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“To dream of a wildness distant from ourselves”: Capitalism, colonialism, and the Robinsonade

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ABSTRACT

Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* holds an iconic position, not solely as a work of literature, but also for its influence in economic and social theory. This article reflects on this influence by mobilizing Charles Mills’s concept of epistemologies of ignorance and Lorenzo Veracini’s work on psychological defence mechanisms in settler colonial societies. This theoretical framework motivates a close textual analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* that focuses particularly on four textual strategies: paired contrasts between Xury and Friday that frame enslavement as a sacrificial act; strategic use of “cosmopolitan” ideals; a theory of subjection as the foundation for legitimate power; and moral relativisms that rationalize Crusoe’s theft of Indigenous land. This analysis then provides the foundation for an original interpretation of Marx’s *Capital* as a critically inverted Robinsonade: one designed to demonstrate how global relations of colonial expropriation generate a crucible in which a particular imaginary of autonomous individuality is forged.

KEYWORDS

Robinson Crusoe;
Robinsonade; settler
colonialism; epistemologies
of ignorance; Marx; Daniel
Defoe

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such [...]. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord, i.e. than I import into it.

(Thoreau [1906] 1962, 1063)

Daniel Defoe’s ([1719] 2007) novel *Robinson Crusoe* holds an iconic position in both literature and economic and social theory.¹ Its tale of a European castaway, isolated and reliant on his individual industry, has provided a metaphor for human economic activity stripped back to its most essential features. The term “Robinsonade” was coined soon after the original publication to refer to works of literature that feature the adventures of individuals or small groups who become separated from established society.² The application of the Robinsonade imaginary to social, economic, and political theory quickly followed, associated particularly with simplified models of social behaviour that claim to strip away the confusing and contingent complexities presented by real-world social practices. Among these complexities are the oppressive colonial relations that are complexly present – and disavowed – in Defoe’s text.

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This article analyses how such disavowals manifest in *Robinson Crusoe*. It focuses particularly on defensive textual strategies that the novel mobilizes to distance its protagonist from the colonial context that is nevertheless intrinsically intertwined with his adventures. I draw particularly on philosopher Charles Mills's (1997, 2007) concept of "epistemologies of ignorance", and Lorenzo Veracini's (2010, 75–94), analysis of the "paranoiac" psychology of settler colonial societies, as well as the works of a wide range of scholars who have highlighted anxieties expressed in specific dimensions of Defoe's text (Donoghue 1995; Ellis 1996, 1996; Fallon 2011; Fuchs 2020; Heims 1983; Hulme 1986; Lifshy 2010; Loar 2006–07; Marzec 2002; McNelly 2003; Seager 2019; Watson 2017; Wheeler 2000). This literature offers a foundation for a close reading of key passages from *Robinson Crusoe* that illustrate a symptomatic denial of colonial oppression. This close reading, in turn, helps to illuminate how a critique of the Robinsonade is structurally central to the first volume of Marx's *Capital*.

Guilt, denial and epistemologies of ignorance

Mills (2007) usefully problematizes the common opposition of ignorance and Enlightenment, arguing that "Ignorance is usually thought of as the passive obverse to knowledge, the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment" (13). When trying to understand the cognitive impacts of structural inequalities, however, Mills argues that it is better instead to

Imagine an ignorance that resists.

Imagine an ignorance that fights back.

Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly— not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as *knowledge*. (13; original emphasis)

For Mills, structures of racial and gender privilege generate "epistemologies of ignorance" – forms of knowing that produce untruths and systematic blind spots alongside knowledge (23–29). Mills's concept resembles Michel Foucault's (1980, 37–54) argument that all forms of knowledge implicate determinate power relations. Foucault has been criticized, however, for performative contradiction – for offering a critique whose standpoint is never explained within the critical analysis (Habermas 1990, 238–265). Mills (1997, 2007, 23–28), by contrast, emphasizes the need to account for a standpoint of critique in a way that can also demonstrate how we can know that active forms of ignorance are incorrect.

Veracini's (2010) work on settler colonialism adds a psychological dimension to Mills's framework, analysing what Veracini calls the "paranoiac dispositions characterising the settler colonial situation" (75). As Veracini argues, "Settler projects are inevitably premised on the traumatic, that is, violent, replacement and/or displacement of indigenous Others. However [...] settler colonialism also needs to disavow any foundational violence" (75). In Veracini's framework, this need for disavowal generates psychological defence mechanisms that, I argue, can be understood as a major motive force for the aggressive suppression of knowledge thematized by Mills's concept of epistemologies of

ignorance. Although this article does not directly deploy Veracini's Lacanian framework, it shares his focus on denial and disavowal as key psychological dynamics, and applies these concepts to a close reading of symptomatic features of Defoe's text. In so doing, it contributes to a broader literature that thematizes colonial anxiety, unease, and guilt in *Robinson Crusoe* (Donoghue 1995; Ellis 1996, 1996; Fallon 2011; Fuchs 2020; Heims 1983; Hulme 1986; Lifshy 2010; Loar 2006–07; Marzec 2002; McNelly 2003; Seager 2019; Watson 2017; Wheeler 2000).

