"Relational Reading and Imagined Religious Community."

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Overview/Abstract

This paper is a historical piece that focuses on Methodism within an early American context. Specifically, it considers how Catherine Livingston experienced spiritual revival and renewal upon discovering Methodism, and how she fostered her budding spirituality in the year immediately following her conversion. Geographically distanced from a Methodist community during this time, Livingston engaged in reading practices that allowed her to develop a sense of relationality with other believers. Specifically, the act of reading allowed her to continually renew and revive her faith, deepened her commitment to sanctification, and underscored to her the importance of spiritual kinship. Her story thus sheds light on the central role that relationships—fictive as well as literal—play in establishing a living, vibrant, religious community.

Introduction

Catherine Livingston's spiritual consciousness developed in an emerging Evangelical world where texts, such as the Bible, prayer books, theological and devotional works functioned as powerful converting instruments. Such literature ignited Livingston's spiritual consciousness and fostered her desire to experiences God's grace. When her mother's servant introduced her to the writings of John Wesley shortly following her initial conversion experience in 1787, Livingston read voraciously, and became convinced that she should embrace Methodism. While many Methodists developed networks of fictive ties with like-minded brothers and sisters in the

gospel, the group's limited representation in the Hudson River Valley area of New York meant that Livingston had to continue relying upon an array of religious texts in order to fill her spiritual emptiness.[1] The act of reading, pondering upon, and writing about devotional literature and theological works allowed her to imagine herself into a religious community and to thereby create ties with a transatlantic network of Saints.[2] Indeed, religious texts fostered, cultivated, and nurtured her ongoing religious life and made her a participant in what Candy Gunther Brown calls a "textual community"—an imagined community that "connected authors, publishers, texts, and readers in an interlocking 'web of relationships.'"[3]

Historians have long emphasized the rise of spiritual "individualism" in the context of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and have routinely stressed that women converts became introspective and tended to isolate themselves from unbelieving family members and friends. In this presentation, I argue for the relational rather than the isolated nature of these women's religious experiences. Specifically, I focus on the diary entries Livingston composed immediately following her conversion experience in 1787 and throughout 1788—a seemingly isolated period of her life—in order to demonstrate that her early participation in textual communities reveals how the printed word fostered significant spiritual ties in early transatlantic evangelicalism. The countless hours Livingston devoted to reading, and writing about the things she read, nurtured her spiritual growth, and gave her a sense of belonging to a larger spiritual community that transcended time and space. This relationality helped sustain her during times of loneliness, helped her draw closer to the divine, and

[1] CLG Autobio 16
[2] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Mission for Life – argues for texts as converting instruments.
[3] Candy Gunther Brow, the Power of the Word, 9–10.

prepared her for future relationships. Reading also served as a sanctifying act—being a part of an imagined religious community fostered Livingston's desire for and understanding of holiness. Indeed, it was the act of reading that enriched her spiritual life and made her not only a more devout member of the Methodist community, but also allowed her to become a part of a community composed of authors and readers who were drawn together by sacred texts.

Background

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, an explosion of printed material enabled people on both sides of the Atlantic to engage in reading practices that fostered the exchange of ideas and cultivated meaningful conversations within the context of real and imagined communities—conversations within which Livingston played a part. Her family's privileged circumstances meant that she had been well educated, had ready access to a variety of imported, and thus expensive, books and other forms of print, and leisure time that could be devoted to reading. As a child, Livingston, along with her siblings, was instructed by a school madam in a special room in their manor house, Clermont, that had been reserved for such purposes. She was also fortunate to come of age during a time when elite women's education was being expanded beyond the arts of the needle (a skill that came to be seen as a complement to rather than the heart of female education). As a result, female students were exposed to subjects once deemed male-oriented. Livingston, for example, had the opportunity to study the same subjects as her brothers, including: science, French, classics and Enlightenment philosophy.[4] The books she read cultured, refined, and sharpened her mind. She

[4] Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 66, 69.

was, her daughter Mary Rutherford Garrettson proclaimed, "bred to the highest refinement and best culture possible on this side of the Atlantic in [her] time."[5]

