



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

Afua Cooper

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During the night of April 10, 1734, Montréal burned. Marie-Joseph Angélique, a twenty-nine-year-old slave, was arrested, tried, and found guilty of starting the blaze that consumed forty-six buildings. Suspecting that she had not acted alone and angered that she had maintained her innocence, Angélique's condemners tortured her after the trial. She confessed but named no accomplices. Before Angélique was hanged, she was paraded through the city. Afterward, her corpse was burned. Angélique, who had been born in Portugal, faded into the shadows of Canadian history, vaguely remembered as the alleged arsonist behind an early catastrophic fire. The result of fifteen years of research, *The Hanging of Angelique* vividly tells the story of this strong-willed woman. Afua Cooper draws on extensive trial records that offer, in Angélique's own words, a detailed portrait of her life and a sense of what slavery was like in Canada at the time. Predating other first-person accounts by more than forty years, these records constitute what is arguably the oldest slave narrative in the New World.

Cooper sheds new light on the largely misunderstood or ignored history of slavery in Canada. She refutes the myth that Canada was a haven at the end of the Underground Railroad. Cooper also provides a context for Canada in the larger picture of transatlantic slavery while re-creating the tragic life of one woman who refused to accept bondage.

The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal Details

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S.M. says

I will never look at the oldest buildings of Montreal again without thinking of Angelique and the history of slavery in Canada.

Stark King says

This book offers the beginning of a remedy to the myth of Canada as we are taught it in schools: a country free of racism and without a history of slavery, which compares itself favourably to its southern neighbours. Cooper's thoroughly researched work demonstrates that Canada's European history is steeped in colonial violence, slavery, and the horror of human trafficking. It also gives us a glimpse of a human being who fought the constraints of that colonial violence. Although little is known of Marie-Joseph Angélique's early life, Cooper has put together a detailed history to offer a chronicle of her life, fleshed out by plausible conjecture. All in all a must read for Canadians. The story of Marie-Joseph Angélique and of slavery in early Canada should be a mandatory part of Canadian education.

Books written by POC says

I'm part way through "The Hanging of Angelique", which is about the Atlantic Slave Trade in Canada. I know that Canadian history rarely, if *ever*, talks about our history of slavery, so this whole book has been both appalling and eye-opening for me.[return][return]Basically, Angelique was accused of burning down Montreal in the 1700s (the book's at home right now, so I'm fuzzy on the details). She had been a slave coming out of Portugal (I am learning so much about the Atlantic Slave Trade this school-year, between my class on Forced & Free Immigration to Latin America and this book), been taken to New York, and then brought up to Canada. The author, who dedicates the book to our then-new Governor General, believes that Angelique's testimony about herself and her life may be the first Slave Narrative in North America, because she goes into so much detail about her experiences as a Slave, and about her *rage*. [return][return]It's a hard read for me, because I *like* the idea that Canada is a Post-Racist Utopia. I want to believe our only connection to the Slave Trade in North America is the end of the Underground Railway. But it's not. And just like we shouldn't ignore Africville here in Halifax, or Priceville in Ontario, we shouldn't ignore this.[return][return]Sadly, none of my reading right now *at all* is fluffy, or even fiction, so I have no recommendations, but if you want to get an idea of what's going on in Canadian historic circles right now, this may be a good book.

Ken Moffatt says

A look into Canada's slave trade, drawn to the tale of one specific slave whose life ended as violently as it

had begun. Powerful and raw, this is the part of Canada's history that was not included in my social studies classes. Afua Cooper brings Mary-Joseph Angelique to life and takes us through her tragic journey. A book that you will find yourself consumed with, each page holding you to the next.

Lesliemae says

Afua Cooper meticulously explores the untold story of slavery in Canada. The court records of Angelique, she "boldly suggests" create the first Canadian slave narrative. While I think her book is interesting in its treatment of early conditions in New France ... I do not think the court records create a true narrative. There is very little of Angelique's actual voice and Cooper's subjective suggestions do nothing to give that voice any life. The only story created is by the elite group of white scribes who wrote the testimony of Angelique.

Felix says

I really wanted to love this book, but I have to admit I struggled. It's mind-boggling that this facet of Canadian history is ignored, and for that I'm glad I read it, but the book overall was a bit dry. The author took a very macro approach to the issue, focusing on societal issues heavy on the names and dates of people and things I would never remember. I walked away feeling like I still didn't really get to know Angelique, and wasn't particularly invested.

It's definitely worth reading, but do so with the expectation that factual information makes up the bulk.

