

## Childhood and Slavery: An Interview with Afua Cooper on Young Adult Fiction

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HP: Can you tell me about the genesis of *My Name is Henry Bibb* and *My Name is Phillis Wheatley*? Did you choose these figures, or were they identified by KCP?

AC: I chose the figures. Because I have written stuff for adults on slavery, as I did my research and my creative writing and my scholarly writing, I began thinking, "what was slavery like for children, and who writes about slavery for children in a creative way?" There are scholarly books on the topic of enslaved children, but I wanted to look at slavery through the eyes of the child, and what better way to do so than to pretend to look at slavery through the eyes of enslaved children themselves? And I also wanted to tie it to literature and to writing. Maybe I should tell you that this idea started for me as a picture book idea. I loved picture books because my own children were growing up and we would go the library and we would get picture books and we would read about seven picture books a night, so I said to the publisher, "I want this to be a picture book story of slavery and

children” and then the publisher came back and said, “we love your proposal but we think they should be YA books.” I fought them for a good three months, because I thought, “no, they have to be picture books.” Well, I never won that fight.

HP: That’s interesting. I’m trying to imagine the story of Phillis Wheatley as a picture book. What would you do differently, what incidents would you select or what details would you keep in order to make that suitable for the age group that reads picture books?

AC: I would talk about her being taken from her parents, because children can identify with that, about her being put on a big ship. I would tell the Middle Passage story, but of course in a less graphic and in a more poetic way, and how she discovered books and the alphabet and words, letters of the alphabet playing in her head, making up rhymes with letters from the alphabet. That’s how I would have done it, and have [American illustrator, Winner of Caldecott Medal] Brian Pinkney do the illustrations. And it would have luscious colours. The publishers knew best and they’re probably right, because both books have done very well.

HP: Did you work on the two novels simultaneously?

AC: No, I did *Phillis* first.

HP: I asked because they were published in the same year.

AC: Yes, they were published in the same year, but in terms of the sequence and the chronology I did *Phillis* first, because I had to do a lot of research for *Phillis*, whereas I have been working on Henry Bibb literally all my life.

HP: Well, that’s your doctoral dissertation.

AC: Yes, that’s my doctoral dissertation, so I knew a lot about him and his family situation, his childhood, and so on. Everyone knows about Phillis Wheatley, of course, in a general way, but it was necessary that I do in-depth work on her life. It’s funny—I went to Boston to research her, but Henry Bibb also spent time in Boston and worked in Boston and lived in Boston, so Boston was an important place in terms of research site.

HP: One of the things I really enjoyed doing in Boston was the Black Heritage Trail and the Museum of African American History, which was absolutely fascinating. But I didn’t realize Henry Bibb had an association with Boston.

AC: He lived there for about three years. He worked as a professional abolitionist with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He brought

his mother from Kentucky out of slavery to live with him in Boston and then they came over to Canada.

HP: Since you were thinking of writing from the perspective of an enslaved child, what did you assume about your audience and what they would be familiar with?

AC: The audience is familiar with adults in slavery, or with enslaved people being adults. They are also familiar with this image of whipping, of a slave being whipped and a slave, usually a male, labouring away in a cotton field or a cane field, and what I knew was that slavery was varied; it was multidimensional. Many slaves did not labour away in cane fields or cotton fields. Many slaves as well, whether they were in the West Indies or in Canada or Brazil, were not male, and a good percentage of the enslaved population was made up of children. We know that by 1800, for example, most of the slave ships that were coming to the Americas were bringing kids, people sixteen and under. So, we could think that slavery was a gendered institution; it was also an institution that was based on age. When you think of it, slavers wanted young people, the younger the better, because they would have more time—they would have more years to spend. You don't want someone who is forty years old, because you're going to work them to death in two or three years. They're going to die. If you get someone who's thirteen, you could potentially get twenty years out of that person. Many people weren't aware of the child component of slavery.

HP: So you were assuming that you were speaking to an audience that really has very little knowledge of the specific aspects of these stories you are going to tell even if they already had some familiarity with the characters.