The educational opportunities Livingston had as a young woman prepared her for her future participation in a religious community that valued reason as well as experience and feelings. In early America, female academies and seminaries began to encourage women to refine their "reasoning and rhetorical faculties," or, in other words, to embrace the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason. This did not mean, however, that affections were discounted. They, too, were deemed a crucial part of human development. Therefore, in addition to refining her reasoning powers, Livingston would have been encouraged to become a woman of sensibility—to "look within" and to "connect with the empathetic self."[6] Like other members of the transatlantic elite, she learned to honor feeling as well as rational approaches—skills that would shape and nurture her spiritual as well as her intellectual development and that would influence her reading interests.[7]

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sensibility had gained negative connotations in Great Britain: it was detached from reason and associated with excessive and effeminate emotion. Americans, in the wake of their independence, however, did not dismiss the affections, but rather interpreted them differently than their British counterparts. While one form of sensibility was declared false, or emotionally self-indulgent, another was described as being true, or grounded in rational discernment; it was "fortified by moral strength and poised to take action in civil society." Livingston, then, was taught to value a discerning mind

[5] "Mary Rutherford Garrettson" National Repository, 341.
[6] Mary Kelley, 16-17.
[7] *Ibid*, 18-19.

and a reasonable heart while in her youth—combining affection and reason was quite natural for a daughter of the colonial elite. Her eventual attraction to Methodism, at least in part, could be traced to her educational background: Wesley's interpretation of Lockean philosophy, his belief in the importance of spiritual as well as natural senses, mirrored Locke's noteworthy influence on eighteenth-century American culture. Since Livingston would have read about the importance of reason and experience, she willingly made space for the experiential elements of religion that connected her to a Savior, and by extension, a community of believers.[8]

As someone whose personal and social development had been shaped by her reading practices throughout childhood, Livingston continued to be drawn to acts of spiritual literacy as an adult seeking religion, a practice that one scholar has described as "regular, repeated practices of reading and writing that occur in the private, communal, and institutional life of the spirit."[9] Her insatiable appetite to read and ponder upon the things she read, shaped and impacted her experiences as she engaged in religious seeking. This appetite also prepared her for her introduction to Methodism and its place within a transatlantic evangelical community. Convinced that reading and writing led to spiritual experiences, John Wesley promoted the same kind of reading practices that Livingston had been taught to engage in—reading practices that reflected the eighteenth century shift from the Renaissance classical approach to a *belles lettristic* approach. Indeed, rather than viewing literary texts as a means to inventing their own ideas, readers began to see literary works as "texts from which meaning can be extracted."[10] For the religious seeker, then, books modeled spiritual living and encouraged them to view

[8] *Ibid*, 16-20.
[9] Tolar Burton defines 2.
[10] Vicki Tolar Burton, 27. Dana Harrington, 249-51.

reading as a means to "spiritual development and Christian experience" in individual and collective contexts.[11]

Methodism and Reading

Upon receiving the works of Wesley from her mother's housekeeper—a woman likely impacted by Wesley's efforts to encourage spiritual literacy for men and women across class lines—Livingston discovered a theology and reading practices that resonated with her. Her later declaration that Wesley's writings "opened to me the way to get religion and the only way to keep it when attained" suggests that she not only found doctrinal truth in his words, but also felt drawn to his emphasis on spiritual literacy. Livingston's subsequent diary entries make it clear that Wesley's discussion of the possibility of holiness, perfection, and unity with the divine piqued her curiosity. Specifically, his words expanded her understanding of conversion to include sanctification as well as justification, the overarching theme of her spiritual diaries, as suggested by the following passage: "I find myself more than ever engaged for Sanctification. I desire to rest in nothing short of this great privilege. I want to serve my God with a perfect heart and a willing mind. I have long seen a great beauty in this doctrine and long to bear witness to the truth of it."[12] Wesley's writings also hinted at the importance of relationships, human-to-human as well as human to divine, in shaping personal spirituality. The sentiments captured in Wesley's declaration that "the gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness" seems to have left a lasting impression on Livingston.[13] Christian fellowship, in all its varieties, served as an essential part of the sanctification process. And

[11] Vicki Tolar Burton, 27.
[12] Dec 1, 1791
[13] Chilcoate 48.

reading functioned as a spiritual act that had the capacity to foster ties and form communities of Saints who were committed to the unfolding of sanctified lives.

