



Aman, R. (2016) Swedish Colonialism, exotic Africans and romantic anti-capitalism: notes on the comic series Johan Vilde. *Third Text*.

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Deposited on: 11 October 2016

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Swedish Colonialism, Exotic Africans and Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Notes on the Comic Series *Johan Vilde*

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The year is 1677 at the Vaxholm Fortress, located on an island in the Stockholm archipelago. A few light rays from the barred window penetrate an otherwise dark room, barely reaching the wooden desk placed in the centre of the cell. Blonde, bearded, and with a face clearly marked by the march of history, the prisoner sitting at the desk is Johan Klasson Tay, or as he is better known to us, Johan Vilde – translation: *John Savage*. Although his gaze is as heavy as the chains around his ankles, the detainee is working from dusk to dawn, defying an aching body and the biting cold from the north winds that refrigerate the prison. As he scribbles it down with a quill on the piece of paper in front of him, Johan Klasson Tay invites us to share in his story – a biographical account that will not only provide an answer to the question of why he is imprisoned, but will explain how he acquired such an unflattering alias, associated with a lack of civilised, modern and cultivated manners. The prisoner's disciplined dedication to his work conveys urgency; time is short – and as it turns out, far too short. Johan Klasson Tay is on death row, condemned to execution by a court of law, with the enforcement of the punishment just around the corner. According to the verbal formula used at the trial, he has been sentenced to death as the 'mutineer, defector, robber, and idolator Johan Vilde'.¹

Comprising four albums published between 1977 and 1982, written by the Swede Janne Lundström and drawn by the Catalan Jaime Vallvé, *Johan Vilde* is a comic that deals with what has been referred to as a concealed part of Swedish history – namely Sweden's involvement in the slave trade during the seventeenth century.² The protagonist, a young Johan Klasson Tay, is a cabin boy on a Swedish merchant ship who is forced to escape after being accused of mutiny. After jumping ship, he floats ashore in Cabo Corso – located in modern-day Ghana – where he encounters the Ayoko clan. Taken to their village, he is eventually adopted by a local family and grows up in an African kingdom. From there, he will go on to witness the harshness and brutality of the slave trade with his own eyes. With the looming threat of being captured by the Swedish slave traders and his family being sent to work on plantations in the Caribbean, the hero Johan Vilde is faced with a new challenge in each album, and must use all his wiles and talent in order to save both himself and his adoptive family from the men of his country of birth. The first two albums, *Johan Vilde: flykten* (*Johan Vilde: the Fugitive*) and *Johan Vilde i slavfortet* (*Johan Vilde: in the Slave Fortress*), were originally published in the widely-read Sunday edition of the major daily, *Aftonbladet*; they were later converted into albums – all 48 pages long and printed in A4 format – by the publisher Rabén & Sjögren.³ Since then, the series has been published and reprinted in several magazines and papers. Though Lundström can look back on a long and successful career in writing – which has yielded several prestigious awards along the way – his most notable work will remain the *Johan Vilde* albums. To quote the jury who bestowed a special honorary *Unghunden Prize*, awarded annually by the comic umbrella organisation *Seriefrämjandet* (Swedish Comics Association), on Lundström in 2012, this series 'helped to

¹ All translations are my own if not otherwise indicated

² Stefan Jonsson, *Världen i vitögat: tre essäer om västerländsk kultur*, Norstedt, Stockholm, 2005

³ The first two albums had print runs of 50 000 copies each, while the latter two appeared in slightly smaller numbers. In private correspondence, Lundström suggests that the high production costs impacted the publishers' decision to decrease the print orders but also that the emerging wave of Franco-Belgian comics in translation may have gradually saturated the market at the time

lay the foundations of a Swedish adventure series tradition.’ The comic book series became so popular that Lundström, on the direct request of his editor, would also go on to publish six novels about Johan Vilde’s continuing adventures on the African continent.

To transform Africa into a stage on which the heroic European protagonist acts out his personal adventure narrative in the presence of alien people, wild animals and exotic scenery is, however, closer to a rule than an exception in twentieth-century Western writings. And comic books are no exception. Yet with its clear anti-colonial slant, Johan Vilde unmistakably distinguishes itself from many other Western comics – from *Tarzan* to *The Phantom*; from *Akim* to *Zig et Puce* – set on the African continent. Not least among these is the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, which, as Mark McKinney has meticulously demonstrated, has a long history – a history that runs parallel to the countries’ own imperial projects – of colonialist and white supremacist representations.⁴ Neither in Vallvé’s drawings nor in Lundström’s script are there any visible traces of the colonialist focus on black bodies as material excess with its emphasis on fat lips, large eyes and prominent teeth, or of the representations of black men and women as underdeveloped, infantile and primitive found in, limiting myself to one of many examples, Hergé’s *Tintin au Congo*. Nor is *Johan Vilde* necessarily perpetuating the neo-colonial discourse that Gayatri Spivak, with customary sharpness, has formulated as ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’;⁵ that is, the narrative in which privileged white subjects enter another cultural context and rescue non-whites from their plight, often learning something about themselves in the process. This is not only a recurrent literary trope in contemporary Western writings on Africa,⁶ it is also replicated on a larger political scale in Western strivings for global solidarity in arenas such as feminist movements,⁷ foreign aid,⁸ and intercultural dialogue.⁹

In contrast to the few other scholars whose work addresses the *Johan Vilde* series,¹⁰ I also remain hesitant to frame the comic as another example, alongside classics such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* or Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, of the long history of Western captivity stories. Although Lundström borrows heavily from the captivity genre with a plot structured around encounter, shipwreck and endurance in an environment that is exotic and unfamiliar to Western eyes, the twist in the story here is that the protagonist, in contrast to what is characteristic of the captivity genre overall, never seeks to maintain his cultural identity nor does he seek re-integration into a Western society. On the contrary, among the Ayoko clan Johan Vilde finds a home away from home; a home that he has no desire to leave and is only taken away from by violence, when he is captured by his fellow countrymen and sent back to Sweden to be imprisoned for treason. As he writes in the prison diary that constitutes the comic’s imagined narrative source, he wanted to stay with the clan forever and live his life as a ‘white Ayoko’. While he is locked in his prison cell outside of Stockholm, his soul ardently desires to go ‘home’ again, to return to what is, at least in a spiritual sense, his homeland.

