

**The Reluctant Pietist: Boston King and Transatlantic Methodism**

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Paper presented at the  
Northeast American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies  
2007 Annual Meeting  
October 26 session on 'Slaves and Communities of Faith'  
Dartmouth College  
Hanover, New Hampshire

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“It is by no means an agreeable task to write an account of my Life,” begins Boston King’s *Memoirs*. That autobiographical diffidence communicated itself successfully. King’s autobiography is a little-read but major late eighteenth-century transatlantic memoir of an ex-slave from South Carolina. He became a former British soldier who fought against the American Revolution, joined the British evacuation of ex-slaves to Nova Scotia, and eventually became a Methodist missionary in Sierra Leone. Originally serialized in *The Methodist Magazine* in 1798, the memoir is as much conversion narrative as an account of his early life under slavery and subsequent conditions of life in Nova Scotia. King’s *Memoirs* are comparable in this sense to those of his fellow minister in Nova Scotia, John Marrant and his *Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings* (1785). Both are mixed-genre narratives where secular events – in Marrant’s case, an Indian captivity tale – function to punctuate what is basically a story of religious conversion. While the pietistic tradition deeply informed many late eighteenth-century African American narratives, such as those of Olaudah Equiano or Jeffrey Brace, pietism informs the King and far more popular Marrant narratives even more heavily.<sup>2</sup> That evangelical pietism, as we shall see, is both a point of great interest and of critical entanglement.

First, we need to supply a brief outline of King’s narrative. The story that King tells is especially unusual in that it does not conform to histories that describe the American Revolution as a story of freedom: Boston King gained his freedom by running away from his master and fighting for the British. The American revolutionaries were a threat to King’s hard-won freedom, especially when the surrendering British evacuated

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<sup>2</sup> Re popularity, see *Signifying Monkey*, p. 142.

New York City in 1783. Along with thousands more black refugees, to avoid re-enslavement King accepted a British offer of ship transport and resettlement in Nova Scotia.

King was a profoundly devout man; after initial resistance towards and rejection of religious faith, he became deeply involved in the intense devotion that characterized the black communities of Nova Scotia. He converted to Methodism and this narrative testifies to his spiritual struggles during that process. To support himself and his wife, King worked as a fisherman, carpenter, and general laborer while living in Birchtown, then the largest free black settlement in North America. He became a church leader and assumed pastoral responsibility for a small chapel, or congregation, in nearby Preston.

Many of the resettled ex-slaves and 'Black Loyalists' were disappointed with their new lives in Nova Scotia, lives that were characterized by poverty, hunger, cold, and anti-black racism. When British reformers, with government support, organized the Sierra Leone Company to establish a new colony as a colonization project for former slaves, the black communities of Nova Scotia readily responded to recruitment promises. Because the communities were so intensely church-based, entire congregations left together. In 1792, in a well-known history, a flotilla of 15 ships carried nearly 2,000 emigrants to Africa.

King's wife took ill and died from fever shortly after their arrival in Sierra Leone, as did many new settlers. King worked for the Company and taught native Africans in his available time. In 1794 the Sierra Leone Company proposed to send him to England to improve his education so that he could return as a teacher, and King spent two years at a Methodist school in Bristol. King's narrative never mentions any early literacy and it is

reasonable to believe that this was his first real engagement with attaining literacy. There are textual grounds to believe that he received assistance in writing his *Memoirs*, which may have been along the lines of a school-leaving project encouraged by the Kingswood school for its possible contribution to missionary work. Upon his return to Africa, he spent the remaining six years of his life as a Company agent and school-teacher in Sierra Leone, where he died together with his second wife in 1802.

I will address two following questions much too briefly, for a fuller exploration would require more time than is possible here. First, because the Antislavery Literature Project has published this new digital edition of King's *Memoirs*, a teaching guide and videos in order to encourage inclusion of lesser-used eighteenth-century materials in syllabi, we will ask about contemporary readings and classroom uses of this narrative. Second, we will explore King's *Memoirs* as a model of transatlantic culture based on evangelical Methodism. As I hope to demonstrate, these two questions bear direct relation to how we can engage with King's *Memoirs* in order to gain a clearer understanding of the historical roles of evangelical Christianity in readings of late eighteenth-century African American culture.

One of the opening issues upon encountering King's autobiographical narrative concerns why it remains so little-known. More to the point for college classrooms, why is Boston King near-absent from syllabi? Like so many other minority-voice texts with which we have subsequently become more familiar and later gained greater critical respect, we encounter this text only under the designation of a 'minor narrative'. Perhaps the most knowledgeable scholar on Black Loyalist history, James W. St. G. Walker, more than forty years ago wrote "Boston King's *Memoirs* was not a major literary or historical

work, but through his reminiscences it is possible to gain an impression of the life of the ordinary black loyalist during the American revolution and in early Nova Scotia.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, from this perspective the importance of King’s *Memoirs* lies in the contribution it provides as documentary understanding of the daily existence of a black man during the Revolutionary era and later as a refugee in Canada. A similar perspective attaches to the selection of King’s *Memoirs* reprinted in one recent college history text, *America Firsthand: From Settlement to Reconstruction*,<sup>4</sup> which reproduces a segment under the heading “Changing Sides” in order to illustrate the attractions of British promises of freedom for black slaves who escaped to join their forces. Yet while useful as historical illustration, this is a problematic choice in relation to the text as a whole inasmuch as less than a quarter deals with King’s military service with the British forces. In her 2006 book, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Freedom*, Cassandra Pybus provides a much more comprehensive discussion of Boston King than has appeared to date. Nonetheless, the basic treatment of King’s *Memoirs* as an historical reference document prevails in nearly all recent literature that cites it.

