

Circum Atlantic Space and Class Identity Formation and Transformation: The Case of The European, The African and The American in The English Novel

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Abstract: The argument in this paper says identities are not given but they keep changing particularly in “The New World” and this paper looks at English literature, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Alexander Exquemelin’s *The Buccaneers of America*. Defoe shows the new avenues and possibilities of self exploration offered by the New World. In this book the concept of identity will be discussed vis-à-vis the ship, the sea, and the island chronotopes. The contention being that these alternative spaces exert certain demands and expectations on individuals which make constant adjustments and metamorphosis inevitable for both Robinson Crusoe and Friday, his servant. Meanwhile, Alexander Exquemelin’s portrays the Atlantic world with its connecting link, the ship as elastic space which can be exploited, manipulated, appropriated, and utilized for self creation, agency and subjectivity. Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Buccaneers of America* deal with the issue of economic subjectivity: i.e. the romanticized and idealized homo-economicus of Robinson Crusoe in his utopian island and the real world of conspiracy and piracy, extravagancy, debauchery, and waste of the buccaneers. The two texts show the honorific and the horrific ways of material accumulation and identity formation and transformation which the Atlantic space made possible from the seventeenth right up to the early nineteenth centuries. The two novels in contention show two contradictory manifestations of the ‘imperial identity’ namely the noble merchant and the despicable pirate’s quests for bullion and status..

Keywords: English literature, noble, *Robinson Crusoe*

DISCUSSION

In the light of Paul Gilroy and Alan Karras’ theoretical assumptions about identity formation and transformation in the Atlantic liminal space this paper seeks to analyze two texts which privilege Atlantic space, circulation, interaction, and identity issues. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* shows the new avenues and possibilities of self exploration offered by the New World[3]. In this book the concept of identity will be discussed vis-à-vis the ship, the sea, and the island chronotopes. The contention being that these alternative spaces exert certain demands and expectations on individuals which make constant adjustments and metamorphosis inevitable for both Robinson Crusoe and Friday, his “inferior other” or subaltern. In a similar vein Alexander Exquemelin’s *The Buccaneers of America* portrays the Atlantic world with its connecting link, the ship as elastic space which can be exploited, manipulated, appropriated, and utilized for self creation, agency and subjectivity. The deck of a pirate ship, it has been observed, was the most empowering place for low class people including blacks within the eighteenth century white man’s world. Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Buccaneers of America* deal with the issue of economic subjectivity: i.e. the

romanticized and idealized homo-economicus of Robinson Crusoe in his utopian island and the real world of conspiracy and piracy, extravagancy, debauchery, and waste of the buccaneers. The two texts show the honorific and the horrific ways of material accumulation and identity formation and transformation which the Atlantic space made possible from the seventeenth right up to the early nineteenth centuries. The two novels in contention show two contradictory manifestations of the ‘imperial identity’ namely the noble merchant and the despicable pirate’s quests for bullion and status.

As already implied both Gilroy and Karras argue that Atlantic America should be studied as a single unit connected by the ocean, the ship, and seaborne trade. Gilroy’s noble project[7], *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* forces us to rethink of the Middle Passage, i.e. the liminal oceanic space between Europe, Africa, and the Americas as, inter alia a cultural melting pot. A space of fusion, cultural cross-fertilization, syncretism, eclecticism, cultural exchange, hybridity, and intermixture of ideas, “instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, and always

being remade” (xi). He forces us to rethink identity, nationality, and ethnicity not in essentialist terms which privilege purity, origin, roots, and homogeneity. Gilroy deliberately shifts from “roots” as the epicenter of origin and authentic identity; a trope popularized by Alex Hailey’s famous book, *Roots*, which elevates Africa to the ideal and uncontaminated origin of black culture and stable identities. He rather opens up these terms and sees the Middle Passage as the central metaphor of “cross cultural circulation” and privileges roots’ homonym routes, which is loaded with such concepts as mobility, transition, fluxes, change, and transformation. In this logic he sees identities of blacks which are his primary concern as constantly being formed and performed, as temporal processes, as negotiations with space and place, geography and history rather than as permanent, stable, and static products.

