

Hesitating Between Irony and the Desire to be Serious in  
*Moi, Tituba, sorcière . . . noire de Salem*: Maryse Condé  
and her Readers

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Maryse Condé's first and fifth novels, *Hérémakhonon* (1976) and *Moi, Tituba sorcière . . . noire de Salem* (1986), both present a fictive autobiographical form in which, as would be expected, personal and cultural identity figure as a dominant theme. In her study of autobiography, *Autobiographical Tightropes*, Leah Hewitt demonstrates how this theme is acted out in *Hérémakhonon* as an ambivalence in the relationship between Condé and the narrator/character, Veronica (187). Hewitt notes that when Condé returns to the fictive autobiographical form in *Moi, Tituba*, this ambivalence is no longer evident because she establishes a narrative bond with her title character (171). Hewitt's analysis of the "identity issues" in *Hérémakhonon* serves as a useful point of departure for a discussion of the way in which the reading situation created by the bond between Condé and Tituba shifts questions about identity in this novel entirely onto the role of the reader. As critics have argued, Condé's novels not only respond to certain realist demands in that they fill the voids of African and Caribbean history left by colonialism, they also contain elements of irony and parody that challenge the expectations a reader might bring to all her fiction.<sup>1</sup> Though perhaps less obvious in Condé's early novels, a certain ambivalence characterizes all of Condé's work. As Hewitt writes in a later article, Condé's view of the

writer's role is to "inquiéter" "to disturb" her readers" ("Inventing" 79); and one way or another, Condé's "fiction finds the difference within any simple or pure identity," be it the identity of the character or of the reader (80).

The apparently traditional form of Condé's first four novels led early readers to overlook the author's formal inventiveness more evident in her later novels, beginning with *Traversée de la mangrove* (82-83). The intimate first-person narration of *Hérémakhonon* led some critics to read the novel as autobiography rather than as fictive autobiography, and the perspectives presented there were seen to be the author's criticism of well-cherished myths of the time.<sup>2</sup> "The novel was badly received," Condé tells Ann Armstrong Scarboro in an interview:

The Guadeloupeans and the Martinicans did not like the picture of their society. The Africans objected to the image of Africa. The Marxists did not like the denunciation of the evils of so-called African Socialism. The militants objected to Veronica, the central character, as a negative heroine, and the feminists hated her because she looked for her liberation through men. (205)

In her afterword to the English translation of *Moi, Tituba*, Scarboro also reports that the controversy surrounding the two-volume *Ségou* (1984, 1985) "centered on what was real and what was fiction, and whether Condé claimed anthropological expertise in her depiction" of the saga of a West African family (196). In *Ségou*, the third person narration, the use of the family tree and of maps, not to mention the reader's desire to know about "lost kingdoms" of Africa, represent such a realist lure that it is difficult for some readers not to take it. The fictive autobiographical form of *Moi, Tituba* has a similar lure in regard to the heroic title character, as Scarboro candidly admits in her afterword: "I myself was embarrassed to realize that I had missed the element of parody on first reading because I was so eager to celebrate Tituba's heroism and her Caribbeanness" (225).

The realist desire at work in the response of early readers to the *Ségou* volumes becomes the desire for a mythic hero in *Moi, Tituba*. This desire obscures what is in fact the reader's "precarious" relation to the text, similar to, yet different from, the one

Hewitt identifies in her discussion of *Hérémakhonon* (AT 174). By focusing on the narrator as a constructed female identity rather than "an external figure for the author," Hewitt shows that the narrator/character, Veronica, embodies "a language of negativity within the subject, part of the doubled subject's ongoing battle with herself as well as others." Veronica thus represents what Hewitt calls "the fascinating, if troubling, contradictions of the self" that mark the author's "torturous ambivalence toward Africa and the Antilles" (186-87).<sup>3</sup> This ambivalence expresses itself stylistically in the text, which creates a "precarious" reading experience because the reader reenacts what Hewitt identifies as "the loss of direction or uncertainty of meaning that troubles the heroine" (174). *Moi, Tituba* marks a resolution of the ambivalent relationship between author and narrator because in this novel they are "supportively bound together through classic literary conventions" (189). Hewitt concludes that while *Moi, Tituba* represents "affirmative image-making (of the antillean woman)," Condé never loses sight of the notion of identity as "an artificial construct, made up of heterogeneous borrowings, and it shifts according to one's relative position in the signifying chain of culture" (189-90).

The postmodern quality of *Tituba* as a constructed female identity is less important to the novel than the narrative authority Condé gives her character, for she establishes the bond with *Tituba* in order to reinsert her into history. Condé says in the interview with Scarborough that she invented *Tituba*, her life before and after the Salem witch trials, because she found that *Tituba* had been "eclipsed" from recorded history of the period. Condé adds that she "felt a strong solidarity" with her title character and in writing the novel "wanted to offer her her revenge by inventing a life such as she might perhaps have wished it to be told" (199). Condé gives *Tituba* her revenge by giving her narrative control of the text, established by the author's statement in the first of two epigraphs to *Tituba's* narrative: "Tituba et moi, avons vécu en étroite intimité pendant un an. C'est au cours de nos interminables conversations qu'elle m'a dit ces choses qu'elle n'avait confiées à personne" "Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our

endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else.<sup>4</sup>

The intimacy established in the first epigraph, as well as the narrative itself, could lead the reader to respond, as Scarboro does, to a desire "to celebrate Tituba's heroism and Caribbeanness," and as Condé herself explains to Scarboro, "I wanted to turn Tituba into a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary 'Nanny of the maroons.'" The novel ends with Tituba's death, but her epilogue assures both her place in history and her continuing role in the reader's imagination. At the same time, however, Condé adds: "I hesitated between irony and a desire to be serious. The result is that she is a sort of mock-epic character. When she was leading the fight of the maroons, it was a parody somehow" (201). When commenting on the possibility of missing what might be "overdrawn" in the novel, Condé warns her readers: "Do not take *Tituba* too seriously, please" (212).