Iejones says

I suppose it is obvious that I LOVE history. This story of overcoming, achievers and survivors impels me everyday to face the rut and grunt of daily life in the post-modern world. This story of enslaved African women, is well written historical account of the life of Angelique. There were Africans enslaved in Canada and their plight was not as light or indifferent. Angelique was accused of setting a fire and hanged for involvement. Cooper is a noted scholar on the African presence in Canada has written a monumental work to revive and recapture the African/gendered side of enslavement and accusation.

Kelly says

Before I read this book I didn't know that Canadians were willing participants in the slave trade. They enslaved African Americans and Native Canadians and treated them like possessions -- just like they did in the United States. I also didn't know that John Graves Simcoe was instrumental in the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada. Something I hadn't ever considered before was also brought to my attention -- the Portuguese initiated the slave trade!

Afua Cooper believes that the collection of court records from Angelique's trial -- for setting fire to Old

Montreal in 1734 -- contain the oldest known narrative of the life of an enslaved Black person in North America. The records tell not only of the events surrounding Angelique's crimes, but they also contain Angelique's personal narrative of her own origins in Portugal, her travel across the Atlantic to New England, and how she came to reside with her owner in Montreal.

This is certainly a lesson that we wouldn't have been taught in Canadian History class because most people don't know that slavery even existed in Canada. Hats off to Afua Cooper for being Angelique's voice and telling the story of slavery in Canada.

Enik? says

I sought this out after translating an article about Marie-Joseph Angélique for the Canadian Encyclopedia. It wasn't quite what I was expecting, being a historical account, not a novel, but it read well and was very interesting.

This book is not only about the bondswoman Angélique, but also about the history of the Canadian slave trade. (Yes, there was such a thing!) Afua Cooper says slavery "is Canada's best-kept secret, locked within the national closet." (p. 68 of my edition) The author exposes the history of slavery in Canada, why it was "needed", why it was sanctioned, and who was involved. In Angélique's time, in Nouvelle-France, it was the French, but the English later upheld the right to own slaves in Canada. Ironically, at the height of the Underground Railroad, it was no longer legal to import slaves. Any slave who made it across the border from the States was automatically free, but the slaves who were already in Canada, the "property" of white owners, were still considered chattel. The book contains excerpts from early newspapers(Quebec Gazette, York Gazette,etc.) about runaway slaves and slaves for sale.

I learned a lot reading this book. I am happy to be Canadian, but I think that sentiment has to be based on truth, not illusion. Even knowing what I now know, I am happy to be living in Canada of today.

The one negative comment I have about the book is, ironically, that it contains too many negative comments from the author. Exposing the truth is a good thing, letting people make up their own mind about what they are reading is an even better one. Had it not been for this, I would have given the book four stars.

Lisa Llamrei says

In April of 1734, a fire destroyed a large part of Montreal. Marie-Joseph Angelique, a Portuguese-born slave woman, was convicted of starting the fire and sentenced to die. In this book, Afua Cooper sheds light on the life of Angelique and the conditions under which slaves lived and died in colonial Canada.

If you think that Canada was never a slave society, if you think of Canada simply as the safe haven at the end of the Underground Railroad, you need to read this book. What made Canada the destination for escaped U.S. slaves was a law banning the importation of slaves - this law did not free a single slave, and Canada did

not free its slaves until England forced us to. And while living conditions for Canadian slaves may have been better than those on big plantations in the American south, they were by no means pleasant.

While Angelique herself left no personal records behind, Dr. Cooper meticulously pieces together court records to paint a picture of the events leading up to the fire. Instead of exonerating Angelique, Dr. Cooper elucidates the reasons why she may have started the fire, if indeed she did.

"The Hanging of Angelique" is an important piece of Canadian history.

Cynda says

Through this book Afua Cooper fights against marginalization. My being educated in the US, maybe particularly in Texas, I know only a few trite half-thoughts about French colonization of the New World. The Big One:

Trite: The French were unsuccessful colonizers.

Better: French colonizers were spread out in many places in the New World.

Better: Here in Texas, colonizers live through their descendant's genetic makeup. I have a French ancestor generations back. I had a great grandmother who was raised by her French stepmother. Better: New Orleans and south has French-surnamed people who still keep some of pronunciation of places and people. The French ancestors live through their descendants' keeping some of the foods altered to meet New World foodstuffs available.

Back to this book. Because Cooper is writing of a woman who either did not write or did not write thoughts, Cooper had to re-create scenarios as best she could. Yet Cooper often refrains from the troubling subjunctive mood and avoids the indecisive indicative conditional tense as much as possible.

