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“The island is not a story in itself”: apartheid’s world literature

Ashleigh Harris

Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper makes two related claims: first I argue that the trope of the island works as a hieroglyph of the apartheid state’s disavowal of Robben Island and all that it represented; and secondly, I illustrate how the texts under analysis also configure the apartheid state as the disavowed of the international community. To do this, I discuss Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s The Island (1973) and J.M. Coetzee’s Foe (1986), both of which thematize South African economic and moral isolation through the trope of the island. Both these texts dramatize the moral conditions of life under apartheid within a distinctly transnational frame. As such, I argue, they de-territorialize apartheid and read it as folded-in to its global moment.

“What a splendid king you’d make of a desert island – you and you alone” – Haemon to Creon in Antigone

Was Cruso free, that was despot of an island all of his own?

Apartheid South Africa had an anxious and ambivalent relationship to the world, being at once isolated via internal censorship and international sanctions and, at the same time, longing for full participation in global trade, technology, and culture. This ambivalence was reflected by much of the country’s fiction written at the time. Many writers felt morally obliged to galvanize local and international support for the anti-apartheid movement by telling the stories that were otherwise suppressed by state censorship. As such, much of the anti-apartheid writing produced in South Africa during apartheid was intended for a global readership. Eileen Julien, describing a trend in African fiction, whereby African novels “speak outward and represent locality to nonlocal others,” calls such writing “extroverted.”

Unlike today’s extroverted African fictions, however, which are in danger of effacing narrative representations of African everyday life, extroverted fiction from apartheid South

CONTACT

Ashleigh Harris ashleigh.harris@engelska.uu.se

1Sophocles and Knox, The Three Theban Plays, 97.
2Coetzee, Foe, 149.
Africa was expressly aimed at raising global awareness of the plight of black South Africans living under that regime.  

Yet, South African literature under apartheid was also “extraverted,” which is to say, to apply Jean-Francois Bayart’s sense of the term, it was literature not only for the world but also of it.  

In this paper, I aim to analyze two differently extraverted South African fictions: Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona’s *The Island* (1973) and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986). These text—which I argue thematize South African economic and moral isolation through the trope of the island—engage the moral conditions of life under apartheid within a distinctly transnational frame. Both texts refuse a reading of apartheid as neatly sealed within South Africa’s national boundaries. As such, I argue, they de-territorialize apartheid and read it as folded-together (com-plic-it, in Mark Sander’s sense) in its global moment.

It is little surprise that the trope of the island emerges so often as a rhetorical shorthand to describe the isolationism of the South African state during apartheid. From the apartheid state’s perspective, international sanctions and boycotts chimed with its sense of abandonment, a narrative made-to-fit for the imperial romance of the desert island survivor. Yet, it is perhaps this anxiety around exclusion from the world that sharpened the edge of the state’s paranoia regarding what its inclusion in that world might look like. I argue that this ambivalence drives a fetishistic disavowal that can be symptomatically read in the trope of the island and its meaning in South Africa at the time. Fetishism, argues Tina Chanter, proves to be peculiarly resilient when it comes to sustaining a belief in a world, the internal dynamics of which are logically inconsistent. This would suggest that no attempt to unpack the logic of the fetish by pointing out its false assumptions will manage to undo its psychic investments.

Offering no resolution, then, the compulsion of fetishism concerns the incommensurability between logic and the affective investment in the fetish. A token that condenses meaning into a hieroglyphic and idiosyncratic language, the fetish is intended to keep at bay—without removing—a belief that has captured our imagination. In this sense, fetishism constitutes a strategy of avoidance.

If we consider the isolation of the apartheid state, it is no surprise that one such contradictory “hieroglyphic” form that its anxiety took was the very figure of the island. While South Africa worried over its global participation in trade, culture, and technology, what better site of fetishistic disavowal than Robben Island, a space that, as David Schalkwyk reminds us, had been “a repository for the mentally ill, sexually deviant and [for] medical outcasts like lepers” long before it came to incarcerate black, male political prisoners in 1961. As such, this expurgating and abjecting role was already part of Robben Island from the seventeenth century onward. As Helen Kapstein has argued, the state’s “need to create a cordon

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4 It is worth mentioning that a crucial strategy of connecting to a global audience was indeed a focus of what Njabulo Ndebele has famously called the ordinary, as opposed to the spectacular, registers of the conditions of life under apartheid. See, Njabulo S. Ndebele, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” 143–57.
6 Sanders, *Complicities*, 5.
8 Ibid., 67.
sanitaire” around Robben Island, “calls to mind the Foucauldian notion of displacement and containment as a question of displacing and containing apartheid history.” Indeed, Robben Island also functioned—perhaps still functions—as a heterotopia in Michel Foucault’s sense of the term. For Foucault, heterotopias are 

real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.11

Foucault himself considers the institution of the prison as just such a “heterotopia of deviance,” which allows a society to imagine the no-place of its utopian imagination by purging its deviants.12 The heterotopia is the obvious site to keep the avoidant, fetishistic drive in play.

