

Des Excuses

Partie I: Mefiance

Moi, Tituba Sorciere and *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. American history translated for our modern times. Traditional French, sprinkled with Creolizations, translated into English. A husband translating the imagination of his wife. A diaspora of languages, bodies, events, and personal histories spread across texts, spaces, time. This is the adventure that was my reading of *I, Tituba* and *Moi, Tituba Sorcière* side by side.

How could a woman from Barbados speak through the mouth, the pen of a British man? This was something that troubled me even before I started my comparative reading. My project became clear, then. I could use my French to uncover the secret ills of this White man's intentions. He would not be allowed to continue his misrepresentation without being slashed to pieces in my seminar paper. So, I embarked on the project to expose him, and what I found was..... troubling. I actually *appreciated* his translation. I thought he stayed true to the original text and represented it well. This was a tough pill to swallow. I had planned to catch him in the act of brutalizing the author's prose; but instead, found a translation which was both inclusive and faithful to its predecessor. I could detect almost no ethical complications and this worried me.

What I had done was common among readers; I had imposed my own Theory of Mind on my reading of the English text before I even opened it. According to Keith Oatley, a professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, Theory of Mind is a method by which one applies prior experiences and/or assumptions of other people's thoughts and feelings to a new situation. It can be applied in a variety of social situations, but it is also a common

practice when reading fiction: “Overall, Theory of Mind has a projective quality: we cast a model onto a person in ordinary life, or onto a character of fiction” (Oatley 16). This process can often be gratifying, especially when one does a lot of reading, which, we know, has the ability to teach important social skills like empathy. I think back to my crowded high school classroom of self-proclaimed “book haters”. That was until I handed them some of my favorite Y.A. titles: *Dear Martin*, *The Boy In The Black Suit*, *Ghost Boys*, *Orbiting Jupiter*..... These books opened them up like clams, their pearl-shaped hearts shone resplendent. They couldn’t and wouldn’t stop until they had read all of the books on my shelf. They learned to meld their hearts to these fictional characters, and they became better for it. Theory of Mind can create beautiful things inside of us. It can teach us how to better understand others and ourselves. It is in many ways effective in bringing us closer to a more unified version of humanity.

However, because Theory of Mind drives us to create categories based on past experiences, there are times when I assign people to inappropriate schema. Because of this imperfect system, I was very easily able to place this white man into the category of “oppressor”, “colonizer”, “abuser”, without really knowing anything about him. It comes from the same amniotic fluid that gives birth to racist epithets, sexist remarks, homophobic slurs. As a woman, I will always have a certain measure of distrust for cisgendered men. My heart has ached watching some men devour the world, leaving death and destruction in their wake. When I combine the identities of “white” and “male” together, it births a monster in my mind. Not all white men are monsters, but they *do* receive a larger portion than the rest. The accumulated scars my confidence has received at their hands, puts me on high alert in their presence. However, there is a problem with this approach to judging character. There is just too much nuance between individuals to make such strong claims about them, and our implicit biases; which are a

conglomerate of intentions, emotions, and outcomes, have a tendency to get in the way of proper judgement. I subjected Richard Philcox to a misjudgment, a *misreading*.

The “impossibility of proper representation” that I presupposed had a lot to do with my discomfort associated with “space”. There has always been an issue regarding the misrepresentation of people of color by White people. It has become so commonplace in the fabric of our nation’s history, that I have come to expect it in most cases. With this in mind, however, I am also not a woman of color and need to recognize my own boundaries in this process of criticism. In Damien Tissot’s *In Between Borders*, he describes a famous question raised by Paul Ricoeur: *From Where Do You Speak?* Tissot is a white man who is interested in feminist theory, so his essay reveals a lot about how one should approach “space”, when speaking from a perspective that is not their own. He proposes that the answer to this question of “from where one can speak” is in writer Léonora Miano’s description of what she calls “inhabiting the border” (Tissot 266). “Inhabiting the border” is a reimagining of a space from which “all can speak”, one that allows “fracture” and prevents totalizing structures (Tissot 277). Could it be possible that Philcox could inhabit the border? *Can I?*

The author of *Moi Tituba, Sorciere*, Maryse Conde, is a Guadeloupean novelist who is married to Richard Philcox. In an interview for *Bomb Magazine*, she describes her relationship with Philcox’s translation work, “For me translation is another work entirely. My husband is a translator and I never interfere with his work. I never read his translations. They belong to him.” Some might argue that this should be enough of a justification. If the author themselves is okay with it, what’s the big deal? One would expect someone to want to do right by their partner anyway, right? However, I was so reluctant to afford Philcox these sentiments. I just couldn’t imagine how someone who hasn’t felt the pain of black womanhood could translate the writing

of a black woman writing about another black woman. Something about it appeared impossible to justify. It seemed to be another appropriation scheme, never allowing women of color to have their say, feeding into a world that seeks to silence them. Despite any love he has for his spouse, I couldn't imagine his being able to do her justice and uphold her creative success. This was where I went wrong.