Specifically, this article analyses *Robinson Crusoe* as a defence of colonialism that takes the ironic form of an idealization of individual self-sufficiency.³ This analysis, in turn, casts light on the structural centrality of what could otherwise appear to be a passing reference to Defoe's work early in the first volume of Karl Marx's [1867] 1990 *Capital*. This reference signals that, architectonically, *Capital* can be read as an inversion of the Robinsonade – as a critical demonstration of how ideals of individual autonomy arise as necessary moments within a global colonial system that contradicts and undermines the realization of such ideals at every turn. In other words, *Capital* provides a model for how it is possible to explain the genesis of specific critical ideals without performative contradiction, by also accounting for the generation of distinctive epistemologies of ignorance.

To set the stage for this argument, this article first explores four textual strategies through which Defoe symptomatically denies and displaces guilt over colonial oppression:

- (1) Paired contrasts between Xury and Friday, which together frame slaveholding as a non-instrumental – even sacrificial – act of the slaver.
- (2) Strategic use of “cosmopolitan” ideals to position Crusoe as a context-transcendent moral arbiter.
- (3) A theory of subjection as the foundation for legitimate power.
- (4) Moral relativisms that attempt to rationalize Crusoe's theft of Indigenous land.

The aim of analysing each strategy is to draw attention to the enormous energies the text mobilizes to preserve the illusion of Crusoe's self-sufficiency – and, by extension, to guard and protect the ignorance of readers who are themselves the beneficiaries of colonial oppression.

Luxury goods

Although Friday is one of the most iconic characters in *Robinson Crusoe*, he does not enter the novel until two-thirds of the way through (Defoe [1719] 2007, 170). Friday provides Crusoe's first human companionship after more than two decades of complete isolation; yet he receives relatively little narrative space before the story introduces a series of new characters, and Crusoe then departs the island. Friday's unique relationship with Crusoe is further minimized by Crusoe's prior relationship with Xury (21–31), and by the sheer expanse of the story in which Crusoe contentedly lives without any human relationships at all, but with only his “family” of domesticated animals (e.g., 125–126, 152, 163). Structurally, however, the novel betrays that Friday is much more central, with key story elements best understood as psychological defence mechanisms mobilized to rationalize Crusoe's relationship to Friday.⁴

Crusoe's adventures begin when he rejects the advice – and associated wealth and comfort – that his family offers and sets out to make his own name in the world (Defoe [1719] 2007, 9). He soon ends up enslaved, eventually escaping through his own ingenuity. In the process, he invites another slave – Xury – to come with him (18–21). Crusoe considers the option of drowning Xury – and, indeed, threatens to do so if Xury will not serve him faithfully (21–22). Crusoe's power over life and death tacitly rationalizes his eventual decision to sell Xury into servitude. During their escape, Crusoe and Xury both express a great terror of “natives”, who are presumed to be cannibals, even though in practice they prove helpful, not hostile (24, 27).⁵ While the narrative makes clear that this assistance is charitable – Crusoe and Xury have nothing to trade – the text takes great pains to contrive a means for them to repay their benefactors by saving their lives (27). In their travels, Crusoe and Xury also manage to collect several objects not required for their personal survival, but sufficiently valuable that, once rescued, Crusoe can sell them for enough money to secure land in Brazil (26, 28, 30–31). One of these “objects” is Xury – whose very name, one suddenly realizes, has all along hinted that he is a *luxury* for Crusoe.

Crusoe's relationship to Xury is presented as exploitative and paternalistic – but also as mutually instrumental. Xury offers advice that Crusoe follows and openly acknowledges as sound (Defoe [1719] 2007, 23), and Xury even spots the ship that rescues them (29). Once they are rescued, however, their unequal racial status allows Crusoe to treat Xury as one of the objects in his possession. Implicitly, the instrumental nature of their relationship also permits Xury to be indifferent to a change of master. The text takes care to specify that Crusoe does not sell Xury into slavery, but into indentured servitude of finite (if lengthy) duration – provided he convert to Christianity before his period of servitude expires. Xury obligingly consents to the exchange (30). Xury's “consent” plays a double role in the text: it rationalizes Crusoe's treatment of Xury by confirming that Xury has no personal commitment to Crusoe, but it also elevates Crusoe's later “non-instrumental” relationship with Friday.⁶ Crusoe nevertheless experiences both regret and guilt over this transaction – he suffers for want of Xury's labour, first on his plantation and again in the aftermath of his shipwreck, and he worries at various points that perhaps the act of trading Xury for money was not morally justified (30–31, 106).