AC: Yes, absolutely. Also, I wanted to show that more enslaved people could read—at least read, many of them could also write, and many could read and write together—but many enslaved people had some literary skills, more than we imagine, more than we thought. And so because I was doing a lot of work on the slave narrative—Henry Bibb, of course, wrote a slave narrative—and I was immersed in the slave narrative literature and it was just so fascinating, and as I developed the idea for a series of young adult novels based on the experiences of enslaved children, it came to me that I should tie it to literacy and to literature. So I had four kids, four young people that I was going to write about: Henry Bibb, Phillis Wheatley, [American abolitionist and writer] William Wells Brown, and [Bermudan-born autobiographer] Mary Prince, so two men, two women, and they were people who wrote narratives or composed some kind of literature—Phillis Wheatley didn't write a narrative, she wrote a book of poetry—and who were literate. I'm not sure Mary Prince was literate. I think she probably could read but not necessarily write, because Susanna Strickland Moodie of course wrote her narrative, *The History of Mary*

*Prince: A West Indian Slave*. Well, after doing Henry and Phillis, I didn't do William Wells Brown or Mary Prince, so that's still in my mind to do. And my publishers still want me to complete the series.

HP: That's one of the questions I wanted to ask you, whether there were other stories that you intended to tell. There's my answer.

Quite often when people write historical fiction they alter the diction and the sentence structure to try to give a sense of historicity, to give the impression to the reader that this is a historical document. How did you approach that question in order to make the text accessible to contemporary readers without it sounding overly contemporary itself?

AC: For *Phillis Wheatley* I linked my book of her to her book. I was aware that my book of her was fictionalized biography, but not really fictionalized because in many ways I stayed true to the story line. What I did, which I thought was novel, was to create a background for her, a background in Africa.

HP: I loved that aspect of the novel, and was wondering what kind of research led to the development of that background, because that background is so moving and convincing.

AC: Well, Phillis didn't come to the new world, in my opinion, as a *tabula rasa*. Her mistress said she learned to read and write English—I mean it's incredible—in fifteen months or something like that, in a year and a half. She was speaking well, she was reading, she was writing. Of course the Wheatley family taught her English and I'm thinking, she's coming from Senegambia—which we're sure she came from, Senegal—so she would have come from a culture in which many people were literate, but literate in Arabic. She would be coming from a multi-lingual culture where several languages were spoken. Arabic would be the language of religion. People did speak in Wolof, Fulani, and other West African languages. So she would have grown up at least to the age of eight or nine immersed in that context, so her mind was alive, it was sharp, and she probably, if she was a Muslim, at the age of nine would have been taught Arabic letters and writing. So that's where I'm coming from. I'm thinking Phillis is not a *tabula rasa*, and research on the West African migration in terms of slavery to the new world, to North America, to the West Indies, to Brazil, and so on, is showing that at least 33% of the captives came from islamically oriented societies, and so the more famous ones like Omar Said from North Carolina, Ben Jallo [Job Ben Solomon, or Hyuba Boon Salumena Jallo] and other names—these people were writing. They were kind of like a curiosity because they would write in Arabic and write their autobiographies and stuff like that and their slave masters would show them off. So why not a woman, why not a young woman?

HP: When I think of Bibb and Wheatley, the documents we have on them are quite different, because Bibb, of course, has the narrative he

wrote himself, whereas Wheatley wrote poetry. You said that you did research on Wheatley and used what she had written herself. One of the things about Wheatley from my perspective is that her poetry isn't very personal, though there are references to herself as an African in them. One of the things I like that you do in the book is to assume that she has a secret stash of anti-slavery poetry, which seems like a perfectly natural development to me. How were you able to use the content of her poetry in the development of the character? Or were you able to?

