THE METAMORPHOSIS OF TITUBA, OR WHY AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS CAN’T TELL AN INDIAN WITCH FROM A NEGRO

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Tituba was a Carib Indian woman who played an important part in the Salem witchcraft trials (she was the first confessor), and has played a curious role in American history ever since. She was a Carib Indian woman—let us keep that fact firmly in mind—and the slave of the Rev. Samuel Parris, who had brought her and her husband John to Salem Village from Barbados. She was involved in some of the occult experiments that began the Salem affair, although she was probably an assistant in these experiments rather than an instigator of them. The experiments themselves are identifiably English rather than Indian in origin.

Over the years the magic Tituba practiced has been changed by historians and dramatists from English, to Indian, to African. More startlingly, her own race has been changed from Indian, to half-Indian and half-Negro, to Negro. Currently she is being represented (as in Arthur Miller’s play, The Crucible) as a Negro practicing voodoo. There is no evidence to support these changes, but there is an instructive lesson in American historiography to be read in them.
Let us begin with Tituba as she appears in the seventeenth-century court documents and contemporary narratives. In the former, although the spelling of her name varies in typical seventeenth-century fashion, she is never referred to as anything but an Indian: “Titibe an Indian Woman,” or “Titiba an Indian woman,” or “Tituba Indian.”¹ She is an Indian in the contemporary narratives as well. Deodat Lawson refers to her as “Mr. Parris’s Indian . . . Woman”;² Robert Calef as an “Indian Woman, named Tituba”;³ and John Hale as “the Indian Woman, named Tituba.”⁴

According to Hale, the Salem witchcraft began with occult experiments by two adolescent girls, “who . . . did try with an egg and a glass” to discover their future husbands’ occupations. The egg and glass is an English folk method of divining. The white of an egg is poured into a glass, and the subject stares into the egg-white, like a fortuneteller into a crystal ball, expecting a vision. It is a method, in short, for producing an hallucination. Both of the girls got the same result: they saw a coffin, or, as Hale put it, “a Spectre in likeness of a Coffin.” The experience literally frightened both of them out of their wits and into the hysterical seizures which were so prominent a feature of the Salem trials. One of them never recovered her sanity; she was “followed with diabolical molestation to her death.”⁵ According to tradition, Tituba assisted in these experiments, and there is one piece of evidence in the court records which suggests that she was experienced in the fortune-

¹ Records of Salem Witchcraft (Roxbury, Mass., 1864); reprinted for Da Capo (New York, 1969), 1, 41, 43, 48.
² A Brief and True Narrative (Boston, 1692); reprinted in Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706, edited by George Lincoln Burr (New York, 1914); reprinted for Barnes and Noble (New York, 1959), 162.
³ More Wonders of the Invisible World (London, 1700); reprinted with an introduction by Chadwick Hansen (Bainbridge, N. Y., 1972), 91.
⁴ A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft (Boston, 1702); reprinted with an introduction by Richard Trask (Bainbridge, N. Y., 1973), 24.
⁵ A Modest Enquiry, 132-133.
teller's trance: she ended her testimony of March 1, 1692 by saying, "I am blind now. I cannot see."8

The other magical practice with which Tituba seems to have been connected also occurred early in the course of events at Salem Village. Several girls were displaying violent hysterical symptoms, and a Dr. Griggs had diagnosed them as due to witchcraft, but there were as yet no suspects. At this point Mary Sibley, the aunt of one of the afflicted girls, went to Tituba and her husband John with an old English recipe for witch-finding. Rye meal was mixed with the girls' urine to make a cake, which was baked in the fire and fed to the Parris dog, presumably on the theory that the animal was a familiar—a messenger assigned to a witch by the devil.7

That is all the basic information we have about Tituba's connections with magical practices in Salem Village, and all of it tells us that she was a Carib Indian who seems to have been involved in practicing English magic.

II

The historian who suggested that Indian, rather than English, magic was primarily responsible for Salem witchcraft was the Rev. Charles W. Upham. He had barely mentioned Tituba in his Lectures on Witchcraft (1831), and had made no issue of her race or culture.8 But in his Salem Witchcraft (1867), he suggested that she and her husband John may have originated the "Salem witchcraft." They are spoken of as having come from New Spain, as it was then called—that is, the Spanish West Indies, and the adjacent mainlands of Central and South America—and, in all probability, contributed, from the wild and strange superstitions prevalent among their native tribes, ma-

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6 Records of Salem Witchcraft, I, 48. She had just been directly describing "spectral appearances."

