The Image of Brazil in *Robinson Crusoe*

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Daniel Defoe's masterpiece, *Robinson Crusoe*, was originally published in 1719 and has been considered a landmark in the history of the novel, especially because of its powerful fusion of fact and fiction. By mixing these realms and exploiting links and gaps between them, Defoe, among other writers, helped to create the genre of the novel, which would come to be the written expression of the bourgeois world *par excellence.*

From the late fifteenth century on, with the discovery and conquest of the New World, reports from distant and exotic lands had already provoked a crisis of values within the literary world, since the borders between fact and imagination were now blurred by the influx of images from travel accounts and their literary impressions. In a society still dominated by the Bible as the paradigmatic book (which meant that all written words should embody the truth), the imagery coming from such accounts were a source of confusion, since their reality apparently relied only on the narrator's voice, which was the reader's best guarantee for understanding the meaning of these distant worlds. Some writers, such as Daniel Defoe—or Shakespeare in *The Tempest* as well as Fernão Mendes Pinto in his *Travels*, both early precursors to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—soon became aware of the fictional and allegorical possibilities that such images of distant worlds opened and of the consequent disruption of the relationship between fact and narration. Those openings were developed in such a way that it is possible to say that they constitute one of the historical sources of the novel. Travel accounts, as one of the sources for the new genre, had their counterpart in trading activity, which was an equally central axis in the new bourgeois economic order, in which the

aristocracy was no longer the only class capable of establishing economic and cultural forms (Fausett 20).

Robinson Crusoe embodies both the travel fiction and the trading issues of this historical moment. Hence we can see its importance in the later development of the novel as the chief expression of the bourgeois world. However, whether we read Robinson's wanderings as an economic or puritan parable, a political allegory, a realistic image of colonialism, or a framework for the discussion of religious matters, we should not forget their fictional status. Perhaps the most interesting standpoint from which to read *Robinson Crusoe*—as well as any other historical novel—is to try to understand how any context was introduced and reinvented by the novelist in the narrative, and, similarly, how that same narrative reconstructs our comprehension of the given context, always keeping in mind that text and context are played off against each other in a sort of continuous movement.

Brazil plays a unique role in Defoe's novel. Not only is the Portuguese colony from the mid-seventeenth century literally part of the novel's context, but the text itself also constructs for the reader a fictional image of that part of the world. Such an image, on the one hand, reinforces the widespread myth of Brazil as a paradise, a land of opportunity, a country of equitable social relations; on the other hand, it is a narrative device used by Defoe to develop his novel's plot and a portion of his political, economic and religious arguments.

After leaving his father's house to embrace a life of adventures at sea, Crusoe begins to work as a trader. In his first voyage he earns £300 by trading trinkets for ivory, gold and slaves on the Guinea coast. Leaving £200 for safekeeping with a friend's widow in London, he departs on a second voyage, but ends up being captured by Moors in Salee, Africa. Following an assortment of other events, he escapes in a boat. He has some provisions, tools and weapons, and a few small commodities. Finally, he is rescued by a Portuguese ship, which is carrying slaves from the coast of Guinea to Brazil. Arriving at Salvador around 1655, he sells all of his goods to the ship's captain and decides to start a new life in Brazil.

The Portuguese captain refers Crusoe to a *senhor de engenho* (a sugar plantation/mill owner). He lives on the planter's property for some time, learning how to plant and process sugar. Amazed by how a plantation owner could accumulate wealth, he decides to become one of them. Using his small stock of money, he buys as much land as possible and settles down as a

farmer. For two years he plants only food. In the third year he plants some tobacco and prepares a plot of land for cultivating sugarcane. At this point he is in real need of more money to improve his plantation; without it, he would be forever no more than a provider of food and tobacco for the larger plantations. He thus arranges to have £100 remitted to him from England. The same Portuguese captain who saved his life at sea decides to bring the money from London, by investing it in English goods. Crusoe sells all of the goods for a large profit. Stocked with capital, Crusoe is now poised to turn himself into a powerful plantation owner.