Condé's warning combines with the narrative bond between author and narrator/character to effect a shift of attention from scrutinizing identity issues in relation to the narrator or author to problematizing the reader's own sense of identity in relation to a text whose author hesitates between irony and the desire to be serious. Left to ponder one's own desire for an epic heroine from the Antilles, and to negotiate the author's playful use of the mock-epic form, the reader is brought into a hesitation modeled on the one Condé describes above, but with a slight variation. In inventing Tituba's story, Condé hesitates between irony and a desire to be serious, but by giving Tituba authority to narrate her own story, Condé places the reader in the precarious position of hesitating between *getting* the author's irony and desiring to be serious about Tituba's narrative of a painful history.

The reader's hesitation constitutes what Linda Hutcheon, in her study *Irony's Edge*, calls irony's "affective 'charge'" (15), exemplified by Scarboro's feeling "embarrassed" when she realized that she had at first missed Condé's irony. It seems, however, that Condé wants her readers to "think past," as Hutcheon puts it, the usual understanding of irony as creating a hierarchy of those who *get* it and those who do not, a hierarchy in which *getting* the author's

irony "creates cozy groupings through complicity . . . or collusion" (93).<sup>5</sup> In the two epigraphs that introduce Tituba's narrative, Condé's use of irony both utilizes and goes beyond its traditional use as a unilateral semantic reversal in which what is unsaid negates or rejects what is said.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, again, both using and effectively abusing the way in which irony has traditionally been seen to create a hierarchy of those who *get* it and those who do not, Condé moves her readers in and out of a stable position in relation to Tituba's narrative.<sup>7</sup>

Identifying irony as a "discursive strategy" rather than a "static rhetorical tool" that simply replaces an unsaid meaning for the said meaning, Hutcheon argues "that irony happens as part of a communicative process": irony "comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations" (10-13). In terms of Hutcheon's model, irony "happens" in the first epigraph to Tituba's narrative because the reader is immediately caught in "the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid" (12). The "said" in the first epigraph, that Condé and Tituba were in intimate conversation for a year, interacts with the "unsaid," that Condé invented her, to allow for the creation of a revisionist myth.<sup>8</sup> This interaction represents a reversal of the common power relation in which the unsaid operates to negate or reject the said. In the context of this fictional autobiography about a historical figure silenced by colonial historical records, what is unsaid in the first epigraph does not challenge the said because it is necessary to establish Tituba's authority as teller of this tale.<sup>9</sup> Any ambivalence the reader may feel in regard to Condé's calling Tituba a mock-epic heroine or to Condé's request not to take this heroine too seriously falls back onto the ground of the unsaid that Tituba's narrative represents in relation to recorded history. Elisabeth Mudimbé-Boyi concludes her article on the novel with her own response to this ambivalence: "I would like to believe that Tituba's life is neither a trivial subject matter nor a burlesque story. . . . In asserting herself as 'I, Tituba,' Tituba comes into existence and signals the end of the marginalization, the end of exile from language, literature, and history" (756).

Operating as “inclusive” and “relational,” the said and the unsaid meanings of the first epigraph interact to legitimize for the reader both Tituba’s authority and Condé’s novel. The irony of the second epigraph operates a little differently, for these words originate neither from Tituba nor from Condé, and the unsaid is the narrative the reader is about to read. The second epigraph is a quote from the sixteenth-century Puritan poet John Harrington: “Death is a porte whereby we pass to joye; / Life is a lake that drowneth all in payne.” On the one hand, as in the first epigraph, the literal meaning of the said will not necessarily be negated by Tituba’s narrative. The notions “that life is supposed to be endured rather than enjoyed,” as Scarboro puts it (215), and that death leads to the grace of God will characterize the life the Puritans lead in the novel. On the other hand, Hutcheon’s notion of the differential aspect of irony will operate on a semantic level in the second epigraph, as “Death,” “joye,” “Life,” and “payne” are revealed in the unsaid of Tituba’s narrative as “other than, different from the said” of the second epigraph (64). As soon as the reader enters Tituba’s narrative, these Puritan notions will be seen as different from Tituba’s notions of life, and the irony of the second epigraph will serve to thematize difference.<sup>10</sup> Tituba is mistreated by the Puritans precisely because of her difference; and as she says at various points in her narrative, her healing powers are different from this thing the Puritans call “witchcraft.” In addition, different meanings for the first line of poetry—Death is the porte whereby we pass to joye—will be possible because of Tituba’s narrative. Death leads to the Joye of Freedom and Return to Africa for Tituba’s adoptive father Yao, and Death leads to the Joye of Self-Fulfillment for Tituba after her death by hanging. As she says in her epilogue, “Mon histoire véritable commence où celle-là finit et n’aura pas de fin” (267) ‘My real story starts where this one leaves off and it has no end’ (175). Once the unsaid, Tituba’s narrative, is said, these different meanings are brought together in relation to one another and to the lines of poetry of the second epigraph. Tituba’s narrative represents a silenced history that thematizes difference as it comes to stand beside the words of the Puritan poet.

