Tituba of Salem: The Racial, Gendered, and Encultured Dimensions of a Confessed Witch

Sarah Curley
Dr. Katherine Lang
Dr. James Oberly

Abstract: This paper examines the involvement of the slave-woman Tituba in the Salem Witch Trials, observing how her race, gender and culture predisposed Tituba as a safe and logical choice for witchcraft accusation. The study finds that the very factors which contributed to her accusation provided Tituba with the opportunity to confess. The primary argument offers that Tituba’s confession was significant given that it was the first in the trials to be offered. Her gender and race and cultural practices, while submitting her to accusation, are also the factors that led to her confession.
On March 1st, 1692, a large crowd gathered at the Salem meeting house to witness the questioning of three women accused of witchcraft. The women, including a beggar, a social outcast, and a slave, were questioned individually as the townspeople listened eagerly. Perhaps most unnerving about the interview proceedings was the presence of the women’s accusers: a collection of frantic young girls claiming to have been harmed by the supposed witches’ dark exploits. One by one the women denied their charges. Their explanations met with hysterical outbursts and shrieks of pain from the girls. This pattern of denial and condemnation was challenged when, with a mere ten words, the slave woman Tituba confessed to witchcraft: “The Devil came to me and bid me serve him,” she admitted. With her confession, the stage of the Salem witch trials was set. The infamous events would lead to the execution of twenty persons and the imprisonment of over one hundred others. Among the survivors was Tituba, who after being released from jail through an anonymous bailout in 1693, disappeared from recorded history.

A slave in the household of the Reverend Samuel Parris, Tituba was accused of witchcraft by Parris’ daughter Betty and his niece Abigail Williams, in January 1692.

---


Following the girls’ display of bizarre and hysteric behavior, deemed the source of demonic forces by local physician William Griggs, three women were named as the girls’ agitators. Alongside Tituba, two other local Salem women, Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good, were initially accused and put on trial. Tituba was a complex and unique resident of Salem. An intricate collection of diverse social expectations, prescribed by both her gender and race, bound her role within the village. The expectations of Puritan women shaped the perception of Tituba, as well as constrained her to specific behaviors. Her racial makeup also subjected her to specific Puritan conceptions, in addition to impacting her expected actions and obligations as a slave. Both of these components—gender and race—proved significant in the events that would lead to the witch trials and Tituba’s particular involvement.

While the components of gender and race are intricately interconnected in Tituba, it is important to understand them thoroughly and individually before considering the intersection her personhood presents. It was these aspects that comprised her character—her race and gender—that together determined Tituba’s role, and most significantly, the inevitability of her confession, in the Salem witch trials.

I. Fear of a Devilish Woman: Gender in Puritan Doctrine

Puritan doctrine dictated strict gender roles for both men and women. As the head of the household, men supplied the labor necessary to maintain the land and provide for their family. They occupied public positions of power, with legal, political, and religious status; men could also vote and own property. Contrastingly, women

---

managed the domestic work of a Puritan household, particularly the rearing of children. Women could not vote or own property, and held little presence or recognition outside the home. Both men and women were bound to strict religious expectations that demanded devout faith and adherence to God’s will. From their faith, men and women also were informed of a gender hierarchy. Historian Paul Lindholt concedes to this notion, offering, “Puritan gender beliefs held to Corinthians, in that ‘the head of every man is Christ; the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.’ In the Great Chain of Being, women occupied a slot just above the beast of field.”

Lindholt is accurate in this assessment of Puritan gender roles. Women were largely regarded as weaker, more frail, and inferior to the abilities and righteousness of men. This assumption placed a significant expectation on Puritan women to be subordinate and submissive to the will of the men within their households. Thus, Puritan women were to behave piously and obediently. While it would be easy to dismiss Puritan doctrine as one of misogynistic and oppressive patriarchal standards, Elizabeth Reis emphasizes “Puritan New Englanders considered themselves to be rather more enlightened than others when it came to women’s place in society and in their cosmology.”

If the Puritans regarded men and women as equal in terms of their respective expectations to Godly adherence, from where did the desire for female submission come?

The emphasis on the necessity of female subordination may have stemmed from fear. According to Puritan doctrine, the soul of a human being was feminine, and like

---


the nature of women, insatiable and unappeasable. If the soul was feminine, and therefore vulnerable, the soul of any human was subject to great temptation and sin. For fear of committing great sin, it was thus absolutely essential for all Puritans to “marry” their souls to Christ, which would result in a benevolent union that would ensure salvation, protection and a fulfilling, Christian life. Almost as significant to the soul was the body, which was “the primary battleground in the struggle between the devil and individual souls. Puritan sermons asserted that the body and the soul were both essential to human beings; each had its specific purpose, though the soul reigned supreme.” A strong body would protect the vulnerable feminine soul, which was constantly susceptible to the temptation of sin. However, female souls within female bodies were doubly vulnerable—and thus doubly to be feared.

According to Puritan doctrine, women were of particular vulnerability to sin, as they possessed a feminine soul within a feminine body. Reis explains this, offering the following:

A woman’s feminine soul, jeopardized in a woman’s feminine body, was frail, submissive, and passive—qualities that most New Englanders thought would allow her to become either a wife to Christ or a drudge to Satan... Puritans believed that Satan attacked the soul by assaulting the body, and that because women’s bodies were weaker, the devil could reach women’s souls more easily. 

