Memory, Re-Imagination and Commemoration

Bridging Academia and Activism. An Interview with Afua Cooper

Safa Al-Dilaimi[1]

Jamaican-born Canadian scholar, poet and performer Afua Cooper is currently the James R. Johnston Professor of Black Canadian Studies at Dalhousie University, Halifax (Canada), co-founder of the Black Canadian Studies Association and a founding member of the Toronto Dub Poets Collective (2002). Her work as a performing artist and speaker facilitates a critical and global reflection on the current socio-political and socio-environmental challenges of feminisms and the remembrance of historical female figures. The interview focuses on Afua Cooper's (feminist) experience as a performing artist, activist and educator; and the difficulties she has faced in the process. As a professor who works in an academic institution and creates a direct link to the community, Afua Cooper shares her perspective on memory and feminisms in Canada, the bridges to the U.S. and transregional connections.

In how far would you describe your work as feminist? Which other dimensions do you consider central to it?

Yes, I would describe my work as feminist and I grew up in that atmosphere of the idea of feminism. Well, not just the idea, but also in practice, growing up with my aunts, my mother's sisters. And seeing my mother's experience was formative for me because I saw women being able, having the ability and having the capacity. But also more than that, having the belief that they could do things. My mother herself was not in the workforce. She was a housewife, she had nine children. But she also had this vision of making sure that we got

1 The interview was conducted on 9 July 2022.

a good education, making sure that we had good food, as a mother and as a housewife. She also sewed our clothes when we were kids. But she was also involved in community development. So, she taught at the local community center. She taught things like nutrition and how to prepare certain dishes and recipes. These are things that we nowadays would not consider feminist studies, but it meant that she left her home. She interacted with other people, with other women. She developed her own intellectual capacity. And then some of my aunts actually went away to the United States and England to work, made their own money. And they also got married and they came back to Jamaica. They bought houses, they bought land, they bought property. It was really nice to see. When you're ten years old or eight years old, you're not thinking "oh, this is a feminist gesture", but just the example of it enters your subconscious mind. And then I also grew up in a society where people felt girls as well as boys or boys as well as girls should have access to and the opportunity for an education. And so, I was lucky in that sense. But I also came of age at a time, in the seventies, where in my own country – this was Jamaica – and the world at large, women faced a particular disadvantage. You look around and you see that the people who are in politics, people who control the economy and the political structure, are mainly men and then they use the resources of the state to do whatever they want. And usually, these are not things that are benefiting women and children. I was watching a documentary about some women in Nigeria who created an after-school program. They said the Nigerian government puts 22 percent of the national budget in the military and only six percent into education. Six percent! And they're saying: What if we could flip that 22 percent into six percent for the military? They said that Nigeria is now within a foreign power, so why is the military so strong? Why does it have all these armaments? So, [men typically, or] the patriarchal thinking put money into things or structures that rarely benefit women and should really benefit society as a whole, men, too, right? So, my work came out of that sensibility to address, or look at, or give voice to these inequalities in the world, especially those that empower women and girls and children in general. Well, I would also say it's a humanistic way. It's a humanistic perspective on practice, because one of the things that we always see is that women are human beings, too and women's rights are human rights. So, those ideas, those sensibilities have informed my work from a young person, whether it's activism, or poetry, or academia.

How do you relate your work and specifically, the Canadian case, with the work of other (Black) feminist writers?

You know, coming from the Caribbean, the Caribbean countries are really new societies. These societies emerged out of slavery and colonization in their present manifestation. So, there's a newness to them. But then you also feel that you have this opportunity where you could recreate yourself in a way, to a certain degree. But because these societies come out of slavery and colonization, it means that they evolved via an experience or a trajectory of illusion which was rooted in immense brutality. I was thinking about that this morning for the interview. We experienced immense brutality then and still are now. So, those experiences are going to shape who you are and they're going to shape your thoughts. They're going to shape the way you think about yourself, about our position in the world, our position as a place, as a geographic territory, where other powers and other people of big powers can say, "this is how you should behave", "this is how you should think", "we are going to set the terms of trade", "we will tell you how much we will pay for your bananas", "you should know you don't have a voice", or "we will tell you how much we're going to pay you for that". So, we have always been at the receiving end of imperialism and imperialist thinking. And that means that we are influenced also by a lot of patriarchal thinking that's coming from the metropolises, so to speak. They impose their ideas of gender, what women should be, how far women should go. Even within slavery, there was this kind of what I'm going to call a brutal equality, because women had to do the same kind of work men did, and the additional burden of having to perform reproductive work. But throughout that, I think after slavery ended, for example, we had this sense that women, – that we – could do things, because sometimes we were the only ones who were there to do things for ourselves. Sometimes we were the only ones who were there to defend ourselves and to defend our lives. So, I think for Caribbean women and Black women in general, within the Americas, we have a kind of capacity that I don't see anywhere else. And it's not something I'm valorizing. I'm not saying "hey, hey, hey, you know, we're big and strong", but just saying because of the fact of our history and also the previous history before the Caribbean or in Africa, coming from certain spaces where women were also held in high regard and high esteem and have certain positions in life and a certain kind of power. That also the memory of that and some living memory of that – will give us that kind of capacity that other people don't have. And the same goes for Black women within South America or Latin America or North