The irony in both epigraphs thus operates as the “communicative process” that Hutcheon describes—inclusive, relational, and differential—rather than simply as an example of semantic reversal; and in both cases the irony happens because the reader becomes part of what Hutcheon calls a “discursive community.”<sup>11</sup> These communities, however, are constituted a little differently in the two epigraphs. The author’s invention of Tituba and Tituba’s narrative authority—that is, the unsaid and the said—can work together to make irony happen in the first epigraph precisely because Condé *draws on* an existing community of readers who recognize, as Hewitt does, narrative traditions in which an author becomes the “repository” of a character’s tale (exemplified by Marivaux’s *Life of Marianne* and the African-American slave narrative) (AT 189). Drawing on this tradition, the reader accepts *both* the said *and* the unsaid of the first epigraph and enters into revisionist mythmaking. Once that community has been constituted, however, the second epigraph appears to *create* a more traditional discursive community, what Hutcheon calls “a cozy grouping” in which the reader enters into collusion with the author and her narrator (91-93). In this collusion, it is the Puritans who serve as the target of irony, and the irony in the second epigraph becomes tinged with what Hutcheon calls the “critical edge of judgment” (58).

At the point where the reader encounters the second epigraph, namely before reading Tituba’s narrative but after accepting Condé’s bond with her narrator, the authority given Tituba, who is not a Puritan, will lead the reader to suspect that what is said in these lines by a Puritan poet will somehow be challenged by the unsaid that Tituba’s narrative represents. This suspicion is confirmed on the first page of her story when she describes her conception as the result of the rape of her mother Abena by a white sailor on the slave ship named *Christ the King*. As the narrative proceeds, the meaning of the notion that “Life is a lake that drowneth all in payne” becomes cruelly ironic as Tituba’s “payne” becomes so clearly tied to her difference. Whose life? Which pain? the reader can not help but ask, for example, when Tituba decides to abort her child, explaining, “Pour une esclave, la maternité

n'est pas un bonheur" (83) 'There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave' (50).

The mock-epic traditionally uses the epic form to treat a trivial matter. In *Moi, Tituba*, however, once Tituba is given the narrative authority to relate events, it is her erasure from history that is trivialized. Condé's hesitation between irony and the desire to be serious results in a novel that is neither *epic* nor *mock-epic* in the traditional sense; instead, she exploits each element of the term to give it her own meaning and use. The *epic* quality of the novel is constituted by the opposition of Puritan hypocrisy and evil versus Tituba's goodness, and it takes on a moral tone early in Tituba's narrative because the Puritans themselves operate within a simple moral opposition: all that is different from Puritan culture is deemed Evil. With the characters of Susanna Endicott and Samuel Parris on the one hand, and Man Yaya on the other, Condé exploits the extremes of the simple opposition the Puritans have established by reversing it: White equals Evil and Black equals Good. The collusion created between reader and author in the second epigraph invites the reader to occupy a stable position on a high moral ground.

On the side of Good is Man Yaya, the woman who raises Tituba after her mother Abena has been lynched for refusing to be raped by her master. Man Yaya teaches Tituba that "tout vit, tout a une âme, un souffle. Que tout doit être respecté. Que l'homme n'est pas un maître parcourant à cheval son royaume" (22) 'everything lives, has a soul, and breathes. That everything must be respected. That man is not the master riding through his kingdom on horseback' (9).<sup>12</sup> Man Yaya's respect for all living things enters Tituba's narrative in direct opposition to her account of the rape of her mother on the first page. This opposition is made more obvious when Man Yaya explains to Tituba why she will not inflict death on the cruel Susanna Endicott. Man Yaya's magic is, first of all, not to be used in this way, and even if she could make Endicott die, "tu auras vicié ton cœur" 'you will have perverted your heart in the bargain.' "Tu seras devenue pareille à eux," Man Yaya tells Tituba, "qui ne savent que tuer, détruire" (53) 'You will have become like them, knowing only how to kill and destroy' (30).

Tituba's desire for vengeance will tempt her later in her story; but having internalized Man Yaya's words, she repeats them to herself when she is alone across the water in the Massachusetts Bay Colony: "Ah non! ils ne me rendraient pas pareille à eux! Je ne céderai pas. Je ne ferai pas le mal!" (111) 'Oh no, they won't get me to be the same as they are! I will not give in. I will not do evil!' (69).

