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# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Disinterring Slum-Clearance London: Expertise and User Perspectives in the 1930s Maritime East End

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### Abstract:

Combining perspectives from spatial literary studies and design history, this article offers a historically contextualised and multiperspectival view of imaginative place as a new tool for practitioners of radical urban geography and relational literary geographies. It originates in two independent research traditions. Both reveal a clash between expert and user perspectives mediated by diverse texts discussing areas classified as slums in 1930s London. The article contributes to a growing literature reclaiming London's maritime East End as a culturally rich zone whose identity as imaginative place has been contested by different groups throughout the period since the early nineteenth century. Its methodology provides a model for putting different text types, here a 1935 slum clearance appeal hearing transcript and a 1937 novel of migrant experience, into a framework that makes them comparable and mutually comprehensible. Humanised insights from the 1930s maritime East End thus contribute to London history and historical geography, both sizeable fields, but also to conceptual work by spatially oriented literary scholars and geographers with literary interests.

**Keywords:** London; literary studies; design history; literary geographies; slum; fiction; nonfiction; East End.

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## Introduction

For most of the nineteenth century and much of the early twentieth, London was the biggest city ever to have existed, containing dozens of local government units and hundreds of neighbourhoods. Despite a wealth of research into its literature and architecture in this period, this is the first study combining literary studies and design history to provide a new perspective on London's great complexity during this era of its imperial power and pre-eminence among cities worldwide. In dialogue with methods shaped by literary geographers, it argues that such a perspective needs to emerge from a deep contextualisation in both history and place accompanied by attentive close reading of texts, making previously unheard voices audible. This contextualisation, as part of a methodology drawing on recent developments in several disciplines, here makes sense of two apparently quite different text types, in relation to one another and their shared surroundings.

The article asks how expert and user perspectives intersect and even clash in the construction of imaginative place conceptions such as the 'slum'. Imaginative place is a concept developed by one of the article's authors in a historicised discussion of London's East End, an imaginative place with worldwide fame (Finch 2016: 153-72, 201-02). As defined here, the East End has borders roughly those of the post-1965 London Borough of Tower Hamlets (combined from the former Metropolitan Boroughs of Stepney, Bethnal Green and Poplar). In London between the 1890s and the 1960s, slum clearance was a large-scale policy named as such in official documents, for instance those of the London County Council (LCC) and its committees on housing and poverty. Slum clearances, we argue in relation to the special issue of which this article is part, are efforts to erase portions of a city. They bury whatever survives of a former street or district underneath new brick, asphalt and concrete. Yet traces sometimes survive and cities can seem haunted by their former slum areas. Following these traces, one can enter and bring back to life hidden or lost histories.

The spatial focus here is a single, isolated residential area, a few riverside streets in East London that were cleared as a slum in the 1930s. Orchard Place, a peninsula off Leamouth Road in Bow, between the Thames and River Lea, was the easternmost point of the Metropolitan Borough of Poplar, with Essex across the Lea. The 1890s *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty* prepared for Charles Booth show Orchard Place as a small patch of housing (coloured dark blue and black to indicate its lower working-class status) west of Bow Creek, the section of the River Lea immediately north of the River Thames (Booth 1898-1899). In July 1934, the LCC officially declared Orchard Place a clearance area, a decision confirmed 'without mod[ification]' to the areas covered by the original declaration in June 1935, following the March 1935 appeal against it discussed here. For decades, the area had been the subject of criticism and condemnation by 'official' observers. At the appeal hearing, the site was described as

an area which, as you will see from your Map, is only approached by a road called Leamouth Road, of considerable length, and has no other connection whatever with what one may refer to as the mainland. In that isolation it has existed from the point

of view of both residential and commercial development for a very great number of years; in fact, notwithstanding the romance that attaches to it as a residential place, it is one of the worst slums in London. (Appeal Hearing Transcript, hereafter AHT: 5)

In the 2010s, the area once occupied by Orchard Place became again a site of regeneration, now that of private property developers rather than government organisations. New residential blocks marketed as ‘London City Island’ rose up on the northern arm of the Leamouth peninsula in the middle of the decade, no longer isolated but connected to Canning Town station on the London Underground by a footbridge.

This study has as its central materials firstly the transcripts of the appeal hearing, held at Poplar Town Hall in March 1935, and secondly a fictional text recounting migrant experience in the marginal, waterside zone in which Orchard Place lay, Simon Blumenfeld’s *Phineas Kahn: Portrait of an Immigrant* ([1937] 1988). Two sections discussing contexts and methodologies precede, which read these primary materials in relation to the spatial and historical environments of the 1930s maritime East End. The methodological discussion in Section 2, following this introduction, considers approaches to urban places framed as ‘slums’ generated in different academic disciplines including radical cultural geography, relational literary geographies and spatial literary studies. The textual and visual material produced as part of London slum clearances, for example the one at Orchard Place, reveal the complex layers of experience and knowledge behind the definitions and understandings of ‘slums’ within the city. The distinctive interdisciplinary approach taken here draws on discussions in design history of how expert and non-expert perspectives differently interpret the built environment, and how attention to displacement intersects with analysis of the ‘slum’ as lived place. Section 3 explores the historical place identity of London’s maritime East End, and the legal and practical frameworks of slum clearance in the period covered by the article, insisting on the importance of a diachronic perspective in literary geographies. Sections 4 and 5 present detailed close readings of two different text types made comparable in that both contain evidence of how people in the 1930s conceptualised London.