The relational engagement Livingston experienced while reading from the writings of Wesley seems to have immediately provided her with a sense of spiritual kinship and highlighted to her the importance of belonging to an extensive religious community. The first indication that she recognized the importance of fictive ties comes when she declares Wesley her "spiritual father"—a role he assumed, and sought, within the transatlantic Methodist community.[14] While reading his words, Livingston, for the first time, entered an imaginary conversation with a figure who understood her spiritual needs, ideas, and feelings. He became to her a father, a mentor, a spiritual guide. By developing a textual relationship with Wesley, Livingston discovered a spiritual home—an imagined space that provided her with opportunities to connect to a community of fellow believers. As she continued to read from the works Wesley wrote, and from material composed by other religious writers, some of which Wesley actively promoted, she became a part of an imagined conversation that connected her to a vast Christian community. The printed word stopped geographic distance from separating the family of God from meaningful relationships with their spiritual kin.

Because Wesley's emphasis on shared textual practices—he encouraged his followers to read the many works he authored, including sermons, essays, and letters, while also providing suggested reading lists for them—spoke to Livingston's sensibilities, it also made space for her to participate in her religion, even when separated from fellow believers. Convinced that

[14] Autobio; Anna Lawrence, 171; Even after his death in 1791—Livingston mourns his death in her diary—Anna Lawrence explains, "Wesley continued to be an almost mythical figure in American Methodism." Lawrence, 216.

regular textual engagement could foster spiritual edification and growth, and that memoirs and conversion narratives could serve as models of piety, Wesley made theological and devotional literature affordable and readily available. Over the course of time he authored, edited and published countless titles—eventually, 1500 imprints would bear his name.[15] As a part of his impressive output, Wesley published inexpensive edited works of authors from a number of religious traditions, including Catholics, Lutherans, Scots, Puritans, Anglicans, and American theologians like Jonathan Edwards.[16] Wesley's emphasis on an informal canons of text encouraged fellow believers to establish a textual community, thus shifting the center of religion beyond the local congregation and into an expansive realm that made space for all believers. For Livingston books abated some of the loneliness she felt in the literal spaces of home and community by allowing her to become a part of a network bound together through literary practices encouraged by Wesley. Reading from a wide range of Christian books allowed Livingston to engage in intimate conversations about religious subjects that mattered to her. Books, and the relationships books fostered, both literal relationships formed between those sharing, exchanging, and discussing texts, and the imagined relationships formed between reader and author, or between reader and reader, were of immediate import to Livingston's spiritual journey as a Methodist.

After embracing Methodism, Livingston, like others drawn to the tradition, often engaged in hours of private devotional reading, meditation and prayer, all of which she carefully detailed in her spiritual diary in an effort to capture the imagined conversations in

[15] Jonathan Yeager, 92-3.
[16] Yeager, 92-93.

which she participated. Specifically, devotional literature, sermons, theological works, scripture, and family manuscripts, such as diaries and letters, consumed her attention. In considering Livingston's 1787 diary, Diane Lobody observed that it is "riddled with references to the books she was reading, but is almost silent as far as living, breathing, immediately present people are concerned. . . . the people who talked with her, affected her, and ministered to her did so through sermons and theological works."[17] For Livingston, these texts created and fostered significant and meaningful relationships with the divine, as well as the living and with the dead. Reading the Bible, for example, enabled the relationship with God that she had been seeking and hoping to nurture. "I sought my God in his Word, and found him every Where present," she declared.[18] Reading scripture bridged the gap between divine and mortal, and, Livingston explained, helped her "lose sight of my little self; and make nearer Aproaches to him, each day, each hour that I lived."[19] Perhaps influenced by what McManners calls "the roots of the active, mediating Enlightenment Christ, in the figure of the friend," that emerged in the context of devotional piety of the seventeenth century, Livingston came to view God as "my Benefactor; and my friend," and, ultimately, as a being with whom she could have a deeply personal and slightly mystical relationship with.[20] Her reading practices seem to have involved the body as well as the soul; she engaged her entire self in the transcendent act of reading. Her diaries suggest that total communion with the divine involved more than just learning about him, but actually allowed her to bask in his presence and experience his love and mercy in an almost

