Tituba, of Multitudes: Language of Deregulation and Resonance

Tituba Confession Literature Review

Before I present my reading of Tituba’s confession, I will begin with a brief and far from exhaustive survey of the literature about it. Much of the literature identifies Tituba as either a mythological African or Indian woman who taught the afflicted girls exotic voodoo rituals. The 19th century writer Charles Upham suggested that the accusing girls were merely lying, pretending to have fits to get attention from the adults in Salem Village. He suggests that Tituba was responsible for teaching the girls the magical rites that enabled their performance. Of her confession he suggests, “her statements show the materials out of which their ridiculous and monstrous stories were constructed” (Breslaw 432). Writing in the 20th century historian William D. Piersen, too, acknowledges the role of African American folk-religion in the development of the witchcraft crisis, but contends that “New England’s black population added little new to the white witchcraft traditions” (Breslaw 182). He suggests that while the “much romanticized Tituba, an Afro-Carib slave from Barbados...may have taught several local girls some West Indian conjuring tricks,” “for the most part it was local white citizens, rather than the exotic black newcomers, who were chosen as the scapegoats of the witchcraft madness” (182).

Elaine Breslaw’s “Tituba’s confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt” offers a new interpretation of Tituba’s ethnic background. Breslaw suggests that her Indian identity, African identity, and knowledge of Puritan society play a role in her
confession, and the witch trials that ensue. Breslaw writes, “Her extraordinary fantasy about a satanic presence, based partly on Indian concepts of evil, partly on Creolized Caribbean beliefs and partly on English witchcraft, was sufficiently familiar to be accepted by [the magistrates]. Creatively integrated into their framework of belief, it allowed the Puritans (and most historians since) to see Tituba as a simple slave trapped by forces beyond her control, a passive victim” (453). But, unlike former historians, Breslaw insists that Tituba’s identity does not make her a victim. Her identities allowed her to provide the Salem community with the language it needed to fuel the crisis. She fueled it, according to Breslaw, to save her life.

A final school of thought criticizes the emphasis on Tituba’s African or Indian attributes. Veta Smith Tucker suggests that contemporary scholars and modern readers are too concerned with “classifying individuals into exclusive racial categories” when in reality, “Puritan witnesses were not bewildered by what they perceived to be dual Indian and African components of Tituba’s identity” (627). Contemporary readers’ insistence on racial categories and racial exclusivity that construct Tituba as either African or Indian promote a myth of racial exclusivity, a myth that the Puritans, according to Tucker, did not buy into.

I want to offer a new perspective, one that in accordance with Breslaw, reads Tituba as having the power to manipulate her interrogators’ deepest fears with a skillful confluence of African, Indian, and English beliefs, but heeds Tucker’s warning to avoid classifying Tituba in exclusive racial categories. This essay posits that Tituba’s language—language that it multiethnic, deregulated, and contains multiplicities—resonated with a society in social turmoil, or anomie. Salem, an anomic society, riddled with social turmoil, insufficient regulations and a breakdown of social bonds with the introduction of witchcraft, understood Tituba’s deviant, deregulated language. Tituba’s language, which suggested expansiveness rather than
boundaries, broke down social roles, and ruptured a “normal” social-juridical framework, made sense to a society that thought itself in turmoil.

Salem as the Anomic Society

Sociologist Emile Durkheim was concerned with the social factors and conditions that produce, or weaken social integration. He suggests that human beings, who are fundamentally social, depend on society for integration and regulation. An absence of norms and established standards in society, leads to anomie, or a condition of deregulation. Societal upheaval, which produces anomic conditions, can break an individual’s bond with society and lead to deviance and deregulation (Dillon). Anomie results from social conditions when

the scale is upset: but a new scale cannot be immediately improvised. Time is required for the public conscience to reclassify men and things. So long as the social forces thus freed have not regained equilibrium, their respective values are unknown and so all regulation is lacking for a time. The limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate. Consequently there is no restraint upon aspiration...Appetites, not being controlled by a public opinion, become disoriented, no longer recognize the limits proper to them (Durkheim 253).