⁴ Mark McKinney, *The colonial heritage of French comics*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2011

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 297

⁶ Mikela Lundahl, ‘Women, whiteness, and the literature of others’, *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, no. 1-2, 2010, pp. 115-137

⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003

⁸ Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The white wo/man’s burden in the age of partnership: a postcolonial reading of identity in development aid*. Göteborg University Press, Göteborg, 2002

⁹ Robert Aman, *Impossible Interculturality?: Education and the Colonial Difference in a Multicultural World*, Linköping University Press, Linköping, 2014

¹⁰ Cf. Tobias Hübinette & James Arvanitakis, ‘Transracial Adoption, White Cosmopolitanism and the Fantasy of the Global Family’, *Third Text*, vol 26, no 6, 2012, pp. 691-703

Other academic commentators have contextualised the *Johan Vilde* series ideologically; Fredrik Strömberg suggests that the comic aligns itself with, and is a prime popular cultural example of, what can be classified in broad terms as a wave of international solidarity movements in Sweden.¹¹ It has been argued that Sweden from the 1960s and 1970s onwards became the leading international voice and supporter of decolonisation and the world's leading proponent of social justice and gender equality.¹² If it was during the 1950s that Swedish authors, largely inspired by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, 'discovered' the world, the next generation of leftist writers of the late 1960s and the 1970s were not satisfied with simply packing their bags and reporting home about the places and people they encountered.¹³ Instead, they – from Staffan Backman and Gunnar Fredriksson to Sara Lidman, to mention a few – emphasised the need to take a firm political position as they attempted to mediate both knowledge about, and solidarity with, regions or nations in the so-called Third World. As in the case of *Johan Vilde* which, according to critics, 'combines adventures with historic and geographical realism' and 'provides a penetrating look into a completely different culture from our own',¹⁴ these works are characterised by the intermixture of footnotes and extensive reference lists with the literary ambition of establishing a sense of proximity between the implied reader and the subject, with an almost exclusively international scope.¹⁵

Johan Vilde made its first appearance in the midst of this changed Swedish political landscape, with its increased focus on Third World issues in general and on Africa in particular – the institutionalisation of foreign aid, the founding of various solidarity movements with Africa, the state-funded construction of folk high schools on the African continent, to mention a few of the many salient initiatives. In response to growing domestic pressure, and to its own inclinations, the Social Democratic government began contributing generously to movements in southern Africa fighting against the injustices of colonial or postcolonial rule. According to academic commentators, public engagement with the plight of blacks in the southern parts of Africa went so far that the countries particularly targeted by the various governmental aid programmes became household names in Sweden, and behind the word was the image of people struggling for racial equality and independence against their white overlords.¹⁶ Symptomatic of the government's ideological compass at the time, future Prime Minister Olof Palme, in a speech from 1965, makes it abundantly clear that to be a socialist implies solidarity with the Third World. As a member of the Agency for International Assistance and in charge of inquiries into assistance to developing countries, Palme states that '[t]he social liberation of the poor is inextricably linked to their quest for social and economic emancipation. The basic moral values of democratic socialism oblige us to stand with the oppressed against the oppressors, on the miserable and poor people's side against their exploiters and masters.'¹⁷ Without drawing any causal connections, it is worth mentioning that the time of Palme's speech coincides with Lundström co-founding the Swedish Comics Association which he describes in a recent interview as part of the promotion of a new wave of Swedish comics that eschewed meaningless violence, sexism and

¹¹ Fredrik Strömberg, *Black images in the comics: a visual history*, Fantagraphics, Seattle, Wash., 2012

¹² Tobias Hübinette & Catrin Lundström, 'Sweden after the Recent Election', *NORA*, vol 19, no 1, pp. 42-52

¹³ Eva Lilja, *Den dubbla tungan: en studie i Sonja Åkessons poesi*, Daidalos, Göteborg, 1991

¹⁴ Erling Frick, 'Review of Johan Vilde', *Bild & Bubbla*, no 4, 1978

¹⁵ Kjell Östberg, *1968 när allting var i rörelse: sextitotalradikaliseringen och de sociala rörelserna*, Prisma, Stockholm, 2002

¹⁶ Piero Gleijeses, 'Scandinavia and the Liberation of Southern Africa', *The International History Review*, vol 27, no 2, 324-331; Tor Sellström, *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa: Formation of a Popular Opinion (1950-1970)*, Uppsala Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 1999

¹⁷ Olof Palme, *Solidaritet utan gränser: Tal och texter i urval*, Stockholm, Atlas, 2006, p. 234

racism.¹⁸ The argument that this essay will advance is that *Johan Vilde* not only became a medium for teaching the implied reader about Sweden's brief yet active involvement in the triangular trade and the interconnection between capitalism and colonialism,¹⁹ but that the comic is also an allegory for the possibility of a non-capitalistic world order. Instead of one myth in which Africa represents the epitome of all that is incomplete, damaged, and unfinished, as the histories of different parts of the continent are reduced to a series of setbacks of nature, the argument that will be pursued here is that in *Johan Vilde* we are presented with 'the Rousseauian picture of an African golden age of perfect liberty, equality and fraternity'.²⁰ Yet according to Valentin Mudimbe, both of these myths, contradictory as they are in relation to each other, underpin the colonial discourse on African traditions and cultures as fundamentally different from the West.²¹