Because translation can often be a site that takes shape in and shapes the power of colonialism. According to Tejaswini Niranjana, author of the book *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, the colonized often face misrepresentation in the production of a translated text, in the pursuit of domination by the colonizer. She discusses this purposeful representation present in the works of translators such as James Mill and William Jones to demonstrate how they sought to portray an uncivilized version of India that could not function properly as an independent nation separate from British rule, one that “needed” Christianity to assuage their overly hedonistic tendencies. “As the missionary texts help us understand, translation comes into being overdetermined by religious, racial, sexual, and economic discourses. It is overdetermined not only because multiple forces act on it, but because it gives rise to multiple practices. The strategies of containment initiated by translation are therefore deployed across a range of discourses, allowing us to name translation as a significant technology of colonial domination” (Niranjana 21). The deployment of these translations further establishes the colonial subject as an Other in need of education and assimilation into the dominant culture. This power differential is based in a hegemonic form of normativity, in which the translator may see their cultural “reality” as monolithic. My anxieties and mistrust stems from patterns that have been continuously damaging to marginalized people groups.

Since Guadeloupe, where Condé is from, and Barbados, where the protagonist Tituba is from, are both former European colonies (although Guadeloupe is still considered an overseas department) of France and Great Britain, respectively, there is a connection in their histories that cannot be fully understood by someone who calls the culture of the colonizer their own. Upon learning more about Condé and watching countless interviews featuring the writer, I have come to learn that she is truly the kind of person who does not want to strongly assimilate herself to anything in particular. In a documentary about her career, called *A Voice of Her Own*, she even says herself that she does not write in either “French” or “Creole”, but she writes in “Maryse Conde”. To her there is no such thing as one true identity inherent in a language, nation, culture, or person, but rather a constantly changing essence through the exchange of ideas. This highly impacts her writing, which is boundless and unrestrictive just like her character. Her writing philosophy reminds me very much of Miano’s concept of “inhabiting the border”. Despite her convictions regarding her changing identity, I am not suggesting that being a Black woman from a colonized nation has not informed many of her life experiences.

She originated from a wealthy family in Guadeloupe that favored French rule and the French language. She was even discouraged from speaking Creole in her home country and was prohibited from interacting with lower class Blacks and people of mixed race. It was not until she moved to Paris as a teenager that she began to feel the ostracization and prejudice associated with her race and nationality. Upon learning about Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, she became invigorated with the desire to learn about the history of her *difference* in a world run by white supremacy (*A Voice of Her Own*). I can see how this desire would translate to her curiosity about the life of Tituba Indian: a woman brought to a strange land in which her “strangeness” was her constant shadow. Although Condé created a mostly fictional account of Tituba’s life, she

believed that by resurrecting Tituba's memory, she could both expose the systemic issues that have operated since the time of the Salem Witch Trials and maybe make meaning of the *trials* she has suffered in her own life.

Trying to convey these sentiments, which are so richly and intimately developed from such a brilliant mind, seems like a nearly impossible feat for anybody, let alone someone who can never experience that same intimate connection with Tituba and her suffering. As Maryse Conde says in the preface of her book, "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" (Condé vii). Therefore, the translator cannot possibly be privy to these whispers and secrets shared among these transhistorical confidantes. At least this was my prior mode of thinking. But like Maryse Conde intimates in that aforementioned interview, *I am an essence ever changing*. I feel that my reading of these two texts has been the catalyst to part of *my* transformation as a thinker, writer, and person. I would like to share with you parts of this process in which I discovered, or rather learned to engage with, something new within myself.

Partie 2: Va-Et-Vient

Reading in two languages back and forth is a slow process to say the least. It is not actually an activity I much enjoy, and I find that it hurts my brain, but I was willing to combat fatigue for the realization of my goals: exposure. But, it would not come to be.