Tituba's description of her first encounter with the Reverend Parris gives an embodiment to this Evil:

Imaginez des prunelles verdâtres et froides, astucieuses et retorses, créant le mal parce qu'elles le voyaient partout. C'était comme si on se trouvait en face d'un serpent ou de quelque reptile méchant, malfaisant. J'en fus tout de suite convaincue, ce Malin dont on nous rebattait les oreilles ne devait pas dévisager autrement les individus qu'il désirait égarer puis perdre. (58)

Imagine greenish, cold eyes, scheming and wily, creating evil because they saw it everywhere. It was as if I had come face-to-face with a snake or some other evil, wicked reptile. I was immediately convinced that this Satan we heard so much about must stare in the same way at people he wishes to lead astray. (34)

Puritan beliefs will ring false in the context of this description of the Reverend. While Tituba's herbal healing and council with her "invisibles" fall on the side of Good, the Puritans' own beliefs are reduced to superstition, as seen in Tituba's account of the Parris family's reaction to the black cat who crosses their path in Boston: "Je ne saurais décrire l'effet que ce malheureux chat noir produisit sur les enfants aussi bien que sur Elizabeth et Samuel Parris. Ce dernier se précipita sur son livre de prières et se mit à réciter une interminable oraison" (73-74) 'I cannot describe the effect this unfortunate black cat had on the children, as well as on Elizabeth and Samuel. Samuel Parris seized his prayer book and began to recite a seemingly endless prayer' (44). By the beginning of Part II, when the Puritan ministers summoned to Salem to test Tituba enter her room and torture her brutally so that she will confess her crimes and name her accomplices, Puritan power and social dominance turn what appeared earlier to be ironic superstition into sadistic cruelty. Who would want to be *like* "them"?

At the same time, however, such stability also depends on the notion that Tituba's character is consistent and stable, and that

the Puritans and the slaves are members of undifferentiated groups in which all White characters are consistently Evil and all Black characters are consistently Good. Very soon in the narrative both of these groups are rendered in their complexity. As readers encounter both the complexities of these communities and the apparent inconsistencies in Tituba's character, the cozy position of collusion set up by the second epigraph becomes unstable, and we as readers become ourselves a community that is "dynamic and subtly differentiated" (Hutcheon 92).

On the first page of the narrative, the rich planter Darnell Davis becomes a model of blindness to differentiation as he inspects the slaves for sale. He chooses Abena because she is beautiful, not noticing that she is pregnant and will thus not be able to work as he expects her to when he buys her. Davis's ignorance of Abena's physical state matches his ignorance that her friendship with his wife Jennifer will consist of more than entertaining her with singing and dancing, "ces tours dont il croyait les nègres friands" (13) 'those devices he thought the slaves to be particularly fond of' (3). Abena and Jennifer sleep together like sisters and establish a feminine bond in opposition to the brutish masculine world of Darnell, "cet homme rude que [Jennifer] haïssait, qui la laissait seule le soir pour aller boire et qui avait déjà une muete d'enfants bâtards" (14) 'Jennifer hated this brute . . . who had already fathered a horde of illegitimate children . . . [and who] would leave her alone in the evenings while he went drinking' (3).

The slaves, of course, constitute an arbitrarily assembled group of individuals from different groups in Africa—Abena and Yao are Ashanti, for example, and Man Yaya is Nago. As with any group, the slaves will at times act in solidarity—for after Abena's hanging Tituba's life is saved by "cette solidarité des esclaves qui se dément rarement" (21) 'that sacred tradition of solidarity among slaves' (8)—while at other moments they respond with suspicion and fear. Just as they are afraid of Man Yaya for her powers, the Blacks on the island will at first hide from Tituba (I, 2). When she goes to meet John Indian at the dance at Bridgetown and later at a party he has organized at Susanna Endicott's, Tituba feels like a

pariah, reticent to join in with the dancing and loud music. When Tituba at first declines his invitation to dance, John Indian asks rhetorically, "Une négresse qui ne sait pas danser? A-t-on jamais vu cela?" (33) 'A Negress who can't dance? Have you ever heard of such a thing?' (16). In the chaos of the Salem witch hunts, John Indian will eventually abandon Tituba to save himself (II, 4), and earlier in the narrative Little Sarah will feel abandoned by Tituba when she refuses to make the young slave's cruel mistress die (I, 10). Back on her island, the maroons, traditionally considered the masters of slave revolt, are nothing but informers to the White planters (II, 14). The Puritans see Blacks as a group, as Evil or at least tending to Evil and in need of Salvation. Tituba's narrative presents individuals who are constantly called upon to make choices and live with the consequences.

The White world is first represented by its act of violence against Abena. That violence, however, comes to be associated with White male sexuality as both Abena and Tituba establish an affinity with their Puritan mistresses in opposition to the brutish or severely repressive worlds of their husbands. In the first pages of the novel, Tituba describes her mother's friendship with Jennifer Darnell in terms very similar to the ones Tituba will use to describe the early days of her relationship with Elizabeth Parris: that is, as children terrified in the master's presence who play at innocent games in his absence (I, 1). Abena will die before that affective equality is undone. For Tituba, it will be placed in the larger context of "une prudence nouvellement acquise" 'a newly acquired vigilance' once she arrives with the Parris family in Salem:

Et puis, je me le demandais, leur regret et leur nostalgie pouvaient-ils se comparer aux miens? Ce qu'elles regrettaient, c'était la douceur d'une vie plus facile [à la Barbade], d'une vie de Blanches, servies, entourées par des esclaves attentionnés. . . .