In more precise terms, what I will argue is that the *Johan Vilde* series abandons the familiar colonialist and exoticising discourse in favour of another more sophisticated form of exotica. It mediates a fetish for spaces and people untouched by modernity; that is, an imagined return to a pre-capitalist past. Thus, what this essay discusses is the way in which the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist underpinnings of the *Johan Vilde* series rekindle a much older Romanticist position. According to Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre's study of the historical development of Romanticism and its relation to the contemporary era, Romanticism emerged as a modern critique of modernity and capitalist civilisation during the late eighteenth century and persists into the present day. Furthermore, Romanticism is characterised by the experience of loss; 'the painful and melancholic conviction that in modern reality something precious has been lost, at the level of both individuals and humanity at large; certain essential human values have been alienated.'²²

In the wake of Europe's overseas adventures, exotic places and people, with their perceived elementariness and primitiveness, supplied their European spectators with a therapeutic image. From this viewpoint, the populations of the colonies were thought to possess an innocence and purity that had been eradicated by civilisation. What is lacking in the present existed once upon a time in a more or less distant past; a past in which the various modern alienations did not yet exist. As such, the very people deemed primitive and subordinate in colonial discourse can from a Romantic point of view be positioned as morally superior: by living in a pre-capitalist past, or at least a past in which the modern socioeconomic system was not fully developed, they are able, for instance, to stand above the desire for material goods equated with Western societies.²³

Needless to say, the Romantic critique, then as now, takes different forms depending on the enunciators' modes of expression. In the works of visual art criticism is carried out by properly aesthetic means that are fundamentally different from those used in literature, for instance. In addition, authors of literary works seldom engage in a direct and explicit denunciation of the diseases of contemporary society. Instead they employ a whole arsenal of narrative techniques and images to transmit a particular perspective.²⁴ Although Löwy and Sayre, cover considerable ground in their discussions of different forms of Romanticism from

¹⁸ Arto Valtonen, 'Seriens gerilla-kämpar', *Västsahara*, no 1, 2015

¹⁹ Cf. Aníbal Quijano, Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, *Neplanta: Views from South*, vol 1, no 3, 2000, pp. 533-580

²⁰ Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in colonial Africa*, New York University Press, New York, 1957, pp. 174-175

²¹ Valentin Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988

²² Michael Löwy & Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the tide of modernity*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2001, p. 21

²³ James Duncan, 'Sites of representation. Place, time and the discourse of the Other', in James Duncan & David Ley, eds, *Place/culture/representation*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 39-56

²⁴ Löwy & Sayre, 2001

the eighteenth century to the present, their scholarly focus remains on artistic forms ranked high in the cultural hierarchy – especially works of prose fiction, poetry and art by European writers and artists considered to be masters of their craft – which at the same time means a neglect of the hidden mass of the cultural iceberg: representations of, and debates about, colonialism and adventure in distant exotic lands in popular cultural forms, which also demand serious scrutiny as they daily affect far more people than elite cultural forms.²⁵ Even though Löwy and Sayre may have had strategic reasons for focusing on Romanticism in high culture I will here analyse these themes in another artistic form to gain insight into its workings. Comic books have, until now, remained essentially absent from academic interrogations of Romanticism.²⁶



Johan Vilde surrounded by his adopted family. From *Johan Vilde: the Fugitive* (1977), p. 47. Artist: Jamie Vallvé, Writer: Janne Lundström

A tale of two cities

A brief summary of the argument laid out above would be that modern life produces, predictably and regularly, cultures of nostalgia, Romantic and exotic visions of traditional life and practices beyond the constraints of a civilisation marked by capitalist consumerism. Nevertheless, in the same way as rebellions against modernity are still profoundly shaped by, and trapped within, the very system they set out to attack, the Romantic attitude is an internal critique of modernity. It is part of modernity's self-criticism – anti-capitalist literature is inevitably shaped by its contact with the global market. Among the many virtues of Graham Huggan's pioneering work, is its detailing of the exoticist discourses that also run through postcolonial literature, directing the ways in which it is marketed and domesticated for Western consumption.²⁷ Naturally, in this context covers and paratexts are of particular importance as they present the first clue to how the product is being tailored for the market.

What unites the covers of all four *Johan Vilde* albums is a firm emphasis on adventure; each one has the protagonist trapped in a precarious situation that we can be certain is a matter of life and death. We see Johan Vilde, with a facial expression that screams of fear, in

²⁵ McKinney, 2011

²⁶ A few notable exceptions that touch upon elements of exoticism or Romanticism are: Laurence Grove, *Comics in French: The European Bande Dessinée in context*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2010; Fabrice Leroy, 'Joann Sfar Conjures Marc Chagall: The Politics of Visual Representation in *The Rabbi's Cat*', *European Comic Art*, vol 4, no 1, 2011, pp. 39-57; Ann Miller, *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French language comic strips*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007; John Moores, 'A Rousseauian Reading of Gillray's *National Conveniences*', *European Comic Art*, vol 6, no 1, 2013, pp. 129-155; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on black: images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992; Matthew Screech, *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes Dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2005

