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Geographical and Temporal Exile in Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba* and *Tales from the Heart*

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Abstract

Current scholarly discussion defines exile in geographical and cultural terms, characterizing exile as something experienced by individuals separated from their homeland or culture. In her novel *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*, Maryse Condé describes exile in a way that subverts this binary. Tituba is born on Barbados and taken to Salem, Massachusetts. While there, she rejects the two cultural identities available to her—American and African. Instead, she identifies herself in geographical terms with the island of Barbados. Geographical theories of exile would expect Tituba's feelings of exile to end when she returns to Barbados; however, my reading of *I, Tituba* suggests that her exile is also temporal in nature. Tituba longs for a future Barbados in which black people are free of white supremacy. This experience of temporal exile is further reflected in Condé's memoir *Tales from the Heart*, in which Condé describes her parents' alignment with French culture, despite not truly belonging thereto. Ultimately, my reading of Condé's works adds a layer of complexity to existing discussions of exile in African diasporic fictional works.

In the novel *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé, the main character Tituba finds herself in Salem, Massachusetts, separated from her home island of Barbados in a state of exile. The reader expects Tituba's return to Barbados to end her feelings of exile; however, these sentiments persist. Existing conceptions of exile, defining the term either geographically or culturally, cannot account for Tituba's case. Thus, exile—as reflected in Condé's novel—must be considered from a new perspective. For Tituba, exile is not just geographical or cultural, but also temporal. She is exiled not from a particular place or people, but rather at a different time. This experience of temporal exile appears both in Condé's fiction and nonfiction, as seen through Condé's descriptions of her parents in her memoir *Tales from the Heart*. Condé's parents experience temporal exile by aligning themselves with a culture that does not see them as belonging because of their race; consequently, they must await acceptance. Viewing identity as either geographical or cultural limits the way one focuses on the term *exile* by confining it to categories that oversimplify and limit understanding of the experience. Examining how exile is experienced within Condé's work shows it to be multi-faceted, containing cultural, geographic, and temporal dimensions.

Existing debates surrounding exile do not capture Condé's descriptions in her works. Hamid Naficy defines exile in purely geographical terms as "individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures."¹ While Naficy does make passing mention of culture, he focuses more

heavily on geographical displacement and how this affects cultural development, instead of looking at culture itself.² Scholars examining Condé's creative works have most often defined exile in terms of culture. Exile is a common theme addressed in Condé's novels, frequently using an absent mother as a function for a type of exile that has a more removed relationship to a distant homeland.³ Previous reflections on exile in Condé's work accept that there are only two possible cultural identities for Afro-Caribbeans. Arlette M. Smith defines the available identities in terms of "allegiance to African heritage," or "the values associated with the Western model."⁴ Tituba defies both geographical and cultural expectations, embracing no particular culture and experiencing no relief from exile. Condé's parents further defy this expectation in a different way, in that their choice of cultural identity does not fit into neat categories.

The way exile is reflected in *I, Tituba* and *Tales from the Heart* requires complicating and expanding notions of exile. In *I, Tituba*, Tituba's experience of exile includes a temporal dimension: she longs for her geographical homeland, Barbados, but also for this homeland at a particular time. More specifically, she seeks a future, unrealized Barbados. A more temporal form of exile is also reflected in Condé's memoir, *Tales from the Heart*. In this work, Condé describes her parents as thinking of themselves in terms of French culture, choosing this over the culture of their home, Guadeloupe. While this does not represent exile in the purest sense, it mimics Tituba's experience of longing for something just out of grasp; that is, Condé's parents long to place themselves within a culture that does not accept them as belonging. Condé's characterization of exile adds an additional layer of complexity to scholarly discourses, showing that the term can have geographical, cultural, and temporal dimensions. By expanding concepts of exile to include a temporal dimension, the experiences of Tituba and Condé's parents can be more appropriately understood and explained. Otherwise, the exile reflected in these works is forced into pre-existing definitions by ignoring important aspects of these experiences to better fit the literature's stagnancy.