Nous n'appartenions pas au même monde, maîtresse Parris, Betsey et moi, et toute l'affection que j'éprouvais pour elles, ne pouvait changer ce fait-là. (101-02)

And then I would ask myself, how could their yearning and nostalgia [for Barbados] possibly be compared with mine? What they

yearned for was the sweetness of a gentler life, the life of white women who were served and waited on by attentive slaves. . . .

We did not belong to the same universe, Goodwife Parris, Betsy, and I, and all the affection in the world could not change that. (63)

These white female Puritan characters choose to shift sides in the moral opposition of Evil and Good, thereby upholding it; but Condé introduces two other white characters, Hester Prynne and Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo, whose oppression at the hands of Puritan culture leads them to establish oppositions of counter-resistance which include Tituba and thus disturb the dichotomies Black-White, Good-Evil.

After Tituba's trial, when she and Hester meet in prison, Hester attempts to impose an equality on the two women by directing Tituba not to call her "maîtresse" 'mistress': "Comment vous nommerai-je alors?" 'What shall I call you then?' Tituba asks. "Mais par mon nom: Hester!" 'By my name: Hester,' the white woman answers. "Et toi quel est le tien?" (151) 'And what's yours?' (95). Given the betrayal of Goodwife Parris and Betsy, Tituba distrusts Hester's familiarity in this scene and asserts her specificity by not relating her life story in Hester's terms but in her own—"Tim tim, bois sèche!" 'Crack, crack!' she begins, "La cour dort?" 'Is the court asleep?'—and when Hester presses her to know if the story she is telling is her own, Tituba confides to her reader that "quelque chose me retint de me confier" (157) 'something kept me from telling her' (99). Eventually, in the margins of a society that would separate the two women by race and class, Hester and Tituba will achieve the affective equality like the one Tituba had had with Elizabeth Parris, that is, based on their identity as women in relation to men. Hester, however, will add an eloquent denunciation of Puritan society to the equation, and a critique of men: "Laisse-moi la paix avec ton triste sire! Il ne vaut pas mieux que le mien" 'Don't talk to me about your wretched husband! He's no better than mine,' she says to Tituba during one of their discussions in prison together. "Est-ce qu'il ne devrait pas être là à partager ton angoisse? Blancs ou Noirs, la vie sert trop bien les hommes!" (158-59) 'Shouldn't he be here to share your sorrow?

Life is too kind to men, whatever their color' (100). Tituba reveals that "au fond de moi-même quelque chose me soufflait qu'elle disait vrai. La couleur de la peau de John Indien ne lui avait pas causé la moitié des déboires que la mienne m'avait causée" (159) 'something deep inside me told me she was telling the truth. The color of John Indian's skin had not caused him half the trouble mine had caused me' (101). When she reflects on certain truths about John Indian—his affected behavior in the presence of whites, the way he seemed to flirt with the Puritan "ladies," his abandonment of her—Tituba will be bitter toward him; but she has difficulty envisioning Hester's feminist utopia in which women would govern and would raise their children alone. "Nous ne pourrions les faire seules, tout de même!" 'We couldn't make them alone, even so!' Tituba jests, and Hester has to admit that "Tu aimes trop l'amour, Tituba! Je ne ferai jamais de toi une féministe!" (160) 'You're too fond of love, Tituba! I'll never make a feminist out of you' (101).

Tituba is not like Hester at these moments—"Une féministe! Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?" 'A feminist!? What's that?'—and she is like her at others, as when she learns of Hester's suicide and mourns the death of both their unborn children (II, 5). This affinity goes to other levels of intimacy as well when, after her death, Hester comes to lie down beside Tituba during her last nights in prison. Here, their similarities as women bring Tituba a pleasure she had only known within the context of complementary differences between male and female lovers:

Doucement le plaisir m'envahit, ce qui m'étonna. Peut-on éprouver du plaisir à se serrer contre un corps semblable au sien? Le plaisir avait toujours eu pour moi la forme d'un autre corps dont les creux épousaient mes bosses et dont les bosses se nichaient dans les tendres plaines de ma chair. Hester m'indiquait-elle le chemin d'une autre jouissance? (190)

Surprising, a feeling of pleasure slowly flooded over me. Can you feel pleasure from hugging a body similar to your own? For me, pleasure had always been in the shape of another body whose hollows fitted my curves and whose swellings nestled in the tender flatlands of my flesh. Was Hester showing me another kind of bodily pleasure? (122)

The inequality between the two woman that would surely have existed outside prison because of their racial and class difference is not effaced, it is transcended when Hester becomes an “invisible” and joins Tituba in pleasure beyond suffering.