America. So, we kind of go through life knowing and thinking we have this capacity for a change, for transformation, for making our lives better than the lives we were born into. Canada is/was once a colonized space, but at the same time, the dominant ideology, the Eurocentric ideology, is a European/North American ideology in which White people are on top. So, the kind of feminism or the dominant feminism is that of White Eurocentric feminism. And White women generally had different sorts of interests than Black women in terms of a feminist agenda or what it is that they think women want. So there always has to be a different kind of articulation from Black and racialized women. So, you know, liberal feminism is about women getting jobs, being in the workplace, the right to abortion, all of those things. Whereas Black women are saying "well, we have been in the workforce for so long, maybe we need to get a break. Maybe we need the right to stay home with our children. Maybe what we want is the right to have children and not to have those children taken away from us by the state. And if we're in the workforce, getting a decent salary for what we do, good benefits, a good vacation package", all of those things. So, White women's articulation always seems to be about work, about their sexuality, you know that sort of thing. I'm not saying Black women aren't concerned about that. Those definitely both are concerns, too. But we also have other concerns which sometimes are diametrically opposed to what White women want. And then we have to think about Black women working in the homes of some White women who are themselves feminists, who are arguing for women's rights and so on. But then you have a Black woman in your home cleaning, cooking your food, looking after your children. How are you treating her? Are you paying her a decent salary? Those are some of the issues I find with liberal feminism.

Many of your works, whether poetry, fiction/literature or performance, have a strong sense of history, place, memory, and experience. In which ways can literature, or any expression of art, serve as a tool to transform the highly dominant, androcentric, and colonial narrative (e.g. in *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (2006), where you break the androcentric, male-centered perspective)?

Well, I think art can do that to some degree, to a certain degree, but not fully 100 percent, because with whatever art we do, poetry, the activism component, the change won't happen unless you're engaging bodily and materially. And that is where the activist work is important. I can perform a poem, write a book, and

be on YouTube, and people will see it and hopefully get inspired. But I'm under no illusion that that's going to transform the world. Many things need to come together for that transformation happen. In transformation, many things have to be going on simultaneously, or maybe not even simultaneously, but many things have to be happening. Because art is kind of a fragile thing. It's also very strong, but it's fragile. Look at some poets like the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, for example, who was constantly being imprisoned because of his poetry and his political leanings. One time, he spent twelve years in prison. So, that's a fragile thing. You know, you write some poems, write some books, you publish in a magazine and then you end up in prison. Also Antonio Gramsci, the Italian philosopher who died in jail because of his writings. He was anti-fascist, he opposed Mussolini, and then he died in jail. So, if there is not another movement of struggle going on simultaneously, then art might not count for anything. But art can also inspire people, whatever art it is, e.g. graffiti. We know art has inspired movements that have led to positive change. So, within liberal democracies, or maybe I should say bourgeois democracy, like Canada or Germany, there's always the desire on the part of the state or people in power to co-opt art. They will put it in a museum. "We'll make this art fabulous. We'll give them a number one book and make it a bestseller". And then the art becomes redefined. You just go, you sign your book, you win a big prize and you pose, and that's fine, because the artist has to reproduce her material life. You have to make a living. But the tendency in bourgeois societies is to just co-opt art and make it harmless. You know, take a thing, e.g. put Che Guevara on a t-shirt or have multiple poses of Che Guevara at the Guggenheim Museum or wherever. And people say: "Oh, isn't that great?". You know, Che Guevara turns over in his grave because he was a revolutionary. So, that's a tendency in democracies. And because the state is so strong, they always have a way of killing things or neutralizing. So, I'm not under any illusion at all. We see how bourgeois societies deal with art. You know, when Van Gogh was alive, he couldn't even sell one of his paintings. People thought it was ugly. The guy died in poverty. And fortunately, he had a nice brother who helped him and at least bought one of his paintings. And now one of his paintings is sold for $200 million and he's not around to enjoy it. So, one minute they say, "oh, your work is ugly. You're not a good painter", a hundred years later it's "wow, you're all the rage". So, that's what they do with art. They kill the revolutionary potential of art. So, I'm not under any illusion. I mean, I do my work because I'm driven to do it. And hopefully it will inspire some people.