To redouble the disavowal logic of the fetish, and to illustrate the ways in which Robben Island operated as a heterotopia during apartheid, it is important to recall that the apartheid state went beyond the standard security protocols regarding blackouts on images and information on their prison operations by also imposing a ban on images of its most famous inmate, Nelson Mandela. The island’s distance from the mainland helped this process of effacing the abject and outcast space of the prison and its inmates from public and governmentally sanctioned discourse. When thinking of the role of the island as a heterotopia, this forced invisibility is important. As Foucault puts it, “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public space.”13 We should recall here that after the passing of the Group Areas Act in 1950, in which public space was mapped according to a racist taxonomy, public space was not fully accessible for black South Africans. While so-called black townships certainly had their own publics, in the national discourse, the townships’ categorization as “black” posited them as heterotopic sites of nationalist fetishistic disavowal; or, to put it more simply, much of what happened in them was invisible to white South Africa. But despite the state’s attempt to keep the township out of the view of white South Africa and the international community, the township remained a permeable space that was never fully closed to the rest of the country. This worried a state paranoid about what it saw as the contaminations of everything from political mobilization to miscegenation. A prison, especially one off the mainland, was a much easier site to achieve the sleight-of-hand that made its prisoners and everything that happened there disappear from public view and this invisibility enabled the rule of brutality with impunity there.

It is also worth noting that some of the most torturous punishments on Robben Island reproduced an island topography on the level of the psyche. Prisoners’ access to the outside world, from news to family letters, was under intense censorship, exacerbating their sense of isolation, and the most extreme form of this was solitary confinement, a favored punishment in the prison. One high-profile example of a prisoner who suffered this punishment (there were others, of course) was Robert Sobukwe, the head of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), who “was held in solitary confinement for 6 years, in almost total isolation.”14 Once again, the process of fetishistic disavowal comes to mind. Chanter writes,

13ibid., 26.
14Schalkwyk, Hamlet’s Dreams, 28.
It is important [...] to unfold the specific dynamic according to which a fetish compels the interest of the fetishist, and the particular ways in which this affective investment precludes investigation of that which is disavowed, as prefatory to mapping out the contours of its excluded ground.\textsuperscript{15}

The disavowal represented by Robben Island and its modes of isolation from 1961 onward speak to a broader anxiety produced by the advancing specter of decolonization across Africa. Indeed, the literature of decolonization had also found the trope of the island a particularly productive one, especially via the intertextual rejection and rewriting of Shakespeare’s \textit{ur}-text of the colonial encounter, \textit{The Tempest}. In “Caribbean and African appropriations of The Tempest,” Rob Nixon traces what is now a well-known trajectory of postcolonial appropriations of Shakespeare’s play, from C.L.R James’ \textit{The Black Jacobins} (1938), to George Lamming’s \textit{The Pleasures of Exile} (1960), to Aimé Césaire’s \textit{Une Tempête} (1969) and Edward Kamau Braithwaite’s “Caliban” (as part of a cycle entitled “Islands,” 1969). We should also add Peter Abrahams’s \textit{This Island Now} (1966) as a South African-Caribbean example, the title of which gives political urgency to Caliban’s famous reclaiming of his land: “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother/ Which thou tak’st from me.”\textsuperscript{16} All these re-appropriations of Caliban (and his voice) follow the postcolonial logic of “writing back.”

Yet, re-appropriation of canonical texts is an insufficient optic if we are to understand apartheid as a global event and if we are to get traction on its relationship to the decolonization movement. What I hope to demonstrate in my reading of two South African texts written during apartheid rule is that they configure apartheid as the disavowed, not only of a national, but also of an \textit{international} global anxiety. When it comes to a model for how to describe literature’s relationship to the globe under apartheid (as a global event), I propose that Mark Sanders’ understanding of complicity is far richer than “writing back.” If we use Sanders’ sense of the word “complicity,” we enable a reading of apartheid as “folded-in” to the global moment and, inversely, of the global moment being “folded-in” to apartheid. In Jacques Derrida’s preface to \textit{Specters of Marx} (which was dedicated to South African communist Chris Hani),\textsuperscript{17} we find a more philosophical register for these global dimensions of apartheid. Derrida—articulating a philosophy of global accountability for apartheid—viewed events taking place in apartheid South Africa as standing “in metonymic relation to those in the world as a whole.”\textsuperscript{18} “At once part, cause, effect, example,” stated Derrida, “what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home.”\textsuperscript{19} Derrida’s collapsing of geopolitical space insists on a sharpening of global responsibility. While the anti-apartheid solidarity movement felt a sense of responsibility for what was happening in South Africa, Derrida’s kind of responsibility was never potentiated in that movement that tended, on the whole, to see the South African state as an exceptional one, rather than one that was sustained by international relations, as well as cultural and ideological resonances.

This philosophical move has, of course, had its detractors, perhaps most famously Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon in their early critique of Derrida’s “Racism’s Last Word.” Derrida wrote this piece first as an introduction to a catalogue for the “Art contre/against Apartheid”...