Men with feminine souls had stronger and greater bodies to fend off the attacks and temptations of sin and the devil. However women, with both feminine souls and

---


9 Ibid., 18.

10 Ibid., 16.
feminine bodies, were at greater risk of succumbing to sin and being vulnerable to great sin. As women stood a better chance of falling into a pact with the devil, emphasis on female submission was paramount. Women were potentially dangerous vessels, vulnerable to the malicious intentions of Satan. This created a substantial pressure on women to adhere to their places of pious obedience. Those who dared to assert themselves beyond the confines expected of Puritan womanhood were threats, abnormal, to be feared and ridiculed. Both literature and ministers regularly promoted the importance of women’s subordination.\textsuperscript{11} Daily actions and societal rituals of each gender reinforced this emphasis. Weak women were to be submissive, for fear of the potential danger their feminine and vulnerable souls were subject to.

Both men and women possessed feminine souls at risk of being battled for between the masculine forces of the devil or Christ. As such, all Puritans were to wait passively for the grace of God in contracting their souls to Christ. Those who did sin could still submit their souls passively to Christ, despite their fall from grace. Of the two sexes, women were believed to be more likely to sin. The greatest sin of all, however, required intentional action on the part of the offender, and was therefore of substantial offense within Puritan doctrine. To contract one’s soul to Satan, rather than to passively await the grace of Christ, was the ultimate defiance of Puritanism. Women, possessing weaker, more vulnerable souls than men, were believed to be at greater risk of committing this. On this fearful but possible reality, Reis communicates the following: “Because women’s bodies lacked the strength and vitality of men’s, according to popular thought, the devil could more frequently and successfully enter

\textsuperscript{11} Lindholt, “Crimes of Gender in Puritan America,” 564.
and possess women’s souls…” Women, therefore were perceived to be easier targets for Satan’s contact, and as such came to be intimately associated with potential acts of evil—in a way, indicative to Eve’s legacy. Contracting one’s soul to Satan became equated with witchcraft and thus, Puritan women grew to be closely linked to the possibility of partaking in witchcraft.

Practice in witchcraft was considered the greatest form of Puritan defiance due to its requirement of intentional contract with the devil. According to Reis, “The witch acted aggressively. Her soul specifically chose the devil, rather than passively waiting for Christ, and she purposefully allowed the devil to use her body. Thus, the witch acted assertively, while the sinner, after falling, suffered passively.” Puritan doctrine specifically demanded that the feminine soul wait passively for the grace of God. Therefore, to instead purposefully seek a contract with Satan was regarded as the greatest sin one could commit. As already noted, women were thought to be at greater risk of seeking such a contract, as their souls and bodies were more vulnerable to the reach of Satan. Preoccupation with the threat of a woman’s potential danger lent itself to the rigidity of Puritan gender doctrine. Since witchcraft was the ultimate sin, and was gendered by Puritans, social pressures placed on women grew from fear and manifested into stifling, nearly impossibly difficult expectations.

As a woman within Salem, Tituba was subject to rigid expectations and gendered tensions. Ordinary Puritan doctrine placed severe expectations on women to

---

12 Reis, “The Devil, the Body and the Feminine Soul,” 27.
13 Ibid., 35.
14 Ibid., 25.
be submissive and pious; for Tituba, an enslaved Indian woman, social expectations of subordination and Godly submission were all the more intense. While her place as a slave allotted Tituba certain “freedoms”—insofar as certain behaviors that did not meet Puritan expectation could be dismissed or excused as a fault of her Indian origins—tension surrounding her existence within Salem was more considerable. The predisposition for women to partake in witchcraft proved significant for Tituba. Like all women within Salem who were feared for their potential danger in submitting to the devil, being an enslaved Indian woman, Tituba was all the more feared as a potential sinner and witch; her likelihood of being accused was thus substantial. When an accusation did come to fruition, Tituba was faced with choice of denying the charges or admitting to guilt. Faced by her accusers and judges who maintained a rigidly ingrained gendered conception of witchcraft, Tituba, as a woman residing within Puritan Salem, confessed.

II. One Woman’s Admission

What prompted Tituba to confess, when the women interrogated before her, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, staunchly refuted their accusations? The motive for Tituba’s confession is far from surprising given the court’s decision not to hang anyone who confessed; though Tituba’s confession is of particular significance since she was the first among those accused to concede to practicing witchcraft. Witchcraft—the crime and sin in question—was a gendered concept to Puritans, which is what accounted for Tituba’s accusation. Her confession therefore followed suit, adhering to her female predisposition to partake in witchcraft. In accordance to Puritan doctrine,

15 Reis, “Confess or Deny? What’s a ‘Witch’ to Do?,” 12.
women, as the weaker sex more likely to sin and to stray from God’s grace, were also “more likely to interpret their own sin, no matter how ordinary, as a tacit covenant with Satan, a spiritual renunciation of God… In essence, women were more convinced that their sinful natures had bonded with the devil.”\(^{16}\) Puritan women’s conception of themselves as the more vulnerable and potentially sinful sex also led them to perceive any of their sinful misdeeds as significant betrayals of their faith. As a woman living within Salem, Tituba was well versed on the gendering of sin according to Puritan theology. Tituba was an active participant in, as well as a close observer of such gender dynamics. Her confession embodies her understanding and place as a woman within Puritan doctrine. Therefore, as gender was a contributing factor to Tituba’s accusation, it was also a significant factor of her confession.