Condé’s anachronistic introduction of Hester Prynne (heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1865), as Scarboro discusses, serves both to subvert the historical record that eclipsed Tituba and to create “multiple layers of interpretations” in the novel which allow for resonances within each reader’s own discursive community (216). Jeanne Snitgen analyzes one of these resonances by reading Hester as representing a view of Western feminism as “primarily separatist,” and by interpreting Tituba’s rejection of Hester’s strict opposition Male-Female in the context of Alice Walker’s definition of womanism, “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (69). “Within the context of the diaspora,” Snitgen writes, “a separatist society of women would be unthinkable for Tituba who in the end will die for the liberation of her people as a whole” (72). Tituba’s rejection of Hester’s feminism is not, however, a rejection of Hester as a friend, and the narrator’s continued reflection on her friend’s words stage a dialogue between womanism and feminism in the novel. Snitgen concludes that instead of writing “didactic” novels Condé prefers “contradiction, as she has in the portrayal of Veronica in *Hérémakhonon*” and cites Condé’s reflection on her first novel: “I thought that I should simply represent a very complex reality and allow the reader to chose by himself . . .” (67). Hester’s opposition, Male-Female, counters and resists the Puritan opposition Good-Evil, and it gives Tituba a different way to think about her own relationships with men. At the same time, however, the multiple facets of Tituba’s perspective on the opposition Male-Female—among them, black, Caribbean, woman, heterosexual, woman with healing powers, slave, as well as her status in the text as Good epic hero—invite readers to wonder how such an opposition could, in fact, describe the complexities of reality.

Benjamin Cohen d’Azevedo, the Jewish merchant who buys her out of prison, is the other white character for whom Tituba

feels profound affection and a certain sense of equality. Benjamin's God is not the God of the Puritans, dividing the world into Good and Evil. "Notre Dieu ne connaît ni race ni couleur," he tells Tituba. "Tu peux, si tu veux devenir une des nôtres et prier avec nous" (204) 'Our God knows neither race nor color. You can become one of us if you like and pray with us' (131). They share a history of oppression which reestablishes a different moral opposition. Soon after arriving in the Cohen home, Tituba says that "j'en vins comme les Cohen d'Azevedo à diviser le monde en deux camps: les amis des Juifs et les autres, et à supplier les chances pour les Juifs de se faire une place dans le Nouveau Monde" (199-200) 'I began to divide the world into two groups: the friends of Jews and the others. And I began to weigh the chances the Jews might have of making a place for themselves in the New World' (128). When Puritan bigots set fire to the Cohen home, killing all the children and leaving Benjamin virtually destitute, he interprets this misfortune as punishment from God, not because of his "passion" for Tituba, but because he refused to give her her freedom when she asked him for it (II, 10).

Condé's numerous interviews and essays reveal that she is too astute an observer of present-day reality to separate completely her views on that reality from her creative enterprise. The author's insertion of Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo into Tituba's story may seem to serve a didactic intention, for the author states to Scarborough that by giving Tituba a Jewish lover, she "tried to associate discrimination against the Jews with discrimination against the blacks" (202).<sup>13</sup> Any didactic intention on Condé's part is, however, complicated by Tituba's one-page soliloquy to Ben proclaimed just before she disembarks from the ship that delivers her back in Barbados:

Mon doux amant banal et contrefait! La dernière nuit que nous passâmes ensemble, nous ne fîmes pas l'amour, comme si nos corps s'effaçaient devant nos âmes. Une fois de plus, tu t'accusas de ta dureté. Une fois de plus, je te suppliai de me laisser mes chaînes. Hester, Hester, tu ne serais pas contente de moi. Mais certains hommes qui ont la vertu d'être faibles, nous donnent désir d'être esclaves! (217)

My sweet, crooked, misshapen lover! We did not make love the last night we spent together, as if our souls were taking over from our bodies. Once again, you blamed yourself for your hardness. And once again I begged you to leave me my chains. Hester, Hester, you would be angry with me. But some men who have the virtue of being weak instill in us the desire to be a slave! (140)

Condé's inclusion of Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo is and is not didactic because it is mediated both by Condé's desire to link discrimination against Jews and blacks and by Tituba's own complex emotions about her relationship to Benjamin. By this point in Tituba's story, her narrative has created a context for these feelings beyond the oppositions Male-Female, Master-Slave, and the reader is left to ponder their meaning.

The presence of these two characters, Hester Prynne and Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo, allow for two things to happen in Tituba's narrative. First, their experience with Puritan tyranny leads them to establish counter oppositions (Men/Woman and Jews/non-Jews) which in themselves may not represent a definitive resolution, but which offer Tituba a space of reflection, resistance and support comparable to her community of invisibles available to her on her island but not in New England. Second, these two characters rise up out of the White population, which not only reveals its complexity and breaks down the opposition Black-White, but in doing so also reminds readers that both oppression and resistance to oppression cross racial lines. Hester and Benjamin eventually enter into myth themselves as they join the other spirits who visit Tituba in her dreams far away from the pain of Puritan New England, as seen on the first night of her return to her island: "Les grands nénuphars blancs m'enveloppèrent de leurs pétales de brocart et bientôt, Hester, Metahebel [Benjamin's daughter], et mon Juif vinrent faire la ronde autour de mon lit, vivants et morts confondus dans mon affection et ma nostalgie" (227) 'Great white water lilies wrapped me in their brocade petals and soon Hester, Metahebel, and my Jew came and sat around my bed. My affection and my nostalgia confused the living with the dead' (147).