You mentioned that transformation cannot happen unless there are many things going on simultaneously. What are those additional things that you consider helpful to drive transformation?

First of all, there has to be a commitment. And you see it on the right, you see it in conservative circles. They have that commitment. You know, Roe v. Wade was in 1973 and everybody thought, "hey, victory, we have won this battle". 50 years later, they overturned it, which meant that they never slept. That's why they kept chipping away. And that's the problem with people on the left. It's that you win a victory today, then they think, "oh, we got it all", and they kind of stop. Conservatives don't stop. They keep going until they achieve what they want. So, first, there has to be that commitment because we are living in a society, in a global society, in which certain forces feel that the majority of people should be slaves and serfs straight up. We shouldn't have any aspirations, they should be on top and tell us what to do. That thinking hasn't changed from the Middle Ages until present times. It's the same mentality we're experiencing, just in different forms. When you look at the people who compose the G7 nations, who are they? These are former slave owners. These are the big powers who were the slave powers and who are the colonizing powers. It's the same people and they have the same attitude. They're telling us how much they're going to pay us for our resources. They're telling us "you don't have all the resources". France is saying to Nigeria "we only need uranium in Nigeria. Don't even bother to think that's yours. We're going to tell you how much money we'll give, if we give you anything". Now, the G7 are the same people who were colonizing the world a hundred years ago. So, that's their attitude towards us. If we don't know that this struggle is multipronged, then we have lost the fight even before we begin to fight. So, there has to be activism inside and outside the academy on the streets. We see a lot that we have gained. You know, we started talking about feminism earlier on and, you know, feminism as a movement, as a practice, was a street thing. It was on the street with people marching. [It was because of that.] Then you had it in the university. It inspired feminist studies in the university. So, the academic feminism came out of street feminism. Now what I see is that feminism is becoming like an academic exercise. It has lost its trade. The street power isn't there anymore. [And that is part of the reason with feminism, because now it's gone. Everybody is theorizing and theorization is killing us. Now it becomes more and more sophisticated.] But we have these real-life material issues that we're dealing with, that people who are teaching feminist studies in the university, in graduate school, have no idea

about because they are members of the bourgeoisie. So, my point is that we have to be back on the streets. We see some of that with the whole Black Lives Matter movement. We have to have activism on the street, we have to work in certain spaces like in the universities and in trade unions. So, it has to be multi-pronged. The writers, the artists, they're all very important to this. And then finally, the upcoming generations, the generation that comes behind us must be inspired to carry on the work. You know, no one generation can say, "this is the end. We have covered it. We've got it done". So, that intergenerational practice has to happen, too. These are some of the ways.

What are the possibilities and key challenges about re-imagination through literature? And how can memory and re-imagination help to commemorate past women's legacies, which are crucial to today's understanding of different layers/axes of inequalities, e.g. gender inequality, social class, race/ ethnicity and other social markers?

Yes, I am going to begin with imagination and reimagination. It is absolutely crucial that we imagine or reimagine a possibility, the kind of possibility that we want for ourselves, for our own lives and for the world. Because when you see the world as it is in its material manifestation and its three-dimensional manifestations, you might think, "okay, this is now really cruel", but how do you want it to be? Do you want gardens to be a park or a garden at every intersection or in the main square of the town? How do you see your world? What is it you want in your own personal world? And that is where the imagination comes in, because we have to imagine a way out of this. So, in terms of struggle, in terms of Black women's work, how do we get all of this? There's a term being used nowadays called withering, which is basically about something being eroded by constant brutality, so to speak. And I think it was in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, where there was a woman in the woods. She's a speaker, an orator and she's talking about your hands, "look at your hands. Love your hands!". And I said, well, why should we love our hands? Why our hands? Are hands important? And then you have to begin to imagine our hands within the context of the time that the woman spoke and worked for other people. Now, they didn't really work for us. You're cooking for other people, you're washing other people's clothes, bathing other people's children, you're raising other people's children, you're taking care of other people's crops. And what you're using to do this is your hands, right? Also your mental capacity, but what's physically manifesting in it is the hands as the tools. And so, you know, this woman, this orator, and thus

also the writer Toni Morrison, is asking people to imagine a new possibility for your life. So, I always think of grasping a new vision. And so someone like Phillis Wheatley[2] used her imagination. She created another possibility. And some people say, "oh, well, you know, she died when she was 34 and she died in poverty". Yeah, we all know that. But in a way, she's like this kind of mythical hero. She died when she was 33 or 34, but look at the legacy that she left behind. And maybe she knew that would be her task in life. That would be her purpose in life.