We can certainly acknowledge that Salem is an anomic society. The introduction of strange, unidentifiable, “normless” fits, threw off the “equilibrium” of society, and threatened the magistrates’ ability to classify and organize a public consciousness around established order and
stability. “The limits are unknown” of the strange fits, on who may have these fits, on who is responsible for causing the fits, on who may accuse one of causing the fits.

Boyer and Nissembaum’s work that described the geographic factionalism between Salem town and Salem Village also fits into the project of reading Salem as an anomic society, with part of the town accepting emergent capitalism, and the other part of town rejecting it. Durkheim suggests that capitalism can be a mechanism of solidarity, each individual in society performing a specific function for the social body. But individuals, with the ever-increasing complexity of the organization of modern society, must attach to something bigger than themselves, an organized social body. Salem’s lack of institutional support and lack of cohesive social body at a time of emerging capitalism, rather than promoting social cohesion, promoted alienation. Alienation from society, according to Durkheim, leads to anomie.

**Tituba’s Confession: The Language of Expansion, Deregulation, and Alienation**

A close-reading of the formal and linguistic elements of Tituba’s confession suggests her role as a social deviant, representing a deviant Salem society; more importantly, her language of expansion, deregulation and alienation, resonated with a society in anomie.

*Tituba’s language emphasized expansiveness. She opened up the possibilities of the witch hunt, moving Salem from the realm of God and social order, to the realm of the devil, and a lack of social cohesion.* Tituba played a key role in expanding the parameters of the witch trials. Her announcement “the devil came to me and bid me serve him” served as the first confession of witchcraft, and also incited the presence of the devil of the realm of witchcraft, threatening a Puritan society that is regulated by God. She also expands the parameters of witchcraft from having individual consequences – that might be quelled by just a mere
confession of individual guilt— to a societal problem, which gives the confessing witch the power to name other names of the guilty. She names “goode Osburn and Sarah good,” as perpetrators, but opens up the possibilities of future witch hunts, confessions, and accusations by suggesting that “4 women sometimes hurt the children,” but only naming those two names. She also expands the conflict outside of Salem “shee furder saith there was a tale man of Boston that shee did see,” and thus suggests that some of the evil still lurks and exists outside of Salem. This expansiveness allows for both transcendence and limits. While she can transcend region sometimes – she acknowledged that she saw the specters “last night at boston” – she is limited by region at other times, unable to know or have contact with the witches in Boston. She has both transcending power to name names, implicate others, and expand the witch hunt to involve any member of Puritan society, but she acknowledges, too, what she does not have access to. Witches, thus, are given a precarious power, one of both transcendence and limits. This type of language might resonate with a society, struggling between its’ own transcendence and limits. Emergent capitalism offers opportunities for economic expansion, for, what Durkheim would suggest, an opportunity to specialize and become a part of a cohesive social unit. But, in a time of social anomie, when the infrastructure that orders society is becoming unraveled, individuals are limited by this expansion, and cannot find social cohesion. Tituba’s language that emphasizes expansiveness and a lack of social cohesion resonates with a society feeling the chaos of societal expansion and progressions, in a time without social regulation.