Gilroy urges “cultural historians” to “take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective”(15) . He wants us to understand modernity from the onset of plantation slavery, and hence any discussion of the modern world and modern identities should put due weight on the liminal space of the Atlantic in forming and transforming identities of both slaves and masters. It is not Europe, or Africa which should be the central focus of the modern identity as both places represent old and finite selves but the Atlantic world which represents the alternative space, the alternative identities, and infinite possibilities. Alan Karras’s book[8] *Atlantic American Societies: From Columbus through Abolition, 1492-1888* concurs with Gilroy and adds that the “discovery” by Christopher Columbus in 1492 ended the geographical, cultural, political, and economical isolation of the now Americas. Karras aptly puts it: “Columbus’ first voyage, in 1492, serves as an historical reference point. From this moment in time forward, the histories of Europe, America, and Africa became inextricably linked. Peoples and cultures began to interact regularly” [1]. He argues that from 1492 to 1888 there was so much movement and interactions among people, cultures, economies, and environments of disparate places and dissimilar peoples within the region so much that it makes great academic sense to study Atlantic America as a single unit. In the same logic as Gilroy, Karras advocates a shift away from geographic national borders and stable identities towards oceanic space where nationality, ethnicity, and identity break down and melt into something else.

As stated earlier Daniel Defoe experiments [3]with the myth of economic individualism and the notion of an honorable moral economy which the expanding empire and the Atlantic space make possible. In the first instance, the ship and the sea are figured as

symbols of freedom, limitlessness, and absence of differentiation for the claustrophobic Crusoe who is against the rigid patriarchal hierarchies and structures inherent in the English society of his day. For a start the ship represents alternative space with different expectations and status markers. It is more than just a vessel of economic trade, contact, education, and cultural exchange but opens a world of possibilities for Crusoe.

Prior to the Guinea voyage we should remember that the rebellious Crusoe is hardly a seafarer, has no trade or apprentice, has no fortune or name but the ship space, i.e. the time spent on the ship itself en route to Guinea and the activities and interactions in it go a long way into preparing him for the twenty-eight years of isolation on the remote island. As he goes on board the Guinea-bound ship Crusoe, who is a nonentity outside the confines of the ship, joyfully contemplates the possible ranks or identities that await him in the ship: “... yet at the same time I had learned the duty and office of a fore-mast man; and in time might have qualified myself for a Mate or Lieutenant, if not for a Master: ...” (15). As expected in the ship to Guinea, Crusoe makes new contacts, new friends, and new acquaintances as he travels as the Captain’s “mess-mate and companion” and this shows that the ship is an alternative social space. The trade or economic functions of the ship are underlined by the fact that Crusoe points to the “toys and trifles” he carried to Africa as exchange items and the fortune of “5.9 ounces of gold dust” he brought back. The mathematically precise mechanic and accountant we later encounter in the island of isolation was trained and nurtured in this very ship’s space and duration of travel and not in any sophisticated academic institution as we learn:

This was the only voyage which I may say was successful in all my adventures, and which I owe to the integrity and honesty of my friend and Captain, under whom also I got knowledge of mathematicks and the rules of navigation, learned how to keep an account of the ship’s course, ... in short, to understand some things that were needful to be understood by a sailor: For, as he took delight to introduce me, I took delight to learn; and, in a word, this voyage made me both a sailor and a merchant: ... (16).

At the end of this expedition which appetized Crusoe for many more cross-Atlantic ventures, he happily concludes that this voyage made him a “Guiney trader” (16). The contention so far, in line with Gilroy is that the ship as a sociopolitical and cultural space and the time spent in it traversing the Atlantic and the activities done in it give birth to new consciousnesses and identities which are as important as its economic functions that have been hitherto emphasized. Paul

Gilroy [7]underscores the centrality of the ship chronotope in his obsession with the image of ships in motion across the Atlantic which he rightly describes as “living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion— ...” (4). The ship as a purveyor and circulator of ideas and activities and joiner of spatial dimensions is pivotal in explicating the Atlantic world, mutable identities, and changing consciousness. By the time Crusoe goes to island-confinement he has accumulated vast knowledge and experience which comes with circum-Atlantic circulation. For instance, he has been a slave in Africa under the Moslems, has been to Algeria and Morocco, owns a plantation in Brazil, a Catholic domain and he himself is an English Protestant, and has had dealings with the Portuguese to whom he sold the boy Xury. It is this vital knowledge, it can be argued, that ensures his survival in the hostile island over and above his exploitation of the materials and tools of modernity he salvages from the shipwreck.

