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Published in:
The Literary London Journal

Published: 01/01/2020

Document Version
Final published version

Document License
Unknown

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

Borch, A. (2020). “Neighbours of Ours”: Cities, Communities, Networks’, University of Notre Dame in England, 11–12 July 2019: Conference Review. *The Literary London Journal*, 16(1), 86-90.

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“Neighbours of Ours”: Cities, Communities, Networks’, University of Notre Dame in England, 11–12 July 2019: Conference Review

Reviewed by

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020)

The University of Notre Dame’s (UND) English campus can be found at nos. 1–4 Suffolk Street near Trafalgar Square in central London. The buildings were first home to the ‘The United University Club’, a private gentlemen’s club for alumni from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, but has since 1997 been owned by the UND and, today, they are part of the university’s global network – one of its so-called ‘Global Gateways’ – which also includes sites in Asia, Ireland, Italy, Latin America, and the Middle East.¹ The campus was a felicitous choice of venue for the 2019 conference of the Literary London Society. With their long history of being home to institutions that, in one way or another, have connected London with other cities (English and foreign), the UND’s premises felt like a suitable place for the LLS to hold a conference on the theme “‘Neighbours of Ours’: Cities, Communities, Networks’.

In his opening address, the President of the LLS, Martin Dines, said that with this particular theme the society looked to broaden its reach. It was intended to open up the conference to scholars whose research interests might not be primarily focused on London but for whom the city and its literature is nevertheless an interesting and important reference point. In other words, the hope was to see papers which, in one way or another, looked at London in relation to other geographical regions. Of the thirteen presentations I heard – three plenaries and ten papers including my own – six speakers presented work which mainly stayed within the boundaries of the Greater London area, focusing on the relationships between different neighbourhoods in the city, while seven had a topic that to a greater or lesser extent looked at London in relation to some city, place or region that is geographically distinct.²

An example of a paper that remained within the perimeters of London was Alison Blunt's opening plenary. An extension of the work she has done in the 'Home-City-Street' project, her presentation examined how people who live along Kingsland Road in Hackney, East London perceive their homes – and the idea of home – in relation to both the immediate neighbourhood and the city at large. Blunt argued that her material (mainly interviews) suggests that, in their homes, local residents tend to experience what one interviewee described as kind of 'disconnected connectedness'. In other words, the home does feel distinct from the rest of the city, but it is not a place of isolation. There are things – sounds and vistas, for example – that inevitably link the home to the outside environment.

James Peacock was also interested in the link between the home and the outside world, with a focus on literary representations of the process of super-gentrification in London and New York since the late 1990s. His paper gave a stimulating analysis of John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012) and Brian Platzer's *Bed-Stuy is Burning* (2017). Among other things, he showed how in Lanchester's novel gentrification precipitates an influx of global forces within the home through, for example, the acquisition of new appliances.

Gentrification and related issues regarding the social status of different neighbourhoods in London came up in other papers too. In his reading of Maureen Duffy's novel *Capital* (1975), Martin Dines, for example, was less concerned with the relationship between the home and the outside world than Peacock. Instead he focused on Duffy's attempts at examining the invisible forces that cause urban gentrification. Jason Finch looked at the boundaries of the slum in Compton Mackenzie's bildungsroman *Sinister Street* (1914).³ He argued that the novel represents West Kensington in London as an area whose middle-class status is challenged and perforated by the porous nature of the boundaries with nearby slum districts. By contrast, Anna Viola Sborgi was interested in an area of London which is more clearly demarcated from its immediate surroundings, Haggerston in East London. Sborgi argued that, in recent years, the area has gained the reputation of an 'urban village' with a distinct artistic feel for upper-middle-class Londoners, an image that has been perpetuated through the development of local infrastructure as well as contemporary film and cinema such as Rob Delaney and Sharon Hogan's popular TV-series *Catastrophe* (2015–2019), Giles Borg's *1, 2, 3, 4* (2008), and Andrew Luka-Zimmerman's *Estate. A Reverie* (2015). Peter Jones took a different approach to this issue, arguing that, despite its status as a low genre, the London music hall culture of the early twentieth century had a broad appeal which meant it connected different social classes (and related spatial environments) in an entirely novel way.