AC: I was able to and I wasn't [laughs], because I imagined myself to be her. She came to colonial America when she was eight or nine: she was young, she was a baby, and she needed love; and she could have died and she didn't, on the slave ship and in the slave market in Boston. Some "kind" family bought her, and Mrs. Wheatley nursed her back to life and she lived. She is going to be grateful. She is at an age where she is impressionable and Protestant Christianity was sweeping the colonies and the Wheatleys had the Reverend George Whitefield [English cleric of the Great Awakening] for supper and he was this fiery preacher on both sides of the Atlantic and Phillis met him, so of course she's going to become a Christian, of course she's going to feel that Jesus loves her and God and all of that. But she's also very much steeped in this tradition, where she was taught about Greek mythology, Venus and Jupiter. It's really interesting. It's kind of like a paradox, because here she is a Christian; she's supposed to be against idols and idolatry, but Venus and Jupiter and the nine muses—they are romping all over her poems, because she is steeped in the eighteenth-century classical tradition. So in a way it is not a contradiction; it's not a paradox. So a lot of people (or maybe not so much these days as in the past) criticize her for being white-washed, etc., and I'm thinking, "this kid was eight years old, what do you expect?" These are going to be her models. These icons and so on are going to be her template. She is going to be grateful. The literature, the preaching that she's hearing is that Africa is a benighted place in need of redemption. She's going to absorb that. But at the same time, she's saying, "look, I'm one of Afric's damsels and here I am, writing. So it can't be such a benighted place, because it produced me. Sure, I was redeemed by the blood of Jesus, but the whole world needs to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus," and she's saying, "it's not just Black people. White people have some of the wickedest hearts and they too need to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus." I think it's incredible that you have this child writing and of course she suffers the pangs of racism because she is not allowed to sit with White people at the dinner table. She's like this experiment. Mrs. Wheatley doesn't want her to associate with other black people and other slaves; she's too good for them even though she herself was still a slave. So in order to move on, Phillis had to forget, because it was such a hard and terrible journey of being stolen from "Afric's fancy'd happy seat" and the warm embrace of her father, which is in her poem—"That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd" (Wheatley 74). In order to live she had to forget, because you cross an

ocean and you could have died and it was awful and you lost your family. What do you do then? And so sure, in her mind, this must be a redemption, that I am rescued by these people. But she's aware of racism. She's aware of prejudice. She's against slavery. She wrote a letter to George Washington. If you look at her letters, you will see a more militant tone in her letters.

HP: Yes, I agree. You mentioned Susanna Wheatley's refusal to allow Phillis to associate with the other slaves now that she's an educated person, and I think that class issue that intermingles with the race issue also affects Henry Bibb's life because of being lighter-skinned.

AC: Yes. It affects him in kind of the opposite way, because White people didn't trust him, because they thought he was White and when they found out he was not, and that he was a slave and Black, they felt he was dangerous. So in Louisiana as he was in the slave market and was sent out to find a buyer for himself, he couldn't be sold; no one wanted to buy him. He was too light, he looked too White; they think he could read, they think he's going to run away. But he used that Whiteness in one of his escape attempts, crossing the Ohio River, because they thought he was White. So he crossed at night on the ferry, and that choice of the night as opposed to day was deliberate, because during the day they could see the colour in him. So he crossed at night when that colour was not visible.

HP: That and the education issue, they are forces that pull in both directions. They're positive—in your story Henry Bibb says how necessary it is to have education in order to escape, or knowledge at least, and counsels his brothers on what to look for to prepare themselves—but at the same time, it is a danger. If you actually know anything you're at the risk of being punished for it.

For your account of the Middle Passage in Phillis's story, did you draw on particular narratives for that one or were you just thinking in general of all the narratives?

AC: I was thinking in general. Daniel P. Mannix, who is a historian, who wrote a book *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865*. His account of the Middle Passage is particularly gripping. I read several accounts, but I remember Mannix's, but I also re-imagined it, what it must have been like for children.

HP: The point of view of the child is crucial to that—the extra level of fear, the extra level of uncertainty about what's happening around you.

AC: Exactly, because children have really no control over their lives, especially on a slave ship. Adults don't either, but adults have more control, simply because adults have greater intelligence.

HP: Adults have a different context, so they can make explanations to themselves of some of what's happening that children aren't able to do, of course.