On the other hand, Alexander Exquemelin is interested in the ship as a “micro-political system in motion” (Gilroy p 4) as he explores the goings-on in a pirate ship. The pirate ship is figured as an ‘egalitarian space’ where the pirate and buccaneer communities are uniformly loyal to one another as “they all swore an oath of loyal endeavor” (68) and share and distribute their loot equitably and above all have the power to elect and impeach their captains. This egalitarian aura makes the pirate ship quite different from the autocracy and monarchism that obtains in Europe at this time. Exquemelin who professes to be writing a first-hand pirate narrative gives a litany of pirate laws and insurances which guide these communities’ mundane lives:

They also draw up an agreement or *chasse partie*, in which is specified what the captain shall have for himself and for the use of his vessel. Usually they agree on the following terms. Providing they capture a prize, first of all these amounts would be deducted from the whole capital. The hunters’ pay would generally be 200 pieces of eight. The carpenter, for his work [...] would be paid 100 or 150 pieces of eight. The surgeon would receive 200 or 250 for his medical supplies, [...]. Then came the agreed awards for the wounded, who might have lost a limb or suffered other injuries. They would be compensated as follows: for the loss of a right arm, 600 pieces of eight or six slaves; for a left arm, 500 pieces of eight or five slaves. The loss of a right leg also brought 500 pieces of eight or five slaves in compensation; a left leg, 400 or four slaves; an eye, 100 or one slave, and the same award was made for the loss of a finger (71).

These well considered remunerations and strict compensation system elevate piracy into the avant-garde of modern system of wage labor in the capitalist enterprise. The compensations with ‘pieces of eight’ or slaves at a ratio of one slave to a 100 pieces still shows the “thingification” of negroes, to use Aime Cesaire’s immortal term. Even in the pirate community, boastful of its egalitarian principles blacks retained a chattel identity.

Exquemelin also invites us to read the pirate communities in their unconventionality and outlaw as conventionally sanctioned rehabilitation centers for the social outcasts and rebels. Buccaneer communities, like the maroon slave communities, were made up of men who had suffered under the tyranny of both the crown and the plantation owners. Most of the people who became buccaneers or pirates were the “masterless men” ostracized by the enclosure movement, indentured servants, and slaves who saw in this unorthodox method of accumulating wealth the only way up the social ladder. Exquemelin describes his fascination and initiation into a life of ruthless plunder. He spent several years in indentured servitude for the deputy governor of Tortuga, whom he vengefully describes as “the wickedest rogue in the whole island” (34) and was sold to a surgeon for seventy pieces of eight while sick. The surgeon later gave him his freedom for 150 pieces of eight which he was to pay later. As somebody with “nothing at all” in terms of material as he describes himself as poor as “Adam when he was first created” he “resolved to join the privateers or buccaneers” (34). Buccaneering posits an easy and fast way out of material poverty and low class status.

Other pirates with humble origins who took to piracy for economic advantage include the renowned Henry Morgan and Francois L’Olonnais. According to Exquemelin[6], the latter “was shipped out to the Caribbean Islands as a boy in the usual way, as an indentured servant or slave,” (89) and Morgan “was sold as an indentured servant in the English manner” (119). “Rock the Brazilian” is an example of people who joined the buccaneers because of displacement and dislocation caused by the Portuguese’s reclaim of Brazil from the Dutch. Yet Negroes were enticed into buccaneering by promises of freedom and the planters and hunters of Tortuga saw in piracy a fast route to riches. The last groups that took to a life of buccaneering were sailors who jumped ship or escaped from a wreck, and the debris of extreme Protestant sects dispersed by Europe’s religious wars, runaway bonded servants and those who had lost their fortunes. In fact buccaneer settlements provided a kind of solace for any number of exiles. Evidently the buccaneer communities enjoyed immense color, ethnic, class, and national diversities. Buccaneering gave agency and economic subjectivity to low class people including blacks. The

pirate ships were the earliest places in modern society where blacks achieved equal standing with whites.

