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Ann Marie Fallon

St. John Fisher University, afallon@sjf.edu

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Anti-Crusoes, Alternative Crusoes: Revisions of the Island Story in the Twentieth Century

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here are the chapter's first two paragraphs:

Everyone thinks they know the plot of *Robinson Crusoe*. The story of the man who is shipwrecked on an island alone is ubiquitous and feels deeply familiar, even for those who have not read it. *Robinson Crusoe* has been plagiarized, cannibalized, and serialized almost since the moment it hit the streets of London in 1719. Here is a passage from an Argentinean novel by Victoria Slavuski published in 1993 that captures the sense of familiarity and also the distance twentieth-century readers have in their relationship to *Robinson Crusoe*: "On days like these we promised each other that at long last we would take the time to read the copy of *Robinson (Crusoe)* that each household kept alongside the Bible and *Twenty-five Ways to Prepare Lobster*, written on Juan Fernandez by Amelita Riera. Nobody got past page fifteen of Robinson and almost nobody opened the *Bible*."¹

Literary critics often treat the multitude of twentieth-century versions of Crusoe as antagonistic to Defoe's character. They tend to consider contemporary novels or films or poems as entities in competition with Robinson Crusoe's fictional world. However, these modern renderings are never so neatly drawn. More often than not, writers use these alternative Crusoes to forge lines of affiliation and empathy, between the eighteenth century and our own time as well as between different regions and languages. Argentinean, Caribbean, and African Crusoes are in conversation with one another as much as they are in dialogue with the historic Defoe. Writers around the globe adapt and transform Crusoe and Defoe's novel to establish a literary web of connection that has come to define our own global moment where fiction travels beyond national and linguistic borders. In this chapter I will move through a few observations on nineteenth-century Crusoes before delving into the twentieth-century map of literary islands crisscrossing the globe.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | English Language and Literature

Comments

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ANN MARIE FALLON

Anti-Crusoes, Alternative Crusoes: Revisions of the Island Story in the Twentieth Century

Everyone thinks they know the plot of *Robinson Crusoe*. The story of the man who is shipwrecked on an island alone is ubiquitous and feels deeply familiar, even for those who have not read it. *Robinson Crusoe* has been plagiarized, cannibalized, and serialized almost since the moment it hit the streets of London in 1719. Here is a passage from an Argentinean novel by Victoria Slavuski published in 1993 that captures the sense of familiarity and also the distance twentieth-century readers have in their relationship to *Robinson Crusoe*: "On days like these we promised each other that at long last we would take the time to read the copy of *Robinson (Crusoe)* that each household kept alongside the Bible and *Twenty-five Ways to Prepare Lobster*, written on Juan Fernandez by Amelita Riera. Nobody got past page fifteen of *Robinson* and almost nobody opened the Bible."¹

Literary critics often treat the multitude of twentieth-century versions of Crusoe as antagonistic to Defoe's character. They tend to consider contemporary novels or films or poems as entities in competition with Robinson Crusoe's fictional world. However, these modern renderings are never so neatly drawn. More often than not, writers use these alternative Crusoes to forge lines of affiliation and empathy, between the eighteenth century and our own time as well as between different regions and languages. Argentinean, Caribbean, and African Crusoes are in conversation with one another as much as they are in dialogue with the historic Defoe. Writers around the globe adapt and transform Crusoe and Defoe's novel to establish a literary web of connection that has come to define our own global moment where fiction travels beyond national and linguistic borders. In this chapter I will move through a few observations on nineteenth-century Crusoes before delving into the twentieth-century map of literary islands crisscrossing the globe.

Writers create surrogate visions of Crusoe as well as anti-Crusoes, and by making Crusoe unfamiliar, they interrupt our comfortable assumptions about *Robinson Crusoe* as well as about our own world where we find

ourselves isolated on islands, circumscribed by our expectations or by our political circumstances. It becomes easy in all these revisions to start to conflate *Robinson Crusoe* the novel with Robinson Crusoe the character; conflation is often part of the point, the book and the character frequently merge through references in contemporary fiction. Part of the late twentieth-century aesthetic is to be supremely self-conscious in the way one borrows, adapts, or reworks materials. Because *Robinson Crusoe* is often considered the first English novel, retelling the novel allows writers to create alternative histories of colonialism, racism, and other forms of oppression. These retellings also bring us closer to Defoe's Crusoe and his Friday; complex stories can often create new empathetic ties to Defoe's novel and his early exploration of isolation.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so many reiterations of *Robinson Crusoe* were published that it became a separate genre, the *Robinsonade*. Especially in France and Germany, the story of a young boy who is cast away and self-educated on an island held tremendous appeal for writers and readers. The scenario seemed to contain an ideal pedagogical model; children could be raised, like the hero of Rousseau's novel, *Émile* (1762), far from the corrupting influence of society. Even whole families could escape this corruption!