To understand the context of Tituba’s confession, it is necessary to first consider the testimony of those who came before her and did not confess. A close look at the examination of Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne allows for this. The testimony of Sarah Good began the proceedings for the day of the three women’s trials. In the examination, John Hathorne, whose rhetoric reveals an assumption of Good’s guilt, questions Good. He asks of her, “Sarah Good, what evil spirit have you familiarity with…Why doe you hurt these children?” Good denies the allegations vehemently, offering, “I doe not hurt them. I scorn it...I am falsely accused, I doe not torment them.”\(^{17}\) At one point Good goes on to suggest others are guilty of the torment of the children, implying there is in

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

fact a demonic force behind the girls’ affliction, though she has no part in it. Good tells Hathorne, “I do not know [who for certain was guilty] but it was some you brought into the meeting house with you.” With this, Good condemns herself by acknowledging there was a commitment of sin and practice of witchcraft. While she denies her own involvement in the tormenting of the young accusers, Good still validates the supposed sin of witchcraft. Reis offers insight on the rhetoric of such deniers, observing that, “women who insisted on their innocence often implicated themselves unwittingly…they could not wholeheartedly deny a pact with Satan when an implicit bond with him through common sin was undeniable.” The consequences for such denial was determinedly execution. This is evident in the case of Good, who went on to be hanged on account of being found guilty “for the horrible Crime of Witchcraft practised & Committed On Severall persons.” Good denied her guilt, instead insisting on her innocence. It was because of her refusal to admit to partaking in witchcraft that she was condemned as guilty and put to death.

The examination of Osborne proves strikingly similar to Good’s testimony. Like in the instance of Good, Hathorne assumes her guilt and frames his questions as such in his examination. The significant difference in Osborne’s examination is the questioning of her relationship with Good. As Good suggested Osborne’s guilt in her own testimony, Osborne is specifically interrogated on her relations with Good. Hathorne

---

18 Reis, “Confess or Deny? What’s a ‘Witch’ to Do?,” 12.

asks, “What familiarity have you with Sarah Good…what communications had you with her?” Osborne refutes any sort of condemning relationship with Good. Like Good, Osborne goes on to concede to the existence of some evil spirit or satanic presence within Salem. Osborne reveals to Hathorne, “It was a voice I thought I heard…[that said] I should goe no more to meeting but I said I would and did goe the next Sabbath day.” This confession proves similar to Good’s, in that it acknowledges the possibility of a demonic force within Salem. In recognizing this but refusing to take responsibility or admit to involvement with the devil, Osborne implicates herself. Sarah Osborne went on to die in prison following her examination, on May 10, 1692. Had Osborne lived to see the noose, it is likely her execution would have been called for, due to her refusal to confess her guilt in practicing witchcraft. Her testimony, as well as Good’s, reveals that those who denied their guilt in witchcraft severely implicated themselves.

Tituba’s examination exemplifies an understanding and adherence to Puritan gender ideology. As the first to confess, Tituba understood her place as an accused woman and as such, confessed accordingly. In her testimony, Tituba concedes to bidding herself to serve the Devil, and then goes on to name other women as partakers in witchcraft. She explains to Hathorne, “Four women sometimes hurt the children…there is four women and one man they hurt the children and then lay all upon


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
me and they tell me if I will not hurt the children they will hurt me…but I will hurt
them no more…yes [I am sorry I hurt the children.]”

Tituba’s testimony contains her admission to partaking in witchcraft, albeit only in response to the threat of her own endangerment. In this way, Tituba validates for the people of Salem the presence of Satan within the village and confirms the afflicted girls’ accusations. Tituba also in a way absolves herself, making it clear her participation was committed out of fear for her own well-being. She further explains she is sorry and intends not to partake in witchcraft again. According to Reis, Tituba’s confession exemplifies Puritan womanhood, thus confirming Tituba’s understanding of and adherence to Puritan gender doctrine.

A confession of guilt to the greatest sin—witchcraft—was the embodiment of adherence to Puritan gender expectation, particularly for that of Puritan women. As Reis states,

A confessing woman was the model of Puritan womanhood, even though she was admitting to the worst of sins. Apology was critical…a good Puritan woman/witch needed to repent her obvious sins. A confessing woman confirmed her society’s belief in both God and the devil. She validated the court’s procedures, and she corroborated Puritan thought concerning sin, guilt, and the devil’s wily ways. A confessing woman created a model of perfect redemption, and during the Salem trials (though not elsewhere) she was rewarded with her life.

---


24 Reis, “Confess or Deny? What’s a ‘Witch’ to Do?,” 12.
Tituba’s testimony possessed all the attributes Reis names as components of an acceptable and desirable Puritan confession. Tituba validated Salem’s concerns regarding the presence of witchcraft, apologized for her involvement in it, and named additional fellow witches. In this manner, Tituba exemplifies agency consistent with Puritan gender doctrine. As the first confession, Tituba’s testimony is particularly significant. Unlike Good and Osborne, whose testimonies of refutation display a challenge to Puritan gender expectations, which resulted in dire consequences for them both, Tituba’s examination reveals her understanding of and participation in the gendering of Salem society. As a woman within Puritan Salem, Tituba was first accused of witchcraft and then confessed accordingly, in observance to the expectations of Puritan women. Therefore, Tituba’s confession may be attributed to her gender within Salem.