[17] Lobody, 52.
[18] Diary, Book 1, November 28, 1787
[19] Diary, Book 1, November 30, 1787.
[20] McManners, 383; Diary, Book 1, November 30, 1787

tangible, albeit figurative, way.[21] An active rather than a passive reader, Livingston fully engaged in fictive conversations with the authors whose work she read and became entirely committed to worshipping and uniting with the divine. She found "much confidence and refreshment" in the written word.[22]

Livingston's diary suggests that she believed that the act of reading allowed her to become one with God. In an entry composed in November 1787, she both noted that she had "past my morning with my God" and also that she had read "one of the finest sermons" written by the Scottish Arminian Henry Scougal, who was known for his keen ability to capture the very essence of Christianity in his theological works. In reading about personal piety from the words Scougal penned, Livingston not only found a kindred spirit in the author, whose views on affliction resonated with her—particularly during a time when she felt isolated, or afflicted, because of her conversion—but she also discovered that the very practice of reading religious material, beyond the Bible, could give her access to the "presence" of God, as she put it.

As a new convert, Livingston continued to read an array of texts, specifically devouring the works of St. Augustine, John Wesley, and Phillip Doddridge. These Christian authors not only invited her into God's presence—they invited all readers to become form a spiritual community that could dwell in God's presence together. From Wesley's journal, for example, she learned of the powerful religious experiences that he had observed amongst the Moravians in Germany. His notion that fellowship should unite all Christians, even despite differences,

[21] Robert Orsi, History and Presence.
[22] 28 Jan 1787

seems to have settled upon Livingston as she read his words.[23] As time went on, she would slowly develop feelings of friendship for and a desire for fellowship with other Christians. These feelings were fostered further as Livingston read from the New Testament and the translated work off Herman Witsius, while also continuing to read from Scougal. As she pondered upon and wrote about Biblical passages, her growing interest in relationships becomes increasingly evident. All those that love God, she noted, would experience a delightful union with him.[24] While many previous diary entries focused on Livingston's relationship with the divine, this observation highlighted God's union with all who love him, a point that captures the possibility of such individuals being united together as a community of believers. This theme continued into her diary the following day, as Livingston reflected upon the "exalted friendship" and "charity" expressed in Paul's "tender" letter to Philemon, and commented on "Prophitess Miriam" leading the children of Israel to victory. Reading from official and unofficial Christian canons, Livingston began to see herself as belonging to an expansive network of spiritual kin. Her spiritual pilgrimage resembled the pilgrimages made by those she read about—she was on the same journey as her imagined Christian friends.

Being a part of a community of writers and readers did not mean perfect agreement on all religious subjects. Figuratively speaking, Livingston engaged in lively discussions and debates about religious doctrine, practice, and experience. She read theological works critically; Livingston's spiritual diary did not merely contain a summary of what she read, but discussed and hinted at the theological conversations, and on occasion, debates, she had entered into. In

[23] Diary, Book 1, December 9, 1787
[24] December 15, 1787

her spiritual diaries she made it clear that she did not agree with everything she read. While she gleaned meaning from the work of Witsius, who remained one of her favorite authors for years, she also disagreed with his strong Calvinist views, and thus challenged several of his theological observations in her diary. For example, as an Arminian, Livingston quite emphatically challenged Witsius's views on the doctrine of election, noting that she was "fully convinced by the Word of God"—or, her own reading and interpretation of the Bible—"that those who indure to the End, are the Elect." Evidence that one could fall from grace, she contended, is found in the "instance of Judas." But Livingston also agreed with many of Witsius's observations, noting that another part of of his work is "beautifully proved by the Old, and New Testament."[25] As Livingston's diary's demonstrate, reading served as a space where she could think within but also outside of the views being proposed by theologians and other male figures. In short, reading allowed her to express her own views rather than being forced to conform to formal authority. As a readers who inhabited an imagined religious community, she could enter into discussion and debate with the author rather than simply accepting what the author has to say. Reading relationships thus offered Livingston a theological community where she could enact and understand spiritual experience and divine presence, while also inviting her to become a part of sacred narrative.