Der Schweizerische Robinson (1812, by the Swiss pastor, Johann David Wyss, translated into English in 1816 as *The Swiss Family Robinson* by William Godwin) took a whole nuclear family to an isolated island where they develop a familial self-reliance. The Robinson Crusoe figures marching through these adventure stories frequently seem to be much more confident and quickly self-sufficient than Defoe's Crusoe. They easily survey the island, build shelters, plant crops, cook, sew clothes, conquer native cannibals and pirates until they successfully escape the island to rejoin society but with a profound new sense of inner values. They are not seduced by society's corruption, and they are also usually the objects of some great material windfall. The creative time of exile on the island is rewarded spiritually and materially.

The references to *Robinson Crusoe* in these titles function as both marketing tool and touchstone. As Lucy Ford says of her 1837 novel, *Female Robinson Crusoe, A Tale of the American Wilderness*, the title was meant to generate interest in this "not uninteresting" narrative.² Like other female Crusoes in the nineteenth century, Ford's character deviates from the confident explorer. The Crusoe Ford paints for us is tremulous and shy. Her descent into the wilderness to escape savages finds her ill-equipped to build the most basic shelter or find any food in the forest: "I actually looked with longing eyes upon the flesh of my own hands and arms, as

victuals appropriate to gorge my cannibal desires.”³ Here the cannibalism that appears first in Defoe’s novel and lives through nineteenth-century Robinsonades turns inward to self-consumption.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Crusoe crosses over from realist explorer to modernist hero and that reflects a changing readership. The Crusoe Virginia Woolf draws for her readers in her 1919 essay on *Robinson Crusoe* is a far cry from the swashbuckling adventurer of earlier Robinsonades. Her Crusoe is most interested in pots: “Thus Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitudes of the human soul.”⁴ Rather than drawing a portrait of Crusoe as a man intent on subduing the island to his will, Woolf emphasizes a Crusoe intensely focused on the problem of throwing pots, an enterprise feminine and domestic in nature. Woolf domesticates Crusoe but she also humanizes him for a new generation. Gertrude Stein picks up this thread in her very brief allusion to Crusoe at the end of her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it.”⁵ Stein not only domesticates Crusoe, she makes him the equivalent of Alice B. Toklas. In these gestures, both Stein and Woolf bring Crusoe into greater intimacy with the twentieth-century reader.

In the second half of the twentieth century alternative and antagonistic Robinson Crusoes, and a few Fridays, abound. The versions of Robinson Crusoe who appear in these pages are often quite distinct from one another and yet they seem as often to be referring to one another as they refer to Defoe. Some writers deploy Defoe’s novel as a textual referent in order to make political or aesthetic points. Robinson Crusoe appears as a significant character or the novel is cited in representative ways in the following texts: Muriel Spark’s *Robinson* (1958), Nadine Gordimer’s short story, “Friday’s Footprint” (1960) in her collection of the same name, Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi et les limbes du pacifique* [*Friday and the Limbo of the Pacific*] (1967), Sam Selvon’s *Moses Ascending* (1975), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1977), Bessie Head’s “The Wind and a Boy” (1977), Derek Walcott’s play *Pantomime* (1978), Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, “Crusoe at Home” (1979), Julieta Campos’ *El Miedo de perder a Euridice* [*Fear of Losing Eurydice*] (1979), Jane Gardam’s *Crusoe’s Daughter* (1985), J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986), Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1993, revised edition), Marianne Wiggins’ *John Dollar* (1989), Victoria Slavuski’s *Música para olvidar una isla* [*Music for Forgetting an Island*] (1993), Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* (1994), and Yann Martel’s *The Life of*

Pi (2001). The Crusoes here range from a middle-aged English housewife to a young Indian boy marooned in a boat with a tiger.

