

Marie-Joseph Angélique's Torture and Execution: Notre-Dame de Montreal

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After being convicted for setting her owners' house ablaze, Marie-Joseph Angélique, an enslaved woman in Montréal, was sentenced to an interrogation under torture and an execution by hanging and burning on 21 June 1734.¹ Although she maintained her innocence even after her conviction, it was thought that she may have been aided in the arson; the purpose of the interrogation was to identify potential accomplices. Angélique was restrained to a table with her legs bound together and repeatedly asked if anyone had worked with her, and each time she responded, a wedge was forced between her bound legs.² This technique is described as extraordinary torture, which differed from ordinary torture in the number and placement of wedges used.³ Extraordinary torture was, of course, considerably more painful; the choice to use it on Angélique was demonstrative of the desire to punish her with maximum brutality, as was common for slaveholders to do to enslaved people.

During her torture and interrogation, Angélique supposedly shifted from insisting that she was innocent to saying that she had committed the crime, although she was unaided.⁴ However, given the nature of the suffering produced by the gruesome torture, confessions were normal. She had already been convicted, so acquiring a confession was unnecessary; even so, one was driven from her through cruel and inhumane methods. In recent years, investigation into the effectiveness of torture for interrogation has found that the information acquired through torture is often inaccurate because people will say whatever they believe will end their experience of suffering the fastest when under such extreme duress.⁵ Despite the dubiousness of its effectiveness, the use of torture against enslaved people was commonplace throughout Transatlantic Slavery.⁶ The idea that it may not have been effective for obtaining information was unexplored and irrelevant because torture was meant to punish enslaved people and reinforce slaveholders control over them.⁷ The extremes of brutality used for this reinforcement of control were justified by a belief that enslaved people were mentally and physically comparable to animals and therefore required punishment in the form of physical harm, which could be understood despite their animalistic understanding of the world.⁸ Since it was obtained through torture, it cannot be said with confidence that Angélique's confession was truthful; she had been maintaining her innocence up until that point and it was her torture which marked the shift in her story. But its accuracy is unimportant, because the confession was unnecessary. After a lengthy, six-week long trial (the order for her arrest was put out on 11 April 1734, a whole 71 days before her execution) at which 19 witnesses testified, she had been convicted and sentenced to death without a confession by judge Pierre Raimbault.⁹ The extended and extreme torture she was subjected to in addition to execution was primarily motivated by the desire to punish her beyond her execution and to compel her to implicate other people who could be punished alongside her. Torture as a method of control over black enslaved people was well documented across the transatlantic world and its unnecessary use as punishment before execution in the case of Angélique is just one example.

After the needless interrogation was complete, Angélique was taken to the Notre-Dame de Montréal Cathedral.¹⁰ (figs. 1 & 2) A two part religious ceremony occurred: the "sacrament of Repentance" was administered to her by M. Navetier, a priest, in private, and then she "made honourable amends [with] a torch in her fist" outside the church doors.¹¹ Both of these are ceremonies in which a sinner admits their guilt and is absolved in the eyes of God.¹² The performance of this religious ceremony for a black enslaved person within the walls of such a

well-known church is noteworthy because the relationship between Christianity and slavery was fraught with various problems, not the least of which was the fact that Christianity was almost uniformly imposed upon the enslaved across the transatlantic world. Ironically, while pro-slavery advocates weaponized Christianity as a central part of the “civilizing mission” of Transatlantic Slavery, many enslaved people and abolitionists cited Biblical concepts and passages as a part of their arguments against the institution of slavery.¹³ Freedom from slavery is an important and central theme in the Bible. If God’s children were meant to be freed from bondage as they had been in stories like Moses’s delivering of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, then as children of God, black people also should be delivered from slavery.¹⁴ However compelling those arguments were, religion was still often used to support slavery by the white people who benefited from it. To combat the arguments made with biblical passages, other passages were cited, such as St Paul’s epistles commanding slaves to obey, and St Peter’s letters “suggesting that it was wholly commendable for Christian slaves to suffer at the hands of cruel masters”.¹⁵ Legislation reinforcing slavery was often written with religious justification, “recasting slavery as God’s work and the abolitionists as devils”.¹⁶ The inclusion of enslaved people in religious practice weakened the absolute control and superiority held over them, as it strengthened the abolitionist arguments that Christianity supported their personhood and thus their rights to be free. However, the nature of Angelique’s inclusion in a Christian ceremony at the Notre-Dame Cathedral was a reinforcement of that control rather than her personhood.