“Tituba’s language suggests both her observance of her normal social roles as a slave, and rebellion from her social roles as a slave. This breakdown of normal social roles resonates with a society in anomie, characterized by the breakdown of specialization and specification of social roles. Some of her language suggests servitude, and deference to her social role as a
slave. She is merely following orders: “the man brought her to me and made me pinch her” and “they pull and hall me and make goe.” She begs pardon for hurting the children, out of deference to a command, “they say hurt children,” but also simultaneously acknowledges a desire for self-preservation not characteristic of her servile slave role: she attacked the children because they threatened to “doe worse” to her. Her language, too, which mimics the language of the questioner, put her on equal footing with those more powerful than her in society. She incorporates the language of the questioner, into her own answers. A question that suggested that the child was threatened to “have her cut her head off with a knife,” is later referenced as an excuse for why Tituba did not tell her masters about her pact with the devil: ‘I was a fraid they said they would cut off my head if I told.” Her responses to questions, too, replicate the language of the questioner. He asks, “would not you have hurt others if you could,” to which she responds, “they said they would hurt others but they could not,” skillfully using the same kind of language, but avoiding the question. Instead of answering whether or not she would hurt others, Tituba suggests that the other witches want to hurt others. Tituba’s language, too, borrows the pathos from sermons such as “Christ Knows How Many Devils There Are,” which would warn congregation members against the worldly desires of capitalism and greed. Tituba’s suggestion that she was tempted by “yellow bird that keept with him” and that if she served him “he told me he had more pretty things that he would give me if I would serve him,” might resonate with an audience who understands the danger of this temptation by “pretty things.” Her ability to move beyond her role of slave, and quite literally mimic a dominant Puritan discourse, allows her to have a credible voice that under normal conditions would only be designated to a white man in Puritan society. Puritan society in anomie, a state of deregulation with a breakdown of social roles, is open to hearing a voice that in a regulated society, would not exist, nor be potent.
Tituba’s discourse suggests utter deregulation. In an anomic society where systems of classification are breaking down, her language, which resists classification, and even comprehension, resonates with a society that may no longer be classified. Tituba’s incantation that there “was an appearance that said Kill the children: involves specters for the first time, and also suggest that these specters take both human form and animal form. The appearance is “like a hog and some times like a great dog,” unable to be classified by human, or animal characteristics. Her language suggests more slippage, she incorporates, “two rats,” further distinguished as “a red and a black rat.” The appearances ranging from between human form, animal form, and even the color of the animal suggest a need to classify these specters, yet the slippage in her language, the suggestion that their appearance is only “like” an animal, resists the ability to classify, or even comprehend. Her language, while slippery, has been identified by scholars such as Upham and Breslaw as providing the meaningful language for the other accusations and confessions. Tituba, indeed, models the discourse that the afflicted girls will latch onto and repeat: “Abigail williams that lives with her uncle mr Parris said that shee did see this same creature and it turned into the shape of goode osburn” but, we must wonder why the girls and the magistrates were able to latch on to a language so unclassifiable and confusing. Puritans, amidst anomie, understand the ambiguous and unverifiable, “a thing with a head like a woman,” or “an other thing hairy...like a man.” Witches, totally ambiguous in their classification, seem possible in a society that is currently deregulated and unverifiable, with the presence of witchcraft.

It is ironic when Tituba closes her statement with “I am blind now I cannot see.” She had marvelous foresight, actually, seeing into the collective consciousness of a deregulated society in social upheaval. Her language that suggested the expansion, deregulation, and unverifiable
nature of society, was felt deeply by a society with an expanded, deregulated and unverifiable social and juridical framework. Tituba is more than just a sum of her multicultural parts. Her framework is expansive, suggests human multiplicity and suggests a lack of classification. Perhaps Tucker was right to warn us against trying to pin Tituba down. Tituba’s language inspired the framework for witchcraft confessions and accusations in a Puritan society that could not be pinned down either, and desired a framework that mirrored chaos.
Methodology: Literary Formalism (Close-Reading)

I wanted to focus my paper on the primary document of Tituba’s confession, although the earlier scholarship on it is plentiful. I was struck with the power that historians were lending her—especially tied to her ethnicity—as being either the victim that sparked the witch trials, or as the model for confessing and accusing witches. With this interest, I was led to the methodology of literary formalism, or close reading, so that I could really unpack what specifically about Tituba’s language sparked such a phenomenon. Formalism, the approach of evaluating and analyzing specific features of a text, allows us to understand the text within a cultural and historical context. Even if Tituba’s words were not strategically planned out and purposeful, her words had strategic and purposeful results that impacted the remainder of the trials. Formalism allows me to interrogate the impact that her words have, and suggest through close attention to form, word choice, and structure, how this impact is linguistically constructed.

