

**Reclaiming the Witch: Subversion and
Suppressed History in Maryse Condé's
*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem***

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Since the advent of the Black feminism movement in the 1970's, Black women have sought to write themselves into existence with the awareness that the historical record, literally "his story," has rendered them voiceless through limited representation filtered through the patriarchal white male gaze. There is a common Cameroonian proverb that claims, "women have no mouth," implying that "by their very nature, they cannot speak" (Dukats 1). This existential muzzling of authentic women's stories and experiences from the Black Caribbean diaspora has served to feed the cultural biases inherent in the neo-colonial narrative that has come to define the racist and sexist undertones of the perception of Black women today. In her 1992 novel *I, Tituba*, the French Guadeloupian author Maryse Condé seeks to resurrect the historical figure of the Black Barbadian slave Tituba, who, according to the historical record, was deemed responsible for bringing to Salem the "witchcraft" that led to the ensuing witch trials that scandalized the Puritan community in Massachusetts. Through the subversive use of the tropes of female slave narratives and the appropriation of the patriarchal neocolonial narrative of the official historical record, Condé makes visible the silencing of Black women and liberates the voice of the slave Tituba to tell her story freely. Through the weaving of imagery and

intertextuality that connects the lives and experiences of Black women, both real and fictional, Condé surpasses the gender limitations of the previous patriarchal assertions of Césaire and Fanonism to reclaim the agency and liberatory potential of the Black female voice.

The classic female slave narratives, including those that have become most well-known by Mary Prince and Linda Brent, are defined by the presence of para-textual documents that are intended to frame their stories for the reader and grant the female authors legitimacy through the presence of a “reputable white abolitionist” (Glover 100). There was a presumed disbelief that a Black woman would be capable of articulating her story and experiences effectively or believably without white male intervention, as evident by the paternalistic and condescending introduction to Mary Prince’s narrative by the Secretary to the Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Pringle.

Pringle undermines Prince’s authority over her own story through his express need to make clear that “no fact of *importance* has been omitted . . . it is essentially her own, without and material alteration *farther than was requisite* to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it *clearly intelligible*” (Gates Jr. 229, emphasis added). The editor of Linda Brent’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* also states bluntly in her introduction that “it will naturally excite surprise that a woman reared in Slavery should be able to write so well” (Gates Jr. 409).

Condé, too, frames Tituba’s fictional first-person narrative with her own textual documents and narrative context, but these are meant to transcend the previous tropes and “make visible those elements that remained buried in the ‘authentic’ female slave narrative” (Glover 103) that served to subvert the authority of the female authors. The first lines of the foreword are given to Condé’s fictional Tituba herself, setting the tone with the assertion that “I can look for my story among the witches of Salem, but it isn’t there” (Condé xi). The rest of the foreword

is penned by the prominent Black feminist author and activist Angela Davis, who draws parallels between her own search for the authentic stories of Black women throughout history and that of *Tituba*, finding only “silences, omissions, distortions, and fleeting, enigmatic insinuations” (Condé xi). The words of the epilogue are also given to *Tituba* to frame her own story without the imposed “authority” of another. Here she speaks from the “invisible world”, as she has already been hanged in the wake of the planter riots, stating that her “real story starts where this one leaves off, and there is no end” (Condé 175). By offering the fictional *Tituba* her own creative control of her story and ensuring that she herself has the first and last words, Condé casts light towards the policing of the past stories of Black women, whose attempts to tell their stories were silenced around parameters that stifled their voices through what Kaiama Glover describes as “predetermined models of freedom” (Glover 99).

The model tropes of the classic narratives emphasize how important it was for these women, who had already gained their freedom, to adhere to a strict code of social conduct that maintained the air of pious Christianity. To be the “right” kind of woman, these former Black slaves had to frame their stories as though they were finally free not only from slavery, but also from the heathenry of their traditional African animist spirituality. Mary Prince states that she must “pray to God to change my heart, and make me to know the truth, and the truth will make me free” (Gates Jr. 262). The tone of *Tituba*’s narrative, however, liberates her from this overbearing paternalistic religiosity and instead delves deeply into her powerful connections to her folk wisdom and relationship to plants and spirits. The very presence of the revolutionary feminist Angela Davis at the forefront of *Tituba*’s text makes a clear statement that this isn’t going to be like previous classic slave narratives with passive puritan Christian testaments and proselytizing.

Autumn Brown writes that “black women have always been ‘doubly’ oppressed, with overlapping race and gender resulting in intersectional oppression” (Brown 27). The historical Tituba was a victim of this double oppression and faced one of the most common tools of the purveyors of the colonial slave trade used to control the female population: she was accused of being a witch. Silvia Federici’s 2004 text *Caliban and the Witch* offers some context for the role that witch trials played in justifying the ensuing colonization and slavery of the Middle Passage. Federici states that the expansion of global capitalism depended on the colonization, Christianization, and persecution of those who “embodied the ‘wild side’ of nature . . . and were disorderly, uncontrollable, and thus antagonistic to the project undertaken by the new science” (203). Tituba has historically been deemed responsible for bringing witchcraft to Salem through her practice of what Federici describes as *obeah*, an African spiritual folk medicine that was both revered and feared by whites and often deemed as sorcery by devout puritan Christians. For someone with such apparent influence in an event that led to mass social hysteria, Tituba is mentioned in the historical record with little context beyond the description of “a slave originating in the West Indies and probably practicing Hoodoo” (Condé xi).