After this ceremony, she was hung, her body was burned, and the ashes were scattered on the wind.¹⁷ A publicly displayed execution in front of a church was a method of humiliating the condemned, furthering the shame induced by the public confession of guilt made during the honourable amends.¹⁸ Psychological torture joined the physical in this multifaceted humiliation, which extended past her death. Angelique’s body was burned after she had already been killed by strangulation, and the remains were then scattered. In New France, “even an offender’s corpse had to be punished,” both with further mutilation and with “denial of a Christian burial.”¹⁹ For Angelique, this meant the destruction of her physical body and the dispersal of her remains so that it could not be buried. Although she was involved in Christian ceremonies at the cathedral prior to her execution, she was ironically barred from typical celebrations of a Christian in death.

Notre-Dame de Montréal was often described as a site of racial inclusion within Canada, because it welcomed Catholics, Protestants, and various underprivileged white European people.²⁰ However, that racial inclusion only applied to black people when they were in a situation like Angelique’s - where including them in a religious ritual was simultaneously within the context of their disempowerment. Both her futile interrogation and the reading of her last rights were gestures that further emphasized her criminality and lack of ability to defend herself from her conviction. As with every other part of enslaved life, her death and the religious practices surrounding it were completely in the hands of the people who held her in bondage.

¹ Procédure Criminel contre Marie Joseph Angélique negresse — Incendiere, Juridiction royale de Montréal, Interrogation under torture (ordinary and extraordinary), 21 June 1734, TL4 S1, 4136, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d’Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montréal, Canada, pp. 3-6.

² Interrogation under torture (ordinary and extraordinary), BANQ, p 4.

³ The document notes that the addition of wedges beyond the first is “for the extraordinary,” indicating that ordinary torture involves just one.

Interrogation under torture (ordinary and extraordinary), BANQ, p. 4.

⁴ Interrogation under torture (ordinary and extraordinary), BANQ, pp. 1, 5.

⁵ Sullivan, Christopher Michael, “The (in)effectiveness of torture for combating insurgency,” Journal of Peace, vol. 51, no. 3 (May 2014), pp. 388-404.

⁶ Scholarship documenting the use of torture and corporal punishment on enslaved people is extensive. For further reading on torture as a means of punishment and control throughout the institution of Transatlantic Slavery, consider the following:

Martha J. Cutter, The Illustrated Slave: Empathy, Graphic Narrative, and the Visual Culture of the Transatlantic Abolition Movement, 1800–1852 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017) ; Charmaine A. Nelson, “ ‘Ran away from her master ... a negroe girl named Thursday’: Examining evidence of punishment, isolation, and trauma in Nova Scotia and Quebec fugitive slave advertisements,” Legal Violence and the Limits of the Law, eds. Joshua Nichols and Amy Swiffen (New York: Routledge, 2017); Tom F. Wright, “Slavery and Race,” Transatlantic Rhetoric: Speeches from the American Revolution to the Suffragettes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

⁷ “In the Slavery Years Torture Was a Standard Instrument of Racial Control,” The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, no. 64 (Summer 2009), p. 42.

⁸ Marcus Wood, “Representing pain and describing torture: slavery, punishment and martyrology,” Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 272-76.

