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Brooke Nicole Nicholson, Eastern Washington University, graduate student, “A ‘Confessed’ Witch: Tituba and Salem Witchcraft, 1692–1693”

Abstract: The Salem Witch trials in seventeenth century New England focused on poor women who defied the social order of Puritans. One woman in Salem history who stood out among the women accused of the devil's bidding was Tituba. She was an enslaved servant in the household of Rev. Samuel Parris of Salem Village. She was accused of practicing voodoo due to her otherness stemming from her African or Indian descent. Accused of witchcraft, Tituba “confessed” to having practiced witchcraft and testified against others, leading to their condemnation and execution. In my essay, I will explore this question: Given Tituba’s outsider status as an enslaved person of African and Indian racial identity, why would the Puritans give credence to the confession to the extent of executing other women on the basis of her word?

**A “Confessed” Witch:
Tituba and Salem Witchcraft,
1692-93**

(Original Title: “Much Voodoo about Nothing: Tituba’s Role in the Salem Witch Trials”)

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The Salem witch trials in seventeenth century New England embodied the fears of Puritans for their anxieties mounted due to the new Indian war, an inhospitable New World that allowed disease to strike their children, farm animals and their relationship with God. The Puritans were experiencing the growing pains of a class division in their colony among the rural population of Salem Village and the more modern dwellers of Salem Town. For further consideration was how the accused witches shared similar traits such as being female, poor and out of sync with the social order. One woman in Salem history who stood out among the women accused of the devil's bidding was Tituba. Her role in the community was that of a slave from the West Indies with undetermined ethnicity and rumors she practiced voodoo. Tituba's otherness fueled the Puritan's racialized, gendered and religious fear and yet her testimony was used to indict others despite her social status in Salem. An analysis of how and why her confession was important in the Salem witch trials takes into consideration Tituba's position in the community and the socioeconomic shift in Salem.

Author Veta Smith Tucker examined in her scholarly article "Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village" how the Puritan magistrates treated accused witch Tituba by noting how her biography was not recorded but she acted as the catalyst to the mania of the witch trials in Salem. Tucker noted, "By contrast, however, judicial records provide detailed documentation of Tituba's bizarre testimony of night rides on a pole to and from Boston to participate in satanic ceremonies."ⁱ Her confession spurred on the magistrates' investigation into other accused witches she cast spells upon for they took this as a sign of the devil's presence in Salem. Tituba and the first wave of women and later men were first the accused and then they became accusers who gave confessions and offered other names of

witches under duress. These confessions not only started a vicious cycle of trials but helped to shape and feed into the Puritan's fears and anxieties about a demonic invasion.

The first accusers included three girls associated with Reverend Samuel Parris who acted as the Puritan minister for Salem Village and was the father of Betty Parris and uncle of Abigail Williams who lived in his household. The third girl was Ann Putnam Jr. the daughter of Parris's most ardent supporter Thomas Putnam. The three girls named three women as the cause of their soul's torment and they selected Sarah Good, a beggar, notorious in Salem Village for her sullen temper and nasty tongue; Sarah Osborne an elderly woman the townspeople suspected of immortality; and Tituba, the Parris family slave who was asked to perform an occult ritual and obeyed the orders of a white woman who had authority over her and good standing in the community and in turn she became the catalyst for the maelstrom to come.ⁱⁱ Tituba was instructed by Mary Sibley to bake a "witch cake" made of rye meal and the Parrish daughters' urine to test on the family dog in an act of countermagic to determine who bewitched the girl due to her mysterious illness. Under Sibley's supervision Tituba and her husband Indian John, who was never accused of witchcraft, baked the cake in ashes and fed it to the family dog. This was an English practice intended to bewitch the dog that would then reveal the name of the witch who had cast a spell over Parris's daughter Betty who had been afflicted with bizarre physical ailments during the winter of 1691-92.ⁱⁱⁱ The other "afflicted girls," Abigail, Ann Putnam and Elizabeth Hubbard, began exhibiting pains and spoke of bizarre dreams during this time and later in March 1692 Mary Walcott and Mercy Lewis joined the group. An insight into how this group of girls became "afflicted" and were the impetus of the Salem witch trials was their involvement in a centuries-old, fortune-telling game during 1691. Betty and Abigail dropped the