At the point that Crusoe encounters Friday, by contrast, he has been fully autonomous, self-supporting, and comparatively happy in his isolation for over 24 years. Still, his security has recently been threatened – not by any direct hostilities, but by his own fears of what local cannibals might do if they discover him (Defoe [1719] 2007, 152–155). The text hints that the cost-benefit ratio might have led Crusoe to remain in his comfortable solitary existence forever, but for two fortuitous events. The first is another shipwreck, which Crusoe witnesses and then explores, finding no survivors. This experience renews his longing for human companionship and reawakens his desire to escape the island (157–159). The second is his dream – implicitly providential – suggesting that rescuing one of the cannibals' victims would provide Crusoe with a willing servant to assist his final escape from the island (167–168). Crusoe thus begins planning in earnest to confront the cannibals. When the opportunity next presents itself, he risks himself to save Friday, gives him a new name, teaches him a new language, and converts him to a new religion. While Crusoe had previously trained his parrot to call him Robin (121, 152–153), he teaches Friday a different name: Master (174).

As the text portrays these events, acquiring a servant serves little instrumental purpose: it places Crusoe at great personal risk, runs down his food stores, and increases his personal labour (Defoe [1719] 2007, 168–169, 175–176, 179–180). Significantly, it is Friday who initiates a relationship of servitude, prostrating himself and placing Crusoe’s foot on his own head – twice, in fact: once immediately after his rescue, and again once he had eaten and rested (171–172, 173–174). Crusoe later offers Friday the opportunity to return to his own people: Friday refuses and makes clear he regards the offer as a punishment (189–191). Friday then travels with Crusoe – leaving his own father behind (209, 233) – when Crusoe returns to Europe. Once in Europe, Crusoe retains Friday even when he must also hire a new servant because Friday lacks appropriate skills (243). Crusoe’s relationship with Friday is therefore presented as essentially non-instrumental, with both sides staying together out of a reciprocal commitment to a master–slave relation. Structurally, the text presents Crusoe as sacrificing his idealized autonomy and independence – his whole self-sufficient existence on the island – to save Friday. Through this sacrificial act, Crusoe sets in motion a chain of events that leads to his return from the ranks of the presumed dead and his resurrection into European society. Friday’s indefinite servitude is figured here as a Christlike act of charitable service – a sacrificial surrender of personal autonomy and freedom – by the slaver.

Of cannibals

The structural pairing of Xury and Friday – and the associated contrast between instrumental and non-instrumental motivations for enslavement – is reinforced by textual strategies that sever Crusoe’s wealth from overt connection to the labour of others. So important is this goal that the text contrives for Crusoe to lose his fortune repeatedly, becoming a “self-made man” many times over. This pattern begins when he severs ties with his family. It repeats when he becomes a slave himself and then escapes to start a plantation in Brazil (having only his own labour to rely on after having unwisely traded Xury). Finally, it repeats again when he is shipwrecked while on a mission to purchase slaves for his fellow plantation owners. Once back in Europe, Crusoe seeks out the accumulated profits from his Brazilian plantation (Defoe [1719] 2007, 235–237). Since these accrued entirely in his absence, it would be difficult to call this “self-made” wealth. Still, the text takes great pains to distance Crusoe from personal profit from the slave trade. Crusoe duly learns that, after he went missing, trustees became responsible for his assets in Brazil. The trustees are described as having no personal interest in the money due to their own great independent wealth. They decide, in Crusoe’s absence, to allow a monastery to use Crusoe’s share of the proceeds to fund its charitable operations until such day as he might return. The arrangement permits the monastery to retain any profits earned in the interim but obligates it to maintain the principal in trust. Thus laundered in good works and prayer, this money finds its way back to Crusoe, along with the title to his Brazilian estate.⁷

Crusoe’s position within a global colonial economy is visible at each of these moments – simultaneously explicit and disavowed. He is able to strike out on his own precisely because there is a socially given opportunity for a European man to operate as an autonomous individual within this broader global framework, leaving behind family ties and positioning himself within networks of global trade.⁸ The narrative embeds him

in such networks – even positioning him as a willing participant in the slave trade on multiple occasions – while still contriving that his wealth appear to derive solely from his individual industry.⁹