AC: Exactly, so Phillis crossed the Middle Passage and when she landed in Boston she was dying. We know this from Mrs. Wheatley: when she went to the slave market Phillis was put in the refuse section, which is just awful. You can't even comprehend that people are thrown in a corner to die. And she was asthmatic or suffered from pulmonary diseases all her life, which she thinks is because of being exposed on this ship crossing the ocean. Whereas Henry Bibb was, as he called himself, an American slave. He was born in the land of slavery. He did not have a prior conception of freedom, as Phillis would have. They have different experiences of slavery. Phillis grew up in the household. She was a domestic slave. Henry worked as a domestic and as a field slave, and as a body servant. His experience of slavery was more varied. I wanted to connect Henry Bibb deliberately to an African past, and so I began with that story of how people could fly and walk on water, which is an Igbo traditional story in the African American context—Igbos walking into Ibo land and of course they drowned, but that's not poetic, so we have them walking on water and walking back to Africa.

HP: I thought that very effective too, the connection with an African tradition even though he's a couple of generations at least removed from that—the sense of a continuity of culture even in those horrific conditions, that there's some connection to the history for them, that they make it useful to themselves.

AC: Yes, that's what enslaved people drew on, this folklore genre that emerged out of slavery—Brother Rabbit and in the case of the West Indies, Brother Anansi stories. It came out of this context of people using these stories to survive and to live another day, really, and passing on their stories to the next generation. I also included in *My Name is Henry Bibb* the figure of the blacksmith, Shadrach. You know, the blacksmith in Africa, and certainly in West Africa, is a magical kind of person. He's known to have great metaphysical skills and talents and knowledge and probably could fly and walk on water [laughs], and so I wanted this figure there on the plantation as a kind of central, grounding figure who could hold everything together and be a kind of teacher to Henry Bibb.

HP: That's a very attractive character, Shadrach, but I notice that in Henry Bibb's own narrative, he includes his attempts to use the men who say that they can conjure.

AC: [laughs] He has no faith in the conjurors; he thinks they're a fraud [laughs].

HP: It's an entertaining part of his own narrative. Why did you choose not to include that?

AC: Well, for one, I'm thinking, this is fiction but not really [laughs]. I'm using the story line of his life, but also in his narrative, it's kind of like Phillis having to become this Christian and be very Christian. Henry Bibb has to show he is modern, he's worthy of freedom, because he's writing his book while in freedom. He has to show his readers—which are middle class, White, anti-slavery sympathizers—that he's not superstitious: he's in the modern age; he's literate; he's a Protestant Christian; he shares their values. So by dissing the conjuror in his book, it is a way of doing that; it's a way of saying, "I'm a good American; I'm not into this hocus-pocus business." But I know that he must have had, but you don't see it in his narrative, a kind of appreciation of African culture. It must have been present in Kentucky where he grew up or on plantations, but you see he did the same thing too with his Cherokee owner; he said they would put on their feathers and paint their face and make an awful noise [laughs], so he's not into a going-back-to-your-roots kind of thing.

HP: You've subtitled both books "a story of slavery and freedom." The emphasis certainly in Bibb's story and in Wheatley's too is on slavery. In Henry Bibb's story freedom is saved for the epilogue.

AC: You're right. It's a story of slavery and pre-freedom.

HP: Do you think that's important for contemporary young readers that your emphasis is on that aspect of their experience?

AC: Here's why—I wanted to tell their stories while they were still children. When they became adults, when they're eighteen, they were free or on the path to freedom. So maybe that's a valid criticism of the book and of the title, but we have Henry Bibb's narrative and in fact it was when he was about eighteen-plus that he begins to think about freedom and making the attempt. His first escape attempt to leave slavery was when he was about twenty-one, whereas Phillis, by the time she was eighteen, her book was out and she gained her freedom shortly after.

HP: So because of your focus on their childhoods, slavery is what gets emphasized. I think that emphasizing the enslaved parts of their lives is important. As you say in *The Hanging of Angélique*, the tendency of Canadians to forget that we have a past of slavery or to ignore that we have a past of slavery, that's something that needs to be remedied.