I, Tituba follows the life of Tituba, characterizing her as embodying a feeling of exile through her longing to return to Barbados, the island where she was enslaved. Smith's definition of exile suggests that Tituba, born on Barbados but raised with Nago cultural traditions, would look to either African or Western ideals as to explain her feelings.⁵ Instead, Tituba expresses no desire to return to Africa, saying both for herself and for other slaves: "We know nothing of Africa [...] it no longer has any meaning"⁶

Rather, Tituba identifies Barbados as her homeland.⁷ This longing for her claimed homeland of Barbados does not come without problems. While Tituba longs to return to her home, she recoils from the suffering that is present there, saying “I am back on the island I thought I had lost! [...] But [...] a slave has just been hung from the top of a flame tree.”⁸ While removed from Barbados, Tituba does in fact exhibit exile in the way that Naficy describes it, defining her home in geographical terms.⁹ Tituba was forced to leave Barbados and, due to her status as a slave, was unable to return though she longed to be there.¹⁰ This situation aligns itself with Naficy’s definition of a geographical exile as someone who has left their homeland and is unable to return despite a conflicting desire to do so.¹¹ Tituba spent much of her youth living in isolation due to the loss of her parents at a young age, thus living alone in an effort to avoid enslavement.¹² As a result, she has little to no relationship with the culture on Barbados, further meeting Naficy’s definition of exile as she is “ambivalent” towards her homeland’s culture.¹³

Condé complicates this notion of exile as experienced by Tituba, allowing the term to take on new meaning and direction. For several years, Tituba is unable to return to Barbados because she is a slave, but she is eventually freed and travels home.¹⁴ According to Naficy’s definition, Tituba’s return to Barbados should end her feelings of exile. Upon returning, however, Tituba has no one to greet her and continues to feel out of place even when she begins to live among a group of freed and fugitive slaves.¹⁵ Though she lives in the homeland she has claimed for herself, Tituba expresses concern over the way in which black people are treated on Barbados and, consequently, cannot find happiness.¹⁶ Tituba’s exile is not from the physical island itself—the place that she identifies as her home although it dehumanizes her and her people. Instead, she is exiled from the Barbados of the future. She references this rift at the end of the novel, saying as a spirit to those still enslaved: “Look at the splendor of our island. Soon it will all be ours.”¹⁷ Tituba’s exile is therefore less geographical and more temporal; it relates not just to a particular place but to a particular time.

The temporal exile experienced by Tituba stretches the limits of the geographically focused definition of exile provided by Naficy. Tituba’s experience relies on being exiled from a future place that she has never actually been to.¹⁸ She returns to the physical location from which she has been exiled, but is unable to find a sense of belonging—neither physically, nor in the way of happiness and security.¹⁹ This longing for an unrealized Barbados is, as noted above, similar to the exile described by Naficy. It is important to clarify that temporal exile still relies on an ambivalent, indirect relationship to

the culture of the homeland and focuses on an inability to reach it despite an intense desire to do so.²⁰ Though Tituba longs for its arrival, this unrealized Barbados remains unconcretized, and she is unable reach it due to a conceptual impermanence of both the self and the hoped-for destination.²¹

This concept of exile, focusing more on a theoretical idea of a homeland versus a physical location, appears again in Condé's memoir *Tales from the Heart*. Unlike the fictional character of Tituba, Condé grew up on Guadeloupe, an overseas French territory. In her memoir, Condé describes her parents' view of themselves in relation to hexagonal French culture and the francophone culture present among people of African descent on Guadeloupe. Condé's parents did not experience any sort of geographical exile, as they gave no indication of wanting to move to France. Their experience of exile was both cultural and temporal. Condé's parents fully aligned themselves with French culture, considering themselves "[e]ven more [French]" than those living in France.²² The Condés claimed metropolitan French culture as their home, choosing it over the colonial French lifestyle in Guadeloupe although they enjoyed their lives and status on the island.²³ This act of choosing a cultural homeland recalls how Tituba, while feeling no serious connection with the people of Barbados or their African traditions, claimed the island as her homeland.²⁴ Similarly, when the Condés visited France, participating directly in French culture, they are not seen as belonging. This raises a question of whether the home to which they laid claim truly existed, mirroring how Tituba's vision of Barbados did not truly exist because of African deculturalization.²⁵

Both Tituba's experience and that of Condé's parents contain a temporal dimension as they long for a home that is both realized and unrealized. The Condés do not explicitly express a desire for a future where they are recognized as fully French. By asserting themselves to be "as much French" as those living in France, they long for a future in which the identity that they chose for themselves is fully recognized.²⁶ Condé describes her parents as comparing themselves to lower-class French people in an effort to defend their desire to be afforded the respect of other French citizens.²⁷ Their push for inclusion, something that can only be gained in a distant future, shows their exile to include a temporal dimension. In one sense, their home is fully realized because they are French citizens well-versed in metropolitan culture; in another, their home is unrealized because they are excluded from true belonging. This expanded view of exile raises questions about a broader Afro-Caribbean identity and how its exponents construct new notions of cultural ownership. In these two works, Condé shows

that the choice of home is unlimited; it can be an island, the ancestral home of Africa, or the colonial power that dictated what culture could and could not be for decades.²⁸

