

# Role Reversals and Permeable Bodies in the Modern Robinsonade: From Postcolonialism to Ecocriticism

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## *Abstract*

This essay argues that the particular lens of Bakhtinian body theory as developed for the Robinsonade by Rebecca Weaver-Hightower will help to shed light on a process observable over the past fifty years, in which colonial and postcolonial authors first embraced and then quickly abandoned the technique of role reversal in drafting their castaway stories. Enamoured of its comedic potential, Adrian Mitchell wrote *Man Friday* (1973). Derek Walcott was somewhat more circumspect in his *Pantomime* (1978), based on the realisation that role reversal demands the ascription of univocal roles and identities, something he did not see in evidence in the creolised world of the Caribbean. Later colonial and postcolonial writers such as J. M. Coetzee and Patrick Chamoiseau were then at pains to avoid questions of identity altogether, making epistemology and discourse their preferred topics. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the clichéd identities formerly applied to Indigenous peoples (physical strength, close connection to nature) could be brought to bear on the idea of nature itself, thus making animal Robinsonades such as *Life of Pi* (2001) and *The Red Turtle* (2016) tremendous successes that could forgo the messiness of human affairs and simply champion the everlasting superiority of nature over civilisation as an expression of contemporary environmental preoccupations.

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Although in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Friday does end up wrestling a bear (Defoe 1994: 213), thus proving his physical prowess, Daniel Defoe's

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novel is generally ambivalent about his physicality,<sup>1</sup> sometimes presenting him as an unimposing man, at other times lauding his physical feats. It is well worth going back and taking another look at descriptions of Friday when Robinson first encounters him. What emerges is a mixed picture: a sense of a certain robustness ('tall', 'manly', 'plump', Defoe 1994: 148–149) vies with ideas of refinement, as when Robinson describes him as 'a comely handsome fellow, perfectly well made' and displaying 'all the Sweetness and Softness of an *European* in his Countenance' (Defoe 1994: 148, italics in original text). It is this duality present in Defoe's text that makes it possible for later observers to discern in Friday a varied character: either the epitome of the meek servant or an embodiment of physical prowess. The same goes for Friday's intellectual abilities, where he is sometimes portrayed as childlike and naïve and at other times as canny and inquisitive. My essay considers the modern history of the balance of power between castaways and their sidekicks based on a specific set of criteria and on a timeline encompassing a number of texts of the past fifty years.

In investigating these relations, my essay is less interested in the Robinsonade as a faithful rendering or linear reinterpretation of a single text in every instance but as a tradition in and of itself. What is meant by that is that in these discussions, Defoe's eighteenth-century novel is not an immediate parent text each and every modern writer explicitly refers back to but rather the founding document of a tradition that may in its development deviate significantly from that document, instead perpetuating a simplified, polarised notion of the distribution of power between coloniser and colonised. In assessing these power relations, two concepts in particular will be brought to bear on my reading of these texts: the first is the Bakhtinian idea of the disciplined body, in an extension of the way Rebecca Weaver-Hightower has already applied the notion to Robinsonades of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second is

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<sup>1</sup> This ambivalence is characteristic of *Robinson Crusoe* in other respects as well, given that Defoe's protagonists 'reveal how they adapted to their circumstances, how they modified actuality as they encountered it and constructed personal versions of 'reality' (Richetti 2008: 121). This means that even *Robinson Crusoe*, with its single narrator isolated for long stretches of time, provides various points of view in that it presents the reader with a narrator *in situ* on the one hand, and an older and wiser voice making retrospective sense of events. For an elaboration of this point, see Gill (2019: 145–146).

