



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

Reviewed by

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What does it mean to live together in the city, and in London in particular? In an urban environment, what distinguishes the home from the street? And what can print and visual representations of neighbourliness tell us about the networks that make up our communities? On 11 and 12 July 2019, scholars from within and beyond the UK assembled to take up these questions at the Literary London Society’s annual conference, ‘Neighbours of Ours: Cities, Communities, Networks’.

The conference began with a plenary address by Professor Alison Blunt of Queen Mary, University of London, called “‘Tales from other people’s houses’: home, (dis)connection and conviviality in an urban neighbourhood’. A geographer by training, Professor Blunt’s talk presented data from the Home-City-Street public engagement project, which has hosted workshops, film screenings, and artists’ projects. The project has even recently launched an app-based walking tour.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on home-city biographies from three generations of residents of Kingsland Road in Hackney, North London, Blunt rethinks the connections between the domestic and the urban. For Blunt, neighbours are our environment. Urban soundscapes and encounters affect us at and in our homes, providing the backdrops to our private lives. Similarly, the urban landscape and its sightlines allow

neighbours to 'be there without being there'. These sounds and sights mean that the urban neighbourhood lies both beyond and within the home.

Several presentations on the first day of the conference spoke to similar ideas of belonging, connection, and community. Focusing on spaces as varied as the tearoom in Bryher's novel *Beowulf* (1948) (Evelina Garay-Collcut), the music hall in fin-de-siècle literary culture (Peter Jones), and the London Underground (Craig Melhoff), scholars identified sites of both community and conflict in literature or cultural histories from a variety of time periods and traditions. These papers all reflect a deep commitment to attending to the social contexts of home and neighbourliness. Nick Bentley discussed intersections of race and class in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2000) and *Swing Time* (2016), while Martin Dines, James Peacock, and Anne E. Cooper addressed the dynamics of gentrification in their papers. The day concluded with a lecture by Dame Marina Warner. By focusing on stories of displacement from contemporary literature, Dame Warner explored what it means to create a home when home is lost.

A highlight of the day was Elizabeth Dearnley and Michael Eades's joint presentation, 'A Year in Russell Square: the lore and language of Bloomsbury'. In autumn 2017, the two began placing birdboxes around the greater Bloomsbury area, each of which contained a secret diary. Those who discovered the birdboxes were able to record their spontaneous thoughts in the diaries inside of them. These diaries contained everything from confessions to cartoons. Contributors often even responded to one another in the diaries or came back to them at a later date to update their accounts. A birdbox associated with this collaborative storytelling project remains in Russell Square today.

Where networks and connections were a theme of early papers, boundaries and borders were a concern of later ones. The second day of the conference featured talks on regional relations and neighbourhood borders, with Adam Borch speaking to the relationship between London and Bristol in eighteenth-century literature and culture, and Jason Finch commenting on the boundaries of the slums in Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913–14). In other papers, panelists discussed the way in which such crossings and boundaries generate exclusion. This was a focus of Lynn Wells' "'All Eyes on London": Surveillance and Power in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and *Sweet Tooth*' and Yun-Hua Hsiao's "'The Chinese Neighbour": Second/Third-Generation British Chinese Children in the Catering Trade'.

The conference closed with a plenary panel by The Baron Six, who shared material from their recently published critical edition on the Hackney-born novelist Alexander Baron, *So We Live: The Novels of Alexander Baron* (2019). A British working-class novelist of the twentieth-century, Baron's *From the City, From the Plough* (1948) is considered one of the finest British World War Two novels. Produced during a moment when the literary market was dominated by memoirs, the novel follows a British battalion in Normandy. The Second World War was a pivot point for Baron, who was concerned with the extent to which neighbourhood and community were lost in the post-war years. These are concerns of his later novels, too, which track class-based and racialized antagonisms that emerge in the space of the city. Indeed, Baron's novels regularly look back at the life and colour of old

communities. Baron longed for community, but he also identified with the figure of the outsider or the misfit, which is a feature of *The Low Life* (1963). In this novel, which maps the Holocaust and the history of racism onto the streets of Hackney, Baron shows that community can be claustrophobic. By the end, though, Baron ends up where he started: he generates nostalgia for the old East End that has been bombed. Across all his novels, then, Baron chronicles every day, particularly human patterns of social life that raise questions about gentrification, migration, and exploitation.

Many thanks to Peter Jones for organizing yet another stimulating conference on London and its environs.

## Notes

1. Further information on Home-City-Street can be found at <<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/homecitystreet>>.

## Note on Contributor

Kristen H. Starkowski is a PhD Candidate at Princeton University. Her research interests include the Victorian novel, minor characters, disability studies, and penny publishing. She has published on disability in the borderlands in *Latino Studies* and on selfish care in Victorian fictions of disability in *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. She was the recipient of a postgraduate bursary from the Literary London Society to attend the 'Neighbours of Ours' conference.

## To Cite this Article

Starkowski, Kristen H., 'Review of: 'Neighbours of Ours', University of Notre Dame in England, 11–12 July 2019'. Online at <http://literarylondon.org/reviewfiles/starkowski-2019conferencereview.pdf>