The scenes I was most interested in were ones related to Tituba's enslavement and any mentioning of her race, gender, or related social position. In my mind, these were the areas of contestation where I would find him slipping up. In the very beginning scene, Philcox surprised me with his accurate translation of Conde's description of the slave trade. He even made sure to include the names of the tribes of the enslaved men sold with Tituba's mother, and he kept the

word *Akwaba* without any explanation as to its meaning. In this way he seems to maintain the cultural value of such a word being used. Even Conde herself gives the French translation of the word *Akwaba* in a footnote. She translates it to: “Bienvenue”, the French word for “Welcome”. He appears to be putting aside his own aims for cultural preservation. Everything I thought he, being a white man, was incapable of! Spivak writes that in order to avoid the colonizing effects of translation, one must develop an intimacy with the language of the original (Spivak 314). Was it possible that Philcox could possess such an intimacy? However, others, such as Shaden Tageldin, an associate professor of cultural studies and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota, calls Spivak’s ideas of intimacy an insidious form of “seduction” that can be used by dominant cultures to exert their power (Tageldin 162). This makes my assessment of Philcox even more complex because there is no possible way I could know or understand that man’s intentions. I only have the translation and its parent text as my treasure map to his thinking, conscious or otherwise. So I continued to infer what I could from what I had.

As I continued my investigation, I did come across one point of interest that may be worth mentioning. On pg. 22 of the original, When Tituba describes how she fell asleep in the middle of the afternoon, Maryse Conde writes, “C’était la saison de Carême”, which means “It was the season of Carême”. Whereas Philcox just calls it the “dry season”. Although this may seem like a minor change, it is curious that he chose to avoid the reference to religion, despite talking about the religious practices of the inhabitants of Salem and that of Tituba’s lover later in the text. “Le temps du Carême” is the Season of Lent. My Catholic senses were on high alert, and I almost found myself getting defensive. However, I had to remind myself that this was not about me and my religion. It’s amazing how self-centered we can sometimes become as readers! Still, what if her inclusion of the Lenten season was of cultural importance? Although I cannot

claim to know much about Hoodoo spirituality, I know it is influenced by a mixture of other religions, including Catholicism. Perhaps, then, Lent would mark an important period for Tituba. Maybe this is one of the secrets imparted to Conde that Philcox was not privy to? I wanted more of this for my project, more of this lack of trust, this uncertainty.

In a passage on pg. 37 in the original text, Tituba talks about desiring a new world in which they would be free to have control over the Whites. “Libres d’assujettir à leur tour les Blancs.” I immediately assumed that there was no way that Philcox would describe a hierarchy reversal in which his race was subjugated. However, he did quite the opposite! He writes, “Free to enslave the white men in their turn.” By using the more violent language, “to enslave”, he is channeling the reaction of someone who is in so much pain that they want the oppressors to know their suffering. *Got me again, Philcox!* It is so important that people learn to recognize and have sympathy for the emotional reactions of people who have been treated poorly. It seems that Philcox was trying to convey this to his audience, many of whom could not relate to such an experience. This is an instance where I believe he is using a charged word to convey an essential message to his readers. Let us take a moment to consider the work of translator, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein.

In her translation of Marie Corelli’s British novel, *The Murder of Delicia*, which is one of the works included in Hossein’s collection called *Motichur*, she changes the setting of the novel to Bangladesh and features an Indian protagonist, Mazluma. In her novel, she compares the situation of English women and those of women in Bangladesh. She desired to expose the trivializing effects of patriarchy in both countries and make the text more culturally accessible to Bengali women. In “What Is Special About Postcolonial Translation”, Ben Conisbee Baer quotes her when he writes:

“What is the form of an Englishwoman’s life? We think they are independent, learned, equal with men, respected in society; but “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”!
(Hossein 2001, 155).

Her intention here is to illuminate the subjugation of English women for women in Bangladesh who believe that their foreign counterparts are living the ideal life. Despite the lack of “fidelity” to the original text, Hossein’s work here is one she considers important. Philcox appears to make a similar, albeit less extensive, move in his translation when he uses a stronger word to describe a Black character’s distress. I would be remiss not to acknowledge this effort on the side of decolonization.

It was at this juncture that my heart truly began to soften towards him, but I was not finished yet. I had to see this exploration through. I continued to see only subtle differences, such as on pg. 121 of the original text when Abigail tries to trick everyone at Church into thinking Tituba had placed a spell on her. Conde writes, “Je le sentais. Elles n’auraient de cesse qu’elles n’entrent, elles aussi, dans la danse!” Whereas the translation says, “I felt that at that moment they would fall into a trance as well.” Instead of using the turn of phrase, “enter the dance”, Philcox changes it to “fall into a trance”. Although it is a subtle change, it does not imply the girls’ intended trickery quite as much. The translation positions it more as a passive circumstance than an intended action. There were quite a few places where I saw these minor alterations, such as the number of judges abusing Tituba, which in the French version is “trois” or three and in the English version is “four”, but it was difficult to find anything of real note by which to criticize Philcox. Was there something wrong with my level of scrutiny as a reader? Was I being too harsh? Perhaps this is something that I need to keep in check?