Now to the point of memory. We have to remember her as she remembered all the education that she got from the Wheatleys in Boston and then all her memory, the memory of her past, because she has a poem called *memory* in which she invoked this as her education. We can't fault her for this. She invoked the Greek goddess of memory, one of the nine muses. You know, here she's talking about memory. She's remembering her past in Senegal or Gambia. She was something like nine years old when she came to the Americas. But we also now have the task of remembering her and of trying to remember what she remembered and how she came out of that brutality. Or maybe she didn't come out of it and it was the brutality that also ushered in her demise.

In which ways do these legacies that form a central part of your work contribute to broadening hegemonic archives and to thinking new forms of the social?

Okay, so back to imagination, because of what we know about Phillis Wheatley and then I'm going to come to Henry Bibb. We have these scraps of information about Phillis. We know a lot more about her owners, the Wheatleys, because they were rich, White and literate. And you know, they left an archive behind on their own ships. So, we have these bits of information about her, which all the people who have worked on her put together to hopefully get a rounder picture of her. And maybe a century later, or not quite a century, but several decades

2 Phillis Wheatley, born free in 1753, was captured at the age of seven by slave traders from West Africa, Senegambia (modern-day Gambia/ Senegal) to Boston (Massachusetts) and became the first African American female poet of the 18th century, under the status of an enslaved person. With her work *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), Wheatley led to a reconsideration of enslaved African Americans' inferiority on both sides of the Atlantic. Though subtly veiled through Christianity, her works persistently incorporated her individual enslavement experiences through themes of freedom and redemption. Footnote added by the interviewer.

later, you have Henry Bibb[3] with lots more archives, because he wrote his autobiography and he published a newspaper and lots more was written about him. And so we have these things and we really have to reinterpret them. These are not just people who were resisting White supremacy. Yes, for sure. But they were also creating a narrative of their own internal life, of their own personal life, which sort of goes against the Eurocentric form of thinking. So, if we come to Marie-Josèphe Angélique[4], she's also an 18th-century figure like Phillis. So, there's this fire and there are the archives that are created by the colonial powers. So, the governor has to write a report, the court documents are written by the judges. They have to write up the narrative and so on. But they have this perspective of the White male, White elite male, who think Black people are inferior, for one, and using the natural condition of Black people of enslavement. And the same archives we look at, we look at them differently. We try to look at them as much as possible through the eyes of Marie-Josèphe Angélique, wondering, "what was she thinking?". So, to your question, we are not necessarily expanding the archives, but expanding the interpretation of the archives, expanding the perspective of these archives to say, "okay, what did Black people think? What were their motivations?". You know, the intendant of New France at that time was a man, who said "Marie-Josèphe Angélique is a wicked negress. She set fire to the city". He had no sympathy for her. And [that] she was a slave and was unhappy. She made White people uncomfortable. She made them distressed. Because of her they couldn't sleep, couldn't work. And it is completely okay for him to have that. But that's his perspective. He's a ruler, he's an elitist and a White supremacist. Fine. That's your perspective. We come and we reinterpret. We offer a different interpretation. What was this woman feeling and

3 Henry Bibb, born 1815 into slavery in Shelby County (Kentucky), became renown as an anti-slavery lecturer, civil rights advocate, abolitionist, author, and editor in both the United States and Canada. After multiple escapes, he found his way to Upper Canada (nowadays Ontario) and published his slave narrative *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* (1849). In 1851, he established the first African Canadian newspaper *The Voice of the Fugitive*. Footnote added by the interviewer.

4 Marie-Josèphe Angélique, born 1705 in Portugal, was sold to Montreal in her late twenties. She was officially charged with the arson of Old Montreal in 1734. Despite a lack of evidence, she was hanged and burned by French colonial officials. Cooper challenges this dominant Canadian historical narrative and the Black enslaved female's subaltern identity in early Canada in her work *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (2006). Footnote added by the interviewer.

what was she thinking? As you were saying earlier, people have childhoods and because they're human, they need certain comforts. They have certain desires, they have lost a lot in their lives because they have suffered. What were their needs? It is our task to ask those questions.

You have done excessive work outside of the "ivory tower of academia", as you like to call it. Can you tell us how your personal background has informed your activism? And in this context, how can academia and activism work together?