AC: On Monday I presented at the Lusophone Studies Association meeting in Halifax. Angélique connects to the Lusophony because she comes from Portugal, and tried to escape from Canadian slavery to return to that country. One woman who was in the audience, who is doing a Ph.D. at St. Mary's University, came to me and said she didn't



know there was slavery in Canada. I wasn't surprised or shocked because I get that response all the time, and by the time you're a Ph.D. candidate you're a very educated person in terms of formal education, but that's quite normal [laughs]. She said, "I knew about the Loyalists, but I didn't know there were slaves here." I said even in the Loyalist period, the White Loyalists brought their slaves with them to Nova Scotia and Québec and Ontario and elsewhere, so I'm not shocked anymore. In our systems of education, whether it's primary, or secondary, or university, let's face it, Canadian studies is going down the drain. In post-secondary institutions, in high school also, there's very little emphasis on the study of Canada; that's also part of the problem.

HP: I read some reviews of both the novels, and one reviewer of *My Name is Phillis Wheatley* "wonder[s] if this short novel would have left a stronger impression if it concluded with a successful moment in the protagonist's young life as a writer" (Hamer, n.p.). What do you think of the notion that's implied there that novels for children should follow that kind of trajectory ending with the success of the character?

AC: I disagree and here's why I disagree. It's precisely the reason I wrote the book. Children were slaves and children suffered horribly as slaves. I've heard that; I've heard people say in response to *Angélique* that they wouldn't teach it to high school kids because it is so painful and I'm thinking, but these are experiences people had. And Henry was whipped as a child and Phillis suffered and crossed the Middle Passage and suffered discrimination in Boston and that's precisely my point. Sure she had a lot of successes as a young writer. She went to England, she was feted by the anti-slavery community, maybe I could have ended it there, but . . .

HP: (interrupts) But would that be the true story if you ended it there?

AC: Yes, it would be a true story, but if I had an agenda or a lofty ideal it would be to say to children or to young people or adults or whoever, that it's important, in spite of everything, it's important to get an education, because here are two people who received an education or learned to read and write under, as we would say in Jamaica, under dread, dread, dread circumstances and they did it and as a result they were able to gain their freedom. So I guess I'm using Henry Bibb's thought process in his narrative, that if you get an education (because he talks about that later on in the newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, that he publishes), education is the great panacea and with it you have the key to the world. I am not using such florid language, but I'm saying to young people, "it's important to gain knowledge. It's important to get an education because you can use it for your own liberation and for your own advancement and look at these two people who actually didn't have what you have today. You can go to school legally, you can sit at a desk, you can receive instruction, you can go to the library. Henry Bibb had to hide to get an education because, as you

said, people could be punished—enslaved people—if they were caught with a book or if it was discovered they could write or they could read. You nowadays-children don't have to do that; no one is going to punish you for learning to read." If I have an ultimate lofty ideal it would be that.

HP: In *Unsettling Narratives: Post-Colonial Readings of Children's Literature*, Clare Bradford quotes Homi Bhabha on "the deep stirring of the unhomely" to note how "a dwelling that might have seemed safe and secure is experienced as uncannily expressive of the psychic and political upheavals of colonialism" (137). Bradford's book is about the depiction of indigenous characters in children's literature, but while I was reading your books I thought about the depiction of physical space, like the homes that Henry Bibb lives in and the parts of the houses that he's assigned to and the same with Phillis. Were you consciously developing a depiction of physical space in relation to the characters' psyches?

AC: Physical space is there all the time, so Henry Bibb lives his life on plantations and on farms, because slavery is also about space. The plantation and the farm are spaces that are policed, that are under surveillance, that are bordered and off-limits to and for certain people. In fact a slave plantation is like a war camp. And there are guards to keep the workers there so they can't leave or revolt or what have you. So slavery is about space; it is spatial and racial discrimination. It's not subtle; it's not something that's sort of in the background. It's always in the foreground. And so my knowledge of that is present all the time and so, yes, it might not have been my primary objective to show how this space of containment is so oppressive to these children and to their parents, but the very fact that these spaces were created for the particular endeavor is about that; it shows that. For Phillis, she's in this beautiful home, she gets good food, she loves her mistress, of course she's grateful to her mistress and her mistress probably loved her, but it's kind of like this genteel prison for her.