In Crusoe's various interactions with "savages" – in both Africa and the Americas – the text similarly explicitly acknowledges the murderous barbarism of colonialism. At least in its Spanish and Catholic form, Crusoe condemns colonialism outright (Defoe [1719] 2007, 145). At the same time, the text presents the various Indigenous peoples with whom Crusoe interacts as radically unfamiliar with European technologies, and therefore as not meaningfully embedded in colonial relations.¹⁰ Repeatedly, Crusoe succeeds in terrifying Indigenous people who have never seen a gun, and therefore cannot work out how he is managing to kill at a distance (28, 178). His own engagements with Indigenous populations are therefore isolated from the broader network of colonial violence and appropriation.¹¹ This strategy enables Crusoe's reflexive fear of Indigenous populations to be explained, not as fear of their strategies for self-defence, or even of their possible retaliation for past atrocities, but rather as horror at their uncivilized customs – particularly cannibalism. Defoe's narrative variously shows Indigenous peoples engaging with complex technologies – sailing, transporting water and goods, cooking, and using diverse instruments of war. Yet, cross-continently, they remain apparently innocent of clothing, and they lust after the consumption of human flesh (24, 27, 175–181, 204). With no obvious means of long-distance communication, Indigenous peoples appear nevertheless to have achieved an admirable global cultural homogeneity – a phantasmagoric mirror-image of the "civilized" global networks of the European colonizer.

Cannibalism provides Crusoe not only with a rationalization for his paranoia, but also a valued occasion for demonstrating his open-mindedness and cosmopolitanism.¹² When Crusoe first discovers that his island is also used by cannibals for murder and the consumption of human flesh, he flies into a righteous rage and his initial impulse is to plot their destruction (Defoe [1719] 2007, 142–143). On reflection, he resolves that their behaviour is a "National" matter – no worse in its own context than any European government's decision to execute its own criminals.¹³ Lacking exposure to the Christian religion, the cannibals are unaware of moral prohibitions on eating human flesh – who is Crusoe to punish them for this infraction, if God has not punished it Himself? At the same time, the cannibals have done no specific harm to Crusoe: what justification does he have for taking their lives? (144–146). In these passages, the text engages in a complex dance of relativism and re-inscription of European superiority. On the one hand, the text satirizes European parochialism – tacitly from the perspective of the global system, with its godlike indifference to the diverse and arbitrary customs that global trade must navigate. On the other, it condemns the murderous colonialism of Spain – without, however, surrendering the claim that white Europeans are objectively superior to their colonial charges. Thus, when Crusoe and Friday witness mutineers bringing prisoners onto the shore, Friday jumps to the conclusion that the mutineers are planning to use the island for a cannibalistic ritual.¹⁴ Crusoe responds:

Why, says I, Friday, Do you think they are going to eat them then? Yes, says Friday, they will eat them: No, no, says I, Friday, I am afraid they will murder them, indeed, but you may be sure they will not eat them. (211)

Europeans may be murderers – but you must concede they have civilized taste.¹⁵ Subtly, Crusoe is again compared to God – this time, in how he adopts a detached view that transcends the “National” customs of his cannibal neighbours.¹⁶ He responds only to the extent required to protect himself from their predations. He secures his various properties and stores up supplies, but otherwise seeks no retribution. His own wealth is thus presented as *sui generis* and self-contained – albeit under constant threat from “outside”. His fortifications and artillery are thus figured, not as acts of expropriation, but as forms of passive self-defence against potential external aggression. As to the motive for that aggression: no doubt it lies in the unfathomable internal dynamics of barbaric nations.

A more perfect subjection

Friday enables Crusoe to create a limited form of human society, fully under Crusoe’s control. The text dangles the possibility, however, that Friday could provide the means for Crusoe to leave the island, not to return to Europe, but to join an Indigenous community that is coexisting peacefully with European survivors from another shipwreck. Friday is keen for Crusoe to serve as a missionary to his people, and Crusoe is keen to make contact with the European castaways (Defoe [1719] 2007, 189–191). They begin to construct a boat capable of carrying them on this journey (191–193). This plan – whose realization could potentially break the Eurocentric imaginary of the text – is duly disrupted, sparing Defoe from entering the imaginative space of an Indigenous community existing for itself and on its own terms, rather than as the backdrop for European horror or control. Instead, a new encounter with the cannibals fortuitously delivers two new members for Crusoe’s little society: a European survivor of the recent shipwreck, and an Indigenous person who turns out to be Friday’s father (194–204). Crusoe is thereby spared the need to travel personally to Friday’s island: he acquires delegates to send in his place, and, instead of himself joining an existing multi-ethnic community, he extends an invitation for others to form a new community on his island (209). The text thus retreats from the challenge of imagining an alternative, non-colonial, relationship between European and Indigenous populations.