My own paper as well as those of Duncan Frost, Aaron Householder, Patricia Rodrigues, and Colton Valentine all looked at literature which, in one way or another, juxtaposes London with some other geographically distinct place. I focused on images

of Bristol and London in the poetry of Thomas Chatterton, arguing that the local Bristolian patriotism we find in his Rowleyan poems is later replaced by a more dismissive and critical attitude which instead upholds London as a site of emulation. London and its relations with the English provinces in the Early Modern period also came up in Frost's paper. Frost argued that the dangers of London (e.g. crime, licentiousness, drink) were a recurring theme in seventeenth-century broadside ballads. In dealing with this topic, these popular publications would often focus on some sort of outsider's (often a naïve provincial bumpkin) visit to the capital whose misfortunes were intended to work simultaneously as both a source of entertainment and a sincere word of warning. The English countryside also played a role in Householder's presentation which focused on *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). Householder showed how, in this novel, Arthur Conan Doyle challenged contemporary perceptions of London as morally and culturally superior to its rural surroundings by developing subtle links between Dartmoor and the capital in a way that was entertainingly unsettling.

Rodrigues and Valentine both looked further afield, considering London in relation to places abroad. Interested in the numerous stories from the Early Modern period written from the perspective of animals, Rodrigues discussed the anonymously published *The History of a French Louse* (1779), a political satire in which the eponymous louse orchestrates the downfall of the British government and turns the country into a French enclave. Valentine gave a reading of three of E. M. Forster's novels: *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howard's End* (1910), and *A Passage to India* (1924). He argued that it is characteristic of all three novels that very different and very distant places become what he called 'spectral neighbours'. Put differently, in Forster's work more or less tangible links and connections are made between London and England and different locations abroad, such as Italy or India, whereby sensations and feelings of the one can appear in the other and vice versa.

In Dame Marina Warner's plenary, London seemed to fade away altogether. In focusing on the continuous influx of immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to camps in Sicily, however, she addressed issues of neighbourliness and networks which directly concern a broad European community of which London is at present still very much a part. Warner discussed her involvement with a project in Palermo, Sicily. Starting from the premise that immigration involves the metamorphosis of culture rather than the simple movement of culture, the project looks to help immigrants generate a sense of belonging in their new surroundings through storytelling and mapmaking workshops.

In the final plenary panel, London once again became the central focal point. Here Ken Worpole, Sean Longden, Susie Thomas, Anthony Cartwright, and Nadia Valman discussed the novels of Alexander Baron in light of their recent publication of *So We Live: The Novels of Alexander Baron* (2019), a collection of critical essays

examining Baron's fiction.⁴ In a wide-ranging discussion, the panellists showed how questions relating to networks and communities in London are central to many of Baron's novels. These are played out in specific city neighbourhoods, especially around Hackney, but also concern the formation of political movements such as divisions within the Labour movement before the Second World War, post-war immigration, and subsequent changes to urban communities.

The theme "'Neighbours of Ours': Cities, Communities, Networks' was meant to open up this conference to scholars interested in London's relationships with other cities, places, and regions. To what extent this aim was achieved can be debated. About half the papers I heard had such an emphasis while the other half remained within the boundaries of the Greater London area. The LLS may well feel it achieved its aim of broadening out the London-centric focus of the society and the conference. After all, the theme was broad enough to welcome both kinds of topics. Personally, however, I had hoped to see a greater proportion of papers that considered London in relation to other places. It was this aspect that attracted me to the conference and I write this review thinking it is possible for the LLS to do more to explore such issues. I have no doubt that a theme which more clearly calls for papers on London's links to other places would result in a similarly interesting and stimulating conference.

In conclusion, a big thank you goes to Eliza Cubitt, Hadas Elber-Aviram, Lucie Glasheen, and Nicolas Tredell for organizing the conference. Thanks to your efforts and welcoming attitude I will certainly be keeping an eye out for future LLS events, and it is my impression that many of the other participants will too.

Notes

1. See the website of the University of Notre Dame (USA) in England for more information <www.london.ne.edu>.
2. The conference was scheduled to include three plenary talks and thirty-nine individual papers.
3. It should be noted that Finch gave two papers at the conference. The other was entitled "'The Postmark? Yes, It Was London E. C.': Clerkenwell Borders and Boarders in Gissing's *Demos*.'
4. Nadia Valman was not present and her paper was read by Susie Thomas.

Note on Contributor

Adam Borch is a PhD candidate at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. His research interests centre on eighteenth-century literature and, among other things, he has published articles on provincial literature during the period. His thesis is on anonymity in the eighteenth century with a special focus on Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*. He was the recipient of a postgraduate bursary from the Literary London Society to attend the 'Neighbours of Ours' conference.

To Cite this Article

Adam, Borch, 'Review of: 'Neighbours of Ours', University of Notre Dame in England, 11–12 July 2019'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020): 86–90. Online