

**RESISTING COLONY AND NATION:
CHALLENGING HISTORY IN MARYSE CONDÉ'S *MOI,
TITUBA, SORCIÈRE ... NOIRE DE SALEM***

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Born into slavery in late-seventeenth-century Barbados as the daughter of an Ashanti woman raped in the middle passage, Tituba, the title character of Maryse Condé's historical novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem* (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) is expelled from the plantation of her birth after her mother's public execution, exiled to New England as the slave of a Puritan minister, and jailed as a witch during the 1692 Salem trials. When she returns to Barbados, Tituba is executed in the aftermath of a failed slave revolt.¹ While tracing Tituba's journeys, Condé's novel explores the complex web of narratives that colonial American societies employ in the attempt to naturalize their existence and their fundamental institutions. In the process *Moi, Tituba* suggests that prevailing accounts of history must be reconsidered and new histories uncovered before contemporary postcolonial societies can escape the legacy of oppression bequeathed to them by the colonies. Simultaneously, *Moi, Tituba* proposes alternative means of understanding history's relationship to the present and to the future, understandings that will support this societal transformation.

Throughout her life, Tituba explores a series of social roles and narrative positions that might enable her to achieve personal freedom or social justice, constructing alternative narratives and communities

¹ This is the biography of the fictional character who narrates Condé's novel, not the biography of the historical person accused of witchcraft in Salem in 1692. Although, as Manzor-Coats argues, the first French edition of the novel was marketed to suggest it was a historical novel, Condé insists in an interview with Ann Armstrong Scarboro that *Moi, Tituba* is "the opposite of a historical novel" (201). For a discussion of the historical Tituba—a woman who, despite her representation in American literature as an African or Afro-Caribbean Creole, was most likely an Amerindian slave from the Caribbean coast of South America—see Breslaw's study.

that challenge foundational fictions designating black bodies as destined for servitude and female bodies as abject receptacles of male desire. Although her efforts lead only to limited successes during her lifetime, *Moi, Tituba* suggests that Tituba's most significant contribution to social resistance is her own life history, which exposes the inaccuracies of American historical narratives representing slavery as a "peculiar institution," an aberration that is separate and separable from other social and political institutions of the state. Looking as much toward the future as the past, the novel draws connections between Barbados' and the United States' colonial histories and their contemporary societies, highlighting their violent origins while nevertheless predicting that, at some point in the future, "tout cela aura une fin" (271) ["there will be an end to all this" (178)]. Because of this proleptic turn in the narrative, and because of the novel's insistence that the past can be put to use in the task of shaping the present and the future, the assassination of the protagonist at the hands of the government toward the end of the novel does not prevent it from remaining, in a certain sense, optimistic.

Moi, Tituba is set during the late 1600s, when the plantation economy is just beginning to thrive in the American colonies, and the novel interrogates the foundational narratives and ideologies of the societies that were later to become the independent nation-states of Barbados and the United States of America. Scrutinizing the profit-driven society of Barbados, to which white English planters came in order to increase their financial well-being, as well as the religious society of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, to which white English Puritans came in order to ensure their spiritual well-being, *Moi, Tituba* insists that the benefits allotted to individual colonists through their societies' survival and success cannot be separated from the dehumanization and genocide of the Indian and African peoples upon whose territorial and bodily resources they rely. Tituba's experiences reveal both colonial societies to be carefully and intentionally constructed—through a network of legal, economic, and religious institutions—to provide white, English, male citizens with worldly and heavenly benefits not easily attained in Europe and to deny these benefits to those persons who are not adult, Christian males of European origin. Nevertheless, both societies also rely upon narratives that naturalize their existence and their fundamental institutions.

As Robin Blackburn has argued in *The Making of New World Slavery*, plantation societies throughout the Americas made use of a fluid set of both economic and religious narratives to support a racially-based system of slavery:

For most Europeans the Africans' lack of Christianity and 'savage'

nature was thought to explain the need to keep them in bondage. The story of Noah's curse, and the theory that blackness constituted the symbol of this curse, furnished justification for the permanent enslavement of blacks regardless of their faith or conduct. But it did not supply legal formulas for treating slaves as property—these were furnished by residues of Roman Law... Where capitalist relations had emerged the sacred aura they gave to private property cast a cloak over chattel slavery, while the biblical injunction to bring forth the fruits of the earth was harnessed to accumulation and slave planting. As the new slave systems were consolidated they thus combined the secular and the sacred, the new and the old. (312)

Hence, multiple, and often contradictory, religious arguments supporting the institution of slavery gradually merged with diverse legal, political, and economic arguments. However, the arguments were presented *as though* they formed a coherent and seamless narrative in defense of racially-based slavery.