white of a raw egg into a glass and they reported they saw the shape of a coffin.^{iv} This harmless game intended to predict their future left an indelible impression on the girls and possibly caused their hysteria due to their religious beliefs and impressionable age. Samuel Parris's statement during March 27, 1692 proved curious since he never included Tituba as a guilty party, "The affliction...never brake forth to any considerable light, until diabolical means were used, by the making of a cake by my Indian man, who had his directions from this our sister, Mary Sibley; since which apparitions have been plenty...But by this means (it seems) the Devil hath been raised among us."^v Prior to the "witchcake" incident in 1692 no records were evident of complaints against Tituba for practicing witchcraft or flouting strict Puritanical customs but despite her assimilation of dress, manners and religious practices her dark skin elicited a false equation of Indians and Africans as conjurers, witches or voodoo practitioners and she stood accused of being a witch.

The power the accused women held was subverted as a weapon wielded by powerful men in the colony. Due to Tituba's confession, the Salem judges could not put her to death, and due to their presumption of her irreversible degeneracy, they were unable to tolerate her presence in the village. In her confession she spoke of the Devil appearing to her, "...as a tall, white-haired man from Boston dressed in black."^{vi} This description resembled her master Reverend Samuel Parris who brought her to Salem Village. Possibly due to the implication of Parris as the Devil in her testimony, he refused to pay her jail fees despite her confession, and she remained in jail for thirteen months until an anonymous person paid her bail and took her to Boston.^{vii} Due to her slave status, it was speculated Parris sold her and her husband Indian John to pay for the jail fines accrued while she resided in her cell. Tituba's confession insinuated

Parris was in league with the devil and added to her ostracization by casting her out of her home, but her race also implicated her as a tool of evil according to beliefs held by Puritans. For example, Cotton Mather found Tituba's racial identity worthy of note for he wrote that she underwent a metamorphosis in the testimony of accusers from African and Indian, just like the Devil, who was first reported as a Black man and later tawny [or Indian] in testimony by the witness.^{viii}

During the seventeenth century the colonists' bias reflected in how they viewed the racial categories of Africans and Indians as blended when it came to their societal view of slaves and they attributed voodoo to Africans and pagan rituals to Indians which were both assumed practices for Tituba based on their assumption of her blended ethnicities. Tucker summarized, "Therefore, being perceived as both African and Indian served not to diminish but to intensify the satanic stigma attached to Tituba and to heighten fears and fantasies Puritans projected on her."^{ix} Several testimonies documented in the legal documents of the Salem witch trials of 1692 referred to "black" figures who were agents of the devil. Descriptions of Indian men, black men, dark figures and black familiars were common in the testimonies. For example, in the case of Samuel Parris, Nathaniel Ingersoll and Thomas Putnam vs. Martha Corey it was stated, "...some of the afflicted said there was a black man whispering in Mary's ear, namely Mary Wolcot and Abigail Williams..."^x and in the examination of Martha and Sarah Carrier both stated they did not see a black man when the Devil came to them but the "afflicted girls" cried out they saw the black man around Martha and Sarah's cross-examiner Dudley Brodsteat continued to suggest the black man visited her and led her to blame her own mother for witchcraft.^{xi}

Historians continued to debate Tituba's ethnicity by arguing she was a captured Indian brought to Barbados and returned; an Arawak Indian imported from South America; or a mixed-race descendant of an enslaved African and an Englishman. Fictional accounts over time have also added to Tituba's racial identity. One of the most famous was Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* casting her as an African American slave and cementing her ethnic identity with his tale. Author Maryse Conde in her prize-winning fiction *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* constructed Tituba's ethnic makeup as French Caribbean and hailing from Barbados.^{xii} Parris did travel to Barbados to reconcile his late father's affairs and Tituba was considered property to be transferred to him. Tucker summarized how Tituba was removed from the village and erased by history only to be repurposed to fit a narrative created by writers and historians, "Wedded to the modern myths of racial purity and exclusivity, contemporary scholars continue to privilege one ethnic identity for Tituba over the other."^{xiii}