In *Vendredi*, *Foe*, and the poem "Crusoe at Home," Tournier, Coetzee, and Bishop reimagine Defoe's story in the early eighteenth-century context and in doing so create new potential lineages for Crusoe, fictions going beyond the colonial fantasy of the nineteenth century. In Tournier's novel Crusoe's island becomes an anti-Western idyll. Crusoe learns to be appalled by European colonialism and violence, as he reverts to a kind of Edenic state of nature. He literally copulates with the island, producing flowers from his semen. Friday joins him on the island adventure but ends up running off with their would-be rescuers while Crusoe chooses this time to stay behind and reject Western civilization. Coetzee's Crusoe, written in South Africa almost twenty years later, is a bitter curmudgeon who dies in the first part of the novel after rescuing another castaway, Susan Barton. *Foe* then follows Susan Barton to London where she stays in the apartment of the elusive writer, Daniel Foe. Bishop's Crusoe is an old man reflecting nostalgically on his life on the island from the comfort of his English retirement. These very different Crusoes imagine a new story in three fairly distinct versions of both the island and London. The island story they imagine generates an alternative history. In Tournier's account, Crusoe opens himself to greater creative and personal freedom. No longer constrained by religion, he is a hero for the twentieth century. Tournier strips Crusoe of his colonial tendencies and creates a figure possessing cultural and religious tolerance. Especially in the context of the 1960s, this embrace by Tournier of a counter-cultural Crusoe transforms the story for a contemporary audience.

Coetzee's revision is more complicated and demonstrates the compromised position of any writer of fiction. Coetzee's severe and uncommunicative Crusoe, a man who refuses to plant crops or to keep the journal we have come to rely on as central to the Crusoe myth, suggests yet another pathway from the eighteenth century to our own time. Coetzee points to a violent legacy of oppression and deliberate silencing. The Friday in Coetzee's novel has had his tongue cut out of his head and it remains unclear if this is the work of Crusoe or of slave traders. When Susan Barton picks up the thread of the Crusoe story and carries it with her to London with the intention of writing and publishing her own castaway story, Coetzee puts into motion an alternate history for Crusoe not focused on the character but on the text itself. The novel, not Robinson Crusoe the character, is the entity under scrutiny. We see Coetzee take a variety of perspectives on who actually gets to be the subject (or the object) of the novel and who gets to tell the story. The letters and journals Susan compiles and leaves for Foe are presumably the "raw materials" this new fictional Defoe compiles later, offstage. Coetzee's

portrait of the novelist evokes an author who edits and elides, who never appears directly on stage and yet silences dissident voices in order to create a singular authoritative voice. For a writer working at the height of apartheid in South Africa, this statement about the inherent dangers, elisions, and silences involved in the creative writing process is a powerful testament to writing under oppression. Coetzee directs our attention away from Crusoe as a hero of modern individualism and toward the otherwise invisible victims of it.

Elizabeth Bishop gives us Robinson Crusoe as an old man looking back on his island adventure and thereby offers a metaphor for the author struggling against the weight of the past. "My brain/bred islands," says this nostalgic Crusoe in describing his obsessions as well as his deep loneliness until Friday appears on the scene. The Crusoe in this poem is a stand-in for the poet who reproduces islands and tries to mark them with his/her own mark. At one point he describes trying to mark a baby goat with red for a change of scene, a move that backfires when the mother goat rejects her offspring. The most resonant metaphor in the poem becomes Crusoe's knife, another instrument he uses to try to inscribe himself on the island: "The knife there on the shelf – /It reeked of meaning, like a crucifix/ ... My eyes rest on it and pass on."⁶ The knife reeks of meaning, holding all the multiple levels of meaning Bishop wants it to contain. The knife speaks to the problem of trying to distill or even control what Crusoe means in the midst of all of the reproductions that emerge even as writers try to make their individual marks with him. Like Coetzee, Bishop wants to continue to use Crusoe as a metaphor for the modern writer but also underline how problematic it has become to ask this Crusoe to stand in for just one thing, when generations of writers have reshaped what he seems to stand for.

