Chapter 3: SUGAR

From Mary Helen Stefaniak, eNetwork

My plan for discussion was to focus on the two poems in Chapter 3. I don't have a list of questions, so here is a report instead!

We devoted most of our discussion to questions and issues raised by the poem entitled "proof [dear Phillis]" by Eve L. Ewing, a contemporary Black poet (93-94). In her poem, Ewing addresses Phillis Wheatley, the first Black person in the American colonies to publish a book of poems, calling Wheatley her "foremother" as a Black poet. Wheatley, who was about seven years old in 1761 when she was purchased by a Mrs. Wheatley of Boston, learned to read and write English and later translated parts of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from Latin for use in her own writing. Wheatley was eventually freed after the publication of her book. She married a free Black man but died in poverty at the age of 31. For a brief and very interesting biography--including Phillis Wheatley's travel to England for the publication of her book, *Poems on Various Subjects--*and several of her poems, go to

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley

In our discussion, we touched on the way Phillis Wheatley was held up by abolitionists as proof that Black people were capable of intellectual and artistic achievement. The question of Wheatley's decline into poverty after she was freed also led to discussion of the quality or benefits of her life as an enslaved person. I'd like to add something to that part of our discussion here.

The SUGAR chapter focused on British and American development of the international slave trade, which was built on existing slave-trading networks in Africa, mostly to support the labor-intensive production of sugar and molasses. The author noted that "African elites" sold their prisoners of war, as well as "criminals" and "undesirables," to European and (later) American slavers. One anthropologist was quoted: "Sugar, we are told, followed the Koran," but the author chose not to emphasize that much of West Africa was comprised of Muslim-ruled kingdoms at the time. Many of the people that the African elites were selling into slavery--and also many of the people kidnapped by the British traders--were Muslims, literate in Arabic. I learned this when I was researching *The Cailiffs of Baghdad, Georgia.* One of the characters in my novel is a descendant of a real historical figure named Bilali Mahomet (d. 1859), a literate and devout Muslim from Futa Djallon, who was kidnapped as a teenager and spent the rest of his life enslaved, first in the West Indies and then on Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia. Bilali Mahomet, who is also a character in my novel, kept a kind of journal written in Arabic in a little handmade notebook that I got to hold in my own hands in the special collections library at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Given what I learned about Bilali and other literate African Muslims enslaved in the Americas, I find it easy to picture the six or seven-year-old girl who will become Phillis Wheatley as the beloved and very bright daughter of her true parents, with a mother who tells her stories and a father who reads to her from the Koran, a little girl who might know how to read and even write in Arabic by the time her family is torn apart. Although its details are imagined, I'm thinking *that* life is the one that we need to compare to her life as an enslaved person, whatever its benefits.

We didn't have time to discuss Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "First to Rise" (89-90) about Crispus Attucks, a fugitive from slavery who was the first to die in the struggle for independence. Komunyakaa (b. 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana) is a Vietnam veteran and a highly regarded poet. To learn more about him and read some of his poems, go to

https://poets.org/poet/yusef-komunyakaa

For more about poet/scholar/artist/cultural organizer Eve L. Ewing, go to https://eveewing.com/

Also of interest:

*Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* by Sylviane A. Diouf