If there was ever a scene by which I could expose Philcox’s cruel biases, it was the scene in the jail when Tituba meets Hester Prynne. In my mind, I always expected men to challenge

empowered women because they feel threatened by them, so I expected this feminist discourse between the women to be a place where Philcox would attempt to defy Condé's intentions. One of the first things I noticed, though possibly minor, was when Hester was asking Tituba about her name on pg. 151 of the original and pg. 95 of the translated version. The French says "D'où te vient-il?", which means "Where does it come from?". However, the English asks a slightly different question: "Who gave it to you?" One of them asks for an origin and the other asks for a person. Since it later leads into the conversation about a man giving Tituba her name, it seems to be a more direct lead into the rest of the conversation, but it also makes the insinuation that Hester is looking for a fight. Though I am aware of my predilection for judging too quickly, I do wonder if Philcox was creating a caricature of the argumentative feminist by translating Hester in this way. This question may be founded in nothing concrete, but the thought lingers still.

Despite this moment of pause, the rest of this section follows the original very closely. Even the parts in which Hester is complaining about men are left practically unchanged. Those changes that are made, do not alter the meaning of the text at all. In her book, *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell describes how we, as a society, come to organize people into gendered categories: defining *masculinity* and projecting it onto people. She delineates that we need to make room for a more individualized understanding of how masculinity functions. According to Connell, we focus too often on domination and hegemony and not enough on the other structures at play such as socioeconomic status, race, among other identity categories (Connell 8-10). We often mistakenly perceive masculinity as a totalizing structure that affects all men in the same way. This is simply not the case. Yes, men benefit from the structural configuration of hegemonic masculinity, but this does not mean that they are all afforded the same benefits. As for the power they do possess, not all of them use this power for evil. This is something I needed

to internalize. As long as there are men mistreating women, I will always have difficulty fully trusting their intentions. However, it is important that I give people a chance to prove themselves.

In another moment of the text when Tituba is describing the unfair treatment she received when attempting to board a ship on pg. 209, the original text reads: “.....une négresse n'était pas à l'abri des tracasseries.” This translates to, “A Negress is not safe from harassment”. However the English does not use the word “harassment”, but instead reads: “A Negress was not secure from delays and obstructions” (p. 135). Harassment is clearly a stronger and more accurate word to describe how Tituba is being treated due to the color of her skin. Although there are other instances where Philcox does not minimize her pain, in this instance, he seems to have done so. Perhaps it was unintentional, but I do believe that as a white male translator, it is his position to most accurately convey the emotional toil of the subaltern. Perhaps my project was not completely in vain, but I think I developed a more thorough understanding of the process of translation and the task of the translator.

Partie 3: Un Secret

I would like to turn now to Philcox himself, the man who inspired my project. In his essay, “Translating Maryse Condé: A Personal Itinerary”, Philcox describes a form of transformation in which, in the act of translating, he actually *becomes* Maryse Condé. Additionally, he discusses how his translation practice has allowed him to inhabit multiple different identities just as Condé, herself, has done in the past with other writers, such as in her translation of *Wuthering Heights*. To him, translation is a sensory experience, one that involves a unique relationship to the text and its author. He writes, “I can remember living in Los Angeles with Maryse and watching her pine like Tituba for her lost island while she endured her “long

solitude in the deserts of America” (Philcox 3). His observations and experiences in which he has become deeply connected to his wife, maybe allows him some sort of pathway to her secret world, and perhaps even a small part of Tituba’s. I couldn’t presuppose to know what his relationship with them is like, which makes my original intentions almost feel invasive.

Philcox appears to be cognizant of his position in the translation process. “As a White, English- speaking male, brought up in the narrow confines of a parochial English family, belonging to a culture used to dominating the world, and, at the time, grappling with a fading sense of superiority, I have had to undergo serious translation to confront the worlds of a Black, female writer from the French-speaking Caribbean” (Phicox 5). By reading his words, which appear genuine and vulnerable, I want to believe him. I want to know that there are people out there who recognize their own privileges in a world full of violence. I want to believe that there are translators seeking justice, reform, and unity. I want to believe that there are translators “inhabiting the border”. The relationship I have with Philcox is certainly changed, but I have learned a lot from the entirety of this process. For starters, I never want to read two novels side by side in French and English ever again. But, despite the taxing nature of the endeavor, I have come to recognize many things about my reading process. I am too eager to see faults in other people, fictional or otherwise; I disguise my own pain with the cloak of aggression; and I am not the perfect reader. There are things about *Moi, Tituba Sorciere* and *I Tituba* that I may never understand. I need to sit comfortably with the idea that some secrets I am not privy to, and that Tituba and Condé may be imparting some of those secrets to Philcox.

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