Similarly, the text evades considering what sort of social community might have formed on the island, given a sudden influx of new settlers. Instead, before Crusoe’s guests can arrive, the narrative is again hijacked – this time by the story of mutineers who choose Crusoe’s island to deposit their captives. Crusoe intervenes – and suddenly finds himself mobilizing, not just military tactics, but shared cultural assumptions about British governmental, judicial, and administrative institutions – to thwart the mutiny and earn his passage back to the European core (Defoe [1719] 2007, 210–234). This timely piece of heroism spares the text from having to consider what sort of social organization would potentially succeed the solitary Crusoe, autonomous and independent on his island. While the text seems motivated to avoid direct discussion of this question, nothing implies that Crusoe has seriously contemplated any basis for legitimate government, other than complete personal subjection. Reciprocal trade relations are certainly acknowledged throughout the text – with Crusoe dealing very honourably with a wide range of potential creditors. Such relations are not presented, however, as the basis for a broader society, but rather as contingently negotiated instrumental relations between autonomous equals. With Xury, the text explores the possibility that

consent rationalizes inequality, and yet is sufficiently dissatisfied with this solution that Crusoe expresses discomfort with it. Crusoe seems most content with the idea that inequality could be legitimate if it arises as an alternative to death. He reflects:

My People were perfectly subjected: I was absolute Lord and Law-giver; they all owed their Lives to me, and were ready to lay down their Lives, *if there had been occasion of it*, for me. It was remarkable too, we had but three Subjects, and yet they were of three different Religions. My man *Friday* was a Protestant, his Father was a *Pagan* and a *Cannibal*, and the *Spaniard* was a Papist: However, I allow'd Liberty of Conscience throughout my Dominions. (203)

By contrast to these perfect subjects, the castaways invited to join the island community more closely resemble Crusoe's own condition when he first arrived on the island. While the castaways' existence is certainly precarious – and no doubt their security and comfort would improve on joining Crusoe's little community – there is no reason to expect that they would perceive themselves to owe Crusoe their lives. Their subjection would never be so perfect as Crusoe has achieved with the tiny community of people whose lives he has personally saved.

By removing Crusoe from the island before the new castaways arrive, the text avoids having to consider how the division of labour and power is to be resolved in this newly formed society. As in many future Robinsonades, the resolution to this problem occurs offstage, in the silence between the paragraphs. The text makes only brief allusions to conflicts between the Spaniard castaways and the exiled mutineers, which are described as having resulted in a relatively stable class stratification by the point that Crusoe later returns for a brief visit (Defoe [1719] 2007, 257). The origins of one form of inequality, however, do not need to be hidden between the paragraphs. The text provides direct evidence that, while Crusoe might describe each of his subjects as perfectly subjected, they were not for all that *equally* subjected. Crusoe notes, for example, that

At the same time I contriv'd to encrease my little Flock of tame Goats as much as I could; and to this Purpose I made *Friday* and the *Spaniard* go out one Day, and my self with *Friday* the next Day; for we took our Turns ... (208)

We took our turns. Yet somehow in this rota, Friday does not appear to get a day off. What, then, are “we” taking turns at doing? Not catching goats, certainly ... The turn-taking seems to refer to something else, something at which the Europeans – for all their differences of religion, language, and nation – are uniquely suited. Supervising Friday's labour, perhaps.

Terra nullius

The question of the legitimacy of inequality – and of property – arises well before Crusoe has visible subjects to rule. Implicitly, it has haunted the text from the moment Crusoe finds himself stranded on his island. For an extended period, no rational reason is given for Crusoe to think he is not alone – and, indeed, early on he gives up serious hope of rescue. His first action, nevertheless, is to construct a series of elaborate fortifications (Defoe [1719] 2007, 51–69).¹⁷ He maintains and extends these, even after experience shows that the island has no animal predators to concern him. Many of his defence strategies – such as entering via a ladder that he pulls up behind him and attempting to

make his fortifications blend into the natural environment – make little sense against animal threats, and even actively expose him to danger from earthquake (69, 99, 136–137, 176). Yet the text insists that, for 15 years, Crusoe has no reason to suspect that other humans might regularly be accessing the island.