Did Cooper grow up Catholic/is Catholic/studied Catholicism? Well, in any case, she got the Catholic value system and hierarchy right. And she got the judicial machinations and the Catholic confession, murder style, right in a land where Catholicism was next to King in the social hierarchy.

What would I have liked to have seen? What not be available in Canada: Slavery conditions in the city of Montreal. Because Canada does not remember slavery in its approved school textbooks, much information about Canadian Slavery has been suppressed.

Overall, Cooper did as well as she possibly could. And she really did her best. She did research for 15 years she did research.

Well done.

Nahliah says

Good read. A good introduction to slavery in Canada. I didn't know about how and when slavery was conducted in Canada and under what circumstances for the slaves involved and so the text was informative. The author tries to stretch her lack of material and authority on the life of this one slave and tries to present

to the audience an authoritative text on slavery in Canada, which it is not. Unlike Edward S. Morgan in "American Slavery American Freedom" she's not drawing from a wealth of resources about the protagonist and some of her material, instead of providing insightful background, seems superfluous and unnecessary to understanding the protagonist and her plight. The book would have been better as historical fiction/ drama. I do like her attempt to give this black woman her voice and provide her with the agency that she was robbed of during her lifetime. But we can't escape the fact that the small amount of material available on her was written (and therefore interpreted) by elite, white men and an attempt to give the protagonist a voice can only be done with this white elite, possibly slave holding voice. Needless to say when the protagonist is "asserting her voice" it is actually the author's voice that the reader hears. The author does try to explain the multifaceted nature of slavery in Canada but doesn't succeed in attaching all of its characteristics onto this one character. On the one hand she demonstrates that all slaves didn't live the same lives but then, without hard evidence, suggests that Angelique could have possibly experienced every degradation attached to slavery. An additional stretch was the claim that this slave's court documents were in effect the first slave narrative ever. The author's argument was essentially that since not all slave narratives were a. accurate and b. written by the former slaves themselves but embellished accounts of slavery that supported abolitionist ends that we can take these court documents (where the protagonist has no say in the writing and interpretation of her story) and see them as a narrative. I don't think that Angelique would agree. It's inconsistent to say that due to the nature of the material and the position and status of its authors the protagonist was robbed of her voice and her self and then say that these same texts can be used as her story that she would have agreed to and possibly would have published had she had the means to do so. Again, it was a good introduction to the topic of slavery in Canada but in order to go deeper further research is necessary.

Erica Char says

The high rating is because of the importance of the work. I admit I was really ignorant about the slave trade as a whole, and more so Canada's role within it. This book was a very important education and written frankly and with candor.

There were many parts I didn't care for the writing style of because it was a bit more text book style than story telling. Sometimes the order of the book was challenging.

Chris says

This is the book that got away. This means I owe Dr. Cooper an apology. Around the time this book came out, I was in Montreal. There was an exhibit about the fire and part of the exhibit was a section about whether Angelique was guilty or innocent of the crime of arson. It was a very interesting exhibit. This book was being sold in several stores, and I was very, very tempted to buy it. I didn't, mostly because of budgeting. But I should have broken my budget because I always regretted it.

Ah, the wonders of the internet.

Marie-Joseph Angelique was a slave. Yes, a slave; Canada had slavery. Perhaps the greatest sin is that this is not common knowledge and is swept under the carpet. In the States, we acknowledge slavery, though there are still racist and stupid people who try to make slavery out not to be that bad. (Honestly, if you haven't seen Ask a Slave on YouTube, GO WATCH IT NOW!). But I never associated Canada with slavery (outside of the Underground Railroad) until I saw the exhibit about the Montreal fire.

Cooper does double duty in this book. Undoubtedly this is because the history of a slave who was executed for a crime is near impossible to do. Angelique didn't leave much in the way of source material. The first duty is the story of Angelique, or as much as the story that Cooper can reconstruct from court records, sales records and the like. The second is a brief, but considering the space somewhat in-depth, look at the history of slavery, while pointing out that such history (and the history of African settlers in particular) has been destroyed.

So in large part, this book points out a largely forgotten and ignored aspect of North American history, not just Canadian.

The section about Canadian slavery is interesting, even for those of us who do not live in Canada. It also raises new understanding about the colonial period of both countries. The sections about Angelique are the most powerful. It should be noted that the book opens with a description of Angelique's torture. While Angelique's voice is only carried through history by the court records, Cooper does her best to give this faceless woman a voice. This is particularly true in regards to the motivation Angelique had for the fire she may have started.

