

The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Montréal

Afua Cooper

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Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angélique* tells the story of Marie-Joseph Angélique who was tried in court and condemned to death for allegedly setting fire to Montréal in 1734. It is a superb historical account of life in New France and the role of slavery in the colony. It was nominated for the highly prestigious Governor General's Award for Non-fiction in 2006.

Marie-Joseph Angélique's life story is, Cooper claims, the oldest North American slave narrative on record. That record is the transcripts of her trial, housed in Les Archives Nationales Québec. Cooper takes these transcripts and builds around them in a vivid historical account of early 18th century New France. Who was Angélique? Angélique is on record as telling the court that she was born in Portugal, and at some point she was sold to a Flemish trader who brought her to New England. It was there, in 1725, that she was purchased by François Poulin de Francheville and brought to Montreal. She was estimated to be 29 years old when she was put to death on the public gallows in 1734. (Her hangman, Mathieu Leveille, was himself a slave.) She was convicted on circumstantial evidence in a justice system that declared defendants guilty unless proven innocent, by a court whose members had all suffered losses in the fire and by 24 vengeful witnesses, including a 5 year old girl. Angélique's life ended according to the dictates of state - sanctioned violence: her legs were smashed to smithereens through torture, she was hung on the gallows, her body was burned and then as a final act of abasement, her ashes were scattered to the four winds.

One of the challenges of writing history is that it is very difficult to make distant historical figures three dimensional. Their lives are recorded in the third person, unless primary documents (such as letters or diaries) exist. Certainly for someone as marginal in the historical record as Angélique, the challenge is even greater. While the transcripts of the trial provide us with what are reportedly Angélique's own words, at best, they are the court scribe's rendition of her answers to questions put to her by the court. Cooper addresses this problem by putting Angélique at the centre of her own story. She brings her accomplished historian's eye to this task: bringing to life the slave trade in Portugal, the Netherlands, New England and New France; the town of Montréal, life in its domiciles, and the details of the town's burning. In addition to the trial transcripts, Cooper consults documents of the Catholic church, the colonial government and the Francheville family, as well as New England newspapers and various first person accounts of the fire. Cooper describes her account as "part slave narrative, part historical analysis, part biography and part historical archaeology" (p. 12). Into this vivid history she places Angélique - surmising and musing what the bondswoman might have been thinking and feeling about the events that engulfed her short life. She transforms Angélique from a hateful and vengeful object of history into a woman with desires,

losses and longings. A woman who chafed in bondage and sought (at a horrific cost) her right to freedom.

According to Cooper, France was a major player in the slaving economy of 18th century Europe. Like other colonizing nations, France encouraged slavery in its colonies as a structuring element of colonial life. It had its “Code Noir” that legalized slavery and dictated its terms (p. 75). In New France, slave holders were required to baptize their slaves into the Catholic faith. Angélique was thus baptized. Her name, Marie-Joseph Angélique, dates from that baptism. We do not know what name she had before that event. She was named “Marie-Joseph” after her godmother (the sister of her mistress). “Angélique” was also the name of her owners’ only child who died when she was an infant. She was not given a last name, for as property, she had no right “to belong”. Cooper writes: “The name Marie-Joseph Angélique, a popular female slave name, symbolized her transformation from non-Catholic believer to Catholic believer” (p. 161). It marked her as the property of a French Catholic entrepreneur and in so doing, wiped away any trace of her birth name. Through her research Cooper uncovers the fiction of Marie-Joseph Angélique’s name and in doing so, reminds us of the ways in which the practices of slavery have always been acts of erasure and displacement. Its strictures constantly work at eroding identity and connection through both insidious and violent means.

In the court transcripts of the trial, Angélique makes it quite clear that she desired to flee Montreal and return to Portugal (p. 221). Prior to the burning of Montreal, Angélique had made one failed attempt to flee. She and her French lover, an indentured labourer by the name of Claude Thibault, slipped across the frozen St. Lawrence river with the intention of getting to a sea port in one of the British colonies. From there, Angélique hoped to return to Portugal, and Thibault hoped to return to France. The trial judge deduced from Angélique’s testimony that Angélique had set the fire in her mistress’ house to both punish her and to distract her and others from Angélique’s next attempt to flee. Unfortunately, she was already being named the arsonist before the fire was out and before she could round up Thibault to embark on her escape. Escape without a white man masquerading as her owner would have been impossible.

Cooper surmises that Angélique, having spent her life in bondage, shipped from one country or colony to another, summoned in at least 3 different languages to do the bidding of her owners, had an insatiable desire to return to her homeland. Portugal was, Cooper insists, “the only home she had ever known” (p. 67). We do not know whether she was born into slavery or was captured and sold into it, but certainly the Portugal to which she longed to return was still a slaving nation. It was the country that had started the trade in African slaves in the first place - as early as 1441 (p. 33). Cooper’s description of Portugal not only includes the history of its slave trade, but also the extent to which African and Portuguese cultures intermingled. (I quote her at length here, in part, to illustrate the breadth and depth of her historical research):

Enslaved and free Africans in Portugal developed an Afro-Portuguese culture that had an impact on mainstream society. There was the *fala de Guiné*, a Creole language that was a fusion of Portuguese, Bini, Kongo, and other African languages. Africans introduced dances that were enjoyed by all levels of society. ... The music known as *fado*, Portugal’s national music, is said to have its origins

in the sorrowful songs enslaved Africans used to sing in bondage in Portugal (p. 38).

Did Angélique hope for freedom if she returned to Portugal? Did she simply long for home: the language and culture she had left behind? Her hope seems an impossibility - especially for an enslaved woman. Why might she have risked everything for such an elusive goal? Her desire disrupts the widely held assumption that slavery in New France was somehow a lesser evil (as slaves presumably only did domestic work and not hard labour) and that surely bondage in Portugal would be worse. Cooper suggests that “when [Angélique] told her mistress she was going to “roast” her, the slave woman wrote an oral narrative of resistance” (p. 12). Her words and actions were a veritable indictment of the practices of slavery.

Herein lies the author’s main reason for painstakingly researching, over a 15 year period, Angélique’s life. Afua Cooper, an historian par excellence of African Canadian history, wishes to re-balance the historical record. While there has been a resurgence in interest in African Canadian history, much of that research has focused on escaped slaves who came to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Cooper’s monumental work reminds us that we also have a history of slavery - one that Cooper suggests “is a drama punctuated with disappearing acts” (p. 7). While our history as the main terminus of the Underground Railroad is important, it must not ever overshadow our other, older history as a colony with slaves.

The hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Montréal is a “must read” for anyone who wishes to right the wrongs of the prior omissions in our collective history. It is a devastating tale that is sensitively and beautifully told. Readers will find it hard to put it down.



Naomi Norquay