While it is significant that her confession granted her life, Tituba was not given the opportunity to reestablish herself within the Salem community following her examination. Reis points out how a confession, containing all of the aspects of Tituba’s, would have allowed for a true Puritan woman to be reestablished into her community. Even though confessing to the worst possible sin, a confessed witch still had the opportunity to be reintegrated into her given home, for exemplifying the expectations of her Puritan womanhood. Tituba, however, remained in prison following her confession. This may be attributed to the other equally significant factor of Tituba’s makeup within Salem: not only was she a woman, Tituba was an enslaved Indian woman, and her very body and assumed racial and cultural practices deemed her potential reintegration into Salem society impossible. Regardless of her confession, Tituba was banished from
Salem. This was due to both her admission to the ultimate female Puritan sin, as well as her visible darkness, assumed to be associated with her guilt.

The factors that led to Tituba’s confession, the matters of her race and gender, collide in the mere visibility of her supposed guilt simply via her body. As we have established, according to Puritan doctrine, “Satan attacked the soul by assaulting the body, and that because women’s bodies were weaker, the devil could reach women’s souls more easily…Among witches, the body clearly manifested the soul’s acceptance of the diabolical covenant.”

The people of Salem therefore understood a witch’s body to be a vessel of the devil. That the body became the possession and tool of Satan also led Puritans to believe that sometimes a witch’s body may be marked. These markings could vary from an arrangement of moles or birthmarks to a crooked or misshapen finger. There was no greater marking of the devil’s work, though, than physical darkness itself. As Tucker purports, “There are numerous references in Puritan discourse to Indians or tawnies literally blackened by their association with the Devil…”

If the clearest mark of a compact with the devil was the darkness of skin, then surely Tituba was a witch. Puritans believed that Satan ravaged the soul through the body, which then revealed itself as the devil’s vessel through visible markings. In the case of Tituba, her female body, already vulnerable to Satan’s attacks, had obviously been marked: the color of her skin was clearly indicative of that. With both her femaleness and Indian ethnicity subjecting her to an assumed association with witchcraft, Tituba’s decision to confess is logical. An attempt to refute the charges

---

25 Reis, “The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul,” 15.

against her would have been to challenge deeply rooted Puritan doctrine, the very same doctrine that demanded a visibly guilty witch remain separated from the Salem community. Tituba’s race and the Puritan perception of it proved equally significant to her accusation and confession, as did her gender.

III. Race In Salem: The Puritan’s Conception of Tituba

Understanding Puritan perception and response to race is essential to recognizing how Tituba’s race contributed to her confession. Early historical records inform us that Puritans dually perceived Tituba as an African and Indian woman. Neither of these identities was exclusive or independent of each other; both proving significant in shaping how Tituba was perceived within Salem society. Much like the manner in which her gender led to accusation and consequently to her confession, so would Tituba’s dual racial identity prove significant. Due to her perception as dually Indian and African, and the Puritan conceptions of these races, Tituba would find herself accused as a witch.

Early sources specifically identify Tituba as an Indian woman. The earliest written document pertaining to her is her arrest warrant, wherein she is referred to as “titibe an Indian Woman”. The warrant is dated February 29, 1692. This minute reference displays how Tituba’s Puritan counterparts viewed her and considered her an Indian woman. Again, in the summary of her examination, dated March 1 of 1692, she is referenced as “Titiba an Indian Woman”. Her continual referral to as an Indian

27 Corwin and Hathorne, “Warrant v. Tituba and Sarah Osborne, 1691/2.”

woman among the Puritans clarifies any uncertainties on how Tituba’s ethnicity was viewed by the Salem people. Therefore at the time of her residence in Salem and throughout the duration of her arrest, trial, and imprisonment, the Puritan villagers considered Tituba an Indian woman.

Tituba’s racial identity within Salem was influenced by her multicultural makeup. One factor comprising this was her history as a slave to the merchant Samuel Parris on his Barbadian estate. Parris went on to become a Reverend, and in 1680 left Barbados for Salem, taking Tituba with him. It is unknown for certain whether Tituba was born in Barbados. In “Tituba’s Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Witch-Hunt,” Elaine Breslaw offers that Barbadian sources indicate “the most probable place of origin for Indian slaves in Barbados was the northeastern coast of South America,” thus likely placing Tituba among the indigenous people of the Arawak.29 Breslaw goes on to suggest that, “[On Barbados] Tituba had been exposed to the African influences omnipresent there…including non-Christian and occult practices.”30 Gaining exposure to such occult practices contributed to Tituba’s cultural makeup, general knowledge, and belief system. Also significant to consider is Tituba’s roots in the Arawak village. The Arawak belief systems and practices adhered to the existence of malevolent spirits that had the power to kill or ruinously maim. Even if her experience with Arawak beliefs was limited to her young childhood, Tituba was familiar with both indigenous practices and those of the occult she was exposed to in


her time in Barbados. When Rev. Parris brought Tituba to Salem, her cultural makeup and practices were further expanded via exposure to and socialization within a strictly Puritan society. Therefore Breslaw maintains that Tituba’s makeup consisted of Indian, African, and European elements.

