

# Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires

## Introduction

In this paper I will compare and disentangle themes of race, contagion and the supernatural brought into play in the novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) and in the Netflix TV Series, *La Révolution* (2020).

The first is an acclaimed novel, recipient of the Nobel prize for literature in 2018, written by Maryse Condé (1937-), a writer and pioneer of the Francophone post-colonial movement. The second is a TV-show, created by Aurélien Molas, a 35-year-old French writer and director, and whose reception was so blatantly negative that it was not renewed for a second season. And yet, notwithstanding patent differences in form (cinematic Vs literary) and in content (post-colonial memoir Vs Zombie fiction), the two works bear strong resemblances in their use of the supernatural to rewrite momentous historical events from the perspective of those whose life-experiences are seldom heard and documented. Furthermore, they tackle trite motifs - such as the representation of the Black female subject as the ultimate and menacing Other, or the threat of the colonies (represented by the Caribbean) against Western civilization - with the intent of reversing them and showing that the Black female Other may be the "healer" of a Western civilization on the brink of collapse.

## The Rewriting of History

Both *Tituba* and *La Révolution* offer reflections on History with a capital H, with the intent of underlying its forged and spurious character.

In *La Révolution*, a quote by Napoleon, "History is a set of lies agreed upon", is immediately followed by the opening scene in a 1789 Paris, showing an unlikely Ninja-like rider intent on killing a zombie dressed in *culottes* and running for dear life. We hear the rider's voice, reading her "testament" that begins with: "It is said that history is written by the winners, it is forgotten that it is re-written over time. Transformed by books, re-invented by those who did not live through it." (E01)

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
“Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires”

*La Révolution* offers an alternative backstory to the French Revolution, tracing its origins to a series of murders committed in an undetermined French province, which quickly degenerates into a zombie narrative. Slowly but steadily French aristocrats are turned into powerful and immortal zombies, feeding off poor peasants in the process. The “Fraternity”, a Robin-Hood styled organization, a “disbarred” doctor, a renegade noble-woman, a Black slave and a Revenant will unite to counter these injustices and incidentally plant the seeds for the French Revolution.

Similarly, Maryse Condé uses fiction to fill a historical gap, that of Tituba, the Black female slave part of the Salem witch trials, who had been forgotten because of “the intentional or unintentional racism of the historians” (Condé, 183). The overture of the novel takes place under the sign of colonial history and violence: “Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* one day in the year 16\*\* while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt.” (3) While this opening allows her to situate historically, geographically (Barbados as a British colony) and socially (relations colonizer-colonized) Tituba’s story, the use of the first-person narration endows Tituba with a voice and a subjectivity that History had so far denied her. It is indeed Condé’s custom to stage in her writings the problem of identity-building for the Caribbean people (Carruggi, 10), aiming to fill the gap left by official documents and dominant history (Bavuidi, 38). We follow Tituba’s life from her birth in Barbados, to her life in a plantation, her travels to North America and her return home where she will be hanged for fomenting an insurrection.

I will start by considering how both works re-shape the 19<sup>th</sup> century trope blending physical decay of a lineage (or a “race”, to use Hippolyte Taine’s terminology) and moral degeneration. While the intent is evident, i.e., reversing stereotypes and cultural constructions (respectively rich Vs poor; white Vs black), the results are quite original. I will then consider how the theme of disease pervades the works, reaching “epidemic” levels and how biological contagions overlap with the spread of the supernatural ceaselessly.

## 1) Degeneration

### La Révolution

The second episode introduces the degenerate and debauched son of the count, Donatien de Montargis, plagued by a fast-spreading gangrene in his leg, threatening his very existence. (Image 1)



*1 Donatien crying in pain while doctors tend to his rotting leg. (E02)*

Meanwhile, we see the count observing pensively the family tree, visibly concerned about the future of his lineage (Image 2). The doctor interrupts his musings and pleads with his lord for the much-needed leg amputation, to save Donatien’s life. The count’s reply is dry and disdainful: “My son is not some pathetic shrub from which you can cut a branch.” (E02)



*2The count of Montargis considering the family tree. (E02)*

The metaphor of the “shrub” used by the count reveals patently his anxieties. To this answer, his daughter reacts violently, accusing her father of condemning her brother to certain death, just like he had done for his wife. The hereditary character of the disease is thus revealed, but instead of dwelling on the trite 19<sup>th</sup> century motif, fusing aristocratic decay with moral degeneration, Molas operates a Gothic twist and a post-colonial re-writing of French history. In fact, the end of the episode shows the count smothering his son to death and, immediately after, injecting Donatien’s arm with an

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
“Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires”

undetermined yet dubious blue liquid, that an alert spectator will have already identified as the “zombifying” potion.