Once established, Crusoe becomes acquainted with other landowners and with the merchants at the port in Salvador. During one of their conversations, Crusoe talks about his experience as a trader on the Guinea coast and explains how easy it was to go to Africa and trade directly with Africans. The local community then suggests that they should unite their resources and send a ship of their own to Africa, thus eliminating the middlemen and increasing the profitability of bringing slaves to Brazil. They offer him an equal share of the cargo without providing any part of the stock, and also offer to take care of his plantations while he is abroad. But it is during this voyage that he gets lost at sea and ends up spending 28 years on a remote island.

When he returns to England after this prolonged absence, he regains control of his property in Brazil, which was in the hands of the state and of a religious order. However, he decides to sell it, since he had become a self-taught Puritan who could not live among Catholics.

Having the character participate in the Brazilian sugarcane industry was Defoe's effective strategy to present a meditation on economics and society centered upon the idea of the self-made man. The Brazilian crop was one of the most profitable industries during Defoe's time and was also basically run by foreigners of low social extraction (Blackburn 173). In the late seventeenth century, 60% of the Brazilian planters were immigrants, a pattern that suggests a considerable level of mobility among them (Schwartz 89). Thus, Brazil functioned as a perfect setting for an economic parable of a middle-class, individualistic and mercantilist self-reliant man.

Since Karl Marx there is a tradition of reading Defoe's novel as an economic parable by focusing on Crusoe's settlement on the remote island and on his continuing labor, which leads to a sort of microcosmic reconstruction of civilization. However, as Michael Seidel points out, the

island would not be suitable for an economic experience in the real sense of the expression, since it did not include relations between capital and labor; there were no problems of supply, demand, wages, monetary circulation, debts, loans or interest rates, all intricate parts of an economic system (Seidel 102). Ian Watt's characterization of Crusoe's life on the island as a case of *homo economicus* is thus viewed by Seidel as an overdetermined reading of the novel. Brazil, on the other hand, had all the necessary economic ingredients to bring about the rise of a middle-class adventurer. If Defoe uses the character to portray his own opinions about moral issues related to money and the free market, he does it by presenting Crusoe's Brazilian experience as the right, legal and moral way of trading, where everybody is reliable, and where everything falls into place. Even after 28 years on a desert island, Crusoe's investments are administered fairly by his trustees, and the capitalist relations stay as honest as any agreement among friends. This economic paradise is, in short, the parable constructed by Defoe.

On the one hand, a real social and economic environment, such as Brazil in 1655, grounds Defoe's imagined plot. In this respect, it is important to remember that Defoe was himself a merchant trader to Portugal and Spain during a period of his life and thus had some personal knowledge about Brazil. On the other hand, he reconstructs this social material in order to weave his story. The equitable Brazilian society is less a reflection of any real Iberian kindness than a criticism of English colonial policy (Seidel 103). In creating an utopian economic environment in Brazil, Defoe criticizes, by extension, his own countrymen. Despite his fictional intentions, Defoe builds a clear distinction between Iberian and British colonial policies. Defoe may thus be viewed as a sort of precursor to Gilberto Freyre's Luso-Tropicalism (Freyre 75-176). Indeed, it would be interesting to know to what extent Freyre was influenced by Defoe's conceptions of Iberian colonialism. Here we have the case of fiction creating reality. What was, for Defoe, merely a fictional mediation, a reconstruction of reality to produce a fictional effect and an economic parable, ended up being part of Freyre's theory on colonialism.

When Crusoe arrives in Brazil, the war against the Dutch in Pernambuco and Bahia had just finished. The war had disrupted the sugarcane industry, and it was time for reconstruction. However, Brazil was now facing serious competition with the French, British and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, which had begun to cultivate sugar since the 1630s and in better growing conditions (Schwartz 97). The new producers integrated cultivation,

processing and transportation, even financing and sales, into a single process (Blackburn 332). Modern capitalism replaced old mercantilism. In order to face the competition Brazil was in dire need of greater production at lower costs. New planters, like Crusoe, would have been very welcome in such a situation. Blackburn adds that, "... there were no shortage of lands, which could be acquired to grow foodstuffs and tobacco" (174).

Here we have exactly what Crusoe accomplishes. With the profit of his sale to the captain who had rescued him, he buys some land and starts planting foodstuffs and tobacco. By focusing on these subsidiary activities, Crusoe could foresee a better future, one in which he would have enough money to build his own sugar mill. The plot of a small planter growing rich, step by step, grounded in his own efforts, is the perfect parable of a self-reliant common man. Even Stuart Schwartz falls into this sublime allegory, when he designates such fundraising methods as "Robinson Crusoe" (Schwartz 93). But Schwartz fails to recognize that, based on his own data, it would be almost impossible for a small *manioc* and tobacco planter to become a sugar mill owner, since the investments necessary to build such a property were far greater than what a small planter could raise by means of his own labor. Other investment sources were needed. Crusoe himself notes this necessity when he states that he and his neighbor planter would need additional labor (Defoe 55).

It is at this point that he decides to retrieve some money from England. Although the step-by-step situation is tailored to create the economic parable, Crusoe only ascends when he receives the new money from London. The first thing he does with this money is to buy a black slave and a European servant (58). Thus, Defoe transforms his character into a real planter, since the possession of a larger labor force was what really distinguished a *senhor de engenho* from a mere *manioc* or tobacco farmer.

In relation to Crusoe's slavetrading activity, we can again find Defoe manipulating the same type of fictional devices. When Robinson talks with his fellow planters and merchants about the Guinean trading, they pay special attention to the part related to the buying of slaves,

> ... which was a trade at that time not only far from entered into, but as far as it was, had been carried on by the *assientoes*, or permission of the kings of Spain and Portugal, and engrossed in the public, so that few negroes were brought, and those excessive dear. (59)

Here we have the perfect manipulation of real matters for fictional intentions. The trade was in fact in the hands of a few large contractors who purchased the right to import African slaves and then sold these licenses to actual traders (Blackburn 174). They were the middlemen whom Crusoe and his fellows were trying to bypass by going directly to the African coast. The price of a slave, in relation to the price of sugar, was also growing fast. In 1710, the price of a slave was about four times as much as it had been in 1608 (Schwartz 94). The plot is, thus, grounded on a very real situation. However, other elements in the same passage are clearly manipulated in order to create a fictional effect. During that time in Brazil, the slave trade was not small at all; consequently, the number of slaves who were brought to the colony was not small, as the novel suggests, but increasing. Between 1651 and 1675 the number of slaves who were taken from Africa doubled in relation to the second quarter of that same century (Blackburn 326). Nevertheless, Defoe's manipulation of these facts clearly serves the fictional purpose of training Crusoe as a leader, the one who provides the others with solutions to their problems. This narrative strategy also highlights, as far as the novel's fictional purposes are concerned, the character's entrepreneurial attitude.

The manner in which Crusoe describes the trade along the coast of Guinea is also a good example of such fictional manipulations of facts:

> I had frequently given them [the other planters] an account of my two voyages to the coast of Guinea, the manner of trading with the negroes there, and how easy it was to purchase upon the coast, for trifles, such as beads, toys, knives, scissors, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like, not only gold dust, Guinea grains, elephant teeth, etc, but negroes, for the service of the Brazil, in great numbers. (59)

The scene of a clever European exchanging trinkets for gold, ivory, silver, and other commodities has the power of a myth. It is perhaps the most Eurocentric and widespread image of the Conquest, in which American Natives, Africans and Asians are reduced to a bunch of idiots. Old and well-established trade communities in Africa, as well as in Asia, would not be impressed by such trifles. But the argument definitively has its fictional impact within the plot.

The real trade was quite different. Tobacco and rum were, without a doubt, very important commodities in those trading routes (Blackburn 174). But, overall, it is important to remember that the rapid growth of African

slave exports from 1650 on was due not only to the explosion of growth of the plantation system in America, but also to the role played by the improved military technology brought to Africa by English and Dutch merchants. In other words, weapons and military technology played a large role in the slave trade after the second half of the seventeenth century (Thorton 116). When Defoe dismisses such facts, he is not unaware of them, but merely keeping in mind the effects produced in and by the narrative. We can obviously learn about mid-seventeenth century Brazil through Defoe's novel, as long as we discern the elements of fictional intention and do not take them as pure facts.

Defoe created a masterpiece. As a piece of art, the novel does not need to answer all of the historical and social questions of its time. Its role is not to fulfill our demand for facts, but to call our attention to various issues and lead us to meditate upon them. Colonial Brazil is one of these issues. Almost three hundred years after being published, the book still leads us through a superb historical vision and continues to be a complex and challenging document.

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