Tituba’s multicultural background influenced her actions, which would go on to affirm how the Puritans would conceive of her racial identity. Following the outbursts displayed by Abigail and Betty in the Parris household, Tituba, in an effort to protect or cure the girls, prepared a “witchcake.” The cake was a concoction of the girls’ urine and rye, fed to a dog. This would supposedly bewitch the dog to reveal the malevolent afflicter of the Betty and Abigail. It is vital to note that the occult practice of this “witchcake” is English in origin—not Indian. That the practice of the witchcake is of English origin, and not of Barbadian or Arawak custom, determines Breslaw to conclude that among Puritans, Tituba’s identity had long been associated with demonic power. Regardless of the fact that the witchcake was English in origin, the people of Salem still perceived Tituba’s actions a product of her racial and ethnic background and thus, associated her with the potential evil of witchcraft. Veta Smith Tucker also supports this idea, in her work, “Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village.” She offers:

There are numerous references in Puritan discourse to Indians or tawnies literally blackened by their association with the Devil…therefore, being perceived as both African and Indian served not to diminish but to intensify the

}

With this, Tucker suggests that Salem residents associated Tituba’s dual racial identity as one synonymous with the danger of Satan. She expands this notion of Tituba’s dual racial identity within Salem by explaining:

…Puritan witnesses were not bewildered by what they perceived to be dual Indian and African components of Tituba’s identity…Evidently, the 17\textsuperscript{th}-century Puritans blended the categories Indian, African and slave…[and] colonial references to Tituba as Indian do not imply racial exclusivity.\footnote{Ibid., 627.}

Tucker purports the notion of Tituba’s racial duality by drawing upon one of the court transcripts detailing her examination. Within the document, Tucker brings attention to a reference of the practice of ‘hoodoo.’ She explains, “Hoodoo is a vernacular term for the maleficent practice of voodoo, which is itself a form of occult practice imported into the Americas by West Africans.”\footnote{Ibid.} The description of Tituba’s witchcraft practices as a form of hoodoo indicates that her Puritan questioners reconciled African and Indian elements in their perception of Tituba. The blending of the two elements was, as Tucker puts it, “a practical conclusion”\footnote{Ibid., 634.} for the Puritans, drawn unperturbedly. This conclusion was perhaps so simple for the Puritans to draw, in part due to Tituba’s cultural practices and actions, which represented her ethnic and racial origins. As Tucker exemplifies, the people of Salem conceived of Tituba’s race

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 627.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 634.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
via her actions, or practices such as ‘hoodoo’. Other such actions by Tituba, such as the creation of the witchcake, confirmed her racial perception within Salem.

The confusion surrounding Tituba’s race has proven the most vexing in the understanding of her prompted confession. While Tucker and Breslaw purport that she was thought of in a dually racial manner, court examinations only ever specify Tituba as Indian. Tucker argues this does not indicate racial exclusivity, however it is significant to note that Tituba is specifically noted and described as Indian and not as Negro. Furthermore, there was another slave woman accused by the name of Candy, who served in the household of Margaret Hawkes. Candy is explicitly described as a negro woman; therefore, had Tituba been perceived simply as black, she would have been specified as such. The Puritans made the distinction between Candy and Tituba; the former specifically as Negro and the latter as Indian.

Existing records claiming Tituba as Negro or colored are the works of historical dramatists; not the word of existing primary documentation. In 1868 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow authored the drama, *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms.* Tituba is listed in the *Dramatis Personae* as “Indian,” though is revealed in the play itself to have a father who was “a man all black and fierce…He was an Obi man, and taught her magic.” While Tituba’s place within the play was minimal, as was the general reception of the

---


play itself, the characterization of her has half-black was noted and perpetuated by future authors. In Both the *History of the United States*, published in 1876, and *History of New England*, published in 1877, Tituba is described as “half-Indian, half-Negro,” when for centuries beforehand all historical documentation had only ever specified Tituba as Indian. This racial duality continued through the 1950s, where Tituba’s character appears to have been appropriated by grossly racist stereotypes. In *The Devil in Massachusetts*, she is depicted as a drawling, lazy, and voodoo-practicing woman.\(^{39}\) She is fully and decidedly negro in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, where she is depicted as casting spells over bubbling cauldrons and concocting potions of chicken blood.\(^{40}\) In the midst of the American Civil War, Tituba’s race and character undergo a dramatic evolution; a fact that can hardly be considered coincidence. Tituba’s historical categorization has, as consequence, undergone an unnecessary and inaccurate transformation. Tituba was Indian woman, despite records suggesting otherwise. Her multicultural makeup contributed to the Puritan’s perception of her race as one of dually African and Indian. Despite this conception of her race, it was only a conception; Tituba was referenced as and was clearly, an Indian woman.

Tituba’s dual racial identity is conceivable as a Puritan notion when considering how Puritans interpreted her multicultural background. Tituba was an Indian woman well-versed with Indian, African, and Puritan practices and cultures. In her time in Barbados she was exposed to all three cultural aspects, and her very personhood came to embody them all. What is clear and therefore may be drawn from this debate, is that


\(^{40}\) Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York, 1953) quoted in Hansen, 10.
Tituba was an Indian woman who practiced and exhibited behavior akin to the cultures of both Indian and African practices. This multicultural makeup shaped how Puritans perceived her. Ultimately, a dually racial identity only served to strengthen Tituba’s association with witchcraft. As Puritans considered her both Indian and African, and both of these identities were strongly associated with practices of the occult, Tituba was all the more likely to be accused as a witch.

Tituba’s practices validated the villager’s perceptions of her as a woman capable of witchcraft and the devil’s bidding. Therefore, the complicated and multicultural makeup of Tituba, constituted by her dual race and cultural practices, led Salem residents to assume her a likely practitioner of witchcraft. This perception of Tituba led to an inevitable accusation of being one of the afflicted girls’ tormenters. Following her accusation, Tituba had a decision in admitting to or denying the charges. It was her place as a slave within Salem society that would allow her the opportunity to respond to the accusations at all, and ultimately, to confess.