I always felt when I went to university that everybody should know this knowledge, that everybody should have access to what I'm doing. I should share it with people. I couldn't understand that it was supposed to be this secret thing that's just kind of kept in a bubble. That I just didn't understand. And so I felt that, if I'm writing about whatever it is, or I'm studying, I can't go and give a lecture on it, but maybe I could present knowledge in another format. And through activism, it was usually through poetry or music, I could. You know, at the beginning I couldn't understand why knowledge was so encased in the academia. Sure, you could put it in a journal that nobody reads, or you could write a book. That is why to me, open access is great, because when you have a published journal, you have subscriptions, you have people who subscribe to you, you have libraries who buy it. But by and large, it still remains secret knowledge. How many people are going to read it? And a lot of good work has been researched, produced, and written. Nobody sees it. So, that's the legacy of the medieval university. It was a cloistered space. The scholars were monks and priests. They were very erudite people who knew a lot. But it was for that specific circle and that context. And that's how it evolved. Certain people or children of the elite will come to university and get this knowledge, and they learn Latin and whatever it is, and philosophy, and Greek history, and it stays there. Then they go and they become rulers, and ministers, and diplomats. It was always something for the elite. So, when people like me, the great unwashed, get sent to university, one thing that could happen is that you feel so alienated that you leave, you don't stick around. Well, if you stick around, it's a constant fight. And I did stick around and it was a constant fight for me. And so I needed another outlet. I needed another way of being. And that was in the community, that was through the arts, that was through activism. That was what sort of gave me a purpose to say, you know what, I can transfer or reinterpret some of what I'm doing here into this space. And the academy is changing quite a bit. I mean, I see people doing all kinds of things that I was thinking about, or I

used to do as an undergraduate. I see people writing pieces on certain things that thirty years ago or even twenty years ago, they wouldn't get the support to do. So, it's changing quite a bit, or it has changed. But for me, not fast enough. Because the hypocrisy still remains in academia. You know, I just don't want to be a part of it. I don't want to be a part of that hypocrisy.

As a founding figure of the Toronto Dub Poets Collective (2002), you helped in situating the dub poetry movement in Canada and organized the International Dub Poetry Festival and Conference throughout the years. How would you describe the inherently different experience of an embodied performance in the art (of dub poetry) and the experience of writing about real-life female legacies (such as Phillis Wheatley, Marie-Josèphe Angélique, or Chloe Cooley)?

I like performing, and it doesn't necessarily mean I'm running all over the stage. For me it means having the words flowing through me. What do I do with my arms, my hands, my knees, or my feet? I could be running across the stage. Performance for me means making the words live in my body, making my body express them. That's what it means to me. And also what songs want to come out? Because I may read the same poem and if I read it sometime, it's going to be different because there might be a sound that wants to be expressed in a particular time when I'm reading that. Or there could be an image that comes in my mind because sometimes as I'm reading, images will come in my mind that perhaps have nothing to do with the poem that I'm reading. Although I'm sure it has to do with it, you know, to be on stage with a poem and then my imagination is actually somewhere else. I could see myself flying through the sky or I could see Harriet Tubman walking in the room. I'm thinking, "oh my God, is that Harriet Tubman who just walked in?". At this point, it has nothing to do with Harriet Tubman. Or does it? I don't know. So, that's what reading does for me. Sitting down to write a piece, a book or an article is a reflective experience. It's also one – obviously – of the imagination, because I have to think "how is this going to be? What's the purpose of this character? What does this character want to say?". Well, it is a time of reflection and just really for everything, it is the imagination and getting into the body, getting into the spirit. And I feel like everything we do, academic writing, everything, has a spiritual dimension to it because we are calling. We are calling in new worlds, we are creating new worlds. You're the creator, because what we do, whatever writing we do, we are creating something. And through this act of

creation, we are ushering in something new. We also tend to think of scientific writing or academic writing as something without creativity. It's an extremely creative endeavor. Even the way you structure the work as "this is going to go first as a section. What am I going to talk about here?". It is an act of the imagination. Comparing writing and performing, writing for me could take weeks, months, or years. If I'm willing to write something, I have to think about it first. It's like a mental exercise. I'm writing a poem now. Someone asked me to write a poem as a kind of praise for somebody else. And so mentally, I'm constructing in my head what it is I want to say and how I'm going to bring in all these ideas. I haven't written anything down yet on paper, I think I will do that next week. But once I sit down, sketch up my ideas on paper, I know new things are going to emerge before I write this poem. So, the writing for me, it's in several stages. It could be spontaneous, it could be something that happens like that. But it's also a very reflective kind of thing, too. So, if I now take that same piece of writing and I'm going to do a performance of the poem, it's going to be a different experience.