⁹ Procédure Criminel contre Marie Joseph Angélique negresse — Incendiere, Juridiction royale de Montréal, Pétition by the King's prosecutor for the arrest of Angélique and of Claude Thibault, 11 April 1734, TL4 S1, 4136, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d'Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montréal, Canada ; Procédure Criminel contre Marie Joseph Angélique negresse — Incendiere, Juridiction royale de Montréal, Ordinance to summon witnesses unto a re-examination, 8 May 1734, TL4 S1, 4136, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d'Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montréal, Canada ; Procédure Criminel contre Marie Joseph Angélique negresse — Incendiere, Juridiction royale de Montréal, Ordinance by the judge to compel witnesses to appear, 11 April 1734, TL4 S1, 4136, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d'Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montréal, Canada.

¹⁰ Jugements et délibérations, Conseil supérieur, Report on the execution, 21 June 1734, TP1, S28, P17230, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d'Archives de Montréal (BANQ), Montréal, Canada, p. 1.

¹¹ Report on the execution, BANQ, p. 1.

¹² “The Sacrament of Repentance,” Syriac Orthodox Resources, (date of last access 27 April 2020), <http://sor.cua.edu/Liturgy/Anaphora/Repentance.html>

¹³ Jon Sensbach, “Freedom from Heaven: State Violence and Religious Protest in the Early Black Atlantic,” Journal of Africana Religions, vol. 3, no. 4 (2015), p. 499.

¹⁴ Sensbach, “Freedom from Heaven,” p. 496-500; Reddie, Richard, “Atlantic slave trade and abolition,” BBC (date of last access 27 April 2020), https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/slavery_1.shtml

¹⁵ Reddie, “Atlantic slave trade and abolition” (date of last access 27 April 2020).

¹⁶ Sensbach, “Freedom from Heaven,” pp. 496, 500.

¹⁷ Report on the execution, BANQ, p. 2.

¹⁸ Peter Moogk, “The Liturgy of Humiliation, Pain, and Death: The Execution of Criminals in New France,” The Canadian Historical Review, vol. 88, no. 1 (March 2007), p. 94.

¹⁹ Moogk, “The Liturgy of Humiliation, Pain, and Death,” pp. 95-96.

²⁰ Franklin Toker, Church of Notre Dame in Montréal (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), p. 78.