IV. A Slave in Salem

Tituba was a slave woman within a Puritan society and as such, her role was dictated by particular Puritan doctrine. Peter Mackinlay offers in “The New England Puritan Attitude Toward Black Slavery,” that the Puritan form of slavery consisted of a combined regard for the slave as both an economic unit and a person of God.

Mackinlay suggests, “Due to a combination of economic and religious forces, the black slave held an indeterminate position in society, a position derived from the Puritan attitude toward the slave as both property and person [before the law].”

societies therefore found a means to reconcile that slaves were simultaneously people and property. For Tituba, this meant that within Salem, she held certain value due to her place of servitude in the Parris household, as well as for her existence as a potentially Christian woman. This is exemplified in the ‘Liberties of Forreiners and Strangers,’ written by Massachusetts legislators in 1641. It reads:

…there shall never be any bond slaverie, villange or captivite amongst us unles it be lawful captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle them selves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel concerning such persons doeth morally require.  

This excerpt reveals that within Salem, the recognition and practice of slavery adhered to the notion that slaves, as property, were also subject to the law and therefore, within a Puritan society, to the rights and liberties of Christians. In “Puritan Conscience and New England Slavery,” Bernard Rosenthal also concedes to this ideal pertaining to Puritan slavery. In reconciling the property component and religious rites of slaves, Rosenthal suggests that “the safest course was not to assume that they [slaves] were outside the covenant of grace…the easiest course, then, would appear to be to allow blacks the opportunity for salvation.”

Possessing the same rights as a Christian would prove significant for Tituba, despite her position as an enslaved Indian


woman. Still, a dual religious and economic recognition placed certain restraints on her. Despite being equally subject to Christian and legal rights as any of her white and free Salem neighbors, she maintained little respect or recognition due to her status as a slave.

Tituba’s Christian rights are what ensured her opportunity to offer her confession. As a matter of Christian defiance, a charge such as witchcraft ensured the religious right to explanation, or more appropriately, confession. Despite her social insignificance, Tituba was still entitled the right to refute or confirm the witchcraft charges because of her categorization as a slave within the Puritan system. However Tituba’s dual recognition as both a woman subject to legal and Christian rights, and as a non-white slave woman would only complicate the matters surrounding her confession.

As a slave woman subject to legal and Christian rights, Tituba was permitted the opportunity to confess; however her confession would complicate the Puritan notion of slavery as a reconciliation of property and person. While the Puritans had to offer Tituba the chance to testify, anticipation for an actual admittance had not been accounted for, let alone what to do following such a confession. Tituba not only admitted to partaking in witchcraft, thus confirming the presence of the devil in Salem, but she also named fellow conspirators in Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. The Salem officials now had to respond to Tituba’s testimony accordingly—but what to do with a confessed slave woman? Due to her already complex role within Salem society, Tituba’s confession only served to further complicate her place within the village.
Tucker considers this, taking care to emphasize how her place as a slave so deeply impacted what would become of her.

Puritan authorities banished Tituba from them and from consciousness because her presence stirred their deepest fear: alienation from God. God’s condemnation was visible in the color of her skin. Unlike other accused (white) witches, who upon confession could be regenerated and reintegrated into the community, Tituba wore the dark skin of reprobation. For her, reintegration into the community was unthinkable… The judges did not know what to do with her. Due to her confession, they were unable to put her to death, and due to their presumption of her irreversible degeneracy, they were unable to tolerate her presence in the Village.  

As Tucker explains, Tituba’s confession created a conundrum for the Salem officials, largely due to her race and place as a slave. While Puritan doctrine dictated that slaves were subject to legal and Christian rights, that by no means placed Tituba on equal standing with her free, white Salem neighbors. Even Tituba’s fellow accused, the social outcasts Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, garnered greater respect and significance as free white women. Furthermore, regardless of whether Tituba had been a free woman as opposed to a slave, she was still not white and thus visibly and markedly different from the rest of the Salem villagers. Tituba’s place as a slave within Salem was not necessarily dictated by her race, as racial constructions and parameters were quite fluid at the time of her service. However Tituba’s slave status on Barbados, combined with her visibly non-white body, solidified her place within Salem as one of little respect or regard. This made the matter of her confession a difficult matter to deal with. Salem officials had to decide what to do with a confessed, Indian witch. Christian doctrine granted her the right to testimony, and the very same doctrine demanded that

as a confessor, Tituba’s life be spared. The issue remained, however, that her race and place as a slave could not be ignored.

Tituba’s punishment for her confession was banishment. Following her confession, she was placed in jail and remained there throughout the duration of the trials. Parris never came to reclaim her, nor did he pay her jail fees to release her and send her off with anyone else. Tituba’s rights to legal and Christian doctrine were not enough to absolve her within the village. The intentional distance the Salem people placed between themselves and Tituba reveals how negatively and fearfully her race was regarded among the Puritans.

V. Tituba’s Confession

Puritan doctrine regarded race and gender in a manner of strict expectation, fueled by both cultural and religious norms. As an Indian enslaved woman, these two features collided in Tituba’s personhood. The factors of her race and gender rendered Tituba unremarkable; in fact it was these factors that prescribed her to the lowest and most insignificant rung of Salem society. At the time of the trials, however, Tituba’s race and gender became hugely important. Being an enslaved Indian woman, Tituba was a natural, if not obvious choice to claim in partaking in the girls’ afflictions. What had not been foreseen in accusing Tituba, was a confession. Tituba admitted guilt to partaking in witchcraft because her race and gender predisposed her to its practice. This assumed predisposition, based in her gender and race, is what allowed and ultimately led to, Tituba’s confession.