### **Contexts and Methods for Reading Slum Clearance**

This article combines methods from literary studies (Deep Locational Criticism), design history and relational literary geographies to take account of texts and actions around a place in 1930s London, a historical spatial node characterized and stigmatized as a slum. Within an urban poetics aiming to expose inequalities, the concept of ‘slum’ remains relevant alongside alternative terms such as displacement.

A 2000s United Nations report (UN-Habitat 2003) designated hundreds of urban areas worldwide as slums. Critical researchers have proposed various responses to this: regionalised and sub-city analysis assessing which spatial areas of contemporary cities can be understood as slums (e.g. Falco, Zambrano-Verratti and Kleinhans 2019); postcolonial critique seeking to use residents’ own understandings of the areas in which they live (Gilbert 2007). The category ‘slum’ arises from outsiders’ perceptions and has often

provided nothing beyond an excuse for demolition and displacement (Mayne 2017). Words like 'slum' sound like they are describing unchanging areas of space. Recent research instead emphasizes temporality in unstable housing conditions via concepts (applied both to people and to capital) of flows, processes and networks (Bond and Browder 2019; Pull and Richard 2019). Critique builds on the history of the concept of the 'slum' (Davis 2006; Gilbert 2007; Mayne 2017). This is classically traced back to nineteenth-century London, where the word 'slum' was coined, making its first print appearances in Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1821).

Socio-spatial formations in specific urban contexts including twentieth-century London are established and contested by artistic practices as well as grassroots cultural movements (McNally 2019; Van Gent and Jaffe 2017; Woods 2021). This article adds further nuance to such work in cultural geography and cultural studies by comparing how a category of artwork, namely literary fiction, and the evidence from a historical document (the Orchard Place appeal hearing transcript) both build and interrogate social divisions. Some literary geographic studies have investigated the writing of stigmatised and low-status areas which could be labelled 'slums', notably in Apartheid-era South Africa (Hart 1986). Comparably, this study explores the relationship between texts and the formation of lived experience in an especially stigmatised portion of the East End, seeking interpretive categories of place applied by its users, both outsiders and insiders. Such work aligns with radical urban geographies and urban studies concerned with 'squatting', the concept of the city in the wake of Global South cities' growth, or with transport workers' experience (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018; Roy 2017; Simone 2016). In particular, the concept of displacement particularly illuminates people's experiences seen from the user or resident perspective. However, contemporary examples of displacement such as those put under the heading 'gentrification' need a deepened historical context (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2019; Lees, Shin and López-Morales 2015).

This article develops Deep Locational Criticism (Finch 2016) in dialogue with an approach to text which views it as something which 'happens' (Hones 2008; 2014) and afterwards expanded and elaborated by several other human geographers (e.g. Yap 2011; Saunders 2013; Thurgill 2018). Hones explored literary works as spatial happenings and meeting points: 'as a reader taking up a text, you have set off an event' (Hones 2008: 1301). An article in this journal developed such a perspective, coining 'relational literary geographies' to describe acts of tracing 'how lived geographies seep into imagined ones and how imagined ones spill beyond the confines of the page' (Saunders and Anderson 2015: 166). In such work, not only representations but also examination of their activation becomes central, in a turn towards 'representations-in-relation' (Anderson 2019: 1122-25). Practitioners emphasize the experiences of actual readers (Yap 2011) or political dimensions of texts' production and consumption (McRae Andrew 2018), and work to take into account 'the performativity of place' in relating the textual and the extra-textual (Thurgill 2018; Thurgill and Lovell 2018). The effort is to produce 'an understanding of fiction premised upon collaboration and co-production' (Thurgill 2018: 224). Most work taking account of 'text-as-it-happens' so far has concentrated on the complex webs of relations surrounding explicitly literary texts such as poems (Yap 2011), short stories (Thurgill 2018) and novels (Saunders 2013). This study offers instead a multidisciplinary

view of texts of place, one of which is apparently literary and the other likely to be classed as a non-literary document.

The two different disciplines applied here bring different techniques to the exploration of how texts formed in complexes of human relations surrounding writing and publishing modified the subsequent meaning of a particular space, the maritime East End. Spatial literary studies enables appreciation of the long-term topographic history underlying Orchard Place, understood on the model of Deep Locational Criticism and geocriticism as layered in a ‘sedimentation of representations’ bearing ‘traces of time’ (Marilungo 2017: 133; Finch 2016; Westphal 2011). Design history focused on 1930s Britain, meanwhile, reveals a chasm dividing the perspective of ‘experts’, be they architects, planners or other officials, who observed an area such as Orchard Place from the outside, and those who lived in the houses and streets designated as slums. Even attempts by architects to engage with the communities that they observed – specifically a 1938 Mass Observation survey conducted by architectural students – only served to reinforce this sense of separateness (Fulham Housing Survey). A radically multiple view of buildings and urban environments emerges. The buried cities unearthed belong in a *longue durée* stretching back to the eighteenth century and forward into the twenty first.