Although the large-scale plantations of the Caribbean did not exist in Massachusetts, *Moi, Tituba* suggests that Puritan New England society also played a vital role in this process of naturalization. Certainly, the economic prosperity of many New England port cities—and hence, many New England colonies—depended upon trade routes that connected Africa, the Caribbean, and North America and provided plantations with slave labor. But Condé's narrative portrays Massachusetts' collaboration with plantation slavery as extending beyond economic and cultural exchange and human trafficking. Puritan society in the novel centers around the identification and eradication of evil and sin. "[É]crasés par la présence du Malin parmi eux et cherchant à le traquer dans toutes ses manifestations" (104) ["[O]ppressed by the presence of Satan in their midst and seeking to hunt him down in all his manifestations" (64)], Condé's Puritans treat even innocuous people and events as though they were particularly threatening; Samuel Parris has "prunelles verdâtres et froides, astucieuses et retorses, créant le mal parce qu'elles le voyaient partout" (58) ["greenish, cold eyes, scheming and wily, creating evil because they saw it everywhere" (34)]. Within Condé's Massachusetts, the most successful means of gaining public influence is through the identification of sinful acts and signs of evil, and colonists have substantial incentive to accuse others of sin, thereby shifting potential accusations away from themselves and accruing power. Those who stand out visibly as different from the collective, including the indigent, the physically disabled, indigenous Americans, and people of African origin, are particularly vulnerable to these accusations of embodying evil, and in fact the association between them and sin is shortly made to appear natural and inherent. Thus, Samuel Parris' wife Elizabeth is able to offer the following analogy of Salem's frenzied

witch hunt that began with the accusation of Tituba, along with a poor woman and a physically disabled one:

Je ne peux comparer cela qu'à une maladie que l'on croit d'abord bénigne parce qu'elle affecte des parties du corps sans importance ... puis qui graduellement s'attaque à des membres et à des organes vitaux. Les jambes ne peuvent plus fonctionner, les bras. En fin de compte, le coeur est atteint, puis le cerveau. Martha Corey et Rebecca Nurse ont été arrêtées! (169)

[I can only compare it to a sickness that first of all is thought to be benign because it affects the lesser parts of the body ... then gradually attacks the limbs and vital organs. The arms and legs can no longer move. Then the heart is attacked and finally the brain. Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse have been arrested! (107-108)]

This description, meant to serve not only as an explanation but as an apology to Tituba, takes for granted that certain members of the community are radically inferior, so much so that their bodies—and hence their lives—are expendable. Goodwife Parris is able to suggest such an analogy only because she has fully internalized the Puritan social hierarchy—one in which she is far from empowered—and believes it to be both necessary and natural.

Moi, Tituba explores and challenges the mechanisms through which such processes of naturalization occur. Looking toward a future in which the community does not purchase the freedom of some of its members by sacrificing that of others, Tituba dreams of a time when “l'État sera providence et se souciera du bien-être de ses citoyens” (184) [“the state that will truly provide for the well-being of its citizens” (118)]. But if, as the novel suggests, both plantation and Puritan societies of the American colonies have so successfully naturalized institutions granting liberty to some by denying it to others that it becomes difficult if not impossible to challenge the *status quo*, even after the abolition of slavery and the end of colonial rule, how might Tituba's dream become a reality?

The opening chapter of *Moi, Tituba* explores the suggestion that the family might provide a model for a benevolent and just community. The nation-state is often imagined through the metaphor of an extended family, a collective of persons bound together and “related” through the unifying construct of the nation, which offers them a singular point of origin, much like a common ancestor. Hegel, for example, suggests even more fundamental connections between the state and the family, a social unit he describes as “specifically characterized by love.... Hence in a family, one's frame of mind is to have self-consciousness of one's individuality within this unity as the absolute essence of oneself, with the result that one is in it not as an independent person but as a member” (110). When the family

experiences a “peaceful expansion until it becomes people, i.e. a nation” (122), Hegel argues that it functions as the first “ethical root of the state” (154); however, he also argues that “[i]t is within the state that the family is first developed into civil society” (155). As Michael Shapiro demonstrates, Hegel proposes that the family and the state exist within a fundamentally interdependent relationship, wherein the state both “creates the conditions of possibility for the moral family, and ... embodies the enlargement of an ethical life begun within the family” (54).