Tituba’s first official examination took place on March 1st. It is clear from the rhetoric of the questioning that her guilt is already assumed. Hathorne begins by asking
her, “Titibe what evil spirit have you familiarity with...why do you hurt these children?” What is significant to note is that Tituba does not immediately concede to her guilt. In response to these first two questions, she responds with, “None [evil spirit do I have familiarity with]...I do not hurt them [the children].” The exchange following her denial presents a shift in the examination. Tituba acknowledges the possibility of Satan’s involvement in the girls’ affliction without altogether indicting herself guilty of being responsible. When asked by Hathorne, “Who is it then [that hurts the children],” Tituba responds, “The devil for ought I know.” It is after this suggestion that Tituba confesses to Hathorne that “The devil came to me and bid me serve him.”45 From this, it is discernible that Tituba’s initial response to the examination was not one of prompted confession, but rather of denial. It is only after she voluntarily concedes to the possibility of the devil’s involvement in the girls’ affliction that Tituba offers a confession of her own guilt.

It is natural to understand the likely fear Tituba, and all the accused, faced throughout their examinations; the sort of fear that could illicit staunch refutation or desperate concession. In the case of Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, who were examined before Tituba, both women vehemently denied their charges, though they acknowledged the likelihood of the devil’s work being present within Salem. Tituba does the same early in her examination by refuting her guilt. There is a shift after her acknowledgement of the possible presence of the devil, however. Unlike her predecessors Good and Osborne, Tituba admits she bid herself to the devil after he approached her. In the instance of her confession, therefore, Tituba used her

45 Corwin and Hathorne, “Examination of Tituba.”
predisposition to partake in witchcraft to her advantage. As her guilt was clearly assumed by her questioners, rather than attempting to fight what was deemed an obvious and likely charge, Tituba admitted to partaking in witchcraft.

With both race and gender stacked against her in an assumed association with witchcraft, Tituba’s confession is entirely reasonable. Unlike her fellow accused, Tituba was both female and Indian. To attempt to insist on her innocence would have been to challenge deeply rooted Puritan beliefs. Such a fight would prove difficult enough if against one factor of Puritan culture; however Tituba’s refutation would work against Puritan doctrine pertaining to both gender and race.

Consideration of the examinations of others accused allows us to fully understand the significance of Tituba’s confession, and how the factors of her race and gender proved so significant in her admission. The examination of another slave woman, by the name of Candy, proves a suitable place to start. Candy served in the household of Margaret Hawkes and was examined on July 4, 1692. 46 The time of Candy’s testimony is long after Tituba’s confession on March 1st—a substantial thing to consider. By the time of Candy’s questioning, one person had already been tried and hanged for witchcraft, while five others had been found guilty and awaited execution. Countless others had been accused and were imprisoned on account of such accusations. 47 Likely prompted by the growing panic in the village and the occurrence of executions, Candy quickly confesses to being a witch. Her examination reveals that elements of her cultural makeup were, like in the case of Tituba, significant to her

46 Hathorne, “Examination of Candy.”

47 Trask, “Chronology of Events Relating to the Salem Witchcraft Trials.”
assumed guilt. Like Tituba, Candy was a slave woman from Barbados and was thus associated with the practice of witchcraft. Candy acknowledges this, but references her former home as a place wherein she was innocent. She instead insists that her practice in witchcraft only occurred after she was brought to Salem. Candy implores, “Candy no witch in her country. Candy's mother no witch. Candy no witch in Barbados. This country, mistress give Candy witch.”

Candy’s examination differs from Tituba’s in that she confesses to being a witch almost immediately, without offering any sort of initial denial. In light of the scheduled executions for those deemed guilty, it is anything but surprising that Candy offered her confession so willingly. By the time of her examination, the pattern had been set, wherein confessors were granted their lives and those who denied their charges were met with the promise of the noose. Following her testimony, Candy was declared not guilty of her charges.

Candy’s examination reveals how cultural assumptions pertaining to slaves proved significant in witch accusations. Both Candy and Tituba were perceived by their Salem accusers as potential partakers of witchcraft on account of their cultural, ethnic and racial makeup. Observe that Candy is specifically described as “Negro” in her court proceedings, while Tituba is noted as Indian. While racial identities were at this time, fluid concepts, both women were still condemned due to their presumed association with dark magic. Their shared experience of living in Barbados was equally damning. As explained before, Tituba’s cultural history and actions, such as the preparation of the witchcake, served as a basis in which the Salem people founded their beliefs of her guilt.

---

48 Hathorne, "Examination of Candy."
Where Tituba and Candy’s confessions then differ, is in the significance of Tituba’s confession coming first. Unlike Candy, Tituba had not witnessed others sentenced to death for refuting their charges, nor had she witnessed others spared execution on account of admission. Tituba had no preexisting pattern to draw upon in deciding to confess. Her confession, therefore, was prompted entirely by her own individual action. Tituba’s confession indicates an awareness of her place within the Puritan system, and an understanding of the social doctrine that worked against her. Despite this awareness, Tituba’s admission was offered without any prior example to follow. Confessing to witchcraft was to confess to the ultimate Puritan sin. The consequences for such an action, especially for a woman assumed guilty with or without admission, very well could have been fatal. Her confession however proved a wise choice, as conceding to her guilt ensured Tituba her life.