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Plate List

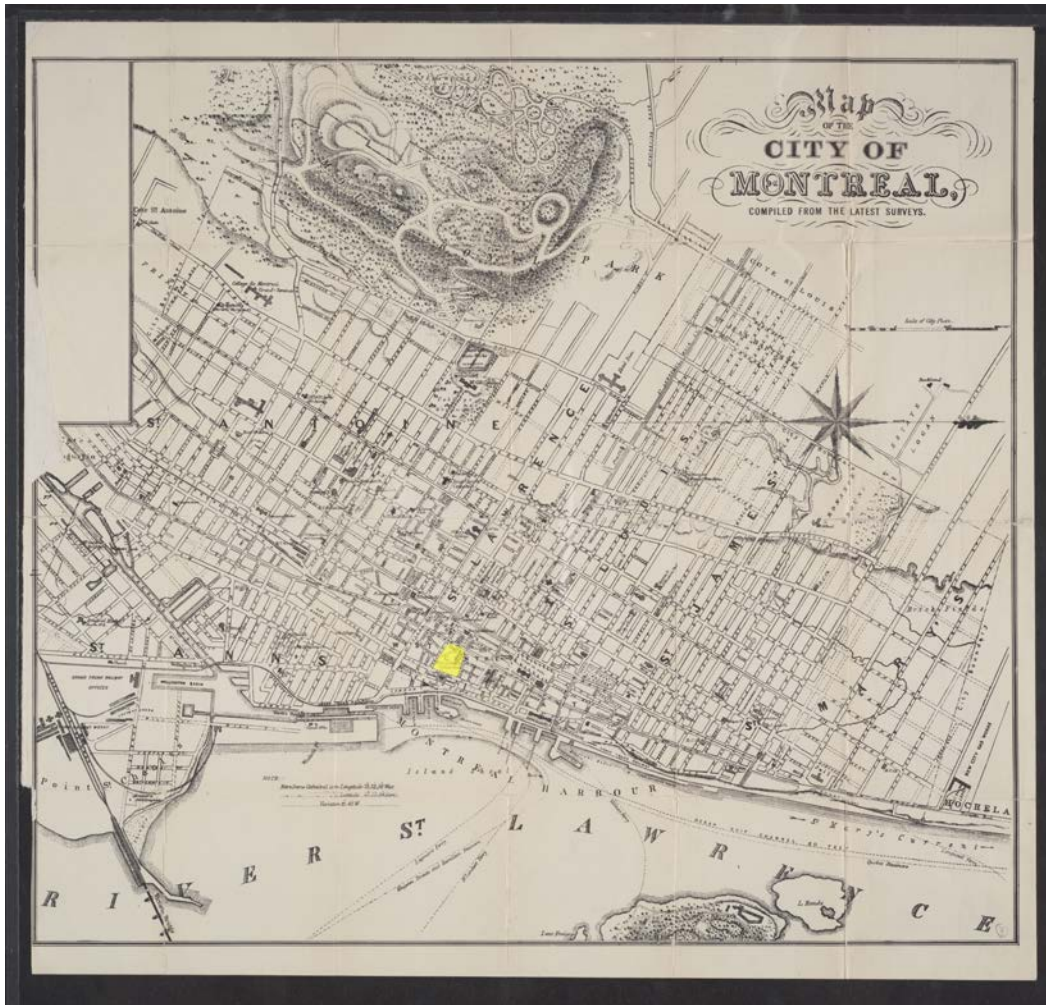


Figure 1: Highlight of Notre-Dame Cathedral added for the essay. Samuel Edward Dawson, "Map of the city of Montreal : compiled from the latest surveys" (1888), print, 49 x 54, McGill University Library.

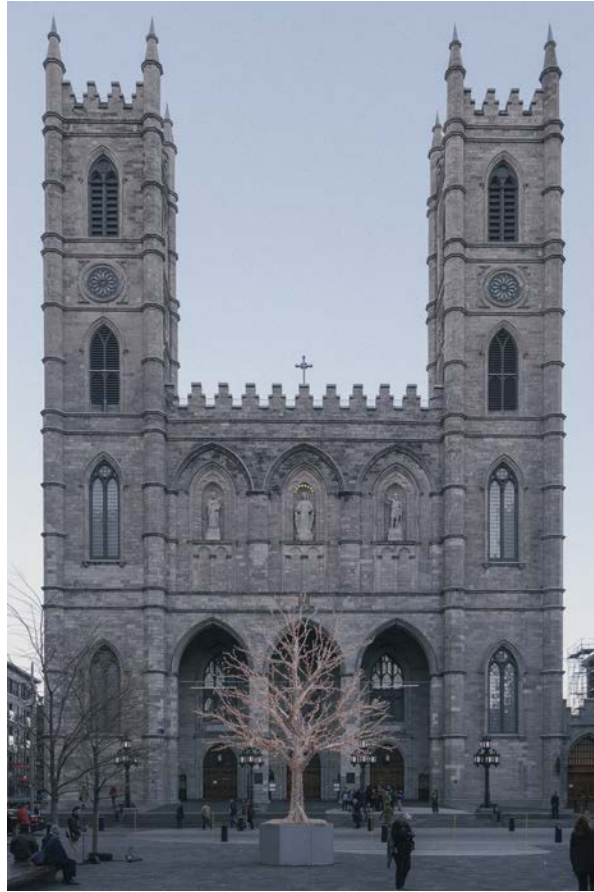


Fig. 4: Louis Bouret, “Notre-Dame Basilica, Montréal” (2015), photograph, Wikimedia CC.