



FIRESTARTER

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

by Afua Cooper  
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“People of African descent, free and enslaved, have vanished from national narratives,” Afua Cooper asserts in *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and The Burning of Old Montréal*. “It is possible to complete a graduate degree in Canadian studies and not know that slavery existed in Canada.”

If her ambitious, scholarly, and tragic account of slavery in Canada – particularly in Quebec, before and after the British conquest in 1760 – has one goal, it is to incinerate any trace of Canadian smugness about our treatment of black people over the past four-hundred years. True, climate and population did not allow for the creation of massive plantations. Also true, most of the slaves in eighteenth-century Quebec were urban domestic workers, with half of them living in Montreal itself. But Canada upheld and enforced slavery for two centuries, and when slaves ran away or rebelled, our laws came down on them with vigour and violence.

Black history has been celebrated every February for some fifty years, but

many Canadians still know little about it. Cooper is incensed that when it comes to black history, only the Underground Railroad – about which she has co-written a book – seems to have registered in the public consciousness. “Black history has less to do with Black people and more with White pride,” Cooper writes. “If Black history narratives make Whites feel good, it [*sic*] is allowed to surface; if not, it is suppressed.”

Cooper seeks to remedy this situation by documenting the earliest known and most dramatic case of slave rebellion in Canada.

On June 21, 1734, a Montreal judge oversaw the torture and execution of a twenty-nine-year-old black female slave named Marie-Joseph Angélique. Born in Portugal, brought to New England and eventually sold to a wealthy Montreal family when she was twenty, Angélique had been convicted of deliberately setting the fire that burned down the home of her slave mistress and destroyed forty-five other buildings – the entire business quarter, including the famed hospital, Hôtel-Dieu. Angélique denied the accusation during her trial, but confessed when the hangman and torturer – sadly and ironically, a black slave himself – smashed the bones in her legs. Later that day, she was hanged in public and her corpse was burned to ashes and scattered to the winds.

“The casting of the ashes was the final insult,” Cooper writes. “It meant not only that the condemned was denied a funeral and a burial, but also that her spirit would roam the earth forever – in agony and despair.”

Cooper, a poet and a University of Toronto history professor, spent fifteen years researching and writing this book. She sets the life of Angélique in the context of slavery in Canada, and the Americas at large. Forty-five pages meticulously document the role of the Portuguese, and subsequently the Dutch, Flemish, French, and British, in the kidnapping and purchasing of men,

women, and children on the African coast and selling them across the Atlantic Ocean. She reminds readers that African slavery was thriving for a full century in Portugal – some 33,000 black slaves lived there by 1550 – before it finally crossed the ocean.

Cooper provides an overview of slavery in Canada, informing readers that many prominent statesmen were active slaveholders – such as Peter Russell, member of the Executive Council of Upper Canada and subsequently provincial administrator; and the Marquis Charles de Beauharnois and James Murray, both governors of Quebec.

Cooper’s most poignant section in *The Hanging of Angélique* is her detailed portrait of a young woman who ran away, was recaptured, threatened her mistress, and allegedly burned down much of Montreal to protest her enslavement (she had recently been resold and would have been sent to a new owner in Quebec City). Moving from an academic, general history of transatlantic slavery, Cooper zooms in on Angélique’s personal struggles, and her rebellious and volatile actions of resistance.

Relying on court documents to fill in what little is known about the life of the Montreal slave, Cooper makes the bold assertion that Angélique trial transcripts constitute the first slave narrative in North America.

Time will tell whether other historians agree. Regardless of the outcome of that debate, Cooper has made an important contribution to Canadian history by reclaiming Angélique’s story and insisting that we pay attention to it. As a result, it will be far more difficult to discuss our troubled and storied past without acknowledging the Portuguese-born Marie-Joseph Angélique, hanged in Montreal in 1734 for her violent protest against slavery.

Reviewed by **Lawrence Hill**, a novelist and nonfiction writer. His sixth book, a novel called *The Book of Negroes*, is scheduled for publication in 2007.