So far I have discussed writers who rewrite Defoe's novel within an eighteenth-century context. Other writers introduce the Crusoe character into a contemporary scene. In having Crusoe walk among us they emphasize a greater intimacy with the text and its problems. They have characters play Crusoe within their texts or have characters named Crusoe or Robinson introduced into the story, usually walking around in the background, appearing at key moments. These stories might also have characters recognizable as Robinson Crusoe traveling through the text. Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime* (1978) is one of the most important examples of this type of revision. Set in Tobago, *Pantomime's* main character is Trewe, a white innkeeper at a failing resort (aptly named The Castaway) who decides to stage a pantomime of *Robinson Crusoe*. He asks his black handyman to play Crusoe and he decides to play Friday. After some initial hesitation, Jackson the handyman agrees. Act 1 is devoted to a rehearsal, which goes

seriously awry from Trewe's perspective, as Jackson improvises his new role and renames Friday, Thursday. Act II is devoted to the aftermath. Trewe argues that he meant his little play to be a light comedy, Jackson makes it very clear that reversing race relations in the Caribbean is a serious matter. The "minor" act of reversing the characters' racial identification changes the entire political spectrum. This is especially true in Tobago in 1978, fewer than twenty years after independence. Jackson asks Trewe to imagine fully the implications of his little pantomime:

He (Crusoe) comes across this naked white cannibal called Thursday, you know. And then look at what would happen ... This cannibal, who is Christian, would have to start unlearning his Christianity. He would have to be taught ... I mean ... he'd have to be taught by this African that everything was wrong, that what he was doing, I mean for nearly two thousand years was wrong ... and what we'd have on our hands would be ... a play and not a little pantomime.⁷

Simply reversing racial roles of course has profound political implications. The Crusoe Walcott (and Jackson) consequently creates for the stage is a black man who is enlisted to save the white Christian from 2,000 years of misguided violence.

Another Trinidadian writer who reverses the Friday/Crusoe partnership during the same period is the novelist Sam Selvon in his novel *Moses Ascending* (1975). Moses is an immigrant to England from Trinidad who decides to purchase a boarding house in Shepherd's Bush, then a poor London neighborhood, and rent out rooms to other even more recent immigrants. Moses fashions himself as a Robinson Crusoe castaway in his boarding house and hires his own man Friday, a white man from the Midlands. In his journal, Moses writes of him: "He was a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man. In no time at all he learn to cook peas and rice and to make a beef stew ... I decided to teach him the Bible when I could make the time."⁸ The comedy of Selvon's novel is that Moses himself is in complete denial of his own racial oppression. Members of the Black Panthers stage futile debates with him until he is finally exiled to his own basement by the end of the novel. Whereas in Walcott's play, the two main characters are able to come to a sort of rapprochement with their dual and equal roles as actors, Moses has a more fraught ending. He imagines himself as the master novelist, but he is instead a failed and unreliable narrator in a first-person novel.

The island is as much a character as Crusoe or Friday in many re-visitations of Defoe's novel. In Julieta Campos' experimental fiction, *The Fear of Losing Eurydice* (1979), a French schoolteacher, Monsieur N, sits in a café and sketches an island on his white napkin. This picture of an island

opens up to a host of other related island images: "Island: The sum of all improbabilities; intoxicating improbability of fiction. Island: image of desire ... All islands formulated by human beings and all islands appearing on the maps comprise a single imaginary archipelago – the archipelago of desire."⁹ Monsieur N's initial plan to use a Jules Verne novel about shipwrecked schoolboys as a translation exercise for his pupils becomes an obsession to collect every reference to islands he can find and to meditate on them in a diary of his imaginary travels – his "Islandiary," or island book. This island collection is interrupted by a love story developing in the marginalia of the book's pages. The desire, for the island, for love, for freedom, manifests itself on a napkin in a Caribbean café.

The archipelago I trace in this chapter, like Monsieur N's islandiary, connects each story to the next, a chain linking all of them with familiar boundaries and characteristics. Each island remains familiar and yet, in their dissimilarity and their changing contours, they transform the literary and political geography of *Robinson Crusoe*. We recognize Crusoe in our own time but subtly changed. Like so many of the characters we've seen, Monsieur N begins to lose control over his island vision. The story printed in the margins becomes surrounded by other literary quotations and eventually overtakes Monsieur N's singular vision.