The methodology of the article involves acts of personal appropriation of place by the user-researchers, both London natives. Comparably, the readings of the 1935 Orchard Place appeal hearing offered here build on the research by architectural historian Elizabeth Darling (2000) into tenants’ attitudes towards their own dwellings at another London site, the modernist housing estate Kensal House in Ladbroke Grove, West London. Darling investigates a 1942 survey of residents’ attitudes which recorded how tenants ‘appropriated’ their flats, customizing the use and layout of space, as well as adding decorations and ornaments, which undermined the intentions of the building’s designers. Most tenants surveyed expressed positive views about the buildings where they lived, but they did refer to aspects of the architect’s design that did not ‘work in practice’ (171). Divisions thus emerge separating expert perspectives and the lived experience of residents. The tenants’ adaptive practices were summed up by Marjorie Bruce Milne (who conducted the survey) as ‘[a] sign of fundamental common sense, of a grasp of essentials which [is] perhaps inarticulate but strong because based on experience’. In the present article, such a ‘grasp’ is detectable in the actions of 1930s working-class East Londoners as presented in the appeal hearing text and the Blumenfeld novel. It also forms a model for research practice. An experienced-based research praxis offers distinct advantages in multidisciplinary urban research, not least because it leads towards experienced, ground-level cartographies and details of daily lives.

In this study, Darling’s work provides a method to explore how a long-established view of architects as the authors of buildings and as such the experts on them was both applied and challenged in the context analysed here. The words of architects underpin how historians understand architecture and the built environment (Forty 2000). However, in the last two decades writers have begun to explore the complexity of how users create meaning around buildings (e.g. Cuming 2016; Hanley 2012). Buildings can have multiple, co-existing and often contradictory meanings at any time. To summarise, studies of urban displacement processes and relational literary geographies would benefit from historicised,

multidisciplinary perspectives. Slum-clearance programmes were a process of creating meaning around buildings and places involving negotiations of meaning. Social class divisions emerge in the way that the authority of 'expert' knowledge buried the meanings created by the experience of users.

### **Historical Depth: London's Maritime East End and the Depression Era**

London's historical East End can seem to have an unproblematic place identity, often conflated with ideas of the city's 'slums' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Cottrell 2017: 2, 26; Groes 2011: 51, 58; Pye 2017: xx). But the East End is a complex space – or imaginative place – which shifted over time: it 'physically moved eastward and expanded', between the mid-nineteenth and late twentieth centuries (Dennis 2010; Finch 2016: 154; Newland 2008). For visiting writers such as Jack London, the East End at the beginning of the twentieth century was a 'human zoo'. Such writings continued a tradition stretching back to the 1860s of seeking the depths of an 'abyss' in the city's poorest sections (Dennis 2008: 42; Seaber 2017). By the late nineteenth century, the East End had taken over from West End slums such as St Giles and Seven Dials as the part of London with the reputation for most wildness and resistance to the official order of metropolis and Empire, and thus become the focus of philanthropic intervention (White 2008: 438-40).

From the mid-nineteenth century until London's docks closed down in the 1970s, the maritime East End was a specific sub-zone within a larger sector dominated by industry and working-class housing. The first part of today's East End to become covered with buildings was a strip running eastwards from the City of London. Wharves, docks and associated buildings grew along the shores of the Thames from the fifteenth century onwards (Hobhouse 1994: 1-20). This waterside slice was long among the most cosmopolitan and least respectable groups of districts in the metropolis. A specific imaginative literature grew up around it from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, exemplified by Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Arthur Morrison's *To London Town* (1899) and *The Hole in the Wall* (1902) and Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1915). In such writings, the maritime East End is distinguished from central London to the west and drabber expanses of East London housing north of it. It appeared as a colourful yet dangerous zone containing rogues and incomers, many of them visibly non-English. Aspects of this literary tradition find echoes in our two divergent 1930s written sources.

Orchard Place was condemned as part of the official programme popularly known as 'slum clearance', a series of Acts of Parliament passed after the end of the First World War. The Housing Acts of 1925 and 1930 named in the proceedings of the March 1935 local inquiry examined here were those governing the decision. Areas of housing recognised as slums could be immune from clearance under the provisions of Acts passed between 1918 and 1935 if judged capable of rehabilitation. LCC officials considered areas of terraced houses at least three storeys high with basements – typically built during the nineteenth century for servant-keeping middle-class families – more amenable to rehabilitation than terraces built for the working class (Yelling 1992: 97-98). By the 1920s, and indeed until the 1970s, many larger and older London houses were in multiple occupation, numerous families and single people sharing a single house designed for one

family, with very limited washing and cooking facilities (White 2001: 235-38). The areas chiefly singled out as suitable for clearance in the 1930s were of terraced cottages built for working-class people, usually two storeys high and without basements. These were often in the riverine working-class boroughs on either side of the Thames to the south and east of central London. Orchard Place, built for the lower working class and in an East End borough, surrounded by industry and water, was a classic demolition target of interwar housing policy.