the narrative and—in some of our examples—dramatic technique of role reversal. While the idea of role reversal may be self-explanatory and will be illustrated by means of an example from the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of the disciplined body may require some elaboration. Taking her cue from Bakhtin, Weaver-Hightower posits that ‘textual depictions of [what Bakhtin calls] grotesque bodies stress their openness, with gaping orifices (mouth, nose, eyes, genitals) and protruding parts (belly, nose, buttocks, mouth, phallus, breasts, tongue, teeth)’. As she elaborates, ‘[t]exts often portray grotesque bodies’ boundaries (including boundaries between the body and the outer natural world, and between the body’s inner and outer spaces) as more fluid’ (Weaver-Hightower 2007: 142–143). In island narratives, these grotesque bodies are traditionally ascribed to Indigenous people, ‘while the disciplined colonist is “closed”’ (Weaver-Hightower 2007: 142). Weaver-Hightower is here principally concerned with openness and closedness vis-à-vis the island’s harmful influences:

In short, the texts show the colonist as having the ability to close his body boundaries to exclude dangerous elements, just as he has the ability to bring the objects he desires within those boundaries, yet the indigene, who lacks such discipline and command over his body boundaries, also lacks this ability to resist infection from the island. (Weaver-Hightower 2007: 142)

It is clear that this addresses preoccupations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers of colonial texts with ideas of miscegenation and of ‘going native’, the question of how to resist succumbing to the decivilising, degenerative influences of life among supposed ‘savages’, of not reverting back to a state of nature. For a look at texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, texts written from a less monolithic perspective, I would like to expand the concept of open and closed bodies to some degree, and—as this is one more step away from Bakhtin’s original treatise—the terminology here will be adjusted to the extent that I will speak of *permeability* and *impermeability* (see Weaver-Hightower 2007: 143) where the various bodies of castaways and companions are concerned. After all, rather than looking at only the potentially harmful environment and its influence on humans (where, in a way, the native people are seen as fully absorbed by nature and thus part of it), I would like to think about openness and closedness between coloniser and colonised. Surely, while the coloniser’s continued discreteness does not signal a change in meaning

under these terms, the colonised's bodily features discussed above might also signal an openness to the outside influence brought to the island by the supposedly civilised colonist. As will be seen, the technique of role reversal is maximally reliant on such binary identities: expectations need to be established before they can be thwarted.

*Classic role reversal*

Role reversal is of course a strategy of very little subtlety best suited to comedy, the mode in which the traditional order is temporarily usurped only to be restored by the end of the play or story, and in which social outcasts—what might traditionally have been thought of as the lower orders—temporarily gain in importance and agency. The classic example to reference here would be J. M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* (1902). In this comedy of manners, the household of the Earl of Loam find themselves stranded on a desert island. Crichton, their butler, turns out to be the only one capable of ensuring the family's survival by both his aptitude for menial work and his organisational talents. Taking charge of food supplies and house-building, Crichton soon becomes known as 'the Gov.' (e.g. Barrie 1995: 40, 42, 43), thus becoming not just the factual but also the titular leader of the community, adored by Lord Loam for what he has singlehandedly brought to the island: 'Out of half a dozen rusty nails. The saw-mill [...]; the speaking-tube; the electric lighting [...]. And all in two years' (Barrie 1995: 41). The company is rescued just before the new head of the household can be married to the Earl's daughter, Lady Mary, and through Crichton's self-sacrifice, normality is eventually restored. While there are no colonial others in the play, it shows that only the domestic servant has the mental wherewithal to keep the company alive. Most impressive, though, are his feats of physical strength, as in the case of one character reassuring another startled by a sudden noise: 'It is only Crichton knocking down trees' (Barrie 1995: 26). In fact, it is not the supposedly inferior butler's body that is shown to be open to new influences, impervious as it proves to be to all manner of challenges and outside influences encountered in this new environment of the castaway existence. It is in fact the collective body of the nobility that is threatened to be invaded by social upheaval, as is witnessed by Crichton's near-marriage into the aristocracy. While clearly concerned with domestic (in both senses of the word) matters within British society rather than questions of colonialism, the play offers an easy and playful template for

critical engagements with questions of power and perceived rank, and as such this basic recipe might be thought an apt means of critiquing the project of colonialisation and empire dominating many modern rewritings of the Crusoe myth.