Cooper looks not only at what might have been Angelique's pre-Montreal history, but also at the relationships and the might have been in Angelique's Montreal life. In some respects, she is hampered by a lack of a firsthand material. Angelique, for instance, says her mistress is kind and nice (there is a strange story about tickling), and also talks of abuse. Angelique is not passive, and Cooper, intentionally it seems, turns her into a tragic heroine. It is impossible not to root for Angelique even though you know the outcome. In the States, when we talk about resistance to slavery, we largely mention the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and John Brown and other abolitionists. We might get told about various slave rebellions. Cooper's look at Angelique gives far more context about such rebellions, not only in the reasons for (cruelty is the only one that is mentioned in schools), but also about how rebellions were not just physical.

Honestly, if you are interested in history of North America. You really should read this book.

Jason says

I hope they're teaching this book in schools because the only story I remember being fed about Canadian slavery was the one about how we saved American slaves via the underground railroad. Here's the other story, a century earlier, of how parts of Canada happily kept slaves. Angelique was one of them, until she rebelled and burned down a chunk of Montreal (allegedly) and they tortured and hung her for it. Every Canadian should read this.

Jocelyn Veevers says

Lots of important and interesting info about slavery in Canada but Angelique's case didn't interest me. 1.5 stars.

Sean Liburd says

"Slavery is Canada's best-kept secret, locked within the national closet. And because it is a secret it is written out of official history. But slavery was an institutionalized practice for over two hundred years. In

this ground breaking work “The Hanging of Angélique,” Dr. Afua Cooper reveals what Canadian history Textbooks omits the truth. Canada was not only a safe haven for slaves, it was also an active participant in the slave trade. Some historians will argue that it was only a mild form of slavery, but Marie-Joseph Angélique who was humiliated, brutally tortured, strangled and hanged surely would disagree.

Born a slave in Portugal and eventually sold to a wealthy Montreal fur trader, Marie-Joseph Angelique fiery spirit and refusal to be domesticated led to her facing trial for the burning of Old Montreal in 1734. Although no one was killed the fire wreaked havoc on the city destroying forty-six building, including Hôtel-Dieu and almost the whole merchant sector that represented the core of the city. At the end of the trial Marie-Joseph Angelique was found guilty despite the fact that no one saw her set the fire. She was still just a slave and guilty or not she would have to endure the faith reserved for most rebellious slaves dishonestly then death.

Afua Cooper a dub poet, author of several poetry and history books must be commended for paying the ultimate tribute to Marie-Joseph Angelique by committing over 15 years to researching and bringing her story to life. She has reached into the hidden archive and brought to light an important update for Canadian history. This fantastic work is now a finalist for the Governor General Literary Award and must be recognized as a very important document in African history in early Canada.

Alejandra says

This is a history book, not historical based fiction. It is not a biography either. The book centers on Marie Joseph Angelique, a black domestic slave who possibly initiated a fire that destroyed a large section of Montreal in 1734. The author brings Angelique's voice back to life through trial records and other legal documents available from the time, and while the tone is fairly academic, her voice comes through clear and strong. Did Angelique commit the crime she was punished for? We'll never know, although I personally was shocked at second hand hearsay being used as evidence in the trial against her.

Parallel to Angelique's story, the author also provides extensive detail on the history of slavery in Canada. Because it happened, and there is no excusing it. Through newspaper ads, bills of sale, court records, etc., the author provides a glimpse on the role and treatment of slaves in Canada. Some sections are fairly dry, but the author highlights key events and ideas to avoid getting lost in the details.

Eleanor Cowan says

Wow! I had no idea! Through the painful lens of Canada's slave-owning history, Dr. Afu Cooper traces the untold story of a young woman slave, who, in 1734, under grisly torture, admitted to arson and was hung, in public, in Old Montreal. This history tracks countless countries that trafficked in innocent human lives, bled Africa dry and did untold harm. Canada is among the guilty.

Eleanor Cowan, author of : A History of a Pedophile's Wife: Memoir of a Canadian Teacher and Writer

Richard says

An extremely interesting look at something never discussed- slavery in Canada. In US slave literature & history, Canada was seen as the land of freedom that escaping slaves followed the North Star to. Using as a case study the story of an 18th Century slave in New France, the author has highlighted the existence of Canadian colonial slavery (under the French and British) which could be just as emotionally and physically traumatizing & degrading as slavery in the West Indies, Europe and the colonies that would soon be the US. The book also brings into focus that so much of what we "know" about slavery has come from White authors & historians. Time to discover or revisit the Black writers- the slave narratives and autobiographies to learn from primary sources. My main criticism of this book is that it can be dry reading- as well as redundant/repetitive in its telling. But, it is still an eye-opening look at an ignored bit of history.