Slum clearance began with a process of inspections and designation by local authorities (involving medical officers of health and municipal architects). Inspectors visited areas and designated buildings, streets or whole areas as industrial or domestic, inhabitable or uninhabitable. The criteria of judgement included sanitation, overcrowding and structural integrity as well as class-based judgements on behaviour and respectability. In the 1897 notebooks used by researchers working for Charles Booth, Orchard Place was described as 'being of the poorest and roughest', its houses as having 'unwhitened steps' and 'no flowers in the front window' (Duckworth 1897: 13). Such designations were then used to categorize areas as slums and subsequently to decide whether streets and houses were candidates for regeneration or should be demolished. Sources like slum-clearance maps and local authority housing committee minute books record official perspectives: those of designated 'experts'. The views of those living within the houses and streets barely figure.

During the Great-Depression-era, both novelists and urban theorists in Britain and America paid increased attention the poorest and most deprived urban zones (Greenwood 1933; Mumford 1938). As Ben Clarke (2007: 14) writes, '[a]ccounts of poverty and descriptions of working-class life were conspicuous amongst' the many works of 'reportage' which came out in the 1930s. Publishers such as Victor Gollancz and others commissioned writers to investigate poor areas: George Orwell in Wigan, Ada Jones Chesterton (1936), Hugh Massingham (1936) and Horace Thorogood (1935) in London. Orwell spent most of February and March 1934 in the North of England researching what became *The Road to Wigan Pier*, but several of its most famous descriptions of interiors and family life were gathered in short stays no more than a few days long (Shelden 1991: 243-52). Chesterton, Massingham and Thorogood were all outsiders in London's poorer districts and while sympathetic were sometimes uncomprehending or faced with hostility. Massingham, for instance, found himself exposed as an impostor and judged a potential spy by the East Enders he went to live among, who ostracized him, even breaking into his room and defiling his possessions (Seaber 2017: 240-47). Unlike the others, Blumenfeld was an East End insider. Naturally talented as a writer and seemingly an authentic voice of the London streets, he was noticed by the established author Aldous Huxley, a connection which helped Blumenfeld get published (Worpole 2011: 10). Perhaps because he was raised in the poorest parts of the East End himself, Blumenfeld was less interested than Chesterton, Massingham or Thorogood in seeking the essence of working-class life. Instead, he portrayed acts of social boundary-breaking, developing a kind of narrative that became characteristic of 'Jewish East End' writers (Finch 2018).



### Experts versus Locals? The Appeal Hearing Text

The transcript of the appeal hearing at Poplar Town Hall in March 1935 reveals a struggle between different perspectives and languages. Contesting voices ascribe different meanings to the buildings in Orchard Place. Attached to a street or collection of houses, the designation ‘slum’ reduced these layered meanings to a single label, erasing their status as homes or places of work and marking them as redundant buildings no longer useful for anything. The expert perspective of architects and local officials thus buried the experiences of the people who lived and worked there. The transcript of the inquiry shows the different forms of knowledge that conferred conflicting meanings on Orchard Place and shaped the different languages through which participants articulated these meanings. It shows how knowledge and language based on expertise buried the knowledge and language of experience. When the user-led methodology of Darling (2000) is applied to the appeal text, working-class perspectives on debates over buildings emerge, in a 1930s environment dominated by the voices of ‘experts’. In certain exchanges at the appeal hearing, the culture of expertise surrounding housing for the working class in 1930s Britain came face to face with residents’ resistance. Experts were employed to observe and improve the conditions (in this case the living conditions) of the general public. They gained their legitimacy by claiming to represent the needs of others (specifically the working-class people for whom they were designing and/or building), while in reality, as Darling argues, they were working to promote their own expertise and preserve their role in work environments such as housing and local government.

The Orchard Place inquiry was chaired by the inspector R.M. Love. He was involved in the visits and designations of slum areas; he was also an architect and a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). The appeal was lodged by Miss E.F. Bainbridge (lessee of 2 Orchard Place), and tenants Mr George Aspinall and Mr Joseph Bood against the three clearance orders applied to Orchard Place in 1934 by the LCC, under the terms of which all of the houses there would be demolished. The inspectors called Orchard Place ‘one of the worst slums in London’. Bainbridge was represented by a solicitor while Aspinall and Bood represented themselves. Aspinall and Bood argued that as their livelihoods were dependent on businesses run from Orchard Place, they were asking to be allowed to stay in the area. Two exchanges at the inquiry demonstrate the way that, in the context of slum clearance, a clash was taking place between two distinct types of knowledge: that of the expert, and that of experience.