Where Exquemelin[6] is fascinated with the marauding expeditions of the pirates on the high seas and a macho identity, Defoe is charmed by the concept of a remote island and the identity transformations it opens to the individual. Once in the island Crusoe goes through a lot of identity transmutations which border around fantasy and political scheming. On more than three occasions he wallows in the thought of being a sovereign king with loyal subjects: "I was lord of the whole manor; or if I pleased, I might call myself king or emperor over the whole country which I had possession of. There were no rivals. I had no competitor, none to dispute sovereignty or command with me" (102). And later when "his island" is peopled he dreamily muses:

My island is now peopled, and I thought myself very rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection which I frequently made, how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own mere property; so that I had an undoubted right of dominion. Secondly, my people were perfectly subjected: I was absolute lord and law-giver; they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion of it, for me. It was remarkable too, we had but three subjects, and they were of three different religions. My man Friday was a Protestant, his father was a pagan and a cannibal, and the Spaniard was a Papist: However, I allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions: But this is by the way (190).

From this long quotation many concepts come into play about the possibilities made achievable by the new Atlantic space. Nonentities at home can now realize their fantasies and dreams in this new utopian space. Crusoe is able to rise from what he calls the "middle state" to a higher class level. The colonies can afford religious tolerance which is taboo back home as evidenced by the prevalence of religious wars at this time. Crusoe, the colonial master has a spatialized identity as he holds together a spatial world from England, to Brazil, to the Caribbean island, to Portugal and France. Other identities the new space allows Crusoe to perform include that of the island's governor, and governor's jailor. Once a group of English mutineers and their deposed captain appear, Crusoe transforms himself into the island's governor. And during the process of restoring the deposed captain to power, the disheveled Crusoe addresses the imprisoned mutineers as the governor's jailor, threatening them with the awful wrath of his fictional superior. Crusoe's identity transmutations move from being fantastic to being political maneuvers and they are both

performative and emulative of established English portfolios to say the least.

Where as Crusoe grapples with his individual identity in isolation Exquemelin shows[6] the intricate and sophisticated political connections a pirate enjoys. The legend of Morgan shows how a pirate/fortune hunter evolves from indentured servitude to outlaw and then to a well-moneyed and powerful middle-class subject and a legitimate member of the British Empire. Again, where Crusoe thrives as an isolated individual subject, pirates excel on group agency and collective identities which are at once removed and integrated to the metropolitan politics. In Exquemelin's account as the war between Britain and Spain evolves the British monarch commissions the buccaneers to further her own claims on the West Indies. In fact Great Britain provides ships and supplies, and commissions the buccaneers, as privateers, to attack Spanish shipping and settlements in the name of the King of England. Britain uses the buccaneers' war against the Spanish to their own advantage, and they are quick to divorce the Caribbean pirates once the job is accomplished. Jack Beeching elucidates this point in his introduction to Exquemelin's book:

The Buccaneers were still on their way to containing Spanish attacks on their settlement, and might even, as more runaways joined them, have evolved in time a new, free-enterprise, multi-national little America republic, a century before the Declaration of Independence. But they fought too well; they were too valuable at sea and on land as auxiliaries in time of war. Step by step, the buccaneers were induced to quit their perilously unbridled life of hunting and piracy, for the advantages of a well defended harbor under some European flag, where they could readily sell off their plunder, and spend the cash proceeds in spectacular debauch. It paid handsomely to patronize the buccaneers, and so, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, their ships often went cruising nominally as English and French privateers (11).

The above quotation shows clearly the complex identity of a buccaneer. He is at once an unorthodox plunderer of Spanish wealth and a patriot flying the British flag and an auxiliary in time of war. His activities are both condemned in public and privately condoned and sanctioned by the governments of the day. This makes piracy an integral and not an aberration of the mercantile spirit of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which glorified and fetishized the accumulation of bullion.