If, however, neither the family nor the state is in fact “characterized by love,” the interdependence between the two social units is potentially quite dangerous. In *Moi, Tituba*, Darnell Davis, the white planter into whose possession Tituba is born, lavishes care and attention on his white son, a pale and sickly infant who struggles for survival after his mother’s death. Davis ensures that the child is nursed and nurtured, and he eventually relinquishes his own dreams of financial grandeur in order to tend to his son: he sells the plantation and returns to England in search of a cure for the boy. On the surface, the Davis family might appear to model the behavior of the welfare state Tituba envisions, for its bond generates individual and collective sacrifices made to attend to the needs of its most vulnerable members. However, the care that Davis extends to his child is literally robbed from another. Davis’ son survives on “le lait que lui donnait en abondance une esclave, forcée d’abandonner pour lui son propre fils” (24) [“the copious milk he was given by a slave, who had been forced to quit nursing her own son” (10)]. The starving slave child could even be a brother to the nourished white one, for Davis “avait déjà une meute d’enfants bâtards” (3) [“had already fathered a horde of illegitimate children” (14)]. While his “instinct paternel ... se réveilla pour son unique rejeton de race blanche” (24) [“paternal instinct was aroused for his only white offspring” (10)], Davis does not identify his mixed-race progeny, who by law follow the condition of their mothers into slavery and are considered black, as a part of his family. With no clear line separating the nuclear family from the system of racial slavery, the integrity of Darnell Davis’ family relies upon the same forms of oppression that uphold the broader colonial society.

While the novel does demonstrate that some families develop out of and produce loving connections, it resists depicting the family as a natural, essential, or inherently ethical social unit. Indeed, it opens with the creation of a family born of horrific violence: “Abena, ma mère, un marin anglais la viola sur le pont du *Christ the King*, un jour de 16** alors que le navire faisait voile vers la Barbade. C’est de cette agression que je suis née. De cet acte de haine et de mépris...”

(13) ["Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt..." (3)]. Tituba's very existence is predicated upon her father's brutality and her mother's suffering; only by virtue of this violence do she and Abena form a family. Consequently, Abena can never separate her feelings for her daughter from the anguish of her conception: "ma mère ne m'aimait pas ... je ne cessais pas de lui remettre en l'esprit le Blanc qui l'avait possédée sur le pont du *Christ the King* au milieu d'un cercle de marins, voyeurs obscènes" (18) ["my mother did not love me ... I never stopped bringing to mind the white man who had raped her on the deck of *Christ the King* while surrounded by a circle of sailors, obscene voyeurs" (6)]. For Abena, the family exists only through the institution of slavery; even the familial relationship that makes her happy—her marriage to Tituba's adoptive father Yao—is not the result of a decision they make but of one made by their mutual owner, Davis.

The families of Condé's narrative—the cherished, the disdained, the denied—are intensely vulnerable social constructions that rely upon the support, or the violent reinforcement, of society. Neither Abena's cherished relationship with Yao nor her ambivalent relationship with Tituba is protected by British colonial law, which denies kinship relations among slaves. Darnell Davis' family is also limited by legal codes, albeit ones much more to his liking: his mixed-race children cannot legally be incorporated into their biological father's family. Neither a model for an ethical state nor a sanctuary from an oppressive one, the nuclear family acquires its form only through the meanings and codes assigned to it by a particular society. As Anne McClintock has argued, the idea of the family has been repeatedly marshaled into service by both colonial and national narratives to naturalize structures of racial and gender dominance,² and indeed the families within *Moi, Tituba* demonstrate an institutionalized interdependence between family and state that is decidedly less ethical

² See, in particular, McClintock's chapter "The White Family of Man: Colonial Discourse and the Reinvention of Patriarchy," where she explores the ways in which British colonies allowed for the "reinvention of the tradition of fatherhood, displaced onto the colonial bureaucracy as a surrogate, restored authority" (240), and her final chapter, "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race," in which she examines the implications of the "metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial—the 'national family,' the global 'family of nation,' the colony as a 'family of black children ruled over by a white father'—depend[ing] ... on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere" (358).

and benevolent than the relationship proposed by Hegel.