This brings us to a second explanation for the absence of holistic readings of King’s *Memoirs*, that being what I shall call ‘genre misassignment’. The *Memoirs* are, as mentioned, in largest part a spiritual conversion narrative containing extensive relations of King’s initially difficult encounters with religious belief and then whole-hearted embrace of salvational faith. He describes even the secular events of his life within this

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<sup>3</sup> George W. Brown et al., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966, 469.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Marcus, David Burner, and Anthony Marcus, *America Firsthand: From Settlement to Reconstruction*, vol. 1 (7th ed.). New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007, 117-122.

retrospective evangelical frame. As a minister, King wrote this text primarily as a spiritual autobiography, whereas contemporary readers approach it almost entirely as social history documentation. Quite simply, we do not read the *Memoirs* for the purposes towards which King wrote. Extracting only slavery-related texts from King's narrative involves an arguable disservice. William Andrews points out that spiritual autobiographies "review the past through the eyes of the metamorphosed, empowered self unencumbered by race, gender and caste."<sup>5</sup> Slave narrators, on the other hand, concentrate on race, gender and caste in chattel slavery as ends to themselves. The very point of King's narrative is to frame and present a spiritually empowered new self; recitation of personal history serves only to provide background. The conversion narrative genre offers King an opportunity to embrace a divine gift of freedom for his soul, rather than only for his body as in a slave narrative.

When we read and teach the religious passages of another latter eighteenth-century Methodist convert, Olaudah Equiano, frequently we do so by contextualizing his professions of faith within a political necessity for ingratiating himself to a white British readership that would presumably be impressed by his adoption of Christianity (and we ignore that many British readers would have been less than impressed with Equiano's choice of a dissident minority church). A half-dozen years ago Adam Potkay cogently critiqued precisely this mode of selective non-reading of Equiano's religious content, although there is no need to adopt his use of that critique as a stick with which to beat post-colonial theory in general.<sup>6</sup> Potkay's basic argument is as applicable to African

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<sup>5</sup> William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: the First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> Potkay, "History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2001) 4: 601-624, esp. 608-611.

American pietists such as Boston King or John Marrant as to Equiano. Potkay observed that these texts can bring to life “some of the religious experiences, biblical hermeneutics, and religious politics” crucial for student comprehension, and we need to appreciate eighteenth-century black writers “on something at least approaching their own terms – terms which are, historically, colonial, oratorical, and Christian.” (611) Moreover, adding to Potkay’s list of colonial, oratorical, and Christian, that understanding must extend to the powerful and interacting presences of transatlanticism and Africa in African American writing. To appreciate and understand the evangelical piety does not entail relinquishing critical evaluation of King’s willingness in later years to function as a willing servant for British colonialism in Sierra Leone.

Next, how did King’s *Memoirs* serve as a model of transatlantic culture based on evangelical Methodism? Eighteenth-century Methodism was engaged in intensive evangelical expansion on both sides of the northern Atlantic. Black Methodism was part of that movement but had distinctly different goals of auto-emancipation from the white-dominated church. King’s narrative evidences little sense of participating in the Methodist movement, although he, Moses Wilkinson, Freeborn Garrettson and other black Nova Scotians created the first major Methodist presence in Africa. They were not the easiest of new subjects for the colonial government to address. Zachary Macaulay, governor of Sierra Leone, while deeply religious himself, found himself driven to exasperation by the pious zeal of the Methodist chapels. He wrote that “The lives of many of them are very disorderly, and rank antinomianism prevails among them.”<sup>7</sup> The “not very respectable” congregation of Moses Wilkerson, which expanded greatly with a

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<sup>7</sup> George Otto Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1881, 17.

revival in its early years in Sierra Leone, was particularly troublesome in its governance. They were, according to Macaulay, “a firm body of malcontents, united under leaders notorious for their discontent.”<sup>8</sup> There was good reason for this discontent given their use as pawns in a colonization project that sought to serve as a model for the expulsion and resettlement of African Americans and African Canadians.

However, Methodist communal religious practices had already developed as a means of survival in the tenuous social conditions and racial antagonism that black immigrants faced in Nova Scotia. These practices expressed a complex relationship between individual spiritual struggle and communal struggle, one that bends and shapes individualism. The task that is not agreeable to King in the *Memoirs*, and which he states in his opening line, lies in the individuation of autobiographical narrative, given that it is tight-knit small religious communities that pursue a collective salvation. An individual promise to serve God is only the beginning of service; it needs to be extended through collective godliness, prayer, and mutual faith. For King, an individual is the weakest link in a community of faith, quite different from later nineteenth-century US slave narratives that emphasize individualism. Unlike these narratives, Boston King is concerned to engage sin and its expiation more than the institution of slavery.

If on one hand the spirituality of King’s *Memoirs* ultimately functions to mask compliance with European colonial projects in Africa in the name of Christian salvation, on the other hand he pursues a religious model rooted within concern for individual confrontation with a sinful human nature and consequent pursuit of salvation. As an autobiographer, he evidences little concern for larger social, national or international forces, even as he participated in the American Revolution followed by resettlement first

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<sup>8</sup> Viscountess Knudsford, *Life and Letters of Zachary Macaulay*. London: Edward Arnold, 1900, 84.

in Nova Scotia and then Sierra Leone. It is individual and congregational, rather than colonial crises, which concern King. The complaint lodged by governor Macaulay against his new subjects, seemingly indistinguishable between Methodists and antinomianists, was thus that they were not behaving as proper colonial subjects, being far more concerned with their congregations than his interests. As a simultaneously colonized and colonizing subject, Boston King and his co-religionists made the best of a poor situation and placed their concern for religious salvation before that of a colonial project.

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