In relation to the Evil of the White world, the epic side of the novel, Tituba is all Good; in relation to her own sexuality, how-

ever, Tituba is much more conflicted, beginning with her attraction to John Indian. "Qu'avait-il donc, John Indien, pour que je sois malade de lui?" "What was there about John Indian to make me sick with love for him?" Tituba asks rhetorically soon after meeting him:

Je dois avouer qu'en me posant cette question, j'étais carrément hypocrite. Je savais bien où résidait son principal avantage et je n'osais regarder, en deçà de la cordelette de jute qui retenait son pantelon konoko de toile blanche, la butte monumental de son sexe. (36)

I must confess it was downright hypocritical of me to ask myself such a question, since I knew all too well where his main asset lay and I dared not look below the jute cord that held up his short, tight-fitting konoko trousers to the huge bump of his penis. (18-19)

As she debates whether to stay in her splendid solitude with her "invisibles" or to join John Indian as a slave of Susanna Endicott, Tituba recalls the evil of "le monde des Blancs" 'the white man's world' and wonders why she would consider returning to that kind of domination: "Tout cela par goût effréné d'un mortel. Est-ce que ce n'était pas folie? Folie et trahison?" (37) 'And all because of an uncontrollable desire for a mortal man. Wasn't it madness? Madness and betrayal?' (19). Tituba continues to question her desire for men, before she leaves the island and after her return, in part because Abena nags her from the "invisible world" with the question, "Pourquoi les femmes ne peuvent-elles se passer des hommes?" (31) 'Why can't women do without men?' (16). In addition, Tituba's teacher Man Yaya gives her a warning about men when she wants to make John Indian love her, "Les hommes n'aiment pas. Ils possèdent. Ils asservissent" (29) 'Men do not love. They possess. They subjugate' (14). Tituba continues to consider all these questions and opinions about the relationship between women and men, she continues to have relationships with men, and she continues to ask herself, as she does while in her a passionate embrace with the young Iphigene, "pourquoi ce défilé d'hommes dans mon lit? Elle me l'avait bien dit, Hester!—Tu aimes trop l'amour, Tituba!" (260) 'why had so many

men passed through my bed? Hester was right when she said: "You're too fond of love, Tituba!" (170). Condé lets the complexity of Tituba's sexuality express itself through the narrator's rhetorical questions without seeking any clear-cut resolution. As Mudimbé-Boyi explains, the author's use of this "oral mode" serves "to prevent her from intruding into the narrative and usurping or covering Tituba's voice" (753). The questions remain for the reader to puzzle through, and they allow Tituba to be what Snitgen describes as "an active, agitating subject who refuses reification" (61).

Tituba's status as mock-epic heroine representing pure Goodness exists alongside her being a woman of flesh and blood, of sexuality and sensuality, beautiful and ugly, wishing for revenge while not wanting to do evil. She imagines that Hester would not approve of her lingering desire for men, but Tituba will claim that desire anyway. As she says in the epilogue, "Moi, j'ai trop aimé les hommes et continue de le faire. Parfois il me prend goût de me glisser dans une couche pour satisfaire des restes de désir et mon amant éphémère s'émerveille de son plaisir solitaire" (271) 'I myself have loved men too much and shall continue to do so. Sometimes I get the urge to slip into someone's bed to satisfy a bit of leftover desire and my fleeting lover is delighted with his solitary pleasure' (178). She will not use her powers to help her fellow slave Little Sarah destroy her cruel mistress because she recalls Man Yaya's words "Ne deviens pas comme eux qui ne savent que faire le mal!" (109) 'Don't become like them, knowing only how to do evil' (68). But Tituba does manage to give the evil Susannah Endicott a horrendous illness (I, 4), and she takes revenge on Sarah Good during the trial (II, 3). Despite her criticism of John Indian's abandonment of her, during her affair with Christopher, she tells her readers that "Ce commerce n'engageait que mes sens. Tout le reste de mon être continuait d'appartenir à John Indien auquel par un surprenant paradoxe, je pensais chaque jour davantage" (234-35) 'Yet . . . this commerce only involved my senses. All the rest of me continued to belong to John Indian, whom, paradoxically, I thought about more and more each day' (152). In what Scarboro describes as the "opaque literary uni-

verse" created in this novel, "nothing is fully defined but much is scrutinized" (224).

In the oppositional structure on which the *epic* is based in *Moi, Tituba*, the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Puritan's treatment of Tituba is never destabilized, which invites the reader's collusion on a high moral ground and proves to be a gesture of revenge as totalizing and unambivalent as was Tituba's erasure from history because of her race and gender. Irony happens in the novel as a whole as it did in the first epigraph; that is, in "the space *between* (and including)" the novel's *epic* structure and its *mock* quality, which consists of a playful use of inconsistency and anachronism as Scarboro discusses.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, by exposing the complexity of representing myth and history, the *mock* quality of the novel serves to mock the epic tradition itself. The traditional epic hero reflects the ideology and history of his culture and his people. His is the dominant culture, well-preserved, self-defining. Tituba struggles to negotiate complex realities within a hybrid culture. To be a seamless epic hero would mock that complexity, and as Hewitt describes, Condé's is "most attracted to *critical* constructions of reality" ("Inventing" 81). The reader is thus moved back and forth within Condé's hesitation between irony and the desire to be serious: *seriously* critical of any society in which one's skin color, gender, or belief makes one an Other to be enslaved or persecuted; *seriously* celebrating Tituba's "heroism and her Caribbeanness"; and *ironically* destabilized by the novel's challenge to uncritical thinking about certain issues extraneous to the epic's structure, specifically, the opposition between what is often called mainstream feminist thinking and womanist thinking, as well as the oppositions Black-White, Male-Female.