Speakers and authors often use strategic rhetorical strategies to appeal to an audience, or prove a point, but this type of rhetorical analysis was less to identify Tituba’s strategy, and more to understand how and why her words resonated with the Puritan society. Formalism allowed me to understand just that, and pinpoint the features of language. Using close reading, I identified her language with having multicultural qualities of expansion, lack of regulation, and resistance to categories and classifications. I was able to show, then, how this linguistic form which resisted cohesion and regulation, fit into a social and cultural context of Puritan anomie. Her words, and the form of her words, mirrored the current Puritan social context, a time lacking social cohesion and regulation. Formalism allowed me the following insights: 1) To suggest that
Tituba’s language played a key role in expanding the parameters of witchcraft; 2) To suggest that they resonated with a current social condition in Puritan society; 3) To suggest that Tituba’s language that resisted classification, made sense to an unclassifiable society in anomie.

There are limits, of course, to formal close-reading analysis. The language of her confession, as mentioned before, is not strategically planned to appeal to an audience. This language was formulated out of a coercive pressure from the magistrates to explain the girls’ fits. Her speech nonetheless, may still be contextualized into a social and cultural world; it still has meaning, although the intent of the meaning is less clear. Another limit is that close reading is most effective on a small amount of text. My attention to formal elements in Tituba’s confession did not allow me to study a breadth of primary source documents.

Methodology: Sociological Theory (Durkheim and Anomie)

I chose a sociological methodology in attempt to offer a creative re-interpretation of Breslaw’s argument. As prefaced by the brief literary review, most scholars have focused on elements of Tituba’s ethnicity, to explain her influence in the Salem witch trials. I contend with those readings–one ought not ignore Tituba’s multicultural language and influence–but I wanted to re-read this idea of multiculturalism, as rather than having an ethnic basis, as having a social basis. Instead of simply labeling her as multicultural, I was able to interrogate her relevance in a social context, using Durkheim’s theory of anomie. I was also able to prove why her language was especially powerful to the Puritan society because of its current social conditions.

Using the theory of anomie allowed me to have the following insights: 1) To explain that deviance (witchcraft and witchcraft accusations) was occurring because a lack of regulation and
lack of social cohesion in society; 2) To explain what social disruptions cause anomic conditions, such as a breakdown of normal social roles, causing a deregulation in society; 3) to understand emergent capitalism as a state of anomie, in which a lack of institutional support and lack of social cohesion was at odds with an emerging and expanding market, causing alienation rather than social solidarity.

In a broader context, anomie fits well to describe a society (Salem) that is wrought with changes, “normlessness” and confused social roles. Anomic conditions, according to Durkheim, cause individuals to become alienated from society. This idea of alienation and deviance perhaps makes it easier to understand why the Salem witch trials were able to happen, why people were able to accuse their neighbors or watch innocent people hang: perhaps they were completely and utterly removed from their society, their human reality. Durkheim’s suggestion that humans need society, might explain why without the structure of society, or strict regulation, anomic conditions might produce deadly results.

Examining witchcraft as a “social fact,” as Durkheim would say, allows us to both examine witchcraft itself, and witchcraft in terms of the context of the community. We can see, too, both the individual and greater social power at play. Examining witchcraft as “fact” in society, allows us insight into the hierarchies of power and the significance of that fact, for the social players. While this theory was useful for me, and useful in constructing the idea of the deregulated Puritan society, it was a bit at odds with my use of Tituba’s confession. Applying social theory to one individual, or suggesting that one individual represents a societal phenomenon is shaky academic grounds. However, I thought that by establishing Puritan society as an anomic society before the close reading, that Tituba’s confession could fit into a larger
social project. Therefore, I avoided saying that Tituba was representative of the anomic society, but rather that Tituba’s words resonated with the experience of individuals in the anomic society.
Works Cited:


