

(Re)Placing Defoe

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MY ORIGINAL QUESTION for this roundtable was about a “place-based” Defoe studies: about the promise of a Defoe untethered from the traditions that once defined his relevance, and how we might continue to place Defoe’s writing differently, relocating it to sites of knowledge like the 21st-century Caribbean, and what we might hope to learn through such placements. But as I prepared to make this trip, I couldn’t stop thinking about the epistemological suspense Bob Markley identifies in *The Storm* between measurable impacts of disaster and the unrepresentable experience of catastrophe. Markley quotes from Defoe’s account of the Great Storm of 1703: “Observations [of the barometer] . . . are not regular enough to supply the Reader with a full Information, the Disorders of that Dreadful Night having found me other employment, expecting every Moment when the House I was in would bury us all in its own Ruins” (*The Storm* 26–27; *Markley* 107). Recontextualizing Defoe in various places may generate new methods of measuring literary value, but I don’t believe it actually helps us with the problem of the future in a moment of ongoing colonial catastrophe.

This roundtable asks about “predicting” the future of Defoe Studies, but I can’t get past the problem of *imagining* the future of anything from our present world. To get my bearings, I rewatched Patrick Keiller’s trilogy of film essays: *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010).¹ *London* and *Robinson in Space* both grapple with what the second film calls “the problem of England,” where the problem is futurity itself under late colonial capitalism—the impossibility of imagining a future when you feel uncertain about the present and bad about the past. More than I ever could have predicted, this is how it feels for me to be a professional literary scholar these days. It’s impossible, most days, for me to imagine any future—

not just for Defoe Studies, or Eighteenth-Century Studies, but for *studies* as we know them, for disciplinary expertise as a career track, for the university we imagined as a home in which we could profess what we know. How many years, now, have we been caught up in our own version of *The Storm*'s "Disorders of that Dreadful Night," unable to attend to our usual gathering of information and ideas because we are bombarded with "other employment," because we are preoccupied with sheer survival, "expecting every Moment" that the house we are in—that is, the neoliberal university—"would bury us all in its own Ruins"?

Yet the final film in Keiller's trilogy suggests that ruins might be our only hope of reconnecting to the possibility of viable futures. *Robinson in Ruins* turns the enigmatic character of Robinson from the narrator's friend and collaborator into a specter—someone who has disappeared from the historical present and yet has left enough material traces of his thoughts and activities that they can still be narrated. This film models a way of reading historical time from a perspective at least partially released from any particular temporality. "Robinson had once said," according to the narrator, "he believed if he looked at the landscape hard enough, it would reveal to him the molecular basis of historical events, and in this way he hoped to see the future." The film trains its sight on a variety of rural English industrial locations, including government pipeline markers and fuel depots, semi-abandoned structures built to develop nuclear weapons and other short-term manufacture initiatives, broadcasting transmitters, a "disused cement works" where Robinson fantasizes about founding a new utopian society. These are all "ruins"—of the precapitalist commons destroyed to render land more profitable, and of the aspirational kind of colonial capitalism that animated Defoe's writing, in whose ruins we all presently live.

Ruinination is a long process, and not necessarily an unsurvivable one. In fact, many things thrive in the ruins of others, just as the decomposition of formerly living beings generates the possibility of new forms of life. Keiller's close-ups on stones, flower blossoms, lichen on road signs indicate Robinson's inclination, in the narrator's words, "to biophilia, the love of life and living systems." My remarks today are also motivated by a love of life and living systems. I propose that we approach the future of Defoe Studies not by attempting to prevent its ruin but by embracing it as a starting point. Let's say: this ship is wrecked. Let's do as a Robinson would do, and consider what use to make of the wreckage. The Defoe to whom this society was devoted when it was founded has not survived to be theoretically relocated. He has been decaying into other forms for a long time: Friday studies, pirate studies, climate studies. Personally, I yearn for a Celestial Hedgehog studies; I orient myself toward the future in which such a thing exists.

Ruinination is not eradication. It is not, god help me, *cancellation*. It is a form of death, yes, sometimes literally. But whatever we're all doing here isn't dead, and I believe we are already doing it in the ruins of Defoe Studies. And so I ask: What have we made of Defoe that helps us imagine a future worth surviving for? With what might we replace him so that we may thrive?

Notes

¹True story: my child was almost named Robinson, not after Crusoe, but after both Keiller's Robinson and the Yankees' Robinson Cano, who is, like my student and collaborator Stacy Creech de Castro, from the nearby Dominican Republic. For better thoughts than I can offer on a Caribbean-based way of placing Defoe Studies, see Stacy's work.

Works Cited

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