We will understand, throughout the season, that the blue liquid is somehow tied to a Black voodoo “girl”, Nais, who haunts Madeleine’s dreams (the speech-impaired Revenant’s daughter). While horrifying events unfold episode by episode (alleged serial murders, the plague’s threat, a prison break, kidnappings, murders, guerrilla warfare harbinger of the French Revolution), they all seem like ordinary administration, when confronted with the season finale’s spine-chilling revelation. Behind the “zombification” of the aristocracy, hides King Louis XVI himself: in order to prepare for the evil to come (the Revolution) he has had a “mysterious little girl” (E05) kidnapped overseas, has her imprisoned in the Bastille while a creepy physician is harvesting (surprise, surprise) her blue blood. The season literally ends on this discovery, while an ominous music lingers on this disquieting image:



3 Nais, tied to a pole, having her blood harvested (E08, final scene)



4Detail, her slit wrist lets blue blood flow into the scale. (E08, final scene)

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
"Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires"

Both framings are deeply and (dismayingly so) grossly wrought with overlapping symbology and references. First and foremost, Naï's posture reminds the traditional European/Christian imagery of Jesus Christ suffering on the cross for the sins of humanity. Moreover, the clinical precision (for 18<sup>th</sup> century standards) of the blood-draining system also vaguely and disturbingly reminds of the Nazi experimentation in concentration camps.

Second, the historical reality of colonial exploitation "transcends" here to Gothic levels: the supernaturally endless supply of the girl's blood powerfully epitomizes on the individual level, the collective plight of the African slave trade. In fact, it re-constructs, and disquietingly so, the colonial Western gaze on to the Black population: an endless supply of essentially free labor. Furthermore, her faceless figure is both a receptacle of White anxieties and, in a way that reminds me of the tomb of the unknown soldier after WWI, an anonymous monument to her people's tribulation.

Lastly, the scales hanging from her wrists, whose practical purpose is to collect the blood dripping from her slit wrists, create an effigy of a Black Blind Justice. The symbology here is quite obscure: was she an equitable judge bestowing her gift (resuscitating the dead) only to those deemed worthy of it, before the "white man" enslaved her? Could it be mocking French pretenses to "justice"? Or again, may it symbolize the threat of the Revolution to come: "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*"?

### Tituba

Maryse Condé artfully plays with racial stereotypes by staging Tituba alternatively marveling at, pitying or reviling white bodies, depending on the relation that she entertains with them. There is, however, one constant in Tituba's depictions: she cannot help but associate white physical traits with disease, and in some cases with evil, fusing here as well physical decay and moral degeneration.

Tituba's gaze registers implacably the tiniest details: consequently, the narration revels in physical descriptions and offers vivid portraits of the characters. Any physical trait of white bodies, may it be the varied color of their eyes, their hair, their skin or their bodies as a whole, stirs up in her images of withering and dissolution.

Mrs. Endicott, her husband's owner, and her white friends had "skin the color of curdled milk" (26), while Mistress Parris, her owner's wife, has a generally sickish appearance, just like her children who have "pale, unhealthy skins" (41).

She cannot help but compare these ill bodies to that of her own people, who, notwithstanding their condition, are full of vigor and energy. For instance, when she describes the little girls who come to visit her and play in her kitchen she comments:

"Although I didn't like them all, I pitied them with their waxen skins and their bodies so full of promise yet mutilated like those trees that gardeners try to dwarf. In contrast, our childhood as little slaves, bitter though it was, seemed glowing, lit up by the joy of our games, our rambles, and our roving together." (60)

Similarly, she builds an unflattering portrait and comparison between her new owner, a redhead and hunchback man, and that of her previous husband: "I must confess that when he undressed,

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
"Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires"

revealing his crooked, pasty body, I couldn't help thinking of the dark-brown muscles of John Indian."  
(127)

These descriptions, which evoke through physical attributes moral ones, give way as well to general remarks about the hypocritical culture that constrains and suffocates these bodies. The portrait of Samuel Parris, the cruel Puritan minister who buys her, is quite revealing in this sense:

"I have already said much about the eyes of Susanna Endicott, but these! 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)

As Dawn Fulton suggests: "Tituba's privileged perspective exposes the extreme hypocrisy of this world, and the cruelty and violence of a community that claims to uphold the highest ideals of moral rectitude." (42) Tituba criticizes openly the principles of Puritanism that baffle her: the constraining of the children; the fundamental misogyny; the repression of the sexual drive and the obsession with the Devil. For instance, while Mrs. Parris considers the act of love-making a "hateful act" (42), Tituba considers it a celebration of life. Mrs. Parris however reacts to this reflection with a panicked "Be quiet! Be quiet! It's Satan's heritage in us." (42) This mania of seeing Satan everywhere is perceived by Tituba as a form of moral depravation:

"I had not realized the full extent of the ravages that Samuel Parris's religion was causing [...]. Imagine a small community of men and women oppressed by the presence of Satan and seeking to hunt him down in all his manifestations." (65)

Condé's irony, of which much has been discussed (Fulton, 48-52), is most visible when Tituba falls into the same trap. As for instance above, when she reads into Parris's gaze Satan's gaze, or when she considers the young girls as endowed with an evil nature:

"There was something in those two girls that made me have doubts about the innocence of childhood. [...] Whatever the case, Anne and Mercy reminded me constantly of Samuel Parris's speeches on Satan's presence in all of us." (60)

The real irony is that, differently from the people surrounding her, who see the Devil in an innocuous cat or in the color black, Tituba's reading of "evil" is quite correct: Samuel Parris is a selfish and cruel man, while the girls' pantomimes of possession will have dreadful consequences.

Despite her situation and her bold opinions, Tituba does not lump all white people together. In the novel we have two important counterexamples: Esther, a female prisoner she meets during her imprisonment, and Benjamin Azevedo, a Jewish merchant, and his family.

Esther's portrait is built around the color black, thus allowing an immediate identification and sympathy on Tituba's part, who conceives Esther as suffering from the same stereotypes that plague her:

"The woman who had spoken was young, beautiful, and not more than twenty-three. She had thrown back her hood unashamedly and revealed a mass of thick hair, as black as the crow's wing, itself the color of sin for some people and worthy of punishment. Likewise,

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
"Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires"

her eyes were black, not the gray color of dirty water, not the green color of wickedness, but black like the benevolent shadow of night." (95)

Similarly, Benjamin Azevedo, a Jewish merchant who becomes her owner, offers a physical and religious counterpart to Samuel Parris. While the latter is the incarnation of a handsome devil, the former, with his deformed body, red hair, loving attitude and accepting religion, builds a positive image and one with whom she can sympathize. Together, in bed, they compare the iniquities that their respective people have had to suffer over the centuries. The ironic conclusion of these conversations is "He outdid me every time." (127)

## **2) Contagion, the Supernatural and the Black "Healer"**

In the two works, the themes of contagion and of the supernatural overlap almost perfectly with almost similar results: while Tituba is bluntly presented as the "Healer", Naïs's representation is more ambiguous.

### **La Révolution**

Naïs, "the little girl with the mask", as Madeleine calls her, has the nightmare-like quality of a brief, blurred and repressed vision surging unexpectedly. The characters who know her, speak of her with awe and fear. Her powers appear to be boundless: apart from resuscitating the dead and transforming them into zombies, not only does she seem to know everything and she "never tells lies" (as Madeleine repeatedly points out), but she also knows what was, but most importantly what is to come. Stupendous powers which resonate with the young girls chanting: "Tituba can do anything. Tituba knows everything. Tituba sees everything." (61)

Naïs's presence is shrouded in mystery until we find out – just like in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* – through a travel log and newspaper clippings, about the mysterious shipwreck of a French Royal Navy ship, the *Rosemary*, in 1786.



5 Shipwreck of the Rosemary, whose unlikely Anglophone name for a French Royal Navy ship, reminds an attentive spectator of Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) (E05)

The travel log contains the notes of the crew's first mate relating the strange events pertaining the crossing from New Orleans to France. Starting from his Majesty's doctor boarding with a cargo, supposedly a "gift for the King himself", to the sailors' nightmares about a "mysterious little girl", which the first mate ascribes to food poisoning. Violence and madness ensue until the first man sees her himself and the journal concludes with this record: "I must resolve to throw this demon overboard before our arrival. I have now persuaded myself: to kill her is the only way to stop this evil." (E05) [My translation]





6 Drawings of the crew's first mate of "the mysterious little girl", Joseph is reading. (E05)

As spectators, we easily jump to the conclusion that, just like count Dracula, Naï's is the cause of the shipwreck. However, Joseph – the doctor and reader of the travel log – tries to explain away supernatural events through the lenses of rationality and medicine, just like the first mate had done. His conclusion is the following: his Majesty's doctor was carrying the "patient zero", who brought along a "new plague" (E05). His interpretation is not surprising, since, from the beginning of the series, supernatural events have been presented through the language of "contagion" (which begs the question of how much the Covid-19 pandemic affected the writing of the show).