The first exchange was between Love and Aspinall, who lived at No 1 Creekside, a street which Booth’s map (1898–1899) had shown containing a few houses coloured dark blue and black surrounded by factories and river. When asked to describe his home, Aspinall stated it was ‘partly business’ (AHT: 9). The transcript explains that Aspinall stored boats on the mooring at the back of his property, which he used for fishing and that he sold his catch to the residents and workers of Orchard Place. Houses like his had special qualities, it transpired at the hearing: ‘[t]hose houses in Creek-side which have the smallest rear yards are somewhat compensated by having a very large right over the strip of land between the river and the Creek-side’ (14). Aspinall also lived in the property. He explained

'I have been there 20 years and if I have to go, I should be out all day and all night with nowhere to moor' (9-10).

Love seems initially to have been perplexed by Aspinall's statement that his property was a business. The inspector explained that the slum clearance order applied only to residences, it was not a compulsory purchase order on all property. Therefore, there was no problem with Aspinall continuing his commercial activity in the area. Harold Williams, who was appearing on behalf of the LCC to promote the slum clearance scheme, then explains the difficulty in some cases of separating the designation of residence and business.

Mr Harold Williams: I may say I do appreciate this man's difficulty. He is living there, and he has space behind the house and in front where he can keep his gear; and while he lives there he can moor his boats, but if this place is redeveloped for commercial purposes, we can see quite well the possibility that that state of affairs may not be able to be continued. All I can say is that the Council will be sympathetic and will do their best; they have powers to do something to help Mr Aspinall. (AHT: 13)

This exchange highlights the conflict between the architect's singular designation of the spaces in Orchard Place and the view residents took of the spaces where they lived and worked. The slum clearance order had designated Orchard Place an industrial area, unsuitable for residential use. The residents were to be rehoused elsewhere in the Borough of Poplar (but away from the river). This abolished in an instant the more complex uses made of the space by the people who lived there, and it abolished the space's meaning for them. For Aspinall, his house was also the source of his livelihood; it was his place of work as well as his home. The criteria and categories used to classify Orchard Place derived from the middle-class separation of home and work, of domesticity and labour. Comparably, in literary fictions of twentieth-century Britain, the homes of poor people, single people and single-parent families often seemed deviations from a notion of home based on ideals of a properly private, clean and secluded domestic environment (Cuming 2016).

A similar problem of classification occurred in the case of Joseph Bood, tenant of 17 Orchard Place. Bood states that his home is also a cooked meat shop.

Inspector: The shop is incorporated in in the building I suppose?

Mr Bood: Yes. I object to it being pulled down. It is going to take away from me my living if they pull me down and send me somewhere else [...] I have been there 25 years and have got a good business there. (AHT: 17)

The inspector replies that once the clearance order has been carried out and all the other residents were re-housed, the people to whom Bood sold his wares would no longer be in Orchard Place. However, Williams then intervened to act as a bridge between the architect inspector and the residents, voicing an important detail in support of the points made by Bood and Aspinall:

Mr Harold Williams: That is one of the things that has troubled me a little bit because I have no doubt these people sell something to the people employed in the factories there.

Mr Bood: Yes, we do. Three fifths of our trade is with the factories, and if you take me away from the factory, you take my living away. (AHT: 17-18)

As Williams noticed, these businesses that people were running from the buildings they also dwelled in, made them dependent on the varied community in Orchard Place for a living. Businesses such as those of Aspinall and Bood served fellow residents but also, and more lucratively, the workers employed in the various industries in the area (an ‘oilworks’ specifically) (AHT: 19). The blanket designation of ‘Industrial Area’ did not account for the multiple uses and complex meanings as a place of the condemned area. Separating business use from domestic, and industrial from residential, did not match the use and lived experience of the space for its working-class residents. What structured the knowledge gap between the experts and the people they claimed to be representing was social class.

Post-World War One, architects were increasingly tasked with designing mass housing for working-class communities. In the same period, as architectural modernism took hold, architects sought a ‘new... socially transformative role’ as part of an ongoing discussion about ‘the relation of architecture to society’ (Mumford 2002: 5). In this new context, architects were faced with the gulf between their expertise and the lives of working-class people. The latter was precisely the subject of a project carried out by a group of students at the Architectural Association (AA) in 1938. The students explained that, considering the new social role of the architect, they had to admit that they were ‘abysmally ignorant of the living habits of any class other than our own’ (Fulham Housing Survey 1938). In order to gain a greater understanding of working-class experience the students conducted a survey (with the help of Mass Observation) of habits and living environments in Fulham, then a largely working-class district of South West London. This took the form of the students knocking on doors and, when permitted, conducting in-depth interviews about residents’ perceptions of their home and environment. The students’ notes reveal their fascination with the minutiae of the material life of the working-class people they were interviewing but record few attempts at dialogue with the residents themselves.