*Postcolonial role reversal*

The most noticeable example of a straightforward role-reversing anti-colonialist Robinsonade is Adrian Mitchell's *Man Friday*, a play of 1973 (adapted for the screen by Mitchell himself in 1975 with Peter O'Toole and Richard Roundtree in the leading roles). In this play, tellingly called *Freitag und Robinson* in its German translation, everything that is assumed to be righteous and civilised on the part of Robinson is turned on its head to show that—in the final analysis—he is in every way inferior to the man whose culture he is attempting to colonise. In stark contrast to the increasingly godlike figure presented in Defoe's text (see Birdsall 1985: 29), Robinson is shown as greedy, selfish, duplicitous, hypocritical, and—perhaps most importantly—weak, his strength lent to him only by possession of his gun. In contrast to this image of the western coloniser, Friday is shown as honest and hardworking, community-minded and quintessentially identified with his collective, his tribe, and with the natural environment they inhabit. Most impressive of all, though, is his physical prowess. Again and again, the play's stage directions mark him out as easily besting Crusoe in various contests as in the footrace: 'Friday lopez along in an easy, flowing style [...]. Friday glides up' (Mitchell 1974: 19). Questions of athleticism aside, there is also the sheer joy inherent in Friday's movement, as in his football match against Robinson: 'Friday's feet are suddenly dancing behind and at each side of the ball, tap-dancing almost' (Mitchell 1974: 20). The final stage direction insists not only on Friday's individual physical gracefulness but that of his entire collective, his tribe: 'They [...] play their instruments, dancing at the same time. Everyone can dance' (Mitchell 1974: 44). Despite Robinson's best efforts, the impermeable body in this equation is not that of the western coloniser but that of Friday, whose unwavering integrity cannot be compromised by Robinson's efforts to 'civilise' him. Such a use of role reversal is of course full of humorous potential, and the laughs are firmly on the side of Friday, all jokes made at the expense of Robinson's weakness, ignorance, selfishness, and lack of suppleness. In the end, it is Robinson who actively wants to be assimilated by the tribe rather than

subjecting them to his influence. As in *The Admirable Crichton* seventy years before, role reversal is employed in what is obviously presented in the guise of a comedy. But even in this early example of comedic role-reversal in an anti-colonial context, a fundamental problem of the technique presents itself: comedic role-reversal is predicated on the idea of an order to which it would be desirable to return. But can it be the design of a text critiquing a situation to reconstitute the world in exactly that image? *Man Friday* avoids the idea of a return to colonial hierarchies by introducing an element of audience participation: the audience are encouraged to act as Friday's tribe and to vote on Robinson's adoption into the tribe or exile from it (Mitchell 1974: 43–44). This simple trick allows Mitchell to avoid the trap role-reversal would normally entail—namely, the expectation that roles must be swapped back in order to bring about a satisfactory ending.

Deeply conscious of the complications the deceptively simple trick of role reversal brings with it, Derek Walcott's Tobago-set play *Pantomime* (1978), rather than copying the technique, has its two principal characters discuss the staging of a play based on it. This strategy of metaisation allows *Pantomime* to have it both ways: it can use the comic potential of role reversal without in any way endorsing it as an adequate response to the realities of postcolonial life. In fact, it is Trinidadian hotel assistant Jackson Phillip's physical appearance that signals the hopelessness of applying the notion of role-reversal to Caribbean life. After all, for any reversal to take effect, the complexities of life in the Caribbean would first need to be reduced to monolithic roles and identities. But when Jackson is first described in Walcott's stage directions, we encounter him dressed in the following way: 'JACKSON, *in an open, white waiter's jacket and black trousers, but barefoot, enters with a breakfast tray*' (Walcott 2001: 132; italics in original text). This mixture of formal attire, on the one hand, and shoelessness, on the other, clearly signals his mixed identity: a Friday figure capable of leaving the fabled footprint in the sand, Jackson is also a waiter adhering to European etiquette when it comes to his dinner jacket. This mixed identity is further underlined by Jackson's use of language, as in this instance, in which he calls his supposed master to breakfast: 'Mr. Trewe? (*English accent*) Mr. Trewe, your scramble eggs is here! are here! (*Creole accent*) You hear, Mr. Trewe? I here wid your eggs! (*English accent*) Are you in there?' (Walcott 2001: 132). Jackson, then, represents a layered and mixed identity of which retired actor turned hotel manager