As a part of her devotional exercises, Livingston also recorded and reflected upon hymns throughout the pages of her diary—texts that captured the unfolding of the Christian journey towards holiness. She was particularly drawn to those written by Isaac Watts and John Wesley—noting that their hymns "showed my wants, and What I ought to

[25] 23 Dec 1787

pray for."[26] Livingston, like other Evangelicals, found spiritual guidance while reading hymns. The appeal of hymns can be explained, in part, by the fact that their messages, and the words used to convey their messages, had universal appeal. Hymns crossed class and denominational lines, thus giving them the powerful capacity to foster community, indeed, Candy Gunter Brown argues, " hymns extended the reach of the evangelical textual community."[27] Hymns infused spiritual power into a variety of contexts, thus sacrilizing daily and ordinary experiences and encouraging spiritual intimacy amongst believers who felt committed to attaining a sanctified state.[28]

In addition to reading from printed materials that connected her to a world of fictive kin, Livingston also read from family manuscripts—a reading practice that helped her feel connected to the spiritual lives of her ancestors. She read, for example, Dutch sermons translated by "Grand papa" as well as pious letters from her grandfather's copybook. Seeing the level of religious commitment demonstrated by her own family members comforted Livingston, and helped her form a spiritual relationship with the deceased.

Livingston further highlighted her desire to foster kinship ties when she wrote about receiving from "Mama a large bundle of letters from the Best of Fathers, and the worthiest of Men." As she poured over the words her deceased father had written, she felt that they "lifted my soul above the world, and filled my heart with gratitude to the most beloved, the most respectable of Characters, a father in heaven."[29] The Father in Heaven to which Livingston refers is not the divine father she calls by the same name—but rather a

[26] Diary December 23, 1787
[27] Gunther Brown, 191-2.
[28] Flint 3
[29] Mary 26, 1788

recognition, indeed, a sense of relief, that her mortal father is also in heaven, watching over her, and communicating with her through the powerful manuscripts that he had left behind. So delighted was she that, she observed in her diary, "After the duties of the morning I gathered my sisters and read my Fathers letters. What a St. and Christian did I find him. "[30] Feeling a deep sense of connection to her father—a spiritual connection that could transcend the divide between heaven and earth, Livingston invited her sisters into a space of Christian fellowship. She shared their father's words with them, hoping that they, too, could feel his spiritual impact—she wanted them to feel the powerful connection that she felt, and thus become a part of the spiritual community to which she had been drawn. The spiritual separation she felt from her family dissipated as she came to know more about their religious lives. Her budding awareness of their spiritual pilgrimages initiated her desire to share the gospel with her living family members, rather than merely isolating herself from them.

Through the means of the written word Livingston created a powerful network of imagined spiritual ties. Reading, praying, writing, and later dreaming and envisioning became relational acts that allowed her to encounter a divine presence and to feel connected to Christians, living and dead, on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, Lobody notes, the reading Livingston engaged in, amongst other things, fostered "immediate experience," serving as "one means to experiencing the transcendence and immanence of God." Reading provided a quiet, liminal space, where deeply personal relationships could be formed—it helped Livingston unite with the divine and create a network of ties with other readers. Simultaneously, the material she read shaped how she viewed God and

[30] May 26, 1788

Christ in the context of friendship, and how she viewed the nature of spiritual kinship. Noted Lobody, "[Livingston] was not so much a person moving toward a goal as a woman growing in relationship. . . . the language she employed instead was saturated with symbols of relationship."[31] Reading indeed expanded her views. It would, in turn, foster visions – experiences through which Livingston gained a sense of a mediating and friendly Godhead. The act of reading, and forming fictive ties, then, helped Livingston recognize the need for additional spiritual relationships—relationships she developed and fostered over the course of her long life.

[31] Lobody 107