²⁷ Graham Huggan, *The postcolonial exotic: marketing the margins*, Routledge, New York, 2001

a stormy ocean desperately trying to reach a floating barrel to save his life; in chains standing in a long line of other enslaved men who share his destiny, under the direct supervision of an armed man; hiding behind a cliff in the dark as we see soldiers watching the body – or is it the corpse? – of a man who, based on the identical white trunks that both are wearing, we can be certain is affiliated with Johan Vilde. Each cover is not only a snapshot of a dramatic event from that specific album's narrative; every one also signals endangerment through the presence of lethal weapons – cannon, sword, spear etc. – in a tropical landscape of sand, ocean, palm trees and moonlight. While the conjoining of sea and jungle as two particularly salient exotic signifiers inevitably alludes to the escapades of *Tarzan*, the back cover blurb informs us that Johan Vilde, 'through strange and fateful circumstances, ends up in Africa and is adopted by the Ayoko clan in the African kingdom of Wassaw. During his flight from injustice and persecution, he encounters one horrific experience after another.' In the first album alone, our hero not only has to escape ruthless soldiers and stranded fortune hunters who seem to lurk around every corner, he is also forced to wrestle a gigantic snake and almost falls prey to hungry alligators. Despite their intention of enhancing the drama of the comic, what these descriptions also bring to life is the imagery of African wilderness and danger. The effect is a representation of an impenetrable, disordered and intimidating Africa full of creature-infested jungles – in essence, the Africa of nineteenth-century travel novels.²⁸

Conversely, when paying visits to the capital, Kumang, Johan Vilde marvels at 'the large, splendid quarters lying side by side like the squares on a chess board' and the royal palace which 'sparkles and glitters so that it hurts the eyes.' With these gleaming images of an Africa with magnificent infrastructure, the comic thus resounds with a clash of metaphors that challenges colonial discourses in which the whole continent is posited as existing beyond the confines of civilisation – without taking account of time, with no arts, no letters, no society – far removed from European modernity and its rational agents. Additionally, the drawings of the cities stand in stark contrast to those of the narrow prison cell or the compressed area of the ship, which both provoke an entrapped, almost claustrophobic, feeling. Kumang is always introduced from afar through an elevated perspective in order to enhance the comprehensibility of its enormous size – where 'size' is also intended to convey 'importance'. From such a viewpoint, the straight boulevards allude to the symmetrical form of a grid, and as Johan Vilde enters the city we get close-ups of the impressive quadratic and rectangular buildings that line the streets like the shape of a bead pattern. Even more importantly, nothing is in need of repair, signals decay or hints at poverty.

A direct object of comparison is the mercantile coastal town under European governance, albeit that of different competing nations, in which Johan Vilde arrives before befriending any natives. The city itself, Elmina, is a place of circulation and exchange; emblematically a product of the cross-cultural networks that have frequented it over the years for the sake of selling, buying and trading products. The caption contextualises Elmina within the triangular trade, informing the reader that the city was a key destination for the Dutch West India Company: iron, textiles and brandy were unloaded and the ships resupplied with human cargo before setting sail again towards the plantations in Brazil. If cities have long been used as a device for reading social change and economic relations, as some academic commentators suggest,²⁹ then Elmina reflects its position within the global development of the capitalist mode of production. As a direct consequence of being a market place for the exchange of goods from different corners of the world, there are among the inhabitants

²⁸ Gerard Schutte, 'Tourists and Tribes in the "New" South Africa', *Ethnohistory*, vol 50, no 3, 2003, pp. 473-487

²⁹ Cf. James Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity: myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1999

‘skilled craftsmen, carpenters, blacksmiths, potters and fishermen’ but also ‘murderers, hucksters, rakes, beggars, prostitutes and pickpockets’. Through the processes by which capitalism as a socioeconomic formation transforms social relations, the poor, the squatters, and slum dwellers constitute the other modernity – or the underside of European modernity. In certain respects, the comic lapses into didacticism as the only human trait to emerge in this city is the pursuit of money; urban life is perceived as a nursery of cynicism and greed. ‘It was the damn gold that tempted me... and the cursed gold that keeps me here!’, one of Vilde’s acquaintances observes of his presence in Elmina, ‘And what am I now? A piece of human debris devastated by climate fever and brandy!’ The message transmitted in utterly clear-cut terms is that the pursuit of riches and fortune comes with a heavy price tag.

As our designated guide, Johan Vilde does not let the ways in which the city’s geography is marked by its function as an entry and exit point go unnoticed. Strolling along its streets he reflects upon its multicultural architecture (‘There are European, Arabic and African stone houses...’) and also immediately notices its coercive socioeconomic segregation (‘...located next to ruined taverns and humble fishing huts’). It must be interpolated that we have to trust the evidence of Johan Vilde’s eyes. The reasons for this are very simple. Each panel depicting Elmina has a foggy filter that erases all contours and, if only momentarily and by way of an introduction, transforms Elmina into a historic analogue of, say, Gotham City. This is enhanced by the conscious choice of colour scheme: where Kumang is painted in warm colours dominated by red and yellow, and always shown in splendid daylight, Elmina is limited to a palette of black, navy and grey that creates a dusky scenery suitable to the shady activities of its inhabitants. In this tale of two cities, the visual storytelling, conjoined with captions and the individual statements of its main characters, turns Elmina and Kumang, respectively, into dichotomous metaphors for capitalist and pre-capitalist eras.

Nowhere does this division emerge with more salience than in the varying attitudes to gold. Drawing on historical sources, the comic attempts to accurately represent the underlying reasons for Sweden’s presence on the African coast. Consequently, it makes no secret of the fact that the colony itself was named *Svenska Guldkusten* (Swedish Gold Coast), and when we are first introduced to Johan Vilde, he works for the ennobled industrialist, Louis De Geer, who at the time had just founded the Swedish Africa Company. It is on one of the company’s ships that the protagonist eventually goes to sea. Although they occupy clearly distinct social positions, the endless pursuit of the valuable metal in Africa thus unites the European aristocracy with the petty villains on the worn-down streets of Elmina. Fully aware of the symptoms of his gold fever infested countrymen, standing in front of the royal palace in Kumang, Johan Vilde exhales in disbelief: ‘[n]ever before had I seen a more impressive sight. The palace was 15 metres high and the walls of its façade were covered with hammered gold.’ Not only is the city bedecked in gold and ivory, its inhabitants’ garb is encrusted with jewels. The king himself is even smeared with gold powder and carries such an excessive load of golden gems ‘that his arms are held up by two slaves’. Their cellars and storehouses are loaded with gold and jewellery viewed as merely ornamental by the inhabitants but known to be so astoundingly valuable to all of the greedy Europeans who drop in throughout the series that they would risk their lives without thinking twice.

As such, we know that the only thing saving Kumang from an armed European invasion, and subsequent plundering, is its protected location within the jungle. To encounter Kumang would represent the ultimate prize, a treasure hunter’s paradise, an African El Dorado. Johan Vilde’s adoptive father has his diagnosis ready-made: ‘[t]he gold has become our curse. If our mountains and rivers were not as rich in gold, we would have lived in peace.’ Again Lundström attempts to illustrate how the pursuit of empire and fortune – and by extension, individual wealth and glory – within a capitalist economy fuels the most pitiful

sides of humanity. As part of his method, Kumang is transformed into a surface onto which the comics project an alternative; that is, a world that has managed to remain outside of European modernity where wealth is still not measured in terms of capital.

Without denying the apparent benefits of such a didactic manoeuvre, it must also be underlined that admiration for Africans – but also Native Americans or Aboriginal Australians – for favouring ‘beads and trinkets’ over ‘gold and currency’ has a long tradition within European Romanticism.³⁰ The ways in which the natives are homogeneously represented in the *Johan Vilde* series as innocent, egalitarian, and more in tune with nature dates back as far as Michel de Montaigne’s famous essay ‘On the Cannibals’, published in 1580. In his highly idealised characterisation of the Other, Montaigne stresses that the natives – ‘cannibals’ in his vocabulary – live in the way nature intends us to live: unadorned and unfettered by modernity. He goes on to explain that in contrast to the people on the European continent, they do not need to conquer new territories as ‘they are still in that blessed state of desiring nothing beyond what is ordained by their natural necessities: for them anything further is simply superfluous’.³¹ Akin to the inhabitants of Kumang, they do not need gold since they already live, to use Montaigne’s wording, in the ‘Age of Gold’ where their lives have yet to be polluted by European corruption.³² Although with clearly distinct motives and from different positions, Lundström joins hands with Montaigne in the claim that another undemolished ‘here’ might still be a possibility in an alternative geo-political space. As is the prime credo of the Romantic and exoticist project, when civilisation has reached a point of complete despair, the only way forward is to look backward.³³

White skin, black mask

Leaving the scenography aside, the main plot of the *Johan Vilde* series revolves around adventures provoked by threats against Johan himself, but primarily against his new family. The Swedes view the people in Cabo Corso and their civilisation no differently than Francisco Pizarro viewed the land of the Incas, as David Livingstone viewed Sigunga, as European nations traditionally view ‘primitive’ lands and cultures – as treasure trove, as the observers’ rightful possession.³⁴ Thus, it becomes Johan Vilde’s task to save not only the clan but also their way of life from external threats. Naturally, when Johan Vilde arrives in the ‘Dark Continent’ he has no knowledge of what sort of alien creatures might inhabit its lands. He has only heard the rest of the ship’s crew refer to them as ‘black pagans’ and ‘savages’. While in their immediate custody, however, Johan Vilde becomes fascinated by the locals. A consequence of his interest in them involves unlearning the violence of stereotypes that determine the colonising perspective; a process initiated already in his first encounter with members of the Ayoko:

The pagans surrounded me and those black, athletic men seemed to me to be more wild and warlike than the people on the coast. Again, I was gripped by panic ... But their leader smiled and held out a bowl of fresh water. “Akwabo ohoho!” “They are friendly...” I quenched my thirst, but was overpowered again by fatigue and fell asleep in the black man’s arms ...

After this incident, Johan Vilde accompanies the clan to their village. Sympathetic to the white boy’s precarious situation all alone on foreign soil, they decide to adopt him. The

³⁰ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991

³¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Complete essays*, Penguin, London, 1991, p. 236

³² Montaigne, 1991, p. 232

³³ Chris Bongie, *Exotic memories: literature, colonialism, and the fin de siècle*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 1991

³⁴ Torgovnick, 1991

welcoming ceremony ends with the renaming of Johan Vilde – he is given the name ‘Boroni’ (‘white man’). Faster than anyone could ever expect, Johan Vilde’s proximity to the Others – in particular, his adopted family – gradually breaks down his identity as a white European orphan. In a textbook example of sidestepping all complexities of intercultural contact, Johan Vilde settles in with ease: he immediately picks up the language, grows accustomed to the local seeds, and learns the Ayoko rituals. He is progressively becoming a clan member, an Ayoko – he is now one of ‘them’.

According to Sara Ahmed, the desire for otherness is closely linked to the desire for knowledge; to know the Other. And this desire has historically involved the desire to take the place of the Other, ‘to go native’.³⁵ In the *Johan Vilde* series, however, it is no longer merely about taking the place of the Other but about forming parenting ties; being adopted by the Other. In previous writings on the series, this firmly rooted desire has been conceptualised as a ‘transracial fantasy’³⁶; that is, a symptom of the way in which the desire to live amongst, and eventually become, the Other was transformed into an antiracist and anti-colonial discourse during the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s. Beyond a reasonable doubt, Johan Vilde has ‘gone native’ in the sense that he more or less fully identifies with, and performs, a non-European position. A particular manifestation of this is the way he dresses – or rather, the contrast between what he wears and what he used to wear. Having exchanged his long trousers, shirt and shoes for a pair of trunks and a bare chest, a certain situation demands that he returns to familiar attire. In the act of masquerading to save his family and their clan, Johan Vilde puts on the clothes of a captured Swedish officer while asserting that ‘I cannot understand how the white men can walk around in these thick clothes!’ Here the clothes are not simply garments; they act as a metaphor for a change of identification – when Johan Vilde took off his trousers, he simultaneously stripped down his identity as a white man. By extension, Johan Vilde’s metamorphosis into, in his own words, one of ‘us Africans’ has even turned his adoptive father colour blind: ‘Sometimes I forget that you’re a white man... that’s how close you are to me!’, he lovingly confesses to his pale-skinned son. In line with the politics of the comic, the Ayokos here come to embody the very colour blindness with which the Swedish Left identified.

Though Johan Vilde’s ability to pass as native remains partly suspended by his physical difference from the rest of the clan, he does perform a long-standing European and exoticist dream of being able to ‘pass’ as the Other.³⁷ Additionally, this reversed version of the postcolonial identity dilemma of being ‘almost but not quite’ plays out to his advantage. In the second album, he and many other Ayokos – including his father and siblings – are captured by slave traders and brought to the Swedish fortress, Karlsborg, awaiting a ship that is set to transport them all across the Atlantic. Locked in a cage with countless others, Johan Vilde testifies from inside this death cabinet of European imperialism that ‘[w]ithin a few years these men and women would be dead – victims of febrile diseases, shipwreck, slave whips, hunger and homesickness.’ By way of Vallvé’s careful drawings, we are exposed to some of the most horrific sides of the slave trade such as the body inspections to determine one’s market value and the consequent human branding as the symbol of the owner is burnt into the skin of a human reduced to a commodity. Against the grain of a national self-image that according to academic commentators does not include direct involvement in the slave

³⁵ Sara Ahmed, ‘Phantasies of becoming (the Other)’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, no 2, 1999, pp. 47-63

³⁶ Hübinette & Arvanitakis, 2012

³⁷ Japi Nyman, ‘Re-reading Rudyard Kipling’s “English” heroism’, *Orbis Litterarum*, no 56, 2001, pp. 205-220

trade,³⁸ awful deeds associated with prevalent colonial powers are here committed by Swedes and in the name of the Swedish nation.

When it is Johan Vilde's turn to be examined, however, he not only fears the humiliating procedure at hand, he is also distressed by the risk of being exposed – the guards carrying out the inspections are the same ones that he escaped from on the ship. Instead of having his 'true' identity revealed he leaves the examiners baffled by his sheer physical appearance: is he a 'white boy that has lived too long among savages' they wonder; or is he an 'albino-negro'? When Johan Vilde insults them in an unfamiliar vernacular, they conclude that he speaks 'the same monkey-chatter as the rest of the savages,' and his racial identity is also confirmed by his 'low forehead and stupid soulless eyes.' The discussion among the Swedish guards is not merely a detail that adds to the plot, in a larger perspective it is intended to illustrate how race, albeit reliant on a rhetoric of biological justifications, is merely a social construction produced by colonial discourse to enable and justify oppression and exploitation. In a subtle manner, the sequence interlinks Sweden's involvement in the practice of the slave trade with the nation's scientific contribution to colonial discourse. As underlined by postcolonial scholars, 'Sweden was never a colonial power, but the colonial mentality is very much present in the Swedish history of ideas'.³⁹ True enough, it was the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, Carl Linnaeus, who introduced the modern scientific system of racial classification that placed all beings in creation in a hierarchical schema. In Linnaeus's system, humanity could be subdivided into varieties based on continent and skin colour and it is the historical development of Europe and the white man that forms the ideal model for understanding historical progress as a whole. Whether deliberate or not, the way Lundström constructs the above dialogue among the guards about the slaves' lack of human traits closely resembles the observations made by Linnaeus's disciple, Carl Petter Thunberg, on a visit to South Africa. He described the black population as lazy, stupid and, at times, 'not above soulless animals'.⁴⁰

While Johan Vilde may have left the guards baffled about his racial identity, it is his inbetweenness – he shares a skin colour with one group and values with the other – that guarantees him access to both worlds. In several ways, he functions as a mediating bridge in the text – between Europe and Africa, between whiteness and blackness, between subject and object – where the position carved out for Vilde is that of translator, of someone who is not only able to master and benefit from both sign systems but also make them known to others. The contradiction between the two roles is brought to the fore when the Swedish slave traders determine that Johan Vilde is 'in all ways an inferior creature – besides his skin colour'. The officer-in-command of the fortress decides that the 'albino-negro' should assist him as his personal servant before being sent to Stockholm as a personal gift to the queen of Sweden. Only surrounded by his countrymen, he seeks a resolution to the dilemma involved in his two contradictory positions as native yet white. Affirming to himself that it is in Africa that he feels at home, he attempts to find an escape route to save all the imprisoned slaves from being shipped to West Indian plantations but also himself from returning to his country of birth. It is by conjoining his white skin and blonde hair with mimicry of the colonial stereotype of the savage as illiterate that he gains access to undisclosed documents and overhears conversations among the leading officers that provide him with the necessary information to launch the escape from the slave fortress. Given his complete proficiency in the Ayoko language,

³⁸ Fredrik Thomasson, 'Contre la Loi mais en considérant les Circonstances dangereuses du moment': Le tribunal suédois de l'île de Saint-Barthélemy pendant la période révolutionnaire, in Frédéric Régent et. al., eds, *Les colonies, la révolution française, la loi*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014, pp. 231-249

