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Literary London Conference Review: 'Ages of London', 23–25 July 2014

Reviewed by

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The 2014 Literary London Conference, hosted by the Institute of English Studies at Senate House, attracted speakers from global universities taking a variety of approaches to the theme 'Ages of London'. Participants responded to numerous possibilities for approaching the literary ages of London by engaging with neo-historical and more traditional narratives from all epochs of London literature, emphasising the historical layers of the city itself and the lived experience of London characters.

In one of the opening parallel panels, Charlotte Stroud proposed an interesting re-examination of the flâneur. Reading Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Stroud used the work of Elizabeth Grosz and New Material Feminism to examine the possibility of alternative understandings of the embodied experience of the urban stroller.

Lisa Robertson presented an analysis of a report by social reformer Emily Hobhouse in *The Nineteenth Century* (March 1900) on working women's housing at the turn of the century. Robertson observed that the misguided need to treat women in model dwellings as children reveals the problem of the anticipated social impermanence of single women in the late-Victorian period. Jane Jordan's paper focused on the site of Lisson Grove, from which Eliza Armstrong was abducted by W. T. Stead for the investigation that led to 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' (1885). Jordan suggested the palimpsestic nature of both places and stories. Attempts to raze or reimagine physical spaces are ill conceived, as spaces persist in the imagined Londons which overwrite the real city.

Revisionary views of London were presented in the compelling Literary London Annual Lecture 'London, Londinium, Londolo: The Endless Possibilities of Re-Imagining London', given by Bernardine Evaristo. Evaristo's prose poetry and poetic novels use a fictional re-imagining of black history to re-examine London's past. Her evocative and enjoyable readings from the novel *Blonde Roots* (2008) and the verse novels *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Lara* (1997)—in which she employs multiple historical epochs to retell the imagined city—were a fantastic close to the first day.

Thursday began with a fascinating examination of 'Thomas Hardy's London' by Mark Ford. Highlighting the centrality of the city to the writing of an author so often considered pastoral, Ford pointed out that Hardy wrote far more poems about the city than many of his contemporaries and that indeed Londoners were the greatest consumers of his literature.

Lynne Segal's talk on 'Ageing in London/London's Ageing' suggested that the embodied experiences of ageing and the city are indivisible. Segal considered ways in which women have been coded as aged, but observed that it is often male ageing that causes greater disquiet. The discussion that followed identified a bitter-sweet 'jauntiness' in women's experience of ageing, which, perhaps countering their imagined agedness at 40(!), offers an alternate possibility for their experience.

Friday opened with David Skilton's plenary, 'Living London', which explored the city space as a site of associated ruins, histories and fictions. In our peregrinations throughout the city, Skilton suggested, we necessarily encounter these alterities.

The 'Shadow Cities' panel addressed the effects of order and disorder contained within and inflicted upon the city. It opened with Adrian Versteegh's talk on the significance of insomnia in Rossetti's poem 'Jenny' (1847-8). Versteegh related sleeplessness in the poem to contemporary discourses on the impact of insomnia on the body, offering a reading of sleep in its relation to the urban space. Alex Fitch's exploration of the psychogeographic *From Hell* (1999) considered the simultaneity of 'past, present and yet to come', and thus the haunted nature of city space. His talk revealed the significance of how urban space is rendered on the page in graphic texts.

One of the final parallel panels, 'Children on the Streets', brought together three lively papers. Lucie Glasheen probed ways in which children not only respond to but produce public space, demonstrating how children uniquely make private space public through interaction and play. Matthew Ingleby took up the theme of the child in the city as a resistant figure, examining the child in relation to both city and empire in the work of G. K. Chesterton. Jenny Bavidge examined the ways in which children in the city are both 'vital *and* victimised'. Reflecting upon age in its relation to both space and embodiment, the panel usefully prompted consideration of the variegated presentations of these issues throughout the conference.

We thank Martin Dines for once again organising such an enjoyable, productive and exciting conference, and look forward immensely to next year's on 'London in Love', to be organised by Peter Jones.

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