HP: One of the things you do as Phillis talks about what's happening around her and what's happening to her is, she'll comment that she's wearing the dress her mistress chose for her and things like that, so her lack of freedom to choose is always clear despite the relative comfort of her circumstances.

AC: Yes. The thing, too, is that we have to bear in mind that Phillis was an experiment. This was the age of carrying out intellectual experiments on the Negro. Something similar was happening in London with several people, with several Blacks whether they were from Africa or the West Indies, or whether they were born in slavery or were born free. There was one who went to Cambridge University, and the central question was, can the Negro read? Does the Negro have enough intelligence to master arts and letters? Thomas Jefferson said no, and when someone sent him Phillis's book of poetry he said, to

support his position, “well, it’s really bad poetry.” So, it’s damned if you do and damned if you don’t. So she was also an experiment by the Wheatleys, even the two Wheatley children. The Wheatley son went to Boston Latin School, and when he came home he taught her what he studied. And Mary, the daughter, studied French and those genteel ladies’ subjects and taught her also. And so it was, “is the Negro Phillis intelligent enough to absorb this literature or absorb this knowledge and read and write? Can the Negro read?” This was the age of the enlightenment, but the dark side of the enlightenment was the taking away of human status from Black people. And Phillis showed she could read and she could write and she could write poetry. But she still could not get her book published in Boston, so that was the great rub, because even though the Negro showed that she was intelligent, people still didn’t believe she wrote the book or wrote those poems.

HP: And of course after her freedom, when she tried to get another collection of her poetry published, she had no success with that.

AC: She had no success. Her mistress, Mrs. Wheatley, was her biggest patron, her best supporter, and Mrs. Wheatley moved mountains. The Wheatleys were wealthy, they owned ships, they had business partners and business interests in London and were connected to the Countess of Huntingdon. They were not small people. And so her mistress was able to make it happen; she got the book published in London. But when her mistress died and Mr. Wheatley wasn’t that interested anyway, she couldn’t get her second manuscript published because the great White mistress was no longer there and the Black woman on her own just couldn’t push down those barriers. And interestingly, it was post revolution. This was supposed to be a time of great freedom and friendship and so on, but racism became even more entrenched. In fact slavery expanded under the revolutionary republic. The revolution didn’t help Phillis at all. Maybe she should have joined the Loyalist cause [laughs].

HP: Have you heard from young people who have read the novels about their responses to them?

AC: Young people have written me letters and emails saying how much they like the two books and which one they like better and how it moved them. I got a letter from a young woman saying I could have included x, y, and z in this book and she would have done that. I just think that it was amazing when I got this letter from this person saying, “you could have done this. This is how I would have done it; I would have made Henry do this,” which means that the person is engaged with the script. *Phillis* won the Beacon of Freedom Award from the Colonial Williamsburg library system, and that prize winner is chosen by children fourteen and under. So when they brought me down to Virginia to receive the prize, it was two young people thirteen years old that handed me my plaque and my medal. They chose the book,

which was the biggest honour, because there were several other books in the competition and they chose *Phillis*.

HP: There's no surer indication of your success in this endeavour, is there?

AC: *My Name is Henry Bibb* has won other prizes too: Best Books for Kids and Teens from the Canadian Children's Book Centre and the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People award. I find that one interesting. It's listed for this award as a social studies book, and that's great, I think. It was also shortlisted for the Red Maple award of the Ontario Library Association. I went to the ceremony for that. It was the greatest thing that I ever did. The award ceremony takes place in the summer down at Harbourfront in Toronto and they bring 3000 kids from all across southern Ontario to Harbourfront. The kids choose the winners, that's the other thing with this award. You're on this big stage at Harbourfront and there are thousands of kids cheering you on. It was crazy, but it was wonderful—all these kids and their teachers—so I feel like I did something sensible and right. They're the best audience. When I was at Colonial Williamsburg to get my award, the children were also suggesting other topics for me to write about. It was wonderful.

HP: Afua, thank you so much for making the time for this. I've really enjoyed hearing your thoughts about these books.

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