³⁹ Paulina De los Reyes, Irene Molina & Diana Mulinari, eds, *Maktens (o)lika förklädnader*, Atlas, Stockholm, 2002, p. 18

⁴⁰ Bosse Lindquist, *Förädlade svenskar*, Falun, Alfabeta Bokförlag, 1991, p. 34

religious practices and cultural expressions combined with his Swedish background, a special role is emphasised in his ability to translate between cultures – his double consciousness. Although it is part of the anti-colonial plot of the story, on one level the protagonist fulfils the colonialist dream of full mastery over the cultures of Others; a position claimed to be inhabited today by the privileged cosmopolitan flâneur.⁴¹ Significantly, then, the materiality of becoming suggests that it is not the white European subject *per se* that positions itself as the hero of the day. It is the force of conjoining two worlds – ‘here’ and ‘there’, modernity and traditionalism, Sweden and Cabo Corso – that permits Johan Vilde to stand out as a ‘hybrid hero’.



Johan Vilde passes unrecognised by his antagonist Björn. From *Johan Vilde in the Slave Fortress* (1977), p. 20. Artist: Jamie Vallvé, Writer: Janne Lundström

This argument is also supported by Johan Vilde’s relationship with Björn; the hard-nosed skipper who serves as the main antagonist throughout the series. Full of bullying tricks, Björn makes Johan Vilde’s life miserable on board, which ultimately leads to his escape. It is also Björn who guards the cell in which the slaves are imprisoned, and the two men will have several subsequent run-ins with each other over the course of the series. Later as the two of them have their final settling of scores, it is revealed that Björn merely repeated the same humiliating procedures on Johan Vilde to which he himself was once exposed. Through such comparative foci, the narrative affirms that it is the absorption of the Other, experience of another way of being, living and knowing that has furnished Johan Vilde with his humane and anti-imperial politics. After all, he too carried prejudices against the locals: fed by stories about the brutality of the natives, during his first encounter with blacks he consequently reacts with fear and expresses surprise over the fact that they look ‘moderately civilised’. With Björn’s destiny in his hands, Johan Vilde acknowledges that the man kneeling before him ‘has destroyed his life. Because of him I can never return to Sweden’. Yet that was another life to which he has no desire to return, ‘it is in Wassaw that I feel at home and we are on our way there! So why should I retaliate?’, he asks while leaving Björn to his destiny surrounded by hungry predators emblematic of the comic’s exoticist view of Africa.

Inside Capitalism’s Outside

What I have discussed so far is the way in which the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist foundations of the *Johan Vilde* series hark back a much older Romanticist position. This viewpoint contrasts the failures of European cultures regarding their own philosophical foundations with comparatively unspoilt and egalitarian societies untouched by modernity located in a part of the world deemed exotic. As such, I have emphasised moments where the

⁴¹ Sara Ahmed, ‘The language of diversity’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol 30, no 2, 2007, pp. 235-256

comic attempts to subvert the imperially established border between civilisation and where the wild things roam, while at the same time focusing on the ways in which this well-intended ethical dimension also relies on a position produced by colonial discourse. This should, however, not take anything away from the *Johan Vilde* series important contribution to uncovering a dark chapter in Swedish history that, as previously mentioned, still remains largely concealed today. Yet as is characteristic of the Romanticist vision, even in the many instances in which a real historical event is selected, moments of that past are always idealised. In this case, a slice of history is handpicked in which the destructive logic of modernity allegedly did not yet exist and in which the humane values that have since been muted by modernity were still present; that very moment is then transformed into a utopia, the embodiment of Romantic aspirations.⁴² As indicated by the hesitant tone of the previous sentence, whether or not the realm of Romantic utopia was ever unaffected by the sort of pollution that modernity represents in the Romantic imagination is, to say the least, debatable, if not uncomfortably essentialist.

Nancy Fraser, in a recent essay, alerts us to the fact that, far from being limited to past decades, Romanticist views are held today by ‘a fair number of anti-capitalist thinkers and left-wing activists, including cultural feminists, deep ecologists and neo-anarchists, as well as by many proponents of “plural”, “post-growth”, “solidarity” and “popular” economies.’ According to Fraser, too often ‘care’, ‘nature’, or ‘community’ are treated as inherently anti-capitalist as their advocates overlook the fact that such practices are not only cradles of critique but also themselves integral parts of the capitalist order.⁴³ As previously mentioned, this also holds true for the *Johan Vilde* series, emergent in the wave of international solidarity during the 1970s. As the first album ends with the unsung hero being adopted, the succeeding ones all begin with a short recap of how a blonde and white-skinned boy ended up with a black clan in Africa. While the aim of these introductions is to provide the reader with short descriptions of the alien people amongst whom the protagonist now resides, brief accounts of governance (the Ayokos are the most powerful clan with a matriarchal system) and religion (the alligator is a totem animal), they also include images of an alternative economic system. The various captions inform us that the Ayokos ‘live by hunting, farming, crafts and gold handling.’ The drawings portray an intent Johan Vilde with bow and arrow or helping to plough the fields as he explains that ‘I took part in the family’s daily chores. We cultivated sorghum, millet and yams [...] and when the yields were harvested we panned gold in the sandbars of the Anokbra river.’ Everyone is equally involved: whilst we see men with hoes, women are balancing large baskets on the tops of their heads. Their common dedication to the chores is conveyed primarily through images of caresses (suggesting affectivity and love) and embraces (suggesting fraternity and equality).