It is no surprise that in inventing Tituba's history Condé would hesitate between irony and the desire to be serious. "As I said," Condé tells Scarboro,

For a black person, history is a challenge because a black person is supposed not to have any history except the colonial one. . . . For a black person from the West Indies or from Africa, whatever, for somebody from the diaspora, I repeat it is a kind of challenge to find out exactly what was there before. It is not his-

tory for the sake of history. It is searching for one's self, searching for one's identity, searching for one's origin in order to better understand oneself. (203-04)

In the narrative Condé invents for Tituba, all the shackles of the age of suspicion surrounding the coherent, unified subject fall away, and "I, Tituba" is allowed to stand firmly on her own two feet in a context that effaced her in the past—seventeenth century Puritan New England—and one that might have effaced her in the present—by reification as a one-dimensional epic heroine. In her epilogue, Tituba herself is supernatural, her own legend is her muse, and she is ours. At the same time, Condé's authorial playfulness seen in the shifting ground of her irony refuses her readers a simple position of cozy collusion. By creating a *mock-epic* and exploiting both elements of the term, Condé invites us to recognize the cultural codes on which we rely as we negotiate the ambivalence Condé's hesitation between irony and a desire to be serious expresses in relation to the enterprise of writing itself. This is not an ambivalence in regard to her narrator/character nor to writing her back into history. It is an ambivalence about the way in which Tituba will be *read* into history, and in effect re-written, by each of us from within our own discursive communities.

## Notes

1 See especially Hewitt's discussion of Condé's "critical self-consciousness" (AT 167-68), and Scarboro's examples of irony, exaggeration, and parody in the novel (213-25). "As she suggested in our interview," Scarboro writes, Condé "was conscious of creating a work of postmodern fiction that defies the norms of mimesis" (213).

2 In an interview with Vèvè Clark, Condé describes the reception of her first novel: "My favorite novel is the first one, *Héremakhonon* (1976). It is the sick child of the family, because it had no success at all, was discontinued after two years by the publisher, and has been so misrepresented by reviewers and critics that I feel sorry for it." The novel was reissued in 1988 with a new preface by Condé to "help

readers understand the novel better than they did in the past" (119-21).

3 Hewitt adds in a note to this passage: "I am stressing here that the ambivalence is already an internalized conflictual mode directed toward the subject's own sense of self" (237-38, note 44).

4 All English citations are taken from the Richard Philcox translation, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*.

5 Hutcheon specifies that "in fact, 'get' may be an inaccurate and even inappropriate verb: 'make' would be much more precise" (11).

6 I am following Hutcheon's lead in identifying this as a traditional understanding of irony, what she calls "a simple antiphrastic substitution of the unsaid (called the 'ironic' meaning) for its opposite (called the 'literal' meaning)—which is then either 'set aside' (Fish 1983: 189; Searle 1979b) or sometimes only partially effaced" (Tittler 1984: 21)" (12).

7 See Hutcheon's discussion of "hierarchical participation" by which "the hierarchy of *meanings* (deep vs. surface) inherited from the German articulation of romantic irony (see Dane 1991: 81) seems to have too easily become a hierarchy of *participants*" (94).

8 Hutcheon explains that "What I want to call the 'ironic' meaning is inclusive and relational; the said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally 'interact' (Burke 1969a: 512) to create the real 'ironic' meaning" (12).

9 In her article on the novel, Elisabeth Mudimbé-Boyi shows how the first epigraph allows Condé to withdraw her own authority from the narrative. This narrative gesture "ensures the authenticity of the character's voice," making Condé's invention "a faithful interpretation, translation, and transcription of Tituba's oral text and of her voice," at the same time that it effectively embodies "a strategy of subversion by reversing the relation of power between writer and character and thus between French (the language of the writer) and Creole (the language of the character) and between the oral and the written" (752-53).

10 Scarboro notes that this poetry "foreshadows the pain and suffering that will occur in the lives of Tituba and the Puritan women whose domestic servant she becomes," and that the "message of the poetry

also works in juxtaposition to Tituba's own tendency to find joy in life and to be cheerful whenever she can" (214-15).

11 Hutcheon argues that instead of *creating* "cozy groupings through complicity . . . or collusion," irony *draws upon* existing discursive communities constituted by shared cultural references (91-93, my emphasis).

12 Early in the narrative, the desire for power over others is the object of mockery in the tale Abena's husband Yao recalls about the monkey who wanted to be king of all animals: "Et il monta au faite d'un iroko pour que tous se prosternent devant lui. Mais une branche cassa et il se retrouva par terre, le cul dans la poussière . . ." (16) 'And he climbed up to the top of the silk-cotton tree so that they would all bow down in front of him. But one of the branches broke and he found himself on the ground with his ass in the dust' (5).

13 Condé also says that writing *Moi, Tituba* gave her "an opportunity to express [her] feelings about present-day America": "I wanted to imply that in terms of narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, and racism, little has changed since the days of the Puritans" (Scarboro 203).

14 Scarboro notes that Condé incorporates "African 'roots' into this pluricultural narrative" and sometimes "subverts history for her own purposes" to do so: "For instance, the tribal wars between the Ashanti and the Fanti that Tituba mentions actually occurred in the 1800s, not the 1600s" (216).

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