

Theorising the collective in British estate literature

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According to their postwar proponents, British council estates were intended to increase equality between social classes by providing decent housing for all. Yet far from reducing polarisation, the building of estates led to what Lynsey Hanley terms 'a kind of ghettoization'¹ in which estates became 'holding cages for the poor and disenfranchised'.² For much media and political discourse, certain types of people live on estates: the word 'estate' evokes crime, violence, drug addiction, low aspiration, and familiar reductive stereotypes: the irresponsible single mother, the racialized young man in a gang, or the immigrant uninterested in assimilating to wider British society. These powerful associations are evident in contemporary cultural texts in Britain as well, where council estates are frequently used to symbolise economic disadvantage and social marginalisation. Significant works purporting to show life on the estate span film,³ television,⁴ theatre,⁵ fiction,⁶ and memoir⁷ – not to mention songs such as Tricky's 'Council Estate' (2008). In view of this field, critics have established the category of 'estate literature' as a topic worthy of sustained inquiry. Susanne Cuevas defines a group of what she terms 'council estate novels', for example, and connects them to a wider tradition of urban working-class fiction.⁸ This is a literary tradition which, as Dominic Head argues, was subject to marginalisation in the wake of the post-industrial economic turn of the 1980s, but which is receiving increasing critical attention in the context of austerity.⁹

Given the especially fraught representational politics around class, race and gender, critics have sought to identify the formal and thematic strategies through which cultural texts might challenge, rather than reproduce, pernicious council estate stereotypes. Katie Beswick, for example, draws attention to the *spatialization* of theatrical performance and its consequent significance in challenging dominant narratives about the space of the estate.¹⁰ Emily Cuming suggests that texts which 'take into consideration the subjectivity and viewpoints of particular individuals in specific circumstances' counter the homogenous portrayal of estate residents by stressing 'heterogeneity, ambivalence and difference'.¹¹ Like these critics, we are interested in stereotyped council estate residents, and we take up Beswick's and Cuevas' interest in the question of genre and Cuming's exploration of the literary techniques which can be used to examine individual/group dynamics. At the same time, we are interested in broadening the category of 'estate literature' to account for the insights offered by reading different genres alongside each other. The texts we analyse in this article reflect the breadth of recent estate literature as it extends across media: we read Caleb Femi's poetry collection, *Poor* (2020) with Anders Lustgarten's play, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in 2016), and with Guy Gunaratne's novel, *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018). By focusing on three different genres, we offer here not a comprehensive account of any individual text but an overview of 'estate literature' as a category that, spanning genres, unites works that otherwise display disparate aesthetic forms and literary traditions.

Reading across genres in this way enables us to specify a key characteristic of estate literature which has so far been under-discussed. We argue that, through their different generic affordances, these three literary works all seek to distinguish an emergent and refreshed imagination of masculine community. Cuming has pointed out that literature can respond to the stigmatisation of those who live on estates through detailed depictions of

singular individuals. Here, though, we show that Gunaratne's novel, Femi's poetry collection, and Lustgarten's play take quite a different strategy: decentring the individual perspective to highlight plural, contingent, and yet meaningful group identities for men and boys. While many scholars have discussed estate literature and council estates more broadly, they have often avoided discussing the collective due to the largely reductive and problematic nature of homogenising depictions of estate types in popular culture. Reading drama, poetry, and narrative fiction together allows us to show that a key feature of estate literature, and one not restricted to a particular text or genre, is its use of the divergent formal capacities of different genres to imagine and express forms of collective identity which are more hopeful and

meaningful than the pervasive reductive stereotypes of estate life. These texts do not primarily seek to distinguish complex individuals from the general collective, but rather explore how the formal qualities of literature can be used to imagine more flexible and generative collective identities for men who are often demonised as violent and criminal.

Adapting Manuel DeLanda's theorisation of the flat ontology or perspective,¹² and building on Jon Helt Haarder's conceptualisation of Danish social housing developments as networks,¹³ we focus on the way literature depicts estates as assembling drastically different individuals (both human and non-human) which act together to refute simple hierarchies of status or meaning.¹⁴ In these examples, we argue, the estate is neither simply a setting nor is it the determining factor which unilaterally establishes and limits the forms of collective belonging possible within its boundaries. Instead, the texts suggest that we-groups are brought into being by the complex interactions which span individuals, places, things: architecture, human mobility, building materials, song lyrics and myriad other agents. The collectives imagined by these texts are therefore fragile and contingent; they break apart and lack the necessary foundation for their sustained existence, especially against broader categories of racialized, gendered, and classed identity groups.

The language of the network or assemblage helps elucidate the ad-hoc nature of these collectives. As we explain below, there is no coherent identity which comfortably encompasses the collection of narrators in Gunaratne's novel, for example. Instead, any sense of this group comes across only in the form of social 'traces' visible when narrators interact, collide, and break away from each other.¹⁵ Because characters narrate their respective stories within the shared space of the estate (and, further, the imagined space of the novel) they appear in the text as collaborative actors. Read alongside one another, their actions within the novel as well as their status as co-narrators bring into focus, we argue, a picture of the estate as a social grouping which is likewise hard to define – but nonetheless meaningful in the way it affects seemingly disparate people. Something similar happens in Lustgarten's play, in which a young character uses his mobile phone to take seven snapshots of seven 'acts of mercy' performed by seven complete strangers on and around a Merseyside estate undergoing gentrification. This photo project is meant to show his dying grandfather that there is still ground for hope in human compassion, but the collectivity it assembles is fragile, heterogenous, and in a sense only exists in the space of the theatre during the performance. The group identities made and remade in the space of the estate in these works emphasize the value of collective belonging and show how estates might function as spaces which enable connection and community. Against the homogenous and reductive representations of the council estate space – and its association with gangs and organised crime – these texts imagine a quite different form of group belonging.

The council estate in popular culture

Before elaborating on the formal innovations we associate with estate literature, it is necessary first to locate this art form among the wider history of social housing. As our reference to the genre of estate literature indicates, there are features which these works share even as they differ individually in terms of locale and perspective. The same can be said of the council estate, which signifies a nationally specific version of a global phenomenon. The UK estate has similarities with, but also differs from, the French *banlieu* or the Norwegian *drabantby*. Dire housing shortages after the Second World War, innovation in building technologies, increasing prosperity, and mounting ambitions on behalf of the welfare state fuelled the construction of new housing across Europe. In the UK, as elsewhere, some of these developments were New Towns, which reflected the planners' ambitious dreams to create entirely new 'urban totalities' from scratch.¹⁶ Others were less ambitious and less utopian in scope but attempted to distinguish their housing units from the surrounding area by using prefabricated concrete elements and some level of holistic design. The heterogeneity implied in this history is also

reflected in the estates which appear in the literature we consider in this article. The North Peckham Estate, which is depicted in Femi's *Poor*, created a self-contained totality with some 1444 homes, whereas the fictionalised estate of *In Our Mad and Furious City* is distinct from, but very much a part of, the surrounding London urban area. In Lustgarten's play, the setting is a 'council flat in Bootle, Merseyside',¹⁷ an area in the process of privatisation and gentrification. The jumble of specific locales and more generalised ones across these sources blends fact with fiction and, in general, draws on the readers' prefabricated idea of what council housing is.

Although stigmatisation of the working classes has a long history in the UK,¹⁸ the vilification of people who live on council estates has been especially intense in recent years. The introduction of the Thatcher government's right to buy policy had the effect of reducing the public sector's