

Configurations of Friday's Body: From *Robinson Crusoe* to the Contemporary Robinsonade

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When Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719, it confronted readers with a newly developed realism expressed, among other things, through the detailed description of its characters' worlds and bodies. Just as it meticulously reports on the material aspects of Crusoe's life and adventures, the novel—in its island section—offers memorable pictorial sketches of both the castaway and his companion, which, when read closely, produce an ideological and aesthetic tension that underlines the novel's complex treatment of physicality as a gateway to the discourses of race, masculinity, and more. In particular, as Roxann Wheeler argues, when the most extensive description of Crusoe's appearance, which mentions his clothes, tools, and umbrella, but also a somewhat grotesque moustache, is juxtaposed with remarks about Friday's homely 'Europeanness', a subversive dynamic of the othered castaway and the surprisingly homely native man is established; 'a pattern of partially collapsed boundaries of difference', in Wheeler's words (2000: 80). These two sketches suggest that to Defoe the bodily was first and foremost a construct to be read and interpreted, rather than placed in the emerging anatomical discourse of the period. The character sketches, just like a number of ekphrastic passages in *Robinson Crusoe* and beyond,¹ become

¹ Memorable examples of such passages include descriptions of Crusoe's 'Magazine of all necessary Things', Will Atkins and his wife in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Roxana in her 'Turkish' dress in *The Fortunate Mistress*, and the abandoned and newly wild cityscapes of London in *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

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a way of combining the realist (or the nominalist, as Richetti would have it [2015: 191]) and allegorical modes, whereby a ‘word-painting’ constituted by minute details is endowed with an emblematic potential. As Juliet McMaster argues, such a textualised approach to the body can be identified in a number of eighteenth-century fictions, combining insight into ‘character’ and novelistic ideas more broadly (2004: xiv). This view is shared by Erin M. Goss, to whom literary bodies in the period ‘are not representational but rhetorical tools that ground and make available components of a conceptual system’ (2013: 157). As such, Veronica Kelly and Dorothea E. von Mücke point out, the body has a ‘discursive character’, embodying—*nomen omen*—tensions between ‘civilisation and discipline’ on the one hand, and ‘transgression’ on the other, and thus often becomes a source of ambiguity (1994: 4, 6).

As this special issue will make clear, the Robinsonade tradition sparked off by Defoe’s novel has to a significant extent preserved this originally discursive, and as such ambivalent, nature of Defoe’s bodies. Addressing a wide array of castaway narratives that respond—directly or indirectly, intentionally or inadvertently—to the original Crusoe-Friday dynamic, as problematised by Defoe, the essays gathered here add significantly to recent studies of the Robinsonade.² Apart from making their own specific contributions to our understanding of selected English-language Robinsonades, from Defoe and his eighteenth-century followers and imitators to recent revisions in fiction and beyond, these articles collectively show how the Robinsonade tradition has explored Defoe’s original ambivalence—despite obvious colonial messages—in the pairing of Crusoe and Friday, an ambivalence best rendered through a focus on the characters’ physicality.

As its title suggests, the main contribution this special issue of the *NJES* makes to Robinsonade criticism is its focus on configurations of Friday’s body, which complements scholarly work on conceptualisations of the castaway’s body in the genre (see Weaver-Hightower 2007; Lipski 2024). While references to configurations of the castaway are inevitable, sustained attention will invariably be given to the Friday figures, and how

² The 2019 Crusoe tercentenary occasioned significant critical interest in both *Robinson Crusoe* and the Robinsonade as a genre. See Richetti 2018; Gill et al. 2019; Kinane 2019; Peraldo 2020; Lipski 2020; Mueller and Ridley 2020; Haug et al. 2022. For an overview of scholarly work on the Robinsonade in the context of the tercentenary, see Lipski 2022.

representations of their bodies elucidate the formal and ideological concerns of the Robinsonade, thus adding to its continuous relevance in changing temporal and cultural contexts. One of world literature's most famous but also most enigmatic figures, Friday has been omnipresent in the Robinsonade imaginary, yet to this day he is still most frequently defined not in his own right but in opposition to Robinson: a walking (and eventually) talking other set in contrast to the castaway protagonist. By forgoing the typical approach of highlighting the evolving social, cultural, and educational relationship between Robinson and Friday in favour of an approach centred around Friday's physical materiality—his body, his movement, his space—this special issue addresses an important gap in discussions of the afterlives of Defoe's classic novel.

The most immediately accessible but still considerably under-researched question concerns the contexts in which Friday's body is employed as a site of signification. There are some Friday figures whose bodies function as willing helpmeets of the coloniser-castaway, and some whose bodies become sites of resistance to colonial rule. This dichotomy has been approached from many angles before, but as yet no concerted attempts at reading Fridays primarily through their bodies have been undertaken. Closer inspection will reveal many examples where the story is not quite so simply told. Discourse around the body can serve to undermine dominant ideas of a paternalistically benevolent colonialism, and the supposed racial, moral, and intellectual inferiority of the Friday figure is belied by an ostentatious display of his physical prowess, by the formal and ideological techniques of role reversal, or by suspension of the Crusoe-Friday dichotomy, as seen in the fantasies of miscegenation and the postcolonial subversion of hierarchies.

When it comes to negotiations of gender roles, the story of female castaways and female castaway-companions asks how what we think of as Friday's typical characteristics are transposed into a different context by their manifestation in the physical dimensions of these female figures, or how they are employed to counteract notions of what is thought of as 'typical'. Discussing the Robinsonade in feminist terms is not an entirely new venture—doing so with a primary focus on the body (and on Friday's body at that) offers new insights into the gender dynamics of the Robinsonade, thus appreciating the now centuries-long tradition of making up for the 'strange surprising' limited role of women in Defoe's originary text.

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Other forms of reconfigured Fridays may result in similarly double-edged discourses: when companion figures are represented by inanimate objects and animals, how does that comment on Defoe's use of othering, and how is that material change meant to be understood by modern audiences? With a host of other questions up for discussion—including the differences between representations of Friday's body in diverse media (audiobooks, theatre, film, videogames); physical representations of Friday employed in children's versions of the Robinson story; idealised representations of Friday's body; the scars and mutilations of Friday's body as the site of colonialist oppression; the perceived threat of Friday's physical presence, and the (monetary) value of Friday's body as beast of burden and bear wrestler—this special issue offers plenty of scope for a long overdue discussion of these crucial themes.

The collective argument the articles in this issue make principally concerns the instability of the boundaries separating the Crusoe and Friday figures as revealed through their bodies. The essays underline the Robinsonade's growing tendency to question the self rather than vilifying the other. Attempts at demarcation and separation, already challenged in some eighteenth-century examples of the genre—and indeed, to some extent, in Defoe's novel—become increasingly harder as (post)colonial consciousness develops. The Robinsonade thus asks fundamental questions not only regarding colonial hierarchies, but also what it means to be English, human, and more. The scope and subject matter of Robinsonades may change over time, but the fundamental questions of 'who am I?' and 'who are they?' are always present.

The discussions that follow proceed from studies of eighteenth-century material to readings of much more recent Robinsonades. That said, our intention has not been to offer an arrangement suggesting a chronological development of the form, especially as achronological leaps in time will be inevitable, given, for example, how the subsequent readings establish relationships between the narratives studied and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The wealth of material covered should not be treated as an attempt at comprehensiveness, either. Appreciating the formal and thematic diversity this collection presents, at the same time we are aware that numerous complex Friday figures remain beyond our scope; we are also mindful of how the Robinsonade continues and will continue to thrive: new Fridays, just as new castaways, in pertinently transformed island habitats will not cease to appear across different media. Just as we

accept the unavoidability of gaps in our coverage, so we acknowledge the equally predictable overlaps: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), for instance, will be referred to with some frequency, which—given the scope of this issue—should not be considered surprising.

Jakub Lipski's essay on Friday figures in the Robinsonade of the 1750s opens the collection with a survey of fantastic creatures from animal hybrids to avian women, reading these strange bodies as the (imagined) physical manifestation of a host of anxieties concerning the budding Empire. While the texts discussed in Lipski's essay are concerned with colonial encounters in imaginary contact zones, Roslyn Irving's essay on *The Female American* (1767) concerns itself with a layered text negotiating the complex identities of a real contact zone and the clash of identities between Britain, the colonies on the eastern seaboard, and the Indigenous population of North America. Given this complex starting point, situating exactly who or what best represents Friday in the text presents a challenge Irving's essay is happy to grapple with.

Different types of colonial subjects are the focus of Przemysław Uściński's essay. Uściński examines the different properties of Shakespeare's Caliban and Defoe's and Coetzee's Fridays to illuminate their respective positions vis-à-vis concepts such as sublimation, labour, and discipline. Agnieszka Łowczanin's essay similarly considers Defoe's and Coetzee's Fridays, alongside the Friday figure featured in Olga Tokarczuk's short story 'Wyspa' (2001), to enquire how the respective narrators' notions of corporeality reflect a changing understanding of material existence and contemporaneous conflicts.

In contrast to the comparative readings of Uściński and Łowczanin, Jochen Ecke dedicates his essay to a single text, J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974). At the heart of Ecke's essay is the idea that bodies are employed pragmatically as foils, as a means for readers to understand that characters will go against their own verbal utterances based on what messages their bodies send. These cues, Ecke argues, are fundamental in understanding not just the different levels of meaning present in the novel but, crucially, the continual blurring of Crusoe/Friday identities throughout the text.

Approaching the idea of corporeality in the medium of sound, Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg's essay provides a survey of six audiobook adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe* to discuss how they decide to manifest their respective Fridays. Turning her ear to aspects such as the quality, rhythm, and diction

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of the audiobook narrators' performances of Friday, Björkén-Nyberg assesses the various interpretations of Friday's role. Moving from the single-channel medium of audio to the multi-channel world of videogames, Sarah Faber's essay on sci-fi sidekicks in *Halo* and *Portal Infinite* investigates the use of AI Fridays employed in futuristic settings. With its observation on the duality of AI Fridays—simultaneously represented as a recognisably alien body while also featuring an eerily human psychology—the essay further complicates the bipolar distinction of castaway and sidekick, Robinson and Friday.

Returning to literary representations of Friday figures, Michelle Kelly's essay dedicates itself to an in-depth reading of Friday in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. The impact of Coetzee's short novel has been such that it is briefly discussed in multiple essays across this volume, but Kelly's detailed dissection of Coetzee's ideas regarding the figure of the puppet, aesthetics, and the notion of grace shines a light on his voiceless Friday's sublime nature. Emmanuelle Peraldo's article engages with the idea of the animal other prevalent in Robinsonades of various periods. Focussing on Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), Peraldo makes a case for the idea that while animal Fridays may perpetuate a form of colonial discourse, when animal studies, post-human theories and postcolonial ideas are brought to bear on these texts, they always subvert readers' expectations regarding the clear-cut dichotomies of self and other, coloniser and colonised, human and non-human. Patrick Gill's article is also interested in ideas of bipolar systems and their deconstruction at the hands of postcolonial writers. Dedicating itself to the technique of role reversal, the essay argues that while this may have enjoyed a brief moment of popularity in the works of politically engaged writers of the 1970s, it was soon seen as too crude a response to the complexities of the postcolonial situation. While it endures in popular culture, Gill argues, critically engaging examples have moved from a postcolonial to an ecocritical context in recent years.

It is these ecocritical—or more broadly posthumanist—concerns of the Robinsonade, addressed in several essays of this collection, that are indicative not only of the genre's relevance for the here and now, but also of how it may provide a gateway to creative speculation about our futures. The Friday figure, in this context, is no longer limited to the role of the castaway's companion, but becomes an embodied projection of these futures, of our fears and our hopes.

Acknowledgements

Research for this special issue was funded by the National Science Centre of Poland as part of the Sonata project number 2020/39/D/HS2/02074: *The Poetics of the Body in the English Robinsonade*.

We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers, without whose invaluable work this special issue would not have been possible. Our thanks are also due to the editors of the *NJES* for accepting our proposal for this special issue and shepherding it through the publication process.

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