Historical narratives, such as Exquemelin's, show[6] the ruthless nature and bloody ways with

which buccaneer adventures were executed by the likes of Morgan and Francois O’lonnais. The cruelties of the buccaneers include hanging their victims “by their genitals, till the weight of their bodies tore them loose” (151), tearing the living heart out of the victims and gnawing it, and hacking to pieces a victim with a cutlass as a demonstration of cruelty and way of instilling fear on others. Historical narratives depict the pirate as a despicable outlaw and criminal on the high seas who enjoys certain benevolences from the throne. For instance, Exquemelin tells us that “the governor of Tortuga, M. de la Place, gave [Francois L’Olonnais] command of a ship with which to plunder and seek his fortune, for at that time there was war between France and Spain” (89). However, pirate fiction romanticizes the pirate-figure and exaggerates his marksmanship, machismo, and total disrespect for life so as to entice impressionable minds into this way of uncouth plunder. I remember my passion for this genre of adventure and fortune seeking narratives and Robert Louis Stevenson’s pirate adventure novel *Treasure Island* remains my all time favorite. The figure of the pirate, Long John Silver, with his parrot shouting ‘pieces of eight, pieces of eight’ patched on his shoulder and his pirate hat and garb, his one leggedness and the crack-shot that he was were so captivating and memorable to me as they were to young Jim Hawkins who is supposed to abandon the inn and emulate this life full of adventure.

Meanwhile, Defoe also sees the Atlantic space as a place to experiment with utopian ideologies. Crusoe is an archetype of economic individualism, entrepreneurial energy and technical know-how, legitimization of self through possession and enlightened management of territory. As myth this novel created a paradigm for a certain type of economic and social behavior, showing how one can serve one’s personal material interests and still be a morally upstanding human being, a myth which Exquemelin’s world of piracy and slavery seems to challenge. According to Edith Clowes [2] *Robinson Crusoe* marked the transition in utopian social thought between utopia as satirical fantasy and utopia as realizable project (148). Not strictly speaking a utopia, it gave material for utopian thinking. Defoe made the industrious, God fearing individual the legitimate agent for realizing wealth and power in the New World. Defoe is obsessed with the legitimate and orthodox way of accumulating bullion and there by improving one’s social status and Exquemelin’s narrative posits as a direct challenge to this gospel of rules.

Defoe also wants us to read the Atlantic world as a mere appendage to the Old World through his use of the enclosure discourse to interpret Crusoe’s island, an accepted English phenomenon of that time. Crusoe’s fear of open space, which to him is “more frightful than the sea”, is dramatized on his first day on the island where he spends his first night metaphysically above the land i.e. he sleeps on top of a tree. He fears chaotic,

uncultivated and undifferentiated earth and achieves order and control over it by enclosing it, and cultivating it. The orderly world of Crusoe again is a parody of the chaos obtaining in the pirates’ world. Crusoe, obsessed with the need for orderly existence that borrows from the metropolitan physically encloses his arable fields, builds enclosures for his goats, and constructs two plantations, like an English gentleman, —his original dwelling and a new “Country Seat” on the other side of the island—each fully developed with enclosures of their own. The new space has to be treated and tamed like the old space and using the same terms before “effective occupation” and control can be achieved. The enclosed space represents idealized England, the Garden of Eden or an organic whole and the unenclosed territory represents the unknown and feared “Other” whose taming and incorporation is mandatory for the expansion of empire.