Harry Trewe is at first blithely ignorant. It is no coincidence, then, that it is Harry's plan to stage an adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* at the hotel, in which the roles of Friday and Robinson are humorously reversed. The Englishman seems incapable of acknowledging that the roles of coloniser and colonised, that is, himself and Jackson, are no longer univocally in tune with Defoe's original castaway story, their relationship less clear-cut than might be expected: while Harry is the owner of the hotel, humorously called 'The Castaways Guest House', his 'factotum' (Walcott 2001: 132) Jackson is far more experienced in running hotels; while Harry is primarily interested in rehearsing his theatrical entertainment, Jackson acts much more responsibly by reminding Harry of all the repairs needed to the hotel: 'Try giving them the basics: Food. Water. Shelter' (Walcott 2001: 133). And in the end, their wranglings over the play become emblematic of the postcolonial situation itself. At various points, each may gain the upper hand so that there is a degree of intermittent role reversal, particularly in the first act, in which their endeavours to exert their influence over the play they are to stage turns that version of the Robinson story into a hopeless hotchpotch of discordant styles and voices, of misunderstood roles and misguided empathy:

HARRY ... Mastah ... Mastah ... Friday sorry. Friday never do it again. Master.

(JACKSON returns with a breakfast tray, groans, turns to leave. Returns.)

JACKSON Mr. Trewe, what it is going on on this blessed Sunday morning, if I may ask?

HARRY I was feeling what it was like to be Friday.

JACKSON Well, Mr. Trewe, you ain't mind putting back on your pants? (Walcott 2001: 134)

In the second act, having gained a better understanding of each other's perspectives, the two manage to fuse their different voices into a much more engaging production than before, although this new configuration also throws up new disagreements with Trewe clearly jealous of the ease with which erstwhile calypso performer Jackson manages to embody a multiplicity of roles and voices. It is Jackson's physical presence and the way he seems comfortable acting out many roles which is at odds with Harry's continued insistence that Jackson act in only one clichéd role

ascribed to him by Harry: that of the calypso performer, a role Jackson is reluctant to embrace fully, especially at the instigation of a white English coloniser who seems to see in that role Jackson's only legitimate identity: 'It's pantomime, Jackson, just keep it light [...] Make them laugh' (Walcott 2001: 137).

In the end, the two men come to an understanding of the mixed nature of their respective roles that suggests a shared future, acknowledging the interdependence of erstwhile coloniser and colonised, and in the final line of the play, Jackson sees a way of bettering his immediate situation: 'Starting from Friday, Robinson, we could talk 'bout a raise?' (Walcott 2001: 152). There simply are no impenetrable bodies to be found in a postcolonial world, the play suggests, as each party is inevitably subject to the other's influences. Looking for monolithic identities, and thus roles that can be reversed, is an endeavour the ignorant and insensitive Englishman is keen to pursue at first, but even he has to realise the utter inadequacy of his simplistic approach when forcefully confronted with reality. Role reversal becomes increasingly difficult a tool to employ when what is being negotiated is the complex identities resulting from the colonial situation rather than the polarising clichés of right and wrong, black and white. After all, as Walcott reflects in an earlier essay, there is hardly any Indigenous culture to be found in the Caribbean: 'Yes. We are all strangers here' (1970: 17). As a result, all its inhabitants have to grapple with a multiplicity of identities and the question how best to embody them: 'Our bodies think in one language and move in another' (Walcott 1970: 31).