Social-class divisions and the authority of expertise over experience are similarly present in the language of the 1935 Orchard Place inquiry transcript. The document is shot through with references to the appellants’ lack of comprehension and the difficulty they have articulating their needs and opinions. An example is when the Inspector (Love) explains to Aspinall that he needed to write to the Council:

I think you should write a letter in to the council stating the whole of the circumstances clearly – or get somebody to help you with it – if you want anything the thing is to make them understand very clearly what you want. (AHT: 19)

These exchanges at the appeal hearing also reveal the use of ‘expert’ language to structure experience. Love’s insistence that Aspinal must make the Council understand what he wants points to the assumed authority of expertise, which the appellants have to negotiate: Orchard Place residents have to couch their experiences in the language of expertise in order to gain compensation. In tandem with legislation establishing how slums were to be cleared, a debate raged in the 1920s over how ground landlords and leaseholders of condemned property should be compensated for their losses, with property-owners’ organisations participating very vocally in it. However, compensation rarely extended to tenants such as Bood (Yelling 1992: 57-72).

The final words on the burial of the residents’ interpretations of the meaning of Orchard Place, based on their experience of living and working there, came from Williams of the LCC and from the inquiry inspector Love:

Mr Harold Williams: It has been my experience that the anticipation of being disturbed is very much worse than the realization of it. At the same time it is perfectly true it does cause not only inconvenience but a certain amount of loss to people who are in Mr Bood’s position. I can only say this, that the County Council feel that the whole of this work which they are doing under the Housing Act is being done for the improvement of the conditions under which the people of London live  
[...]

Inspector: You may indeed get something a jolly sight better than you have been having, you know. (AHT: 20)

These paternalistic assurances that the architects and local authorities knew better than the residents what they needed demonstrate how, at the Orchard Place hearing, expert knowledge was asserted over the experience, ‘inarticulate but strong’ in Bruce Milne’s words, of residents facing clearance.

Ultimately, evidence taken from Williams, the LCC expert on what constituted a slum, as well as Hugh Alderson Fawcett, Assistant Medical Officer to the LCC, and Dr W. Allan Young, Medical Officer of Health for Poplar, satisfied Love, chairing the proceedings. The 60 houses covering 1.25 acres, ‘inhabited [...] by 409 persons of the working-class’ of Orchard Place, Love concluded, together made up an irredeemable slum (AHT: 5). Williams declared that:

[a]ll the properties without exception are in a bad state of repair, the streets are narrow and congested, you find that for the most part the buildings on these areas consist of 2-storey cottages, they are very damp indeed, it is almost inconceivable that they could be anything else, in view of the fact that this area is very subject to flooding (AHT: 6)

According to Williams, ‘the whole area is a museum of the defects referred to in the Housing Act, as defects leading to clearance action’. The use of words like ‘defects’ and ‘congested’ and even ‘cottages’ refer directly to the texts of the post-World-War-One Housing Acts. This is an area of discourse that the ‘working-class’ Orchard Place

inhabitants were probably unable to use. Whatever objections they put up are overruled, because the discussion becomes not one of general equity but of the application of the wording of the Acts. Dr Young of Poplar is swift to agree with Williams and Fawcett, the higher-status experts from the LCC, that the properties are ‘unfit for human habitation’. Asked whether they are dangerous and ‘injurious to health’ (AHT: 16), Dr Young says that they are, speaking from experience stretching back to January 1928 when he visited the area after floods. Moreover, on his view, the houses ‘cannot be made fit’. Fair-minded as Williams seems, the approach he articulates admits no alternative view, such as those of residents like Bood and Aspinall who both lived in and operated businesses in the condemned area. There is no suggestion, for example, that they might be rehoused in new buildings on the same site.

In the hearing text, then, the locality interacts with various levels of locational belonging residents had, including identities as dwellers in the Metropolitan Borough of Poplar and the County of London without going to the level of national identity. These levels of belonging seem to be inseparable from social class identities. Love stresses in his conclusion that ‘[t]he owner has done all she could’: she is not to be classed as a slum landlord who has wilfully allowed property to deteriorate in order to increase profits, in other words. The reader of the hearing transcript might wonder whether the freeholder of Orchard Place Miss Fitzwygram, represented by a professional surveyor rather than speaking for herself as Aspinall and Bood do, really did all she could for the tenants and lessees of Orchard Place. After all, as Yelling (1992) indicates, landlords of residential property in 1930s Britain were typically advised to spend as little money maintaining their property as possible. Considered together with the AA Fulham survey, the text of the appeal hearing demonstrates the contested and fluid meanings of urban space and on-going negotiations between experience and expertise.