7 There are accounts of the witch-cake episode in Lawson, reprinted in Burr, 162-163; in Hale, 23; and in Samuel Parris' church records, printed in Salem-Village Witchcraft, edited by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (Belmont, Calif., 1972), 278.

8 Charles W. Upham, Lectures on Witchcraft (Boston, 1831), 22.
materials which, added to the commonly received notions on such subjects, heightened the infatuation of the times, and inflamed still more the imaginations of the credulous.

Upham did not suggest what these "native... materials" might be, but he added that unnamed "persons conversant with the Indians of Mexico, and on both sides of the Isthmus, discern many similarities in their systems of demonology with ideas and practices developed here."  

A year after Upham, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow provided a more colorful, and more stereotyped, suggestion in his verse-drama, *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*. Longfellow's Tituba is listed in the *Dramatis Personae* as "an Indian Woman," but we discover in Act I, Scene III that she is only half-Indian. Her mother was an Indian, but her father was "a man all black and fierce. . . . He was an Obi man, and taught [her] magic."  

Obi, or Obeah, is a specifically African and Afro-American system of magic.

*Giles Corey* is not a particularly good play, and was never very popular. But everything that Longfellow wrote did get read, by historians as well as by the general public, and historians clearly preferred Longfellow's half-Negro Tituba to Upham's Indian. In George Bancroft's "Thoroughly Revised" Centenary Edition of the *History of the United States* (1876), Tituba is "half-Indian, half-negro" although she had been an Indian in all previous editions. In volume four of John Gorham Palfrey's *History of New England*, published the year after Bancroft, she was also "half-Indian, half-negro," and that she would remain, for the most part, until after the Second World War; in Samuel Eliot Morison's *The Puritan Pronaos*, for example, she is "Tituba, a half-breed slave."

In 1914 George Lincoln Burr expressed a minimal degree of

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11 (Boston, 1876), II, 256.

12 (Boston, 1877), 105.

13 (New York, 1936), 252.
doubt as to her race; he said she was "perhaps half-negro, half-native." There is no way of telling what occasioned Burr's doubt, but it was genuinely minimal because it was expressed in a footnote to Lawson's *Brief and True Narrative*, in which Tituba is clearly described as an Indian. And it is surely significant that Burr made no attempt to resolve his uncertainty. He was an almost compulsively accurate scholar, as most of his footnotes clearly indicate. I cannot think of another occasion on which he left such an uncertainty unresolved.

In any case, Burr's doubt was unique; for others, from Longfellow in 1868 into the 1950's Tituba remained half-Indian and half-Negro. This is not to say, however, that her race remained stable. Throughout the period, historians and dramatists emphasized the Negro half of her by endowing her with invented characteristics which seemed to them appropriate to a Negro. The ugliest of these endowments came from John Fiske. In the Salem Village parsonage, he said,

were two coloured servants whom Parris had brought with him from the West Indies. The man was known as John Indian; the hag Tituba, who passed for his wife, was half-Indian and half-negro. Their intelligence was of a low grade, but it sufficed to make them experts in palmistry, fortune-telling, magic, second-sight, and incantations.

It should hardly be necessary to point out that there is nothing in the documents or the contemporary narratives—*nothing*—to support Fiske's vicious insinuations. We do not know the I.Q. of John or of Tituba. There is no reason to assume they merely "passed" for man and wife; on the contrary, there is every reason to believe they were legally married; they are always referred to as man and wife in the documents.

It is perhaps to the credit of American intellectuals that nobody has adopted Fiske's inventions. Yet other writers' portraits of Tituba and John have also been full of inventions, and if they are less vicious than Fiske's they are nevertheless attributable to racial stereotyping. One of the more elaborate