Campos' text builds around images rather than plot. She layers associations. The image of an island sketched on a white napkin becomes just as significant – if not more so – than the islands, real and imagined, that are catalogued throughout the text. The islands themselves are connected only by free association. Free association as an ordering principle creates a freedom of movement between geographic and textual spaces. In Monsieur N's islandiary, Campos creates new islands and questions the status of old literary islands. She creates a poetics of relation between the dislocated New World space the island represents in the Caribbean café and the dislocations of postcolonial and postmodern experiences we will see along the way. Like the other writers in this chapter she imagines that, as in *Foe*, "the world is full of islands."¹⁰ This Islandiary is also a metaphor for rethinking literature through comparative reading practices. Campos is writing at the cusp between Caribbean decolonization as represented in Selvon and Walcott and the postcolonial movement that follows. A Cuban exile living in Mexico, Campos uses the metaphor of islands to examine Cuba as an isolated island. But she also wants to trace relationships between literatures. Literature and literary influence are connected like an archipelago of influence, she argues by analogy. They are not one system of call and response between British writers and the former colonies. Instead, they are equal parts on a chain of literary influence. The archipelago eliminates the image of hierarchy,

meaning that writers from South Africa influence Caribbean writers as much as British ones. The chains of influence stretch in multiple directions and follow different tides.

While Campos maps our world of islands through the 1970s, we have glimpses of Crusoe wandering into other novels of the 1980s, including Jane Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter* (1985), Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1993), Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* (1994). These apparitions of Robinson Crusoe feel ghostlike and insubstantial. Individual characters suddenly stumble into Crusoe's ghost or into a minor silent character who admonishes the main character into remembering something shared but apparently forgotten. In Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Robinson Crusoe is a hermit who exiles himself to an island in the middle of the reservation. He wears his clothes on backwards and shares the island with hundreds of cats. A minor character who never speaks he nonetheless acts as a link in the middle of the novel to the past, a quiet figure protected from the violence elsewhere in the novel and also part of it in the sense that he fathers children who carry the narrative but then he distances himself from these children and their community. This Crusoe is at once unreachable and patriarchal, he founds a familial line but refuses to be integrated into the community. This elegiac figure is repeated in Cormac McCarthy's bleak novel set on the Mexican-American border, *The Crossing*. Robinson Crusoe is once again a hermit in a ruin, far from civilization and, tellingly, surrounded by cats. The central protagonist of *The Crossing*, a young boy named Billy, has left his family to return a captured wolf to Mexico. He encounters the Crusoe-like hermit in the very center of the novel, which is also the very center of McCarthy's trilogy. The hermit invites the boy in for breakfast and begins to tell him about the ruined church in the middle of this ruined town and his own search for God. The old man had been a priest and he bore witness to the death of another man, a wanderer who had lost his son and gone looking for God. "In the end," he says, "we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace" (159). With no further explanation, at the end of this almost mystical encounter, Billy decides to return to his family. The novel though, does not end with reconciliation or renewal. His brother and father die. Coming back out of the desert the detritus of modernity greets him. He comes out of a primitive isolated and ruined landscape and eats out of sardine cans, he crosses highways and the hulks of ruined airplanes. The Crusoe of this novel is a figure at a crossroads between the pre-modern and the modern, between a reliance on God and a loss of faith. He is standing, in some sense, as we do, between a desire for some eternal meaning and our clear knowledge of the violence and destruction we live with.

Robinson Crusoe is part of a quartet of characters in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. These four characters, Hawkeye, the Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael, are four Native American elders who have escaped from a mental institution. Each of them also represents an ancient Native American mythic woman and they take turns telling creation stories in short vignettes interspersed between chapters. The novel jumps from these creation stories back to multiple plot lines involving family members in and around the Blackfoot reservation near the Canadian/US border. The plot culminates in the final destruction of a dam running in the middle of the reservation and the return of the river to its native course, a return that also results in one of the central character's homes being swept away. The Crusoe that ultimately emerges from this narrative is a Native American elder. Crusoe here is a mythic holder of ancient wisdom as well as one who foretells major catastrophes. Unlike Coetzee's stoic and even cruel Crusoe or Walcott's changeling representation, this Crusoe reinterprets and channels Native American identity.