Coexisting with this paranoia, Crusoe simultaneously appears oblivious to obvious evidence of prior human habitation. He reads nothing into the fact that goats live on the island – nor does he wonder why, on an island that appears to have no predators larger than foxes, goats immediately show fear of both him and his hunting dog (Defoe [1719] 2007, 53, 65, 93). He treats it as a happy accident that the island also features sugar cane, tobacco, and aloe, alongside a wide variety of commonly cultivated fruits, all conveniently concentrated in the same central region (84–86). He never explicitly considers – even after encountering evidence that others regularly sail to the island – that the island is so amenable to his “industry” because it has been previously cultivated by other people.¹⁸ This denial of any prior human role in the fertility of the island is so strong that it even carries over to his own introduction of European grains, which he plants “accidentally” when dusting out an old grain bag, and then initially interprets as the spontaneous product of divine intervention (67–68). The incident suggests a high proclivity to perceive valuable resources as arising fortuitously and spontaneously – without serving any practical purpose prior to European cultivation. Crusoe thus understands himself to be making productive use of resources that have somehow appeared by mysterious providence. All increase in productivity from that starting point may then be understood as the result of his actions alone.

In a particularly vivid example of Crusoe’s paranoia, after 15 years alone on the island, he sees a single footprint in the sand (Defoe [1719] 2007, 130–137).¹⁹ He immediately retreats in terror and panic to construct additional fortifications and build up his food storage – spending two years on this project before he feels comparatively secure. This reaction is particularly striking because he never considers that the footprint might suggest a potential for rescue or companionship – and only belatedly checks whether he might be seeing an old footprint that belongs to himself. The intensity of his emotional response implies a powerful insecurity and fear of illegitimacy – and an immediate reflex to defend his claim both by asserting his autonomy from the immediate environment and by extending his capacity for violence. This paranoid reaction is then retrospectively rationalized by Crusoe’s subsequent discovery that his island in fact contains a hidden shore that he had thus far missed in all his explorations. The whole time he has engaged in peaceful husbandry and improvement of his island, cannibals have been landing on his island to feast on their victims. His bountiful and peaceful island had all along housed a hidden charnel house, strewn with human bones left over from barbaric feasts (139–140).

The discovery of the cannibal shore is one of the most directly apologist passages in a text whose structure is already heavily determined by its apologism. On the one hand, it shows Crusoe to be strangely oblivious to the details of his island property: he has somehow managed not to notice for 15 years that not only is the island part of the territory of another people, but it is also in regular use. His obliviousness plays several distinct roles. First, it makes his usurpation of other people’s land unintentional and innocent (Defoe [1719] 2007, 139, 148). Second, it implies that any other use of the island cannot possibly be very regular – otherwise Crusoe would have noticed it before or, since he was taking no pains to conceal himself, the cannibals would have noticed him (140–

141, 155–156, 163–166). Third, it implicitly compares his potential crime of usurping property to the much greater moral sin of cannibalism (140). On the other hand, when Crusoe later decides to “forgive” the cannibals for the “National” evils that they do in ignorance of their wrongdoing, the implicit logic is that he should likewise be forgiven for what is surely the much less heinous crime of unintentional theft (144–146). This remission of colonial sins is already set up in the scene in which Crusoe discovers the cannibal coast. Overwhelmed with emotion, Crusoe tearfully thanks God for enabling him to be born in “a Part of the World where I was distinguish’d from such dreadful Creatures as these” (140) – the part of the world, that is, whose greatest crime is that it steals land it honestly mistook to be fallow and uncultivated. And perhaps enslaves or kills the inhabitants. In any event, we can be confident that it refrains from eating the dead. Crusoe’s conscience is clear. Now he just needs to secure his property.

Towards a critical Robinsonade?

The forms of denial analysed above are not solely of interest for literary analysis. When social, political, or economic theory evokes a Robinsonade, similar forms of denial are often tacitly imported into the theory. The consequence – as Mills analyses in relation to social contract theory – is a powerful epistemology of ignorance that specifically undermines knowledge of racialized structures of power. This final section builds on Mills’s framework to explore an unusual critical mobilization of a Robinsonade in the first volume of Marx’s [1867] 1990 *Capital*. I argue that Marx sets out to invert political economic Robinsonades – not by demonstrating that they are false, but rather by showing how the specific oppressions constitutive of global colonialism simultaneously generate political ideals of equality and individual freedom that prime the plausibility and appeal of Robinsonades. In this way, Marx attempts to develop a critical theory that enables him to call out oppressive social relations, while also accounting for the social production of his own critical ideals – the specific combination of tasks, in other words, that Mills establishes as central to overcoming epistemologies of ignorance.

In its opening chapters, *Capital* remains largely within the social contractarian space favoured by political economy: free exchange of the products of labour by autonomous producers, which Marx sarcastically describes as “a very Eden of the innate rights of man [...] the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” ([1867] 1990, 280). By the end, however, the text stands squarely in the realm of the oppressive application of state power, levelled simultaneously through the regulation of marginal populations in the core and genocidal campaigns in the colonial periphery (873–942). In between, Marx punctures the vast epistemology of ignorance that normally obscures the intrinsic connection between the forms of thought and practice set out in his opening and closing chapters.