The physical act of enclosing land runs concurrently with the psychological act of mastering the “Other,” conquering the wild savage, asserting superiority over the subaltern and transforming “Otherness” into a utility for the market. Enclosing thus becomes a way of homogenizing, Anglicizing, nationalizing, cultivating (etymologically bringing culture) to the cannibal, the savage, the barbaric, the unexplored, the wild, the undiscovered, and the unconquered “Other”. In Manichaeic discourse the enclosed space becomes the center, the self, the superior other, the cultivated, the civilized and the open space remains the periphery, the inferior other, the uncivilized where vagabonds, gypsies, migrant laborers, displaced farmers, ‘masterless’ men, and ostracized people live. Crusoe dramatizes this by showing equal enthusiasm in cultivating both the island and his servant, Friday. Before he even appears in the text, Friday is reified as the object to cure Crusoe’s fears, observes Brett Mcinelly[10]. Through a systematic subtraction of Friday’s “Otherness”, a subtraction that is tantamount to obliterating the fact that Friday is different and outside of Crusoe’s enclosed order, Friday submits not only his identity to Crusoe but his entire culture as well. Throughout their relation, Crusoe encounters only his own immured subjectivity in the character of Friday. The potential for alterity and newness that Friday might bring to Crusoe’s world is never inhabited. The details of this project of making a mimic man (due credit to V.S.Naipaul’s title) out of the colonized are done through naming, branding, indoctrination and brainwashing. Friday starts life when he comes into contact with Crusoe, (symbolic feeding with milk) and whatever he was, did, before this encounter is rendered null and void what scholars have called epistemic violence. The power of naming and the process of naming are in themselves acts of mastering and controlling one’s environs, hence a form of enclosing. Crusoe, therefore, through the agency of language and particularly through a creative process of naming things

in the island creates and assumes control over everything. He has a monopoly of power, knowledge, absolute truths, and culture as a colonial master. Crusoe, by implication England is the center and everything is valorized in its relation to this central signifier. As already suggested, Gilroy's noble project forces us to challenge these conventional and linear perceptions of modernity. Brett Mcinelly observes that the expansion of empire also meant expansion of selves as she notes: "The movement of Defoe's narrative from the colonial center to the periphery facilitates Crusoe's development as a character. The sheer expanse of the globe through which Crusoe wanders has a paradoxical effect on him: rather than being overwhelmed by the vastness of his environment and dwindling under feelings of insignificance, Crusoe's self-image [identity] enlarges the farther he travels from England" (3).

The other important point we get from this discourse of enclosing and orderliness which Robert Marzec[9] advocates is that the process of enclosing becomes a means to self discovery, identity and nationhood. As Crusoe tames the land by enclosing it he also unconsciously tames his unruly nomadic impulse which had compelled him to escape national borders by going to sea. He gets domesticated as he practices this on the "Other" and settles to a life of an agriculturalist. Land cultivation and identity construction are indissolubly related. However, both Gilroy and Karras [7,8] are skeptical of the organic relationship between identity formation and land, fixed space or solid ground. Teaching Friday is as much a learning adventure for Crusoe as it is for the tutored.

If Defoe looks at the concept of "noble economy" and how one can use it to achieve a high class status then Exquemelin's[6] book *The Buccaneers of America* explores the uncouth, uncultured, and the ruthless ways of social climbing. The imperial spirit had the admirable and the despicable sides to it. It created socio-political amphibians that existed out of the crown law but yet formed an integral part of the navy. As shown above, the circum-Atlantic space gives rise to both orthodox and unorthodox fortune seekers and both command respect as evident in their fictional immortalization and romanticization. Today in South Africa there is a soccer team that shows its glorification of the seventeenth century spirit of buccaneering by adopting it as an official name i.e. "Orlando Pirates: The Buccaneers." This, it can be argued, is one way of identifying with the buccaneering legacy and keeping the wild spirit alive. The Golden Age of Piracy is said to have lasted from 1680 to 1725. Pirates were great asserts in this age of trade and circum-Atlantic navigation as they understood the world's trade routes, practices, and commodities better than most conventional European traders. Whereas Daniel Defoe shows how the new space gave birth to new social classes in a conventional and orthodox manner,

Exquemelin explores the wild side of the 'imperial spirit'. He shows some pirates reconfigurations from outlaws to colonial merchant/plantation owners to successful and wealthy British naval officers and prominent members of the English middle class. The notion of an honorable moral economy propounded in *Robinson Crusoe* should not be isolated from the horrors of buccaneer plunder and the terrors of slavery. It is the totality of these modes of wealth accumulation and grasping that gives the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries their peculiar 'imperial identity'.

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