### **Community and Stigmatisation: The Novel**

The literary portraits of London’s East End waterside by Dickens, Morrison and Burke mentioned above (dating from the period 1865–1915) tended to give it a certain piratical glamour, whatever negative elements it was also shown to contain. Perhaps Harold Williams hinted at this glamour when, speaking at the 1935 clearance hearing, he called Orchard Place ‘one of the worst slums in London’ despite ‘the romance that attaches to it as a residential place’ (AHT: 5). In Simon Blumenfeld’s 1937 fictional treatment, the waterside East End forms part of an unromanticised view of the maritime East End: as a zone of working-class housing driven by wage rates and room rental costs. His *Phineas Kahn: Portrait of an Immigrant* contains detailed descriptions of work in the rag trade or garment industry in East London between 1900 and 1920, as carried out at the proletarian and small local entrepreneur level by Jews. The standpoint is Marxist, if not openly Stalinist as in Blumenfeld’s earlier novel *Jew Boy*, and the style plain, shifting between affectionate familiarity and the tone of a sociologist. ‘Hand in hand, a little frightened and apprehensive’, Phineas Kahn and his wife Shandel arrive in Vienna and immediately find themselves ‘[f]ace to face for the first time with the problems of a highly industrialised modern city’ (Blumenfeld 1937: 96, 99, hereafter PK). This is a multi-generational family

epic of migration across Europe in which Phineas is the central character but in which the focus shifts in the novel's final section to his grown-up children.

After journeying through the Europe of 1900 in Section I of the book ('Russia'), the Kahns move in Section II ('The Golden Lands') from having no English social class because they are completely foreign in London, to become established members of the London lower working class. Having lived at various addresses in Aldgate and Spitalfields immediately east of the City of London, Phineas and Shandel, with their eight or nine children, move to one of the East End's lowest and least desirable districts, in 'a crooked little turning in Wapping that leads down to the docks' (PK: 216). Here they live surrounded by raucous Irish casual labourers working on the wharves and their families. A third section describes how, crossing social class boundaries in a fashion common to writings by authors with Jewish East End backgrounds (Finch 2018), the Kahn children reach adulthood and enter different portions of the British middle classes, belonging there but also still apart as second-generation immigrants. The violent and profoundly non-respectable waterside street St Magnus Hill contains the closest and most direct comparisons to Orchard Place available in Blumenfeld's novel. St Magnus Hill (its name recalling the riverside City church mentioned in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) is located on the western side of the docks area north of the London Docks in Wapping. When London is bombed during the First World War, residents are kept awake by 'the adjacent battery of anti-aircraft guns at Tower Hill' (PK: 222). This area lay considerably closer to the multiple trades of the inner East End and the eastern portions of the City of London than did Orchard Place, with its orientation towards fishing and boat repairs. However, Bow Creek, where Orchard Place lay on a peninsula, and the fictional St Magnus Hill both lay within what had been understood since the nineteenth century as London's dock zone.

Outsiders are hated and suspected in Blumenfeld's St Magnus Hill. 'All the most lurid characters of the waterfront lived there', he writes, with a nod to fellow East End writer Thomas Burke's Limehouse or the American gangster movie (PK: 216). As in accounts of London slums stretching back to Morrison in the 1890s, policemen will only venture there after dark in pairs. But St Magnus Hill ultimately nurtures the Kahns through the stresses and disruptions of the First World War. Like Orchard Place in the Booth notebooks of 1899, St Magnus Hill is a discrete and isolated community within the vast city. Connections could be drawn with an inhabitant of Orchard Place, Charles Lammin, who in 1935 wrote a narrative of his life and that of his relatives. Lammin named the area as 'the Orchard House' and described it in matter-of-fact but affectionate tones as a strong community. Children would periodically fall into the river there, he said, and it was the duty of anyone nearby 'to jump in and save the drowning one' (Isle of Dogs Life 2013).

Considered together, the fictional St Magnus Hill and the non-fictional Orchard Place cast light on the gendered power structures of landholding. In the 1930s, the chain of urban property ownership remained driven by hierarchies of social class and respectability as it had been in the Victorian period (Yelling 1992: 93-94, 101). In the March 1935 appeal hearing the continuing power of traditional landowners is demonstrated by an agent for Miss Fitzwygram, the ground landlord of Orchard Place (AHT: 4), descendent of the Wigram family of ship-building capitalists who, in the early nineteenth century, first built the houses and factories thereabouts. In the novel, the Kahns enter the area via their

Jewish and female landlord from Lordship Square, Ma Kaminsky. She is clearly a lessee of houses, frequently a role women took (Yelling 1992: 139). Letting them out to weekly tenants like the Kahns puts her lower on the ladder of landlordship than the non-fictional Miss Fitzwygram. But she seems a more considerable slum capitalist than Miss E.F. Bainbridge, the coffee-house keeper and lessee of Number 2, Orchard Place, who like Bood and Aspinall objected to displacement. The fictional Ma Kaminsky instead leases so many houses in different East End neighbourhoods that she can forget she even has one in St Magnus Hill.