Marx introduces Crusoe in his analysis of the fetish character of the commodity, where he draws explicit attention to Crusoe’s popularity among political economists and mockingly describes him as a model of “simple and transparent” economic relations ([1867] 1990, 170). Marx’s tone is needling and sarcastic, poking fun at Crusoe’s religious exertions, and drawing attention to the fact that – isolated though he may be – Crusoe carries over to his isolated island the social conventions of his nation: “having saved a watch, ledger, ink and pen from the shipwreck, he soon begins, like a good Englishman, to keep a set of books” (170). These social conventions would not have arisen

spontaneously: they express Crusoe's own distilled experience of British society. Crusoe may be alone, but he is entirely socialized before he comes to be isolated. It is this very social and historical specificity, indeed, that makes Crusoe useful for Marx's critique.

Marx quickly moves on from an explicit discussion of "Robinson's island, bathed in light", but the remainder of *Capital* systematically assembles the materials to connect that island to a global network of relations with colonial expropriation at its core. At first, the relation is only hinted at from the margins of Marx's text.²⁰ Footnotes offer sarcastic and sceptical asides or suggest counter-intuitive comparisons between European economic practices and the unfamiliar customs of purportedly uncivilized peoples. Before long, monstrous and phantasmagoric imagery begins to intrude into the main text – metaphorical and hallucinatory images drawn from folklore; vampires and werewolves and shapeshifters of all sorts haunt Marx's depiction of industrial production.²¹ By the end, this phantasmagoria itself gives way to a cold and sober portrayal of the concrete actions of capitalist industry, documented in plain text by state officials – no less monstrous for prosecuting its case in factual prose. Relentlessly, Marx's text demonstrates how the major vector for the contemporary production of barbarism lies, not in some savage margin, but right at the heart of the industrial core.

By the later chapters of *Capital*, particularly in his discussion of "so-called primitive accumulation", Marx ([1867] 1990) sarcastically revisits social contractarian accounts of how originary freedom devolves into forms of slavery and domination, and characterizes such accounts as an economic application of the Christian concept of original sin. Political economy posits that humans are naturally equal in their original state; unfortunately, through the debased actions of some mythical ancestor, there has been a fall (873). Somehow this fall necessitated the development of unequal property relations, thereby setting in motion a chain of events that bars any return to the Eden in which wealth might be equally distributed again. The whole system, however, is presented as being fundamentally just and legitimate, because purportedly derived from a primeval state of human autonomy.

For Marx, this apologetic Robinsonade pervades political economic theory. He regards it as an inverted or mirror image understanding of the real historical process, but he also believes that its pervasiveness provides important clues for making sense of the complex and counter-intuitive process by which capital is reproduced. *Capital* is structured to take the readers through this looking glass, so that they can see the historical process the right way up, and thereby transcend the deranged image of social relations presented in political economic theory. By starting within the Robinsonade of political economy, Marx intends to explode political economy from within. Piling up counter-example after exception after contradiction, he aims to demonstrate the aggressive ignorance required to sustain the naive vision of capitalism as a system fundamentally and essentially grounded on personal freedom. Along the way, he makes regular use of the imagery of Enlightenment – only to debase it with terms drawn from anthropological analyses of purportedly primitive and uncivilized societies.²² It is no accident that Marx's own term of choice for political economy's distinctive epistemology of ignorance is the "fetish" – an anthropological term for a material object onto which "primitive" religions arbitrarily confer mystical value ([1867] 1990, 163–177).²³

The overall structure of Marx's text remains poorly understood.²⁴ The nature of its object – a system of knowledge that actively produces ignorance – has proven remarkably

resilient in blunting, confusing, and redirecting readers, who quite regularly arrive at conclusions opposite to those Marx set out to prove. The Robinsonade that is the object of Marx's critique is a pervasive framework for making sense of our economic and social institutions. Thinking against this grain is difficult, and the often oppressive application of Marx's work attests to the challenge of creating critical analytical frameworks that can counter processes that actively produce distinctive forms of ignorance.

In this context, a close engagement with *Robinson Crusoe* can serve a useful clarificatory function for political and economic theory – but not because it provides a simple and clear model for our most essential social relations. Instead, it provides a particularly accessible illustration of the intense struggle to preserve ignorance of the violence at the heart of civilization. It makes readily available the vast network of rationalization and denial with which Marx is wrestling in *Capital*. At the same time, *Capital* can cast light on *Robinson Crusoe*'s iconic literary status by showing how the work is much more than a simple diversion or innocent entertainment. Through its juxtaposition of Robinson's island "bathed in light", with the graphic violence of its account of primitive accumulation, *Capital* makes explicit the oppressive nature of the aggregate social relation that Defoe is struggling to deny.²⁵ It re-situates Defoe's fantasy of the self-sufficient individual within the context of a complex global system that helps to generate the illusion of individual self-sufficiency by severing persons from certain kinds of social bonds, while enmeshing them in a much more intricate set of connections that are global in scale, and barbarous in their results.