Exile plays a significant role in African diasporic histories, and is thus essential to reading both *I, Tituba* and *Tales from the Heart*. Condé's body of work focuses largely on identity within different contexts, but never offers definite conclusions or falls into any particular school of thought regarding Afro-Caribbean identity.²⁹ In *I, Tituba*, Tituba's identity oscillates throughout her life, transcending the "traditional determinism of nationality, race, gender, or territory," and takes on a hybrid nature.³⁰ Exile is noteworthy here because it solidifies for the reader that Tituba considers herself to be Barbadian.³¹ She longs for this island that she calls her home, even though the only reason she is there is because her mother was victim to the colonial slave trade.³² Condé also writes about her parents' identity as they perceive it within French culture, underscoring how they maintain a geographic connection with Guadeloupe while denying its francophone culture.³³ In this way, Condé links longing for the elusive notion of home with agency. Tituba chooses Barbados to be her home just as Condé describes her parents' choice of French culture as their home. As Tituba does not find true belonging in Barbados, Condé's parents are treated by their chosen culture as culturally dissonant although they follow the correct colonial norms.³⁴

In discussions about exile and Afro-Caribbean identity, scholars often rely on the assumption that there are two options available: self-identification with either African or Western culture. Condé effectively challenges this in her work, using both fiction and nonfiction to show that identity falls outside of these two categories. For Tituba, this undoubtedly has an opportunistic spin. Tituba feels a connection to her homeland and envisions a future in which black people will be free, despite having a limited connection to her fellow Barbadians and feeling out of place in their presence.³⁵ Condé's characterization of her parents is more complex because they view themselves in opposition to the Afro-Caribbeans of Guadeloupe, seeing themselves as superior because of their affinity for French culture.³⁶ In both works, the characters find themselves exiled from a place in time—a future in which they hope to be accepted and equal. As I have argued, this desire adds a temporal dimension to the experience of exile, expanding the literature's usual parameters. The choices explored in Condé's oeuvre reposition the conceptual boundaries of exile, allowing for a greater complexity and a greater understanding of how exile operates in the colonial context.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Hamid Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema," in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.
- ² *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³ Arlette M. Smith, "The Semiotics of Exile in Maryse Condé's Fictional Works," *Callaloo* 14, n° 2 (1991): 387.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 387.
- ⁵ Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philcox (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1992), 183.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 96; Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba sorcière... Noire de Salem* (Mercure de France, 1986), 127: "Mais nous ne savons plus rien de l'Afrique et elle ne nous importe plus." Translations are mine unless noted otherwise.
- ⁷ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 62, 79, 102.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 102; Condé, *Moi, Tituba*, 137: "Je la retrouve, cette île que j'avais crue perdue [...] Mais [...] On vient de pendre un nègre au faite d'un flamboyant."
- ⁹ Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema," 12.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 128.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹³ Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema," 12.
- ¹⁴ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 102, 142.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142, 153.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 169, 155.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102, 178; Condé, *Moi, Tituba*, 235: "Regarde la splendeur de notre terre. Bientôt, elle sera toute à nous."
- ¹⁸ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 178.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ²⁰ Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema," 12.
- ²¹ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 178.
- ²² Maryse Condé, *Tales from the Heart: True Stories from My Childhood*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Soho, 2001), 3, 5; Maryse Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (Éditions Robert Laffont, 1999), 3: "Plus français, renchérissait ma mère avec violence."
- ²³ Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 5–6.
- ²⁴ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 62, 9, 142.
- ²⁵ Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 5.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4; Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, 5: "Pourtant, nous sommes aussi français qu'eux, soupirant mon père."
- ²⁷ Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 5.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁹ Marie Denise Shelton, "Condé: The Politics of Gender and Identity," *World Literature Today* 67, n° 4 (1993): 718, 720, 722.
- ³⁰ Gema Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 47, n° 2 (2014): 119, 130.
- ³¹ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 62.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³³ Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 5–6.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4; Condé, *I, Tituba*, 151.
- ³⁵ Condé, *I, Tituba*, 178, 151.
- ³⁶ Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 4.

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