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14 *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 153, n. 3.
15 *New France and New England* (Boston, 1902), 159.
of these portraits is Marion L. Starkey's, in *The Devil in Massachusetts*, where we find "the loutish John Indian and his consort, the ageless Tituba, said to be half-Carib and half-Negro." Starkey's Tituba is "half-savage," with "slurred southern speech and tricky ways." And she is lazy. She does the heavier household chores, "but not, one gathers, with energy." She prefers "idling with the little girls" to working, and it is during such "idling" that "Tituba yielded to the temptation to show the children tricks and spells, fragments of something like voodoo remembered from the Barbados."\(^\text{16}\) Starkey characterizes Tituba's confession as "her apparently witless wanderings," and her behavior under examination as "instinctive."\(^\text{17}\) It is hard for the reader to remember that such a Tituba is half-Indian, and perhaps it was hard for the author as well, because at one point she calls Tituba "the trembling black woman."\(^\text{18}\)

Kai T. Erikson, in the preface to *Wayward Puritans*, expressed his reservations about working with historical data. "The sociologist," he tells us, needs to be very careful in these unfamiliar waters. For that reason, the following study relies as widely as possible on court records and other kinds of original document: these the sociologist can treat essentially as he would contemporary data.

Yet he does not seem to have made much use of court documents in his section on Salem witchcraft; neither of the basic collections of such documents appear in his text, his notes, or his bibliography.\(^\text{19}\) And certainly his Tituba is not the Tituba of the documents. Erikson is particularly aware of the dangers of borrowing from secondary sources, for historians and sociologists use different criteria to decide which facts are most relevant to the problem at hand, and unless the sociologist is aware of this when he borrows from the work of his-

\(^{16}\) *The Devil in Massachusetts* (New York, 1950), 9-11.

\(^{17}\) *Devil*, 44.

\(^{18}\) *Devil*, 43.

\(^{19}\) These are Woodward's *Records of Salem Witchcraft* and the more complete and more accurate *Salem Witchcraft*, a three-volume bound typescript compiled by the WPA and deposited in the Essex County Court House at Salem.
torians, he runs the risk not only of writing second-rate history but second-rate sociology as well. Perhaps all one can do about the problem is to state as clearly as possible where his main dependencies lie.\textsuperscript{20}

This he does; it is unmistakably clear that Erikson’s chief authority for Salem witchcraft is Starkey. Thus it is not surprising to find that Erikson’s Tituba is “a woman who had grown up among the rich colors and imaginative legends of Barbados and who was probably acquainted with some form of voodoo,” and “an excitable woman who had breathed the warmer winds of the Caribbean and knew things about magic her crusty old judges would never learn.”\textsuperscript{21} These phrases contain two stereotypes—one for Tituba and one for her judges—and they are almost equally remote from the facts: some of the judges of the Salem court were old, but more of them were middle-aged; Chief Justice Stoughton was certainly “crusty,” but Samuel Sewall, to judge by his well-known \textit{Diary}, seems to have been thoroughly warm and genial.

Salem witchcraft forms only one section of \textit{Wayward Puritans}, but it is half the substance (the other half is the McCarthy hearings) of a play by William Carlos Williams, \textit{Tituba’s Children}. It was written in 1950, shortly after the publication of Starkey’s \textit{The Devil in Massachusetts}, and Williams quotes extensively from Starkey, thus establishing the curious form, which Arthur Miller would later adopt in \textit{The Crucible}, of injecting long sections of historical information and misinformation between the lines of dialogue in the printed version of the play. Williams’ Tituba has the laziness which Starkey had attributed to her (and for which there is, of course, no basis in the documents). In Williams, however, it is not confined to her behavior, but extends to her speech. His Tituba is “a drawling half-Negro, half-Carib slave” who speaks a language dripping with corn pone: “Maybe I feed it to de dawg,” she says and “He going to whup me hard.”\textsuperscript{22} With Williams’ Tituba, as with

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Wayward Puritans} (New York, 1966), x.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Wayward Puritans}, 145, 144.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Tituba’s Children}, in \textit{Many Loves and Other Plays} (New York, 1965), 233, 235.
Starkey’s, it is hard to remember that she is half-Indian. Nobody refers to her as an Indian, but one character calls her “a black slave,” and another, “that black woman.”

The last vestige of Tituba’s actual race withered away in Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, leaving her a “Negro slave.” And in Miller Tituba’s magic is blacker as well as her race. Starkey had been appropriately vague about the magic she attributed to Tituba, calling it “tricks and spells, fragments of something like voodoo remembered from the Barbados.” Miller is much more specific. His Tituba has been chanting over a boiling kettle containing, among other things, a live frog, while the girls of Salem Village dance, one of them naked, in the dark forest. And she has given one girl chicken blood to drink, as a potion with which to kill the wife of the man with whom this girl is in love. The chanting, the witch’s brew, and the naked dancing in the forest are more easily attributed to Miller’s unfortunate penchant for melodrama than to any specific system of magic, but the sacrificial chicken is, of course, a prominent feature of voodoo ceremony.