Read together, the two texts highlight the role of denial – not just as an individual psychological dynamic, but as a collective social one. If *Robinson Crusoe* operates to protect its readers from the realization that they are implicated in colonial barbarism, *Capital*, by contrast, seeks to confront its readers with the intrinsic interconnections between such barbarity and their most cherished ideals. Through this analysis, Marx attempts to rupture the apologetic force of the Robinsonade, while analysing the profound structural transformation that will be required to realize ideals of autonomy and equality on a global scale. In the process, he provides a model for analysing the production of forms of ignorance as part and parcel of the process by which distinctive forms of domination are reproduced. Through the structure of the argument, Marx indicates that emancipatory transformation requires epistemological as well as practical labour. Without this combination, we risk channelling political energies into the creation of an isolated island of illusory freedom that remains blind to the production of its own barbaric shore.

Notes

1. This status developed over time: cf. White (2011). For a discussion of the work in historical context, see Richetti (2005, 174–233). See also Yazell et al. (2021) on social science citations to the work, although Horwitz and Skwire (2020) argue that recent economic texts reference it less.
2. Schnabel ([1731] 1997) is generally credited for coining the term; cf. Grapard and Hewitson (2014) on its influence.
3. Cf. Loar (2006–07); Hulme (1986).
4. See also Wheeler (2000, 63–81), Hulme (1986, 205), and Watson (2017) for a sense of the changing racial understanding of Xury and Friday.

5. On Crusoe's fear of cannibalism, see Ellis (1996), Heims (1983), and Hulme (1986).
6. Lifshy (2010) similarly notes that Xury tends to be underemphasized but serves a key role in establishing the text's understanding of the master–slave relation.
7. Fuchs (2020) similarly explores what is being omitted from the discussion of Crusoe's absentee wealth accumulation in Brazil.
8. Cf. Watt (1957, 60–92), Hymer (1971), and Hutnyk (2020).
9. On the role of colonialism in shaping the novel as a literary form, see Said (1994) and, with specific reference to *Robinson Crusoe*, McInelly (2003). Cf. Fallon (2011) for an analysis of more recent revisionist approaches to the text, driven by anxieties about developing post-colonial identities in the wake of decolonization.
10. Hulme (1986, 185) notes the implausibility of “uncontacted” people in the areas where Crusoe is travelling. See also Donoghue (1995).
11. Loar (2006–07, 4) sees this as symptomatic of a broader disavowal of colonial violence. Seager (2019) analyses Defoe via Rawson's (2001, 12; original emphasis) concept of quasi-satirical “not *not meant*” endorsements of colonial violence.
12. Ellis (1996) discusses cannibalism as a trope in *Robinson Crusoe* and other works.
13. Cf. de Montaigne ([1580] 1877, chap. 30).
14. Crusoe converts Friday from cannibalism by cooking a tasty goat stew and roast. The implicit theory seems to be that Friday eats human flesh because he has never tried anything else (Defoe [1719] 2007, 177–179).
15. In other works, I have argued that this form of argument can insinuate itself even into works that are attempting to be critical (Pepperell 2016).
16. Both Weber (2002) and Marx ([1867] 1990, 172) are struck by how this kind of abstract detachment is associated with both Protestant Christianity and international capital in this period.
17. Hulme (1986, 193–196) contrasts this ungrounded paranoia of cannibals with Crusoe's response to demonstrated risks such as earthquakes.
18. Cf. Hulme's (1986, 186) discussion of the colonial imaginary that such fertile land would have been untended prior to Crusoe.
19. Cf. Lifshy (2010), following de Certeau (1984, 154), on the metaphors of spectres and phantoms that express the raw paranoia the footprint evokes.
20. For more detail on the textual basis for this reading, see Pepperell (2010, 2012, 2018).
21. For other recent analyses of this imagery, see Reddeman (2015) and Roberts (2016).
22. On debasement as a strategy in Marx's work, see Pepperell (2014).
23. For a detailed discussion of the history of the fetish concept, see Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988, 1993).
24. For more on the architectonic structure of *Capital*, see Pepperell (2010, 2011).
25. See also Hymer's (1971) more detailed examination of *Robinson Crusoe* in light of Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation, as well as Fuchs (2020).

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