Following Walcott's simultaneous use *and* rejection of the idea of role reversal in *Pantomime*, other postcolonial writers seem to have forgone that facile recipe altogether, focusing instead on the epistemological question of whose stories are told and what can be known of anyone's identity in a postcolonial space. A classic text to consider here is, of course, J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), 'in many ways a novel about absence, the limits of the margin [in which t]he landscape of the text is continually marked by dislocations and absence' (Fallon 2011: 81). The most glaring absence in the novel is that of Friday. While his body is a constant presence lurking in the background, he is also painfully marked by the absence of his voice, having had his tongue cut out long before the start of the novel. With no voice to add to this novel about European male hegemony in storytelling, Friday excels in physical regards: while others squabble over



which story to tell, Friday performs silent rituals and dances, making his presence felt merely by use of his body. Said body—according to our extension of Weaver-Hightower’s use of Bakhtinian theory—ought to be massively receptive, subject to outside influences. The stump of Friday’s tongue marks a gap, an absence that could easily be filled by his colonisers’ influences, yet he proves intransigent when Susan attempts to teach him to write (Coetzee 2010: 145–152) or to explain to him the meaning of the word ‘A-f-r-i-c-a’ (146). Voiceless Friday is ignored throughout the novel, thus not exerting much of an influence on Crusoe, Susan, or Foe at all: ‘You have omitted Friday’, as Foe reminds Susan at the end of the book’s third section (Coetzee 2010: 152). And they in turn resist learning anything from his behaviour or anything of his story. The only reversal detectable in the novel is reserved for the final part which comes in the guise of a prophecy, a look to a time when people like Friday may finally find a way of expressing themselves fully. That expression, though, will not take the form of words as it will be set in ‘a place where bodies are their own signs’ (Coetzee 2010: 157). Overall, though, mutual resistance to (or ignorance of) influences is the name of the game in Coetzee’s novel, as characters are chiefly shown ‘vying for narrative control’ (Gill 2021: 4).

A text perhaps less familiar to anglophone readers is Patrick Chamoiseau’s 2012 work *L’empreinte à Crusoe*. This complex novel consistently withholds the assignation of any roles, as it seems to combine the identities of coloniser and colonised in a single amnesiac character in constant search of his own identity. While academics may refer to all of these texts as re-writings of the Crusoe myth, Chamoiseau has a very different idea, talking instead of the act of ‘desécrire’ (Chamoiseau 2012: 33): the *unwriting* of the western canon rather than its rewriting or a simple and bipolar ‘writing back’.

What these novels tell us is that the complexities of postcolonial life elude representation by simple means of role reversal. Seeing the world in terms of hard-and-fast roles is not an adequate response to centuries of complex history in colonial South Africa (Coetzee) or the postcolonial Caribbean (Chamoiseau) among other places. The very notion of attempting to write another’s identity is seen as deeply problematic in both of these texts. Looking back, it may be easy to identify perpetrators and victims, but looking forward, the only productive way of coming to terms with a (post)colonial identity is acknowledging its mixed nature, where

identities are contingent, multiple, and complex. That does not mean, however, that the technique of role reversal ever went away: it simply required a new field of application and a new sense of symbolic complexity.

*Role reversal and nature*

Yann Martel's 2001 novel *Life of Pi* is frequently read in terms of human/animal encounters with narrator and protagonist Pi Patel representing the human self and Bengal tiger Richard Parker marked as the animal other. In that reading, boy and tiger come to realise that their survival on the lifeboat is maximally dependent on their peaceful coexistence. While the tiger's physical prowess clearly marks him out as superior to the boy, he lacks the boy's guile, meaning both need to contrive a way of surviving their shipwreck for over two hundred days in close proximity. As in the postcolonial situation presented in Walcott's *Pantomime*, then, role reversal becomes difficult to detect when it is primarily a pragmatic affair: while the tiger has the upper hand in some situations, Pi has it in others, and what results is a patchwork of contingent situations both learn to deal with. In a psychological reading, the tiger might well serve to symbolise part of the boy himself, his animalistic and ferocious inner nature, which he has to embrace in order to have any chance of survival. A strict vegetarian, Pi learns to catch fish based on the tiger's needs and appetites (Martel 2002: 245–248), for instance. Again, the mutuality of the arrangement comes to the fore. What is presented is a give and take rather than a black and white notion of clear-cut identities, and as with the novel's ideas on religion, a sense of pragmatism rather than an insistence on absolutes prevails.

There is, however, a coda to the first 400 pages of *Life of Pi*, a coda more or less ignored in critical discussions of the book as a castaway story. Responding to the disbelief of the insurance investigators sent after news of his survival has reached them, Pi offers them an entirely different story in which the animals initially on board the lifeboat are mere stand-ins for human characters. In this version of the story, the survivors are Pi himself (the tiger Richard Parker), his mother (the orang-utan Orange Juice), the sailor (a zebra) and the cook (a hyena) (Martel 2002: 407). What transpires is that the cook kills both the sailor and Pi's mother (Martel 2002: 415) as well as committing acts of cannibalism (Martel 2002: 412). In an act of

revenge, Pi kills the cook (Martel 2002: 416) and proceeds to devour his dead body (Martel 2002: 417).

What we find underneath the ecocritical live-and-let-live guise of the animal Robinsonade in *Life of Pi*, then, is an old-fashioned instance of role reversal, neglected by most critics for being far too simplistic: the colonised boy whose name was (indirectly) given to him by a Francophone coloniser takes revenge for the murder of his mother at the hands of the French cook by killing and eating him. As if not clear enough already, the role reversal is further underlined by descriptions of the cook's physical appearance as a supremely grotesque and highly permeable body: 'He was a disgusting man. His mouth had the discrimination of a garbage heap. He also ate the rat' (Martel 2002: 407). The cook ingests anything, up to and including his fellow passengers. His omnivorous nature marks him out as possessing the grotesque body usually associated with the Indigenous population. As Weaver-Hightower explains in the context of castaway stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: 'These stories show indigenes as indiscriminate in what they eat and of voracious appetite, with open mouths and naturally permeable inside and outside boundaries. Their open and undisciplined bodies make them vulnerable to the island's infectious savagery' (2007: 143). At the same time, the cook's behaviour—while in line with expectations vis-à-vis Indigenous bodies and their portrayal in older texts—can also be equated with the rapacious attitude of colonisers and colonialism itself. After all, he is the one who voraciously uses up the castaway community's resources (Martel 2002: 407) and commits murder for entirely self-interested reasons (Martel 2002: 411–412). His comeuppance at the hands of a young Indian boy who ends up not only killing but also eating him, completes a twenty-page plot that is as clear-cut an instance of role reversal as anything staged in the 1970s. Only through its animal allegorisation does the story gain sufficient complexity and mystique to become the foundation of a Booker Prize-winning novel. As the other 400 pages of the book bear out, the story of Pi has to be told as one eschewing facile ideas of right and wrong in favour of an open-minded pragmatism that allows the protagonist to follow several religions (Martel 2002: 89) and arrive at an accommodation with the tiger he is supposedly sharing a lifeboat with.

The allegorical nature of the animal roles in Martell's *Life of Pi* is replicated in Michael Dudok de Wit's *The Red Turtle* (2016),<sup>2</sup> albeit in even more existential and universal terms. In this animated movie, made by Studio Ghibli, a nameless castaway with no backstory is stranded on a desert island which he soon attempts to leave on a raft made of bamboo. Time and again, as he tries to steer his raft out into the ocean, his progress is impeded by a red turtle, and he has to turn back. What appears to be a metaphorical stand-in for the non-human environment—the turtle—soon confronts the viewer with new and complex questions when she is transformed into a human woman, soon to be the castaway's partner and mother to his child (who, growing up, displays some distinct turtle-like features). The metaphor works both ways: the island and turtle could be a stand-in for marriage and life-long commitment; but the union of man and erstwhile turtle could also be seen as an image of the harmonious union of man and the environment. What is unmistakable in the film is its endeavour to recentre nature, to leave behind the anthropocentrism of the Robinsonade, the story of a conquering and civilising hero come to stake a claim of possession. Instead, we witness the castaway as simply one of the organisms on the island and the red turtle as far more in tune with the laws of nature and endowed with more agency than the man.<sup>3</sup> The simultaneous endowment of the turtle with these powers and integration of the castaway with his surroundings completes the process by which the Robinsonade ascribes the role of unalloyed good no longer to Indigenous peoples, valorising their integrity and close connection to nature, but to the environment itself.

### *Conclusion*

What this discussion has shown is that while the time-honoured technique of role reversal may have been conspicuous for its use in anti-colonial discourse for a brief period in the 1970s, later examples of the genre show up the limitations of its capacity to adequately represent reality in the eyes of people living in actual colonial (Coetzee) or postcolonial (Walcott and

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<sup>2</sup> The film's original publication (in French and Japanese) dates to 2016. The American DVD referenced in the text was published in 2017. Hence the discrepancy in the years given here and in the list of references.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the avoidance of anthropocentrism in *The Red Turtle*, see Gill (2019: 151–153).

Chamoiseau) situations. Facile ideas of ‘writing back’ are cast aside by these writers in favour of a more sophisticated understanding of postcolonial identities. Inherent in all attempts at critiquing colonialism through the technique of role reversal, though, is the valorisation of colonised peoples for one property above any other—their natural strength and agility. Uncorrupted by civilisation and unburdened by refinement and learning, these ‘noble savages’ are all defined first and foremost by their physical prowess. From Mitchell’s Friday, who like all his tribe is endowed with a fine sense of rhythm in line with the tritest of clichés (‘Everyone can dance’ 1974: 44), on to calypso performer Jack and even Coetzee’s Friday, who expresses himself through dance and movement and who will finally come into his own in ‘a place where bodies are their own signs’ (2010: 157), postcolonial endeavours of role reversal rely on ascribing clichéd roles to their protagonists. In doing so, they may differ in degree, but in the final analysis, even writers with the best of postcolonial intentions will end up valorising the colonised as a stereotypical other, as physically strong and as uncorrupted by civilisation, thus equating them with a powerful connection to nature. This phenomenon becomes especially conspicuous in a discussion of the physicality of a given Robinsonade’s Friday figure: the focus on the material body affords us the opportunity to discover remnants—intended or otherwise—of much older and politically questionable ideologies that might otherwise go unnoticed.

What can be seen as a weakness in postcolonial applications of role reversal—however much you intend to champion one side over the other, ascribing universal good to them seems destined to fall short of what are, after all, human endeavours—can become a virtue in discussions of the properties inherent not in a people particularly close to nature but in nature itself. And that transfer is one to which this essay has borne witness: one-dimensional role-reversal gives way to a more refined questioning of roles on the human scale while transferring the virtues it once saw in Indigenous (or not, as Walcott points out) peoples onto Mother Nature. This also eradicates the once problematic structural feature of role reversal: an expectation that there would be a re-reversal, that things would go back to the way they were. The transference of virtue from any group of people to nature itself also opens the door to a utopia of endless harmony: humanity living with or even living *under* the dictates of nature forever.

All of which is not to say that role reversal has been entirely eradicated from the modern Robinsonade or other forms of postcolonial discourse. After all, it combines excellent entertainment value with an easily comprehensible notion of righteousness that speaks to sympathetically enlightened—if not critically engaged—audiences. This is why we can still see the technique at play in popular culture, as in the Belgian animated movie *Robinson Crusoe* (2016),<sup>4</sup> in which the eponymous hero has to rely on the help of a group of animals for survival; or as in the Cook Islands romance *Stranded Pearl* (2023), in which successful businesswoman Julia has to find her way back to nature and into the arms of the native tour guide who will ensure her survival on the island they both find themselves stranded on in the wake of a yachting accident. In the popular imagination, valorisation of the other by means of role reversal provides not just good entertainment value but also a superficial and somewhat self-congratulatory sense of tolerance and inclusiveness. At its heart, though, as we have seen, it relies on the traditional set of clichés and stereotypes pertaining to questions of race and identity. Its application to the environment itself comes with far less baggage and a more realistic message: that in all its encounters with the natural world, it is the body of humanity that needs to approach nature and the order established by it with maximum permeability.

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<sup>4</sup> Released in the US under the title *The Wild Life*.

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