Blumenfeld's literary realism involves statements of prices, hourly rates of pay and amounts of money earned. It also involves statements of individual houses' size and amenities (or lack of them) because these were essential facts in the determination of what rent was chargeable for a given house. The authors of Victorian slum fictions from Dickens and Hesba Stretton to, near the end of the century, Morrison and George Gissing tend to present the slum as an essentially static and village-like corner within the big city whose inhabitants, like villagers, all know one another. Blumenfeld, in contrast, presents his Kahns as continually on the move throughout their earliest and poorest years in London, around the same section of the city, but between one neighbourhood and another, depending on the state of their finances at any given moment. This narrative is much closer to the findings of urban historians and historical geographers who have researched London housing in the period between the 1830s and the 1960s than to the village-like slums of Victorian novelists (Green and Parton 1990). Even the relationship with St Magnus Hill is largely transactional for the Kahns.

Blumenfeld's manner of viewing houses embodies a specifically twentieth-century realism by counting rooms, thus recalling official reports of the 1920s and 1930s which surveyed London districts in preparation for the establishment of clearance areas. What Ma Kaminsky offers the Kahns in St Magnus Hill is more space than they can afford anywhere else in the East End, 'four rooms and a scullery' plus the promise 'to do it up for you from top to bottom' (PK: 216). The low price is because of the extreme lack of respectability and perceived physical danger involved with living in St Magnus Hill. 1930s landlords were advised that one of the advantages of letting property in bad condition to lower level working-class tenants is that there would not be demands for extensive and expensive repairs. Ronald Sunnucks, author of the 1934 book *Investment in Housing* (quoted in Yelling 1992: 134) distinguished investment as a ground landlord, risk-free and relatively low-return, from two other categories of property investment. On the one hand there were 'terraced houses in good districts which were well tenanted'. Then there was what Sunnucks called 'speculative property', a euphemism that avoids but hardly conceals the label of slum landlord. Tenants of 'speculative property' are said by Sunnucks to be 'satisfied with cheap renovations', the chief problem for the landlord being 'to secure regular payment of the rents'.

The houses at St Magnus Hill, like those at Orchard Place, are of two storeys without a basement (the scullery was on the ground floor at the back of the house). This was the sort labelled 'cottages'. Yelling writes (1992: 118-19) that 'the clearance programme fell most heavily' upon cottages and 'undoubtedly this was often the worst property from the structural point of view, although it had other advantages'. Among these advantages was

presumably the fact that cottages could more often be occupied by a single working-class family who in areas of larger tenement houses would need to share the building with several other tenants. At the Orchard Place hearing, Dr Fawcett of the LCC had classified the houses there as ‘mostly 2-storey cottages with a few 3-storey houses with cellars’ (AHT: 13). Questioning meant to establish whether they were in such bad condition as to be impossible to renovate with any amount of maintenance included asking him whether they had what might now seem merely the characteristics of cottages: whether ‘walls are wavy’, whether there are ‘rooms generally too low’. Such features might have appeared picturesque a few decades later.

In Blumenfeld’s novel, then, just as in the Poplar hearing transcript, user perspectives emerge to question officialdom, expertise and the hegemony of higher social classes in both of the mid-1930s London texts examined here. Blumenfeld gives a detailed account of the user perspective of the fictional Kahn family. They fit into urban networks such as that which links them to their leaseholding landlady Ma Kaminski or to the character of Mr Stephenson, an exporter of manufactured ready-to-wear clothing produced in the workshops of the Jewish East End by a pyramid of micro-entrepreneurs and a labour force beneath them (PK: 172-73). The Kahns’ encounter with the uncomprehending Stephenson resembles the Orchard Place claimants’ efforts to make themselves heard at the hearing. George Aspinall’s shrimping business at Orchard Place relied on precisely the same sort of mixed-use buildings as the Kahn family’s tailoring enterprise in Blumenfeld’s fiction. Blumenfeld was an active Communist during the 1930s (Hepple 2005). Still, the future he envisages for the Kahns is not revolutionary (such as he gives the protagonist of *Jew Boy*). Rather it is of escape from the slums and from life in the physical environments established by the English middle classes, if not from their mental worlds.

## Conclusion

When people think of a neighbourhood like Orchard Place, they do so using different perspectives which are also always being combined, tensions between them remaining. Here these have included the perspectives of expert and user, literary studies and design history, appeal hearing transcript and left-wing novel. Our study has offered means by which radical geographers’ work on displacement and the ‘slum’ as concept could benefit from deeper historical contextualisation and modes of enquiry developed in different humanities disciplines. This contributes to relational literary geographies by deepening a diachronic perspective on the spatial events to which early-twentieth-century texts contribute (Saunders 2013; Thurgill 2018).

The interdisciplinary approach we have taken here and the conjunction of a nonfictional text and a fictional one, read by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, adds to an understanding of how an imaginative place such as the maritime East End could look very different seen from different viewpoints: how it could have multiple identities. For the experts at Poplar Town Hall, the maritime East End needed organising for a rational future; for the residents of Orchard Place facing displacement, it was a combination of domestic and working space with its own traditions, now under threat; for the incoming Jews of Blumenfeld’s novel, perhaps, it was a staging-post on a



journey through British society. For the authors of this article, the maritime East End stands for a tangible part of London's identity still reasserting itself in the 2020s.

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