In strictly Marxist terms, what we are presented with is an image of the means of production before the entrance of private property which presupposes a class division between the owners and the producers. Subsequently, the Ayokos come to represent the social world before its break-up by capitalism in which most people, however differently situated, had access to food and shelter, land and work, without having to go through labour markets.⁴⁴ As a consequence of the way in which such arrangements were unwaveringly annulled by capitalism, the Romantic vision has come to idealise what it associates with a pre-capitalist past such as manual labour and conservation of nature – the closer to nature, the closer to Eden.⁴⁵ Symptomatic of this reasoning is Johan Vilde’s reaction to receiving a hug from his adoptive mother during a break from work – he concludes that ‘I was in paradise.’ Yet, as

⁴² Löwy & Sayre, 2001

⁴³ Nancy Fraser, ‘Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode’, *New Left Review*, no 86, 2014, pp. 69-70

⁴⁴ Fraser, 2014

⁴⁵ Pieterse, 1992

Fraser stresses, such appeals to what is imagined to be capitalism's outside often end up recycling capitalist stereotypes, as female nurturing is counterposed to male aggression (men hunt and fight, women nest), spontaneous cooperation to economic calculation (material sustenance solely based on needs), nature's holistic organicism to anthropocentric individualism (belief in the inseparability of environment, economy and spirituality).⁴⁶ Thus the anti-capitalist critique in *Johan Vilde*, when premised on these oppositions, does not contest but unconsciously reproduces the institutionalised social order of capitalist society.



Johan Vilde participating in the daily chores. From *Johan Vilde in the Slave Fortress* (1977), p. 3. Artist: Jamie Vallvé, Writer: Janne Lundström

In retrospect, it seems plausible to contend that writers and critics were reading *Johan Vilde* with assumptions about heroes – and antiheroes – appropriate to their time. Symptomatic of its publication at a time when Sweden was beginning to position itself as a leading anti-colonial voice, when the first album in the series, *Johan Vilde: the Fugitive*, was awarded the first prize in the publisher Rabén & Sjögren's comics competition the jury placed emphasis on the fact that '[t]he authors see the ruthless human exploitation from the perspective of the oppressed slaves.' What I have sought to draw attention to is the fact that, no matter how well-meaning, the concern for and idealisation of the Other at the same time tends to transform that very otherness into a Romantic mirror-reflection with therapeutic benefits for the white European spectator. This long-standing phenomenon was addressed by Frantz Fanon in a foundational text for postcolonial studies, *Black Skin/White Masks*, which asserts that '[t]he Blacks represent a kind of insurance for humanity in the eyes of the Whites. When the Whites feel they have become too mechanised, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance.'⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Fraser, 2014

⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 2008[1952], pp. 108

Accordingly, part of the argument put forth here is that the *Johan Vilde* series perpetuates a Romantic vision in which the use-value of Africa is as a paradise lost, a utopian future past, a Romantic mirage of a non-capitalist alternative beyond the bounds of modern civilisation. In contrast to the imperialist narrative in which the white man or woman travels to the periphery to report home about places and people he or she encounters, with an emphasis on lack and shortcomings, the periphery is in this case – emblematic of Swedish travel writings during the 1970s – valorised as superior to the materialistic and oppressive centre. Although the politics and culture of the centre are denounced, the polarity between Sweden and Cabo Corso, between Elmina and Kumang, between Johan Vilde and the Ayokos is left intact since the series never disputes the assumption that world history is best rendered by a universal subject surveying the world from the centre – or as in this case, narrated by a white boy adopted by a West African clan. And as Stefan Jonsson reminds us, even when it is critical of European ascendancy, this discourse derives its authority from that very dominance.⁴⁸ What this implies is that exotic spaces untouched by modernity and capitalism are not originally located in the midst of a certain ‘elsewhere’, and then reflected in representation. Rather they are the product of these representations, in which the discourses of Western dominance function as a filter that introduces otherness through categories that are comprehensible to a Western audience.⁴⁹ Consequently, the Romanticist allegory of anti-capitalism that Africa represents in the *Johan Vilde* comics is a product of the very system it sets out to critique – and it is created in order to serve the ideological purposes of the text.

This is not to suggest, however, that the criticism launched against capitalism and imperialism throughout the *Johan Vilde* series necessarily falls short of its target. What I am proposing, however, is that to appreciate the critical intervention that Lundström offers, attention should be directed away from the protagonist himself and his adoptive family to the comic’s dialectical outer structures. Through the link between the Swedish boy, Johan Vilde, and the Ayokos in Cabo Corso, the story exhibits an imperialist connection between colony and metropolitan centre, the former providing wealth to the latter. By way of the mixed-media format of the comic, the series thus pedagogically contextualises the triangular trade by illustrating how the vivid prosperity enjoyed in Europe came at the cost of labour regimes, plantation slavery, and massacre; an acute recalling of Karl Marx’s affirmation that ‘accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole.’⁵⁰ In sum, the lasting contribution of *Johan Vilde* is the portrayal of the historical emergence of global capitalism, its interconnection with European imperialism and Sweden’s share in the construction of the modern world order. Moreover, the fact that the protagonist, Johan Vilde, and the Ayokos always manage to escape from the aggression of the Swedish soldiers and slave traders is a crucial part of the plot that insinuates the fragility of Sweden’s colonial claims on the region. Or better yet, it is a subtle indication of the reasons why the nation’s imperial ambitions never fully materialised on a larger scale. In the midst of this, the sole crime committed by a young Swedish boy was to prefer a way of life not defined by the hunger for land, gold and other resources.

⁴⁸ Stefan Jonsson, ‘Disclosing the World Order’, *Third Text*, vol 27, no 2, 2013, pp. 242-259

⁴⁹ Claudia Egerer, ‘Ambivalent geographies’, *Third Text*, vol 15, no 55, 2001, pp. 15-28

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy. Vol. 3*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 646