In order to liberate the fictional Tituba from her oppressors, Condé appropriates the “official” patriarchal neocolonial narrative of the Salem witch trials and gives her a voice. By offering deeper emotional context and an authentic lived experience to the fictional Tituba, Condé subverts the racism and sexism of the white puritan ideology to expose the manipulative social construct of the notion of the “witch” that was used to persecute her (Bernstein 4). The fictional Tituba is liberated from the confines of the historical record and granted the agency to ask such questions as “why in *this* society does one give the function of witch an evil

connotation? The witch, if we must use this word, rights wrongs, helps, consoles, heals . . .” (Condé 96). Instead of adhering to the socially constructed stereotype of the witch of Salem’s notorious legends, Condé presents the reader with the humanized representation of a Black woman who practices folk medicine, uses herbs and healing remedies, and nurtures a strong connection to her female ancestors through the spiritual realm.

In her effort to amplify and align the fictional Tituba’s story with the larger movement of Black feminism, Condé uses literary imagery and intertextuality to weave connections to figures of the larger literary canon and pop-cultural references that signify the fight for Black freedom. Contrary to previous Black liberation literary movements such as Fanonism and the Harlem Renaissance, which primarily centered a male-dominated discourse and often silenced the authentic expression of women, the Black feminism movement emphasized the need to amplify Black female experiences through creative expression that provides more authentic representation. In this spirit, Condé aligns the stories of the classic female black slave narratives with the refashioning of Tituba’s story as a neo-slave narrative, while weaving circular connections to the literary canon and more contemporary experiences.

While in prison in Salem, the fictional Tituba shares a cell with Hester Prynne, the heroine of the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne’s canonical “quintessential American novel” (Bernstein 3) *The Scarlet Letter*, which also takes place in Salem amidst the social upheaval of the witch trials. Condé strategically brings one of the most visible American literary heroines and one of the most invisible American historical figures together and contemplates how each might have contributed to the legacy of the other if their stories were represented in a more authentic and transparent way. As Bernstein observes, the connection between the fictional Tituba and the reimagined Hester “reclaims Salem as shared terrain” and appropriates a work of

canonical American literature to more authentically represent its time and place as directly “shaped by the presence of the racial other” (Bernstein 4).

Tituba’s final observation on the day of her hanging at the gallows is the presence of “strange trees . . . bristling with strange fruit” (Condé 172), a nod to Billie Holiday’s protest song against the lynching of Black Americans at the dawn of the civil rights movement. In the song, Holiday sings: “southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” By weaving the imagery of the fictional Tituba’s hanging with the lynching of Black men and women in the American south, Condé heightens the social consciousness of what it means to liberate her voice from obscurity and to align it with the broader fight for Black liberation. As the fictional Tituba speaks to the reader from the “invisible realm” in the novel’s epilogue, she exudes a revolutionary force and states that she “continues to heal and cure[,] . . . hardening men’s hearts to fight . . . [by] nourishing them with dreams of liberty” (Condé 177). Bernstein describes the ways that the fictional Tituba reaches across time to critique and observe the current social and political climate from the spirit realm, with references to those who “cover their faces with hoods [and] lock up children behind the heavy gates of the ghettos” (Condé 178). Condé deliberately mirrors the use of post-text as it has been used in the classic female slave narratives, yet instead of using her authorial voice to undermine the fictional Tituba of the ownership of her own narrative, Condé holds this space for Tituba to speak for herself, even in the wake of her death. This post-text elevates Tituba’s life and spirit to a powerful timeless presence that cannot be contained by shackles or gallows and instead taps into the power that comes from revisiting the lost and overlooked stories of the past in order to reimagine what is possible in the future.

Tituba's story, as resurrected through the creative fiction of Maryse Condé's novel, acts as a conduit that connects the threads of slavery to the present, where the fight for Black liberation is still being fought. Through the literary tools of appropriation and intertextuality, Condé centers the experiences of Black women, both literary and lived, and holds space for their lives to be explored in multidimensional ways, free from the stereotypes and presumptions cast onto them by the patriarchal gazes of the literary canon and the historical record. As Condé recognizes, only the fictional Tituba can truly speak for herself, and in tune with carrying her revolutionary voice forward, the final words are hers, alone:

*. . . recognize my presence in the twitching of an animal's
coat, the crackling of a fire between four stones, the
rainbow-hued babbling of the river, and the sound of
the wind as it whistles through the great trees on the hills. (179)*

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