But if the institutions of state, religion, and family are all implicated in forms of violence that the narrative rejects, what options are available to Tituba and to those of her contemporaries who wish to construct social communities that are neither oppressive nor involuntary? One possible model that the novel explores is the intentional community, a collective social unit established through the conscious and voluntary decisions of its members. These members generate their own narratives about their relationships to each other, and inevitably such narratives rely upon creative, interactive uses of history and memory. When Tituba is born, for example, Abena's husband Yao embraces the child and proclaims to Abena, "[a] partir d'aujourd'hui, ton enfant c'est le mien.... Et gare à celui qui dira le contraire" (16) ["[f]rom this day forward your child is mine.... And just let someone try and say she isn't!" (5)]. In claiming Tituba as his child, Yao does not undo the violence of Abena's rape or overcome the conditions of slavery that the family faces on the plantation. However, in his refusal to allow Abena's tortured memory of her history to be the single most influential fact in determining her present and future, Yao is able to establish a network of mutual affection and support, extending what little protection and care he can offer to the infant born into slavery and attempting to reframe Abena's experience of motherhood. The family that Yao narrates does not rely on history or memory in order to come into being or to remain intact, and it provides an alternative to the social, legal, religious, and economic narratives that employ this discourse to naturalize sexual assault and slavery.

As an adult, Tituba attempts to develop other intentional mini-communities that follow the model Yao provides, resisting the narratives that naturalize her oppression and her disenfranchisement. Many of these relationships ultimately fail, but one model proves to be particularly successful. When the young child Tituba is banished from the plantation after Abena is hanged for attacking Davis as he attempts to rape her, an elderly slave and traditional healer takes Tituba in and instructs her in the secrets of the natural and supernatural worlds. Man Yaya is able to communicate with spirits, and she teaches Tituba that "[l]es morts ne meurent que s'ils meurent dans nos coeurs. Ils vivent si nous les chérissons, si nous honorons leur mémoire" (23) ["[t]he dead only die if they die in our hearts. They live on if we cherish them and honor their memory" (10)]. Unlike many of the other social, religious, and familial communities into which Tituba enters, this remembered community, a reconstitution of the past, provides her with love and support without requiring that she sacrifice dignity or personal agency. It also offers Tituba a

position from which to challenge the English, and particularly the Puritan, belief that a connection with spirits can result only from a malevolent collaboration with Satan. Embracing her own “*faculté de communiquer avec les invisibles, de garder un lien constant avec les disparus, de soigner, de guérir*” (34) [“ability to communicate with the invisible world, to keep constant links with the dead, to care for others, to heal” (17)], Tituba insists that being in league with spirits is not cause for torture, imprisonment and death; rather, her relationship with the dead is “*une grâce supérieure de nature à inspirer respect, admiration et gratitude*” (34) [“a superior gift of nature that inspires respect, admiration, and gratitude” (17)]. Like Yao, Tituba attempts to challenge received notions of memory’s relationship to the present, but whereas Yao refuses to allow to the pain and violence of the past to shape the present, Tituba refuses to surrender the love and support she had known in the past when she finds those resources scarce in the present.

Not all of Tituba’s attempts at establishing communities and alliances are as successful as her alliance with the spirit world. Having been granted her freedom as a child when banished from the plantation, Tituba voluntarily enters into slavery again as a young woman in order to marry John Indien, the man she loves. This leads to her sale to Samuel Parris and her exile to New England. The young Puritan girls of Salem, whom Tituba pities and attempts to entertain with stories of witchcraft, turn against her and publicly accuse her of being in league with the devil, leading to her torture, arrest, and imprisonment. Christopher, the leader of a Maroon community with which Tituba briefly allies herself upon her return to Barbados, betrays her by alerting the plantation owners to a slave revolt she is helping to plan, leading to her arrest and execution. Even so, Tituba persists, continuously attempting to develop alliances that will enable her to undermine the social and religious narratives that sustain the oppression she witnesses.