Between March and October of 1692 over 150 people were arrested under the suspicion and accusations of witchcraft and 20 were executed. Many of the Salem witch trial accusers withdrew their statements and repented for their lapses. Tituba recanted her confession after the Governor called for a stay of execution for those already convicted and began to empty the prisons and those who could afford the costs to be released on bail.^{xiv} She also admitted to lying about her story and of those accused. In a bout of defiance, she too joined those who spoke against Parris and held him responsible for the witch mania that gripped Salem. Tituba accused him of forcing her to admit to witchcraft and that he beat her to elicit a confession. His punishment of Tituba instead of the girls for dabbling in witchcraft was a way to uphold the stereotype of the Indian as a Devil worshipper while he removed himself

from the taint of association with the evil force she represented.^{xv} The feat Tituba accomplished was to submit to her abuser while covertly feeding his fears of a conspiracy.

Massachusetts General Court reversed the bill of attainder that permitted property seizure from the convicted witches' families, but Tituba was not included. Legislature later offered restitution to the estates of the accused in 1711 but Tituba was a slave who could not hold property and as a final affront she never even received restitution for being incarcerated for her name or her owner's name does not appear in the records. The last recording of Tituba was her release from jail by an unknown person who paid her jail fees in April 1693 and took her away. Tituba's whereabouts afterwards was unknown, but author Elaine Breslaw conjectured her husband Indian John joined her, for he disappeared too, and they both were sold to pay debts owed by the Parris family. There was a record of a child named Violet who remained with the family and it was also conjectured by author Elaine Breslaw she was Tituba's daughter who was also later sold since slave families were often separated and sold to the highest bidder.^{xvi}

While she was not executed for witchcraft, her otherness forced her erasure from history only to be reimagined by modern scholars and writers who have their own agendas much like the magistrates who used her words to advance petty grievances. The Salem witch trials mirrored a factional discord between Parris and the villagers over his position in the community and the amenities it entailed. Another item of note about Salem was the distinction between the Village and the Town for those in the town were more affluent and considered those in the rural hinterland, "a Puritan vision of a close-knit community that had become little more than a pious memory."^{xvii}

The role of the Salem witch trials was a reaction to the Puritans' anxiety about a world with turmoil and chaos beyond their control. Breslaw summed up the aftermath by stating how Parris apologized for his role as the leader in the witch hunt by stating he was too zealous in his desire to protect the community from the Devil but he did not appease those who continued to blame him for the terrible events – for stoking the fires of discontent with his own resentments and urging the young people to continue their accusations.^{xviii} The white confessors were released and returned to the community of Salem and later received restitution for estates or settlements for survivors for the cost of imprisonment. Tituba's name was not recorded on the lists and any record of her life after she left the jail was also absent. Her absence in later historical documentation can be attributed to her status as a slave but her name will forever be associated with the history of the Salem witch trials due to court records, fictional representation and the enduring fascination of Puritan society. While Tituba received no financial reparation in her lifetime, the research presented can offer some penance to her for the wrongs committed by others in her name.

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Citations

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*. 89.
- ^{iv} Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*. 89.
- ^v Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*. 89.
- ^{vi} Tucker, "Purloined Identity," 625.
- ^{vii} Tucker, "Purloined Identity," 626.
- ^{viii} Tucker, "Purloined Identity," 625.
- ^{ix} Tucker, "Purloined Identity," 625.
- ^x Boyer, Paul. *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, 185.
- ^{xi} Boyer, Paul. *Salem Witchcraft*, 202.
- ^{xii} Conde, Maryse, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, 216.
- ^{xiii} Tucker, "Purloined Identity," 628.
- ^{xiv} Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 173
- ^{xv} Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 112.
- ^{xvi} Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 177.
- ^{xvii} Boyer, Paul. *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, 10.
- ^{xviii} Breslaw, Elaine. *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 177.