\textsuperscript{15}Chanter, \textit{Whose Antigone?} 67.
\textsuperscript{16}Shakespeare, \textit{The Tempest}, Act1, Sc2, lines 331, 332.
\textsuperscript{17}Chris Hani had been the chief of staff to \textit{Unkhonto we Sizwe} (“The Spear of the Nation”), the armed force of the African National Congress during apartheid that was, in those times, considered a terrorist group by the authorities.
\textsuperscript{18}Popescu, “Waiting for the Russians,” 2.
\textsuperscript{19}Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, xv.
exhibition in 1983. The itinerant exhibition, which collected numerous art works with overt anti-apartheid content, began in Paris and traveled to various locations across the globe, with the intention that the art would be donated to South Africa at the point at which it abolished apartheid: the organizers called the exhibition “a future museum against apartheid.” Derrida’s introduction to the catalogue takes up this concept of the future museum: he writes that the exhibition is a “memory in advance,” a “future for which apartheid will be the name of something finally abolished.”

Derrida’s piece was translated and republished in the journal Critical Inquiry in 1985, which prompted Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon to accuse Derrida of operating in a “regime of abstraction” by “removing the word [apartheid] from its place in the discourse of South African racism.” They argued that his “essay’s opening analysis of the word apartheid [was] symptomatic of a severance of word from history.”

McClintock and Nixon then went on to provide a lengthy historicization of the word apartheid in the South African context, a history that they presented against Derrida’s perceived de-historicization of the term. One of their chief claims was that by 1983, when Derrida wrote his text, the South African government had stopped using the word apartheid in all official contexts, and had replaced it with terms such as “separate development,” and “good neighbourliness.”

To McClintock and Nixon this meant that apartheid would not be the “last word” of racism. Derrida—nonplussed—responded:

You say “Derrida is repelled by the word.” No, what I find repulsive is the thing that history has now linked to the word, which is why I propose keeping the word so that the history will not be forgotten. Don’t separate word and history! That’s what you say to those who apparently have not learned this lesson. It is the South African racists, the National Party, the Verwoerd and the Vorsters who ended up being afraid of the word (their word!), to whom it began to appear too repulsive because it had become so overseas. It’s you, and not me, who also seem to be frightened by this word because you propose that we take seriously all the substitutes and pseudonyms, the periphrases and metonymies that the official discourse in Pretoria keeps coming up with: the tireless ruse of propaganda, the indefatigable but vain rhetoric of dissimulation. To counter it, I think the best strategy is to keep the word, the “unique appellation” that the South African racists […] would like to make people forget.

What better illustration of the mechanism of disavowal, than the apartheid state’s erasure of its own term, apartheid, under the more palatable “separate development.” While I sympathize with Nixon and McClintock’s critique in its own time, I agree with Derrida that by understanding apartheid— with all its historical specificities intact—as in and of the world, we ultimately heighten a global sense of accountability for the human rights abuses committed under that regime and avoid an international disavowal of those global complicities that held the apartheid state in power for so long.

Thus, in reading apartheid as a global event, we not only draw attention to the obvious concrete complicities of the international community in apartheid—such as the fact that the US never once supported calls at the UN for sanctions and boycotts against South Africa during the 1970s or 1980s, and that at the beginning of the 1980s the “United States [was]
South Africa’s largest foreign market and its leading source of imports.” What this also allows us to think through is the ways in which the calls to “isolate South Africa” unwittingly reinforced the idea that apartheid was an exceptional state, one entirely cut off from global complicities. We might well argue, then, that the rhetoric of South Africa’s exceptional status allowed the apartheid state to function as something of a fetishistic disavowal of racism globally. In this sense, if Robben Island is a heterotopic space consolidating and simultaneously contesting the South African apartheid state, then South Africa during that time may equally be read as a deviant heterotopia of the globe.

**The Island (1973), by Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona, and John Kani**

In *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery*, Tina Chanter argues that Antigone’s moral courage in the face of Creon’s petty power lust, and the moral punishment he subsequently receives, explains the play’s “resurgence at moments of crisis” where it is used “to render visible suffering that is in danger of remaining invisible, or insignificant.” Yet, Chanter warns against reducing the reworking of *Antigone* to so much appropriation. While Antigone’s courage certainly resounds across centuries of injustice, Chanter reminds us that every aspect of this play’s writing, production and reception in fifth-century BCE Athens structurally holds within it an unspoken power structure in which slaves and women were not given the status of being fully human. She writes of Sophocles’ conservatism and of the exclusion of women from the public sphere, to the extent that they could not act in, or be spectators of, the theatre of Dionysus, where *Antigone* played. Yet, writes Chanter,

> [w]ithout the contributions of women and slaves, without their work behind the scenes—a phrase that can be read here more literally than usual—men would not have been free to pursue political debate, including that in which dramatic performances were implicated. Structurally the freedom of the free citizens was dependent upon the manual labor of slaves.

Chanter introduces two important elements to her reading of the character Antigone. First, Antigone is more a figure of fetishistic disavowal, upholding Athenians’ belief in a social hierarchy in which slaves and women were less than human, than she is spokesperson for the unseen and unheard. And, second—an observation that typifies the first point—when she makes her plea to Creon, she insists on a clear line of distinction between herself (of a royal, though shamed, family line) and slaves. “In asserting her own claims as a subject, and in seeking to gain recognition for her brother as someone worthy of burial, Antigone has no qualms about confirming the unworthiness of slaves,” writes Chanter. Indeed, when Creon insists that Eteocles would have approved of the King’s decision not to bury Polynices, Antigone responds, “[i]t was his brother, not some slave, that died.” Furthermore, argues Chanter, Antigone’s “attempt to write herself into history, to speak in a way that challenges

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24Beaubein, “The Cultural Boycott of South Africa,” 9. Beaubein goes on to write: According to 1980 figures released by Pretoria’s Department of Customs and Excise, the U.S. imported some $3.3 billion in metals and mineral such as platinum, diamonds, manganese and Kruger rand gold coins. In return, the U.S. exports to South Africa were valued at $2.5 billion for 1980, 17% higher than the previous year. U.S. corporate investment in South Africa has been growing at a rate of 25 percent per year, the most rapid rate of any U.S. foreign investment. U.S. capital earns an average rate of profit of 14.9% after taxes.


26Ibid., 70.

27Ibid., 62.

28Ibid., 74.

her own exclusion, is articulated in such a way as to require the exclusion of slaves from the standards of humanity to which she demands access.”

What do we make then of the appropriation of Antigone in Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona, and John Kani’s The Island if we concede that the figure of Antigone is thus tainted by the legacies of slavery and Athenian patriarchy? The kind of easy political appropriation of Antigone as speaker of truth to power, as figure of moral courage against a totalitarian system, is inadequate here. Indeed, it is just such an appropriation of Sophocles’ play that The Island complicates.

Athol Fugard had been approached to produce Antigone by a group of amateur dramatists, known as the Serpent Players in 1965. As Errol Durbach notes, it was

on the eve of production, that Fugard was denied a police permit to enter the black township of New Brighton for the dress rehearsal of Antigone, while the Serpent Players were refused permission to perform before white audiences in Port Elizabeth.

Norman Ntshinga, who was set to play Haemon in the production, was arrested and given a 20-year sentence on Robben Island. With the significance of the play sharpened for Ntshinga in his incarceration, he staged “a ‘pocket version’ of Antigone, relying on memory to distil the play into a fifteen-minute performance that could be fitted into the rubric of the annual concert granted prisoners on Robben Island.” And it is no wonder that Antigone’s words on her sentencing resonated with Ntshinga:

O tomb, my bridal-bed – my house, my prison
Cut in the hollow rock, my everlasting watch!
I’ll soon be there, soon embrace my own,
The great growing family of our dead
Persephone has received among her ghosts.

[…]

What law of the mighty gods have I transgressed?
Why look to the heavens any more, tormented as I am?
Whom to call, what comrades now? Just think, my reverence only brands me for irreverence!

Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods, once I suffer I will know that I was wrong.

But if these men are wrong, let them suffer nothing worse than they mete out to me – these masters of injustice.

But in citing not only Sophocles’ play, but Ntshinga’s potted version of it and the circumstances of its staging on Robben Island, The Island goes beyond such a simple reiteration of Antigone as moral hero.

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31 Ibid., 68.
33 Fugard, “Antigone in Africa,” 133.
34 Chanter, Whose Antigone? 59. Chanter mistakenly cites Sipho Mguqulwa as the actor who was arrested, which emerges from a mistake in Fugard’s “Antigone in Africa.”
The Island is a two-hander play comprised of four scenes. In the first scene, Winston and John are engaged in the brutal Sisyphean task of carrying sand in wheelbarrows to and from two heaps in an interminable and meaningless labor on Robben Island. When they return to their cell, John tries to convince Winston to rehearse the version of Antigone they are planning to stage. In scene two Winston and John argue about the play, since Winston does not want to dress as a woman to play the part of Antigone. John is called away and hears that his sentence has been reduced to three months, which will leave Winston alone in the prison. In the third scene, John imagines his freedom as Winston's envy intensifies. Scene four sees the staging of Antigone for the inmates and guards. John plays Creon and says in his opening monologue:

Did I hear “Hail the King?” I am your servant … a happy one, but still your servant. How many times must I ask you, implore you to see in these symbols of office nothing more, or less, than you would in the uniform of the humblest menial in your house. Creon's crown is as simple, and I hope as clean, as the apron Nanny wears. And even as Nanny smiles and is your happy servant because she sees her charge … your child … waxing fat in that little cradle, so too does Creon – your obedient servant! – stand here and smile.

The speech clearly satirizes the apartheid state, and John's enactment of it inverts the symbolism of Creon's power so as to make his point (ironically) in front of the prison guards. If it weren't enough that John, an inmate of Robben Island, is performing the role of king, the fact that Creon, symbol of unfettered power, should compare himself to one of the most familiar scenes of servitude during apartheid (the black nanny of a white child) sets the satirical tone of the staging of Antigone. But more subtly, the fact that servitude is overtly named cuts against the effacement of the slave subtext of Sophocles' Antigone. Later in the play-within-the-play, the scene of Antigone's retort to Creon that it was Eteocles’ “brother, not some slave, that died” is revised in the Robben Island version. The text reads:

John (as Creon): “Was he that died with [Polynices] also your brother?”
Winston (as Antigone): “He was”
John: “And so you honour the one and insult the other.”
Winston: “I shared my love, not my hate.”

This last line overturns Antigone's recourse to the discourse of slavery as her justification for her actions.

This strategy to make servitude and slavery overt is redoubled by the strategies around masking and unmasking in The Island. The double meaning of John's opening speech as Creon is emphasized by the fact that his rudimentary costume—he wears a prison blanket as his robes, and a medallion made from “a jam-tin lid and twine” barely disguises the fact that King Creon is, in fact, a black political prisoner on Robben Island during apartheid. In Long Walk to Freedom Nelson Mandela recalled his own participation in a Robben Island performance of Antigone where he played Creon under similar conditions to those described above. “Our productions,” he writes, “were what might now be called minimalist: no stage, no scenery, no costumes. All we had were the words of the play.”

Unlike Sophocles’ play, we are not meant to suspend disbelief and see the actor playing Creon as, simply, Creon. This strategy is even more overt in the case of Antigone. We are

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36Fugard, The Township Plays, 223.
37Ibid., 226, 227.
38Ibid., 202.
39Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 541. I am indebted to a reviewer of this paper for drawing my attention to this.
aware throughout the play that Winston is unhappy about playing the role of a woman in the intensely masculinized environment of the prison. As Chanter notes, by setting the play in a prison, the gendered conditions of Sophocles’ *Antigone* are reproduced. Yet, once again, unlike the Athenian play, Winston’s Antigone is not meant to be convincing: her wig is a mop, her breasts tin cans, her necklace is made of nails and string. This uncertain mask becomes even more significant at the end of the play when Antigone, in her final speech demasks to speak as Winston. As Antigone, Winston says:

> Brothers and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death.

Then, Winston tears off his wig and continues as himself, “Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Time waits no longer. I go not to my living death, because I honoured those things to which honour belongs.” The demasking allows Winston to speak the words, no longer in the tradition of Antigone, but more straightforwardly as himself. The words are, I would argue, no longer Antigone’s. My reading differs from Chanter’s here since she sees the play’s disavowal of women as producing the same fetishistic effect that she reads in Sophocles’ play. This may be true of women, but I argue that *The Island* undoes the fetishistic disavowal of slavery and it is this message that was meant both to resound for an international audience and to disallow any disavowal of racism as a global—not only a South African—concern.

When it comes to the production history of the play, it is interesting to note that—as was the case for so much anti-apartheid literature of the time—the global stage was more conducive to the play than the censorious South African one, for which even the seemingly innocuous title *The Island* was too evocative, given the ban on representations of Robben Island. Thus, first produced as *Die Hodoshe Span* at The Space in Cape Town in July 1973, by December that year, the play had its international debut as *The Island* at The Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court in London. It was subsequently staged in New York (at the Edison Theatre in November 1974) and in Sydney (the Seymour Centre in 1976), and was also televised for Radio-Telefís-Eireann in Dublin in 1986.

In these international contexts, the play easily slipped into being no more than a wit ness-account of life under apartheid and on Robben Island. This is precisely the reading I wish to resist here. It is not incidental that a play about life on Robben Island should recite and rewrite one of western culture’s most significant plays and draw attention to the system of slavery that that play disavowed and that continued to be a site of global amnesia when *The Island* was created. To put it another way, if Robben Island is, in this play, the disavowed of apartheid, so too is apartheid the disavowed of the cosmopolitan ideal of hospitality.

**Foe (1986) by J. M. Coetzee**

And complexity upon complexity, if Man Friday is the disavowed of Robinson Crusoe’s individualism in Daniel Defoe’s famous 1719 narrative, what is the fetishistic disavowal at play in J. M. Coetzee’s much discussed *Foe* from 1986, a text that articulates its stakes
according to the more abstract issue of representation and epistemological violence, rather than immediate political reflection on the apartheid regime?

Let’s begin with the first and more obvious claim, that Friday’s servitude is that which enables the narrative of Crusoe’s individualism. Ian Watt makes a convincing case for reading Crusoe’s story as patterned by his path as homo economicus (in which all his decisions are made in the interests of bettering his economic condition). 44 Profit, writes Watt, “is Crusoe’s only vocation, and the whole world is his territory.” 45 This reading is certainly borne out by closer attention to Defoe’s novel. His protagonist Crusoe, when settled on a plantation in “the Brasils” buys himself a “negro slave, and a European servant” in the interests of advancing his plantation. 46 Indeed, Crusoe is in search of profit through a slaving expedition to Africa when his ship is wrecked upon the rocks of the island, leaving him stranded as the only survivor.

Despite his isolation, as Watt points out, the “island offers the fullest opportunity for [Crusoe] to realize three associated tendencies of modern civilization—absolute economic, social, and intellectual freedom for the individual.” 47 Yet these freedoms come with a particular attitude of what we might more accurately call homo imperialis, which is to say, the freedoms of modern civilization are (like the freedoms of Athenian men at the Theatre of Dionysus) structurally “dependent upon the manual labor of slaves” 48 and on unfettered access to the resources of the annexed colonies. It is little surprise then that Crusoe, on exploring the island he has been cast away on, notes:

I descended a little on the side of that delicious vale, surveying it with a secret kind of pleasure (tho’ mixt with my other afflicting thoughts) to think that this was all my own, that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession; and if I could convey it, I might have it in inheritance as compleatly as any lord of a mannor in England. 49

Indeed, the only thing that could make this ownership of the island better for Crusoe would be the ownership of slaves. His thoughts run in precisely this direction as he fantasizes, not the company of friends or a wife, but this:

Besides, I fancied my self able to manage one, nay, two or three savages, if I had them, so as to make them entirely slaves to me, to do whatever I should direct them, and to prevent their being able at any time to do me any hurt. 50

Shortly after this fantasy, Crusoe’s wishes are fulfilled when Friday enters the text and quickly makes himself submissive to the will of Crusoe:

at length he came close to me, and then he kneeled down again, kissed the ground, and laid his head upon the ground, and taking me by the foot, set my foot upon his head; this it seems was in token of swearing to be my slave for ever. 51

This scene is so important to Crusoe that it is repeated as we read further of Friday’s making “all the signs of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long as he lived.” 52 As though the relation has now been almost

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46Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 58.
47Watt, Rise of the Novel, 86.
49Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 113, 114.
50Ibid., 204.
51Ibid., 207.
52Ibid., 209.
ritualistically confirmed by Friday, Crusoe goes on to name the slave, against which he renames himself as “Master.”

In “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee’s Foe reading Defoe’s Crusoe/Roxana” (1990), Gayatri Spivak notes Marx’s brief discussion of Robinson Crusoe, which appears in his elaboration of “the fetishism of commodities” that emerge in social relations. As Spivak puts it, “in generalized commodity production, the commodity has a fetish character. It represents the relationship between persons as a relationship between things. When commodities are not produced specifically for exchange, this fetish character disappears.” For both Spivak and Marx, then, Robinson Crusoe’s labor is an example “of the production of use-values,” not exchange values, since there is no one else on the island—thereby Marx uses the text to illustrate non-fetishistic production.

It is important to recall that Marx’s reading of Robinson Crusoe is not a literary reading, but a use of literary fiction to illustrate a point about social relations and labor. Nevertheless, his example betrays a telling aporia: Friday. Marx writes, “All the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation, are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion.” But this can only hold if we agree to the condition of Friday being a slave, whose labor does not then enter into a competitive market for the production of exchangeable goods and who is reduced to no more that one of the “objects that form” Crusoe’s wealth.

Marx, seeing Robinson Crusoe as homo economicus writes that “having rescued a watch, ledger, and pen and ink from the wreck [Crusoe] commences, like a true-born Briton, to keep a set of books.” But the labor-time that Crusoe journals is, once Friday appears on the island, first as an apparition—a single footprint in the wet sand—not his alone. It is interesting to note that without a single mention of Friday, Marx then transports the reader “from Robinson’s island bathed in light to the European middle ages shrouded in darkness. Here, instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy.” Once again, Marx is making a point about labor-product relations and value, but this next step, stretching out from the island of light to darkest Europe, betrays a weakness in the illustration. If we refuse to be complicit in objectifying Friday, and his labor, we might argue that something of the fetish of Marx’s commodity enters Defoe’s book. Recall, for one, that Crusoe has already sold another slave, Xury, to a

53Ibid., 209.
54Marx, The Portable Karl Marx, 447.
56Ibid., 6.
57Marx, The Portable Karl Marx, 452.
58Marx, The Portable Karl Marx, 452. Ian Watt makes a similar point about “the profit and loss book-keeping which Max Weber considered to be the distinctive technical feature of modern capitalism” and links this to Crusoe’s “book-keeping conscience” (Watt, The Rise of the Novel, 63).
59Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 162.
60Marx, The Portable Karl Marx, 453.
61Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 54.
captain (to be set free after ten years if he promises becomes Christian) for “60 pieces of eight,” whereby we see exchange value of the slave in play. When Friday prostrates himself under Crusoe's foot, he performs his own objectification and once he and Crusoe leave the island, his commodity status comes to fruition. And is the island not itself part of the broader Atlantic slave trade that Crusoe is deeply imbricated in? Thus, if we deny the isolationist myth that the island wishes us to believe in (by virtue of enabling a plot of the individualistic self-determination of homo imperialis, Robinson Crusoe), we see that Friday is the object of exchange in the trade of labor upon which Crusoe's profits are based. Once again, Friday becomes fetishistically disavowed in the services of Crusoe's self-determination, just as the slave is disavowed in the story of global capital.

The island is itself, then, a convenient fiction for imperial man and it is this fiction that there are pure spaces, free from global capital and imperial history, that J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* deconstructs. *Foe* is comprised of four parts. Where *The Island* was structured toward its intertext, *Antigone*, which is loosely reproduced at the end of the play, Coetzee's novel works away from *Robinson Crusoe* in a centripetal movement that also moves from the island to the imperial world. In the first section of the book we read the protagonist Susan Barton's narration of her time on the island with Cruso and Friday. The second section is narrated from Clock Lane in London, where Susan is living with Friday, Cruso having died of fever on the ship that rescued them from the island. Her narrative here comprises a set of letters to her host Mr Foe, a fictionalized Daniel Defoe, who has shown an interest in her narrative, *The Female Castaway*. Susan is cast into poverty here, having nothing but her story of the island, which she wishes to sell to Mr Foe. Foe is an ambivalent interlocutor for her confessional though, and this becomes exacerbated when he disappears because he is wanted by the tax authorities. Susan leaves Foe's London lodgings and attempts to find passage for Friday to an unspecified place in “Africa.” She realizes however that there are no trustworthy ship owners and that Friday will inevitably be sold into slavery. So, in the third section of the novel, Friday and Susan seek out Mr Foe once more, who reunites her in increasingly fantastical and dream-like sequences, with her lost daughter and nanny and here the book leaves Cruso's island almost entirely as it segues more thoroughly into its second intertext, Defoe's, *Roxana*. We sense in this section that Susan may be mentally unsound and this is intensified in the final section, which surreally describes a final encounter between Susan and Friday, where Friday becomes a metonym for the history of slavery.

This centripetal movement from the island—in a specific place and time—to the entire history of slavery evidences the ways in which Coetzee's island operates as a heterotopia and can never be understood as truly isolated. Although the novel begins with Susan Barton's dramatic claim “I am cast away. I am all alone,” her isolation is short lived as she is immediately discovered by Friday and Cruso. Barton seems over-invested in the “desert island” narrative throughout the text. Her version of the story *The Female Castaway* is searching for

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61 Slavoj Žižek critiques this passage from *Capital* in developing a clearer relationship between the Freudian and Marxian fetish. Without noting the significance of *Robinson Crusoe* in this passage, Žižek notes that in Marx's description of the economic evolution from feudalism to capitalism, with the establishment of bourgeois society, the relations of domination and servitude are repressed: formally, we are apparently concerned with free subjects whose interpersonal relations are discharged of all fetishism; the repressed truth—that of the persistence of domination and servitude—emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 26. This symptom is, for Žižek, the commodity.


63 Coetzee, *Foe*, 5.
the form of isolation in a way that Foe later dismisses: “The island is not a story in itself,” he advises Barton.\textsuperscript{65} Interestingly enough, when Barton first arrives on the island she says something similar of Cruso:

It was as though he wished his story to begin with his arrival on the island, and mine to begin with my arrival, and the story of us together to end on the island too.\textsuperscript{66}

This is where Barton’s storytelling begins. She gives a lengthy account of herself to Cruso, an account that later she will withhold from Foe, favoring then the account of her time on the island.\textsuperscript{67} Her different circumstances prompt the variant stories she tells. On the island, Barton requires Cruso’s protection and hospitality, and the account she gives of herself follows the logic of what Jacques Derrida sees as the first violence of hospitality whereby the guest must always “ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own,”\textsuperscript{68} and then adjust his/her account of his/herself accordingly.\textsuperscript{69} Later, when Barton is trying to sell her tale to Foe, the adventure of the island comes into focus, rather. Moreover, while she writes her memoir in three days, she ekes out the telling by making up new circumstances—fictions we recognize from the historical Defoe’s novel.\textsuperscript{70} Here, though, it appears as though these fictions are made up not only for their adventurous appeal: since Foe is hosting her as she writes \textit{The Female Castaway}, like an eighteenth-century Scheherazade, she keeps her narrative confessions going.

Barton is aware of the exchange-value of an account of the island right from the outset where she entreats Cruso to keep a record of his experiences on the island:

The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance, such as: When you made your needle (the needle you store in your belt), by what means did you pierce the eye? When you sewed your hat, what did you use for thread? Touches like these will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word, there was indeed once an island in the middle of the ocean where the wind blew and the gulls cried from the cliffs and a man named Cruso paced about in his apeskin clothes, scanning the horizon for a sail.\textsuperscript{71}

The ledger account that Defoe’s \textit{homo economicus} keeps becomes here the narrative account that has potential exchange-value as a book (the book, in fact, that Defoe will write).\textsuperscript{72} In this representational matrix, inspired as it is by Derrida’s famous assertion that “there is nothing outside the text,”\textsuperscript{73} the island becomes nothing more than narrative, perhaps explaining Cruso’s dismissal of Barton’s question as to why he hadn’t escaped by making a boat: “And where should I escape to?”, she asks. Beyond the island is simply more text,

\textsuperscript{65}ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{66}ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{67}ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{68}Derrida and Dufourmantelle, \textit{Of Hospitality}, 15.
\textsuperscript{69}Coetzee, \textit{Foe}, 8, 10.
\textsuperscript{70}ibid., 63, 67.
\textsuperscript{71}ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{72}Ian Watt makes a revealing point about the link between Marxian alienation and the appeal of adventure narratives like \textit{Robinson Crusoe}, which enable readers to fantasize a return to non-alienated labor. He writes:

If Robinson Crusoe’s character depends very largely on the psychological and social orientations of economic individualism, the appeal of his adventures to the reader seems mainly to derive from the effects of another important concomitant of modern capitalism, economic specialization. (71)

\textsuperscript{73}Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 158.
which Barton later gains insight into: “The world is full of islands, said Cruso once. His words ring truer every day.”

Within this sea of narrative then, global in meaning and exchange-value, is Friday’s silence, symptomatized in Foe by his missing tongue. Cruso tells Barton that Friday’s tongue was cut off by slavers, a narrative she later questions, urging Friday to give an account of what happened. Including the possibility that Cruso might have cut Friday’s tongue out, Barton implores Friday to find a way to convey his story, reminding us of Judith Butler’s observation that to call the other to account for him/herself is a form of ethical violence. Butler writes:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine … The narrative authority of the “I” must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story.

Friday’s disorientation by what is not his infuses the book, as does Susan Barton’s disorientation at the absence of Friday’s account of himself (instead, he spins endlessly in an uninterpretable dance that, though Susan imitates, does not fill in the silence of Friday’s story). Eventually, Susan comes to understand that “it might not be mere dullness that kept [Friday] shut up in himself, not the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me.”

Barton then runs the gambit of the ethics of subaltern advocacy, always falling into Butler’s ethical violence by trying to force the story from Friday’s lips:

The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday.

Two pieces of self-awareness remain, then, for Susan: first, that if Friday “was not a slave, was he nevertheless not the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told?” and that “the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost!”

Friday’s lost tongue becomes Susan’s fetishistic obsession then, to restore it, to give it voice again. Yet she is trapped in a cycle whereby this obsession can only ever be the demand that Friday tell his story on her terms. Even in the dream-like sequence which closes the novel, where Susan fantasizes Friday’s ephemeral speech, we have a sense of Susan’s urge to invade the mouth of Friday, in an image that suggests rape:

He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in. His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

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74 Coetzee, Foe, 71.
75 Ibid., 23.
77 Coetzee, Foe, 98.
78 Ibid., 118.
79 Ibid., 150.
80 Ibid., 67.
81 Ibid., 157.
This is the metaphoric fugue of Friday’s unintelligible narrative, an ephemeral sound that somehow speaks the island (“From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island”).\(^{82}\) It is important that this scene, dream-like as it is, occurs on a ship (possibly a shipwreck), which metonymically comes to signify the Atlantic slave trade. This is a language, though an unheard one, a narrative, but a disavowed one, that washes from the island both “northward and southward to the ends of the earth.” In a sense it stands outside language, it is, as Barton narrates, “not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.”\(^{83}\)

Ultimately, the narrative of Friday cannot be told, but the brutality of the slavery that tore out his tongue is the brutality of the narrative, under Defoe’s pen, that turned him into the happy slave, content to be the vassal of King Crusoe. Coetzee’s text, in all its theoretical complexity, attempts to point to the disavowed of Defoe’s text (simply put, Friday’s narrative on his own terms). But in so doing, he also casts the condition of apartheid onto a global stage. South Africa, like Cruso’s island, is “not a story in itself;” Rather, it is an uncontained global story, one that to return to Derrida’s words, “translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home.”\(^{84}\)

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In *Hamlet’s Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare*, David Schalkwyk discusses the collected Shakespeare, owned by political prisoner Solly Venkatrathnam, that has become known as the “Robben Island Shakespeare.” While incarcerated on Robben Island, Venkatrathnam asked his fellow political prisoners of the time to sign their names next to their favorite passages from Shakespeare. The book has 34 signatories, including Nelson Mandela.\(^{85}\) This book opens yet again a heterotopian space. As Foucault writes, “Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed […] heterochronies.”\(^{86}\) What better example of just such a heterochronic space than a text that, in its time on Robben Island, connected the inmates to the (literary, global) past and to their personal memories of reading Shakespeare before entering the prison (think, for example, of the fact, as Schalkwyk interestingly notes, that Robert Sobukwe—who was in solitary confinement for 6 years on Robben Island—had embarked on a translation of *Macbeth* into Zulu before his imprisonment).\(^{87}\) But further to that, Venkatrathnam’s book, now part of the history of the island, has since the end of apartheid traveled around the world as part of various exhibitions, perhaps most fittingly the one in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2006, where the South African literary critic Schalkwyk saw it for the first time. As such the book is a library of its own past, but also of the very notion of world literature, encompassing Robben Island and Stratford-upon-Avon in equal measure.

This brings me back to the very notion of world literature (in this paper illustrated by *Antigone* and *Robinson Crusoe*) that I am attempting to open into a relationship of accountability with the history of apartheid. Just as Shakespeare becomes part of Robben Island’s

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\(^{82}\)Ibid., 154.

\(^{83}\)Ibid., 157.

\(^{84}\)Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xv.

\(^{85}\)Schalkwyk, *Hamlet’s Dreams*, xi.


history (the world on an island, as it were), so too, must we read apartheid’s literature as world literature (the island as the world). To disavow this, is to deny the global itinerary, as Louise Bethlehem has put it, of apartheid. The novels discussed here operate as portals to other spaces and times, not only as a fantasy out of the carceral state of apartheid or the penal island of Robben Island, but to see the here and now of those apartheid spaces in and of the world.

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**Notes on contributor**


**ORCID**

_Ashleigh Harris_ [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6207-3067](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6207-3067)

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