While *Moi, Tituba* offers no definitive models for a revolution that might produce a liberating and egalitarian society not predicated on the suffering of the majority of its residents, there are two traits shared by the revolutionary communities that achieve any real measure of success within the novel: like Yao’s parenting of Tituba and Tituba’s connection to the spiritual world, they are intentional alliances designed to contradict or to undermine institutionalized forms of oppression, and they establish non-traditional, creative relationships with history and memory so that the past is neither erased from, nor repeated in, the present. After Tituba is hanged in Barbados for her role in a failed slave revolt, she continues to develop such relationships

from the spirit world, insistently pursuing revolution across years and even lifetimes. From beyond the grave, she works with the living to inspire their continued resistance, “[a]guerrir le coeur des hommes. L’alimenter de rêves de liberté. De victoire. Pas une révolte que je n’aie fait naître. Pas une insurrection. Pas une désobéissance” (268) [“[h]ardening men’s hearts to fight. Nourishing them with dreams of liberty. Of victory. I have been behind every revolt. Every insurrection. Every act of disobedience” (175)]. Refusing to rest once she herself has achieved the liberty that comes with death, Tituba provides slaves with the dreams and narratives they need in order to challenge both the martial and ideological arsenals of the planters.

Tituba’s own life story, which she narrates by means of the novel, is instrumental to this project. In part, this is simply because her story reveals the inaccuracies of American foundational fictions that represent slavery as a unique aberration, distinct from a broader narrative of freedom and liberty. Because of this challenge to national narratives, Tituba’s tale is not readily included in the history of Salem; as she bemoans upon her return to Barbados, the written historical record relegates her to a marginal note:

«Tituba, une esclave de la Barbade et pratiquant vraisemblablement le hodoou.» Quelques lignes dans d’épais traités consacrés aux événements du Massachusetts. Pourquoi allais-je être ainsi ignorée? ... Est-ce parce que nul ne se soucie d’une négresse, de ses souffrances et tribulations? Est-ce cela?

Je cherche mon histoire dans celle des Sorcières de Salem et ne la trouve pas. (230)

["Tituba, a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" A few lines in the many volumes written on the Salem witch trials. Why was I going to be ignored? ... Is it because nobody cares about a Negress and her trials and tribulations? Is that why?

I look for my story among those of the witches of Salem, but it isn't there. (149)]

As Tituba suggests, her historical marginalization helps to hide the injustices that both people of color and women have suffered throughout the post-contact histories of the United States and other nations of the Americas, and, as Walter Benjamin warns, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). The suppression of Tituba’s story within the public record makes it easier either to deny the existence of such suffering or justify it in both past and future, when Tituba foresees that “ils se couvriront le visage de cagoules pour mieux nous supplicier. Ils boucleront sur nos enfants la lourde porte des ghettos. Ils nous disputeront tous les droits et le

sang réonbra au sang” (271) [“they will be covering their faces with hoods, the better to torture us. They will lock up our children behind the heavy gates of ghettos. They will deny us our rights and blood will beget blood” (177-178)].

Critics including Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi and Jeanne Garane have engaged the work of Edouard Glissant and Alain Brossat to explore the ways in which Condé’s novel reconstructs a lost Caribbean history through the fictional recreation of a verisimilar life. Garane argues that through her disappearance from historical accounts of Salem, “Tituba incarnates the problem of West Indian identity... West Indians must search for an independent identity, looking neither to Europe nor to Africa, but to a West Indian past for its (fictional) origins. Since this ‘history’ has been undocumented or lost, another must be created” (155), highlighting the means by which Condé, as author, fills in the gaps within the historical record with her novelistic creation of Tituba’s life story. And yet, within the fictional world of Condé’s creation, in which past and present coexist in an open and mutually dependent relationship, neither historical victories and lessons nor historical atrocities need to be reinvented imaginatively, even when they have seemingly disappeared from public record. While historical accounts of Salem suppress Tituba’s life story, Tituba becomes “une légende parmi les esclaves” (246) [“a legend among the slaves” (160)] even before her death for her healing powers and for escaping the Salem witch hunt alive. After her hanging, Tituba discovers that the slaves of Barbados know much more about her story than is recorded in written history; there is a popular song about her life and death which they sing “d’un bout à l’autre de l’île” [“from one end of the island to the other” (175)]. In and of itself, of course, the song will not lead to the collapse of oppressive political structures, social practices, and economic institutions. Nevertheless, the story it relays does serve to refute the narrative webs that allowed these systems to come into existence in the colonial era and which continue to support their dominance in postcolonial nations. Tituba’s song keeps her memory alive and acknowledges her suffering and that of millions of others. By insisting that such suffering be somehow accounted for in the narratives as well as the institutions of the nation-state, both song and novel function not merely as an important accounting of her suffering, but as an avenue toward its denaturalization and its eradication in future generations.

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