Other characters as well have used the terminology of disease and epidemic to talk about Naï's blue blood. In the second episode, the count, who has been transformed into a zombie by King Louis XVI, is first presented as ailing from a terrible sickness, complaining about "the poison" in his veins. His brother replies: "I promised to cure you [...] I've called upon the best doctors" (E02). In a parallel thread, we follow Joseph analyzing an undetermined blue liquid. His clinical observations accompany his experiments: "It's blood but it's acting like a parasite" (E02). And finally, while dissecting the rat, he concludes triumphantly: "It has the same symptoms as rabies... but it's definitely a new disease." (E02). As the series progresses, we hear Oka warning Albert, the Revenant, that "The contagion is spreading." [my translation] and that they should make haste to "discover the source of evil at all costs." (E05)

The identity between Naï's, contagion and evil reverberate throughout the whole season and is followed through two different lines of inquiry. The character of the doctor allows for the medical angle to be fully exploited, while Albert, the doctor's brother and Revenant, on the look-out for ancient evils, lets the spectator follow the supernatural angle.

### **Tituba**

In the novel, disease is a widespread theme, which at times takes the shape of a "contagion", both on the "spiritual" (for lack of a better word) and physical level, while Tituba always finds herself right at the epicenter of these epidemics.

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
"Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires"

Her sole presence creates a ripple in other people's existence with oftentimes catastrophic consequences. Her husband, fine antenna, warns her of her dangerous nature: "I know you are violent. I often see you as a hurricane ravaging the island, laying flat the coconut palms and raising the lead-gray waves up to the sky." (30)

Her arrival in the village of Salem is the catalyzing event of a domino effect leading straight to the witch trials. The young girls haunting her kitchen start fixating on her powers and stage (at someone's behest) scenes of demonic possession. Soon, these pretended possessions spread like wildfire through the village children, foreboding the viral wave of condemnations that will ravage the county. It is interesting to note, that historical documents of the time used the "plague" analogy to define the mass-hysteria that raged at the time (Ray, 179-80). Condé herself uses the word "plague" to talk about it:

I was not an eyewitness to the plague that afflicted Salem, because I was kept chained up in Deacon Ingersoll's barn after I had made my deposition. (107)

This laconic statement is ambiguous enough for us to wonder whether "plague" refers to the madness only, or to a real biological epidemic, and, transparent enough to show Tituba's exclusion from these events. Throughout the novel, and even during the witch trials, Tituba is never explicitly accused of being Black, but only of practicing witchcraft. Each and every-time the other slaves and white people alike, brand her with the labels "sorceress", "witch", she strives to re-purpose the meaning of the words towards "good" and to emphasize her healing powers instead:

Tituba: "Everyone gives that word a different meaning. Everyone believes he can fashion a witch to his way of thinking so that she will satisfy his ambitions, dreams, and desires." (146)

When Mrs. Parris accuses her of having practiced sorcery under her roof, Tituba retorts that when both Mrs. Parris and her daughter had been sick and Tituba had cured them, no one had objected to it. Similar double standards are manifested when Tituba is travelling back to Barbados. While the Captain of the ship had initially accused her of being a witch, as soon as the ship is stuck in high seas with no wind, and the crew is sick with an epidemic fever, the Captain orders her to perform rituals to call on winds and to heal the crew. Tituba remarks: "So many fevers and sicknesses traveled between Africa, America and the West Indies, fostered by the dirt, the promiscuity, and the bad food." (138) This statement stresses her clinical eye: notwithstanding her mastery of supernatural powers, she first and foremost uses her knowledge of herbs and concoctions to heal. And it is with a certain pride that she realizes what her expertise can do: "I rubbed their pale, unhealthy skins using an oil whose secret Man Yaya had entrusted me. Gradually their skin turned gold under my touch." (41-42) She conceives herself and presents herself as the "healer".

## **Conclusion: The Specter of the Caribbean**

I have briefly sketched how these two works, in different ways and with diverging outcomes, play with traditional colonial discourses presenting the colonies as dangerous spaces, bearers of contagious diseases. Whereas the epicenter of the contagion can be traced back to the Caribbean, it is Western society's own doing that brings about the ultimate doom, excluding these Black female sorceresses from any agency.

In fact, while Tituba's presence is indeed the catalyst event that sets in motion the crazed witch-hunt, she is only used by Samuel Parris and his cronies as a scapegoat and a means to reach their goals. Similarly, Naïs may very well be "patient zero" of the zombie epidemic, but, in the end, it is Louis XVI who brings about the catastrophe and, consequently, the French Revolution.

What sets the two works apart is how these narrative strategies are constructed. Condé's novel is set against the silence of history in the form of a powerful first-person narration, building Tituba's identity as an independent and free-spirited Black woman. Molas' representation of Naïs is poles apart from Condé's: we discover Naïs's name only in episode five, we never see her clearly, we don't know what she thinks, knows or wants, while her actions are solely mediated by other characters' fears and desires. While the TV series has been largely criticized by the French public for its audacity in rewriting French history (see bibliography), I argue that it hasn't been audacious enough in its representations: the "other" is here still the "other", deprived of agency and subjectivity.

Cynthia Laura Vialle-Giancotti  
“Caribbean Witches and Zombies Decolonizing Empires”

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