Miller has two dramatic reasons for blackening Tituba. One is to dramatize her as a voodoo priestess. The other will require some explanation. Miller holds the New England clergy responsible for the events at Salem; in *The Crucible* they use the witchcraft to play on the emotions of the public in a vain attempt to support their own ebbing power. Tituba was the first confessor. So in the climactic scene of his first act, Miller has a clergyman, John Hale, bring Tituba to confess to witchcraft precisely as a revivalist would bring a sinner to confess her sins.

“Now in God’s holy name—” Hale begins, and Tituba responds, “Bless Him. Bless Him.” A stage direction tells us that she “is rocking on her knees, sobbing in terror.” The statement and response pattern continues between Hale and Tituba, as do her weeping and rocking; emotions rise until Tituba con-

23 Tituba’s Children, 232, 238.
25 The Crucible, 10-11, 19, 42-43.
fesses; she is joined by her troupe of adolescent girls, who in the process of confessing accuse people of witchcraft as fast as they can name them, while Hale "is shouting a prayer of thanksgiving." It is as vulgar a scene as Miller ever wrote, with Tituba featured as Aunt Jemima at the Salem Camp Meeting.

We have come a long, twisted, and discouraging way from the Tituba of the documents to the Tituba of Arthur Miller, but we are not quite done. In 1970, in an article entitled "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," John Demos calls Tituba "a Negro slave." He has just been making the point that "many witches came from the lower levels of the social structure," but he makes no other point concerning Tituba, and since an Indian slave would also be from "the lower levels of the social structure," Demos has no apparent reason for making Tituba a Negro. Presumably he thinks her so only because he has seen The Crucible. But that, of course, is precisely the point. Demos is a professional historian. When he adopted Miller's distortion of Tituba's race, as earlier historians had adopted Longfellow's, her metamorphosis was complete.

III

There is no need to belabor the conclusions, but some of them, at least, ought to be drawn. To begin with, it is abundantly evident that American historians sometimes pay more attention to each other, and even to dramatists, than they do to their primary sources. But that will hardly be news to anybody. More specifically, it is painfully evident that we are dealing here with a kind of inverse racial prejudice, and that where witches and witchcraft are concerned, American intellectuals prefer Indian to English; and half-Indian, half-Negro to Indian; and Negro to half-Indian, half-Negro. It is surely significant that the racial metamorphosis occasioned by this prejudice began between the Civil War and the First World

War, a period when ethnic hatreds in this country were at their most intense. Unhappily it may also be significant that this metamorphosis did not stop, or reverse itself, after the First World War, but instead moved inexorably to its completion in the 1970's.

There is no difficulty in understanding why John Fiske participated in this process. He was an overt and conscious racist, and the first president of the Immigration Restriction League. But that explanation will not apply to the other American intellectuals we have been considering. Arthur Miller, to take the most obvious example, has been a man of almost aggressive good will; he is the last person one would suspect of being a racist, at least in any ordinary sense of that word. The same is true, in varying degrees, of the rest. All of them are persons of good will. None of them would knowingly or willingly further a racist idea. And indeed, the metamorphosis both of Tituba and of the magic which she practiced has proceeded at a pace, and with a momentum, which suggests that the process has been very nearly independent of conscious judgments by individuals.

The truth is, of course, that we live in a racist culture, and that we are all bound by it: some more, some less, but all of us in at least some ways of which we are thoroughly unaware. White intellectuals, at least in recent years, have liked to think of themselves as free of racial prejudice, and have been hurt, and even angry, to hear themselves described by black militants as "phony white liberals." The hurt and the anger are partially justified, because surely we have meant no ill. But anyone who examines the difference between the Tituba of the documents and the Tituba of The Crucible must recognize that there is substance in the black militants' accusations. We are not free of racism, and we will not be free of it until we recognize, among other things, that beliefs and practices which we regard as superstitious do not necessarily have racial boundaries—until we recognize, in short, that witchcraft, when it is found in New England, is more likely to be English in origin than Indian or Negro.