The haunting quality of these Crusoe figures is brought home in a slightly different way in Jane Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter*. Polly Flint, daughter of a sea captain, is orphaned and left to live in her aunt's house, where she discovers the book, *Robinson Crusoe*. Polly carries the book with her over the course of the twentieth century as she survives wars and depressions. In the final chapter Crusoe himself appears to her and they hold a debate about the merits of Defoe's novel and Crusoe's legacy. This version of Crusoe is probably the most akin to Defoe's Crusoe, if only in the sense that Gardam's character seems to mimic Defoe's language and speech, although its framing of Crusoe attempts to establish a matrilineal succession for Defoe's novel. Polly Flint is Crusoe's daughter, his literary successor. The text of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* shapes and directs Gardam's work. Polly is constantly compared to Crusoe; she uses his story to help navigate the moral thickets of the Holocaust and nuclear disarmament. Crusoe's moral clarity, with his lists of good and evil, becomes a basis for judging her own actions. Gardam, however, begins the novel with a quote not from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* but with an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's essay on Crusoe, "The pressure of life when one is fending for oneself alone on a desert island is really no laughing matter. It is no crying one either."¹¹ Beginning with Woolf's interpretation of Crusoe rather than Defoe's text suggests once again the creation of a divergent legacy for *Robinson Crusoe*. Rather than seeing him through the lens of early eighteenth-century colonialism or New World conquest, here he is diverted again to a legacy beginning with British women writers from the turn of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most obvious versions of Robinson Crusoe in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fictions and films are the castaways. In the film *Cast Away* as well as Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*, the screenwriter and the novelist respectively recreate a Robinson Crusoe-like story in the modern world. Rather than being images of Robinson Crusoe walking through the modern city, these characters experience instead the island castaway narrative. There are many versions of this particular fantasy, from *Gilligan's Island* to *Crusoe on Mars*. Some of these versions are discussed in Chapter 14 in this volume. I focus on *Cast Away* and *The Life of Pi* because they pose the problem of what it means to be isolated individuals in our own global moment; a moment quite similar to Defoe's experience if only in terms of the rapidly changing sense of the expanding world in the early eighteenth century as the British first established the nation of "Great Britain" and began to found overseas colonies in competition with the Spaniards in the Americas.

The contradiction of being alone in the midst of crowds was as familiar to Defoe as it is to us. London in the early eighteenth century was a city teeming with new urban-dwellers and Defoe wrote his story of isolation in the midst of this unwieldy and heterogeneous population. Cynthia Wall has argued that the deserted island, counter-intuitively perhaps, is yet another representation of London in that time, a place where one struggled to feel at home in the midst of its rapidly changing contours.¹² In the film *Cast Away* a FedEx agent, Chuck Noland, played by Tom Hanks, is the only survivor of a plane crash who washes ashore on a deserted island. Since he has drifted far from the wreckage, rescuers give up their search and he is left on the island for four years. Noland manages to survive using the detritus washed up from the airplane, packages with all the random stuff of consumer culture in the twenty-first century. He even imagines that a volleyball is his Man Friday. Eventually he is able to rescue himself by using the tin of a port-a-potty that floats ashore. He had been unable to build a raft with enough weight and momentum to propel him beyond the surf. The tin becomes a sail and finally gets him beyond the white water. This Crusoe doesn't critique but rather is dramatized by the film as adapting with contemporary materials to Defoe's original creation. He seems in many ways one of the truest reincarnations of Defoe's Crusoe, transported to a modern setting. Like Crusoe, efficient from the outset of the film, Noland tracks time and goods precisely. By reinventing Crusoe as an American executive, director Robert Zemeckis and writer William Broyle recreate the Crusoe story in terms of contemporary capitalism. Rather than founding a colony, or finding salvation in God, this new global American version of the castaway employs the detritus of consumer goods to make his escape. Unlike the other Crusoes we have looked at so far who seek to found alternative legacies for

Defoe's hero, this film translates the story into a contemporary setting and in doing so re-establishes its relevance. Crusoe/Noland is deeply sympathetic, translated to our own time, his basic values and perspectives intact.

