preparing food throughout the day, and there's also the kitchen gardens. So we tried to imagine: what are the different sounds that would be coming from these spaces? [For example, from] people inside the building; so we can hear one of the Moravian Single Sisters singing a hymn. I imagine that as being representative of someone engaged in their own personal spiritual practice, or maybe she's weaving or carding wool or doing some of the activities of daily life within that building. And then that building itself has stone walls.



So how would that sound travel through those stone walls into this outside grassy space? And then across the street with the kitchen gardens, of course.

SE: This soundscape is placed in the month of May in the midmorning in the year 1758. Understanding what time of day it is [and] what season of the year allowed me to understand what kinds of insects and birds would have been present in that space. So we thought really carefully in designing this soundscape about all of those factors and what they could teach you about Moravian life. And people listened really carefully to these environments. We all do as part of our daily lives. We know to recognize certain birds and insects, and they tell us about [the] time of year or the time of day. They give us important cues about the world around us. And it's also one way of really understanding sensory experiences in the past and really bringing those to life in the present.

JS: So you're recreating the sound as much as you can, or [rather] you're recreating what you imagine the sound could have been at that time. I think that's brilliant because it allows us to feel our way into the lives of the people and to try to understand that whole concept of understanding our world through sound. That's really an ingenious method, I think, of trying to bring that to your readers. Now you have a personal connection to all of this, don't you? To the whole story of the Moravians in Bethlehem.

SE: Yes. My ancestor, Johann Jacob Eyerly, he came to Pennsylvania in 1753. He was Moravian. He came to be a part of the mission and actually ended up living in Gnadenhütten, which was a little Delaware and Mohican Moravian town that was just north of Bethlehem along the Lehigh River. He got to know many of the Native Christian congregation through living there, and also those who were living in Bethlehem and later in a community in Nazareth where he would live later in his life. His son, Johann Jacob Eyerly Jr., ended up walking across Pennsylvania in 1794 to survey lands that had been granted to the Church in Western Pennsylvania, along Lake Erie, by the very early United States government. He kept a diary of his experiences walking through that forested landscape, encountering different people. And that was a tremendously valuable archival record to find that really allowed me to understand my own family's connection to this history over 250 years.

JS: You write in the book that you grew up in the area but you didn't really understand what you were living among, so to speak. That came later. [Did that come] through your education, or how did you come to it then later on?

SE: Yeah. It was only through doing the research for this book that I really came to understand that my family had this connection. [It] had been so long since my family emigrated from Germany that that history was kind of forgotten. It was only through the archival records that were kept by the Church that I was able to actually discover this connection again, and to understand that the farm and the place where I grew up in Pennsylvania had actually been visited by the Native Moravian congregation in 1772. That's something that I would have never known about that place. We always knew there was a small waterway on the edge of our farm named Moravian Run, and my father always wondered about the name of that, but we assumed maybe it was later waves of immigration out of Moravia that it came to be named that. But it was actually a stopping place for the Native Moravian congregation traveling through that part of the state in 1772. They camped there, and a young boy who was Delaware was buried there. And so, understanding that long connection with place and this sort of deeper history of the places that I had loved as a child and my home, was tremendously meaningful. And it was only my work as a historian that allowed me to find those histories and to understand those connections again.



JS: Now, of course, the Moravians weren't the first to settle in Lehigh Valley. Indigenous populations had been there for hundreds of years prior to European settlement. So what do we know about the interactions between Moravian settlers and local Indigenous populations?

SE: The first two Moravian missionaries to come to the British colonies in North America actually came to New York City and ended up meeting two Mohican men who had travelled there from their village along the Hudson River Valley. They ended up traveling back with those men to some small Mohican towns [like] Wechquetank that were nearby. And they just lived amongst those communities and began to offer basic medical care and to basically practice their faith in the midst of those communities. Soon after, some Mohican people did request to be baptized and ended up coming southward into Pennsylvania once the Bethlehem community was founded in 1741. So both Delaware and Mohican Christians ended up becoming a part of the Moravian Church. And it was a very lively and large part of the Moravian congregations in Pennsylvania. But there's also, I guess, the darker side to this history as well. The reason the Moravians were settling in Eastern Pennsylvania is because they were able to purchase lands from the Pennsylvania colonial government that had actually been seized through a fraudulent purchase of the land called the Walking Purchase.

JS: The Walking Purchase. Wasn't that the story [where] they said "we'll grant you so much land that you can walk in 24 hours?" But they then ran that as opposed to walking it. And so by doing that, they took more land than they would actually be allowed. Is that correct?

SE: That is correct. Part of the Walking Purchase was this 500-acre original tract of land that Bethlehem was founded on. There was actually a Delaware community there that was pushed out as a result of the Walking Purchase. And there was a Delaware community where Nazareth was founded as well. These were all Native American communities before they were Moravian. That is part of the church's history, too. And it's something that I wanted to really be honest about in writing the book and to consider the longer history of these places and to really recognize that these were places of human settlement in Pennsylvania. People had been living there for possibly 16,000 years. There's really ancient history in these places that, again, has not really been emphasized in historical scholarship about the state and its history.

JS: I guess you're contributing then to the unearthing of that history, of understanding more clearly just what it meant for a settlement to occur where people were already settled. The Indigenous populations that converted to the Moravian Church; were they fully accepted within the Church?

SE: They were in the 1740s and 50s. And that's one of the things that is so wonderful about the Moravian records: they contain great detail about the lives of individual members of those communities. There's actually quite a bit about individual Delaware and Mohican Christians and their activities within the community. There's a whole group of us who study Moravian mission history, and we can tell a lot about the Native Christians who are part of that community and how they were accepted within the Church. That did change beginning in the 1760s because the context around the Moravians shifted. And that's one of the things that I really wanted to highlight in the book: the contribution of German diasporic communities like Bethlehem to early American history. Because that's a part of the history that really has not been focused upon in previous historical scholarship, but also because it hasn't been focused upon because it was embedded in this larger British Atlantic system. The Moravians only had so much political and religious power in the context of British colonial Pennsylvania, and thus they were not able to protect



the Native members of their communities in the way that I know that they wanted to [based on] what I see expressed in the archival records. They just did not have the political power to do that because they themselves were seen as outsiders.

JS: Right. The last chapter of your book is titled "1782." What happened that year?

SE: I'll go back briefly ten years. Over a series of moves, the Native Christian community was moved farther and farther away from Bethlehem gradually because of the Seven Years' War and then also various conflicts leading up to the American Revolution. In 1772, that community was located about as far north in Pennsylvania as you can go, which is the northern branch of the Susquehanna River. That territory then became disputed between Connecticut and Pennsylvania because both of them believed they had a right to the land. There was a huge conflict over that particular area, and the congregation was pushed out and ended up walking across Pennsylvania to Delaware territories that were beyond the colonial boundary at that time, which would have been the Ohio River Valley and the Tuscarawas River Valley, now the state of Ohio. That was a crossroads of the American Revolution because the British were stationed at Fort Detroit and the Americans were stationed at Fort Pitt, or what's now called Pittsburgh. And the Moravian communities on the Tuscarawas River Valley lay right in between those.

SE: So what happened in 1782 is an American militia was sent out of Fort Pitt to investigate whether the Moravians, including the Germans who were part of the community and Native Christians as well, were actually sending military intelligence northward to the British at Fort Detroit. Some people were imprisoned at Detroit by the British at that time, and the Americans were very suspicious that the Moravians were sharing secrets. And what ended up happening was a horrible massacre; what was considered at the time and for many decades afterward the worst massacre of the American Revolution. The militia seized almost all of the Moravian members of those towns: 96 men, women, and children. And over a day, on March 8 1782, they killed 96 people and burned their bodies.

SE: This was a militia of 160 men. Only 18 of those men abstained from those atrocities. Afterwards, they returned to Western Pennsylvania. When the United States government was formed after the Revolution, George Washington actually ordered the new Congress to investigate that massacre but they could never find a single person who would admit to having actually been there. So they could not go any further with that investigation but it was considered a stain on the early American nation for many decades afterwards and well known about. But again, like many histories, it gradually became forgotten about. That's one thing I wanted to reveal at the end of the book: what was the ultimate fate of those Native members of the Moravian Church? What happened to them? And what was that history of what was known as the Gnadenhütten massacre?

JS: Right. And how they suffered at the hands of a geopolitical configuration between these two [powers], the British and the Americans. That's horrible. It's a very somber note to end the book on but it's an important one, I think; that we understand that that happened. And you having given us an introduction to Moravian life prior to that massacre makes that massacre all the more disheartening because we understand more about who these people actually were, and then we see them so senselessly slaughtered in that massacre. But we don't want to end the interview on a too somber note. So I'm wondering: books answer questions, but they raise new questions. So what new questions does your book raise?



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SE: Well, I hoped that my book would raise new questions about the great diversity of communities who were part of early American history, because so often those histories have focused only on British-affiliated communities or religious traditions or social institutions. I really wanted to highlight the contribution of Germans to early American history and also of Delaware and Mohican Moravians to that history; that those were really important contributions, to remember and to recognize that that is American history too. And that there are many people who helped to shape our country and its subsequent histories.

JS: And you've accomplished that, I think, quite clearly in your book. To conclude, I'm just curious: what are you currently reading that you're excited about?

SE: Well, I have a book here.

JS: [The title is] *Capturing Music*?

SE: Yeah. It's a story of musical notation, and I think it's interesting in the context of Moravian soundscapes. I'm really thinking about different technologies of writing and transmitting sound over time, how people have attempted to capture sound and share it with each other over time and space. And different musical notations accomplish that. But I hope that some digital technologies, like the ones that I used on the book's companion website might also accomplish that, too, in recordings and streaming media.

JS: Right. And it's by?

SE: By Thomas Forrest Kelly. He teaches a wonderful course on this topic. It's a beautiful book, it has lots of different illuminated manuscripts going all the way back to the Middle Ages.

JS: Nice. Good, well thanks for that. I do think your book has captured something as well. Perhaps not notation, but certainly you've captured a community through sound. That's really impressive, so congratulations on the book and thank you for bringing that to our attention and for bringing it to a larger audience. Thank you very much.

SE: Thank you. I really hope that I honoured those people who were part of this story in the 18th century by capturing them in the act of living. What do people care about? What did they hear and how did they experience their life? And what could we learn about that in the present?

JS: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

SE: Thank you so much.

JS: So you've been listening to Sarah Eyerly and she's been discussing her book – and I'll give you the title again – *Moravian Soundscapes: A Sonic history of the Moravian Missions in Early Pennsylvania*. We've included links to Sarah's website in the show notes, so do check those out. Thanks for listening.