Tituba’s gender also contributed to her admission. As in the instance of comparison to Candy, a comparison and contrast to an accused man will allow us to consider how Tituba’s gender factored into her confession. Reis informs us, of the accusation of men, that, “Not only was it far more unusual for men to be accused of witchcraft than a woman, but when men were accused…[they] were far more audacious in their rejection of the charges.”49 Such is the case with Giles Corey, a prosperous land-owning farmer in Salem who was accused and examined for witchcraft in April 1692. Corey is famous for his adamant denial of the charges, and as consequence, being pressed to death in defiance of admission. His last words, “More weight,” were repeated throughout the duration of his execution, in a refusal to admit to his guilt in

49 Reis, “Confess or Deny, What’s a Witch to Do?,” 13.
partaking in witchcraft.50 His execution reveals that Salem officials were willing to commit the penalty to any supposed witches, regardless of gender. However Corey’s examination provides insight to what Reis defines as a notable and significant difference in the male and female associations with witchcraft.

In Corey’s examination, he responds to his alleged charges with utter defiance, insisting, “I hope through the goodness of God I shall [be released], for that matter I never had no hand in, in my life…I have done nothing to damage [the accusers]…I have never had temptations [of the devil] in my life.”51 Corey’s language depicts a man who is assured of his innocence and insulted by his accusations. This contrasts with the examination of Tituba, wherein her early denouncements of guilt are offered less assuredly. This may be attributed to Tituba’s gender, which predisposed her to be assumed guilty. Furthermore, Tituba had no other example to follow in instances of admission or adamant denial of guilt. Corey, contrastingly, had had chance to witness several others be questioned and accused and could observe the outcomes of such confessions and denials. His stance therefore signifies what Reis deems a product of the genderedization of witchcraft. In comparison to Tituba’s examination, it is observable how gender contributed to both the chances of accusation and the likelihood of an accused person’s decision to confess or deny the charges.


Tituba’s confession reveals her awareness of Puritan doctrine and how such doctrine influenced the manner in which her race and gender were regarded. In deciding to confess on account of the association of witchcraft with her race, cultural practices, and womanhood, Tituba had to craft her admission in a way that would befit Puritan culture. This is made evident when Tituba exclaims, following her admission, that, “They [the devil] tell me if I will not hurt the children they will hurt me…[I said] I will serve you no longer then he said he would hurt me.” With these words, Tituba concedes to her pact with the devil but insists it was only under the threat of danger and coercion that she did the devil's bidding. Furthermore, Tituba explains she made attempts to ward off the devil by telling him she would no longer serve him. Along with her confession, this reference to coercion and the force of the devil reveals Tituba’s understanding of Puritan doctrine and beliefs, and moreover, what was expected of her within that system of belief. In choosing to confess, Tituba reveals an awareness of how her racial categorization and gender within Salem predisposed her to an accusation such as witchcraft; furthermore, an accusation that would have proven next to impossible to refute, given her place within Salem. Tituba further exemplifies her understanding of this by mentioning the coercion of the devil in her service to him. The reference to the force of the devil and her conscious reluctance to do his bidding provided for the Puritans, a sound and reasonable confession.

---

52 Corwin and Hathorne, “Examination of Tituba.”
VI. Conclusion

The Salem witch trials formerly ended in 1693, the same year Tituba was released from prison. What became of her following this is unknown; the inadvertently powerful woman disappears from written record. This is a disservice to Tituba, given how significant her action and role within the trials were. Tituba reemerged in text and literature in later years, albeit in largely problematic and inaccurate representations. Tituba’s place within the trials is deserving of recognition. Her case presents an intriguing and hugely meaningful commentary on Puritan gender norms and racial ideology, all within the context of a frantic and tension-filled episode of early American history. That little is written on her behalf and her significance is a disappointment; though the increasing efforts set by Rosenthal, Tucker, Hansen and Breslaw offer encouragement to others to continue to pursue the importance of this woman’s place within the Salem witch trials.

Tituba’s actions within the witch trials reveal her thorough understanding of her place within Puritan society. Due to her predisposition to be associated with witchcraft and thus assumed guilty, Tituba was able to offer a confession on account of the same factors that contributed to her accusation. As an enslaved Indian woman within Salem, Tituba was perceived as a likely and almost assuredly perpetrator of occult practices. When Abigail Williams and Betty Parris’ illnesses were deemed the products of Satan, it was hardly a surprise for Tituba to be named a likely offender. Without previous admissions to follow, Tituba, acknowledging her place within Puritan society, was the first to offer an admission to guilt of practicing witchcraft. Her confession

---

53 Rosenthal, “Tituba’s Story”, .
embodied an understanding of the gender and racial factors that prescribed her to be accused. To attempt to refute her charges would have meant challenging deeply ingrained Puritan values; such an effort would have proven futile, if not most certainly fatal. In confessing, Tituba both saved her own life and perpetuated the course of the trials, validating the Salem residents’ concerns and beliefs about a Satanic presence within their village. Tituba’s place within the trials therefore was one of great significance. More significant still, was Tituba’s decision to confess at all. Tituba exhibited impressive understanding of her position within Salem as defined by her gender and race, and thus, by being the first to confess to the practice of witchcraft.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


### Secondary Sources:


http://hne-rs.s3.amazonaws.com/filestore/1/2/8/3/5_3584a2570122929/12835_0737ee7a923097e.pdf (accessed May 9, 2014).


Reis, Elizabeth. “Confess or Deny? What’s a ‘Witch’ to Do?” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (2003),  


---. “Tituba.” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (2003),  

---. “Tituba’s Story.” *The New England Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (1998),  