The Life of Pi is the story of a young Indian boy who is shipwrecked in a boat accompanied by a tiger. Our young friend is a contemporary Crusoe figure as well, but rather than being a replica, he embodies an apparently new kind of globalized self. Setting sail from India with his family, en route to Canada when the ship sinks, Pi ends up drifting around the globe in a narrative that also drifts from magical realism to ordinary realism. Like Noland, Pi represents a modern re-inscription of the castaway story. To be cast away today, these narratives suggest, is not qualitatively different from what it was to be cast away in the early eighteenth century. One is simultaneously intensely isolated and struggling to survive and yet at the same time constantly reminded of connection. Placing the island on a boat emphasizes the sense of globalized motion inherent in the modern experience. While Defoe's Crusoe moved restlessly across the globe in the early part of his book, he is stuck in one place waiting twenty-eight years for someone to find him. But Pi is stuck in motion, drifting the globe and yet somehow always out of touch with any other ship or continent. He is reduced to basic bodily survival in a lifeboat with a tiger that may or may not turn out to be real. Pi is a mathematical constant, the ratio of the circle's circumference to its diameter, which is also an irrational number. To see Pi the boy as both irrational and constant, a reinvention of Crusoe who is also a constant and irrational figure in the global literary stage, is once again to emphasize Crusoe's legacy as a modern myth in transit.

Alternative and anti-Crusoes abound, but they are character re-enactments rather than rejections. This textual legacy of *Robinson Crusoe* becomes a much stronger theme in the work of Marianne Wiggins, Victoria Slavuski, and Julieta Campos. These three writers have bits and pieces of Crusoe-like characters drifting through their narratives, but much more prevalent is an abiding interest in Defoe's book. Characters experience the shock of recognition when they experience a Crusoe-type moment, and they then stand in for the readers who also stumble upon passages that are deeply familiar but made unfamiliar by the context. Wiggins very nicely encapsulates this problem of recognition in her novel, *John Dollar*. Wiggins not only cannibalizes the story of Crusoe; she literally has her horrifying schoolgirls eat her central character, John Dollar, a Crusoe stand-in. The real problem in Wiggins' novel, however, is that everyone is already immersed in the *Robinson Crusoe* narrative:

Everyone who stepped ashore that day (except the bearers) had either read or heard the story of *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, so there was

that, that sense of exhilaration which comes when one's life bears a likeness to the fictions that one's dreamed plus there was the weighty thrill of bringing light, the torch of history, into one more far-flung "reach of darkness."¹³

British colonialism is being satirized in this passage. Wiggins' schoolgirls attempt to understand their lives through the legacies of British fiction. Stepping ashore is participating in fiction, living in it. Wiggins' re-enactment of this colonial scene reconnects the reader to the history of British colonizing; everyone (including readers) experiences the thrill of recognition in fiction. The overwhelming desire "for the fictions one's dreamed" threatens the development of female characters throughout *John Dollar*. When the young schoolgirls eventually resort to cannibalism, the act is a horrific literalizing of the colonial project of consumption of natural resources.

While everyone on Marianne Wiggins' island has heard and read the story of *Robinson Crusoe*, no one in Victoria Slavuski's Argentinean novel, *Música para olvidar una isla* [*Music for Forgetting an Island*; translation mine] (1993), has actually read the novel. This failure, something alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, emphasizes the problems of differentiating truth and fiction as well as memory, especially under political oppression. These characters are like many contemporary readers in their failure to read at all, let alone read carefully. Slavuski's characters live or spend their vacation on Alexander Selkirk's "real island" off the coast of Chile and are familiar enough with the history of the novel to debate among themselves the details of Defoe's account versus histories of Alexander Selkirk's abandonment on this particular island. The novel follows a US anthropology student finishing writing her dissertation about Selkirk's island. She makes friends with another woman who is producing a documentary about the island. They in turn become connected to various inhabitants, some of whom are political dissidents. The characters engage in long debates about the relationship between Selkirk and Defoe/Crusoe. Finally, they stumble into magical grottoes, which reveal different aspects of the island's past to different observers. Slavuski's narrative techniques and her title emphasize the problem of memory and truth in the face of political oppression.

Translation in Slavuski is an act whereby a text is possessed, moving it from one language and one cultural context to another. Translation in this sense becomes not just a linguistic act of transference; it is a metaphor of crossing, a linguistic act of creating new narrative territories. One character claims the name Robinson Crusoe is just the English translation of Selkirk.¹⁴ Translation becomes a political act of appropriation. Slavuski returns often to the idea of an authentic castaway, whose history has been undermined by Defoe/Crusoe. Several characters spin conspiracy theories about the ways that Defoe stole and translated Selkirk's work. Characters in the novel

constantly revise the various histories of the island for themselves as a way of resisting censorship and military oppression. These multiple stories add to an increasing sense of claustrophobia on the island. No one can invent an original story just as no one can escape from their political fate as the military approaches the island and prepares its invasion.

Crusoe's island is translated by Slavuski into a modern-day temporary refuge from political, spiritual, and romantic difficulties. The military ultimately orders everyone off the island just as Defoe says he has "done with" the island. In the end, the layers of narrative history and loss are overwhelming. All the main characters walk around lamenting their fate and quoting Alexander Selkirk, "Beloved island, I never should have abandoned you." Slavuski recognizes both the futility of the island and the impossibility of letting it go.

As with the other modern versions of Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe* operates as the central textual touchstone – every household keeps a copy of the novel alongside their family Bible. In Slavuski's novel, the irony is that all the central characters are obsessed with the history of *Robinson Crusoe*, even as they are unwilling to read the actual text. Like the Bible, *Robinson Crusoe* is ubiquitous. Furthermore, the book by the only native islander, *Twenty-Five Ways to Prepare Lobster*, also referred to in this passage, seems like an oblique commentary on revision itself, twenty-five different versions of the same lobster. Slavuski's narrative enacts the increasingly thick layers of cultural and literary meaning that have piled up over Crusoe's island. The novel acts out in miniature the premise of this essay: multiple stories, including postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist ones, have transformed the boundaries of Defoe's original island. Placing *Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible together on the bookshelf, alongside a recipe book for lobsters, establishes a small canon of island reading. *Robinson Crusoe* is both global and local.

"Where are you Robin Crusoe? Where are you? Where have you been?"¹⁵ Six years into his twenty-eight-year island habitation, Robinson Crusoe wakes up to a disembodied voice asking for his whereabouts. The voice turns out to be his trained parrot. The question itself haunts twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature as novelists, playwrights, poets, and filmmakers from around the globe call back to Defoe's novel, echoing the mimicry of Crusoe's Poll the parrot. Much of the criticism of revisions of *Robinson Crusoe* frames the relationship between the eighteenth-century novel and its successors as adversarial, the new and improved revisions pitted against the original text, colonialism versus postcolonialism, slavery versus freedom, realism against abstraction. Yet the proliferation of Crusoes, and indeed the search for that nebulous island, goes on, suggesting that what we

have before us is not a struggle between two potential alternative readings of Crusoe but really an altogether new way of mapping how we understand and read literature in motion across the globe. We are still searching for Robin Crusoe not because we know what he means or what he stood for in the early eighteenth century but because with each revision he has come to mean something new again. We recognize the island everywhere and nowhere as each new generation of writers renders the familiarity of Crusoe unfamiliar again.

NOTES

- 1 "En días como ése todos nos prometíamos que por fin íbamos a aprovechar para leer el Robinson que junta polvo en cada casa de la isla junto a la Biblia y al Veinticinco maneras de prepara una langosta escrito en Juan Fernández por Amelita Riera. Nadie pasaba de la página quince de Robinson, casi nadie abría la Biblia." Victoria Slavuski, *Música para olvidar una isla* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1993), 12.
- 2 Lucy Ford, *Female Robinson Crusoe, A Tale of the American Wilderness* (New York, NY: New York, 1837), 1.
- 3 Ibid., 22.
- 4 Virginia Woolf, "Robinson Crusoe," reprinted in *Robinson Crusoe: An Authoritative Text, Context and Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1994), 287.
- 5 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 237.
- 6 Elizabeth Bishop, "Crusoe at Home," in *Geography III* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 17.
- 7 Derek Walcott, "Pantomime," in *Remembrance and Pantomime: Two Plays* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 126.
- 8 Sam Selvon, *Moses Ascending* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1984), 4.
- 9 Julieta Campos, *The Fear of Losing Eurydice*, trans. Leland Chambers (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), 102.
- 10 J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin Books), 71.
- 11 Jane Gardam, *Crusoe's Daughter* (New York, NY: Europa Editions, 1985), 8.
- 12 Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 195.
- 13 Marianne Wiggins, *John Dollar* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1989), 69.
- 14 Slavuski, *Música para olvidar una isla*, 347.
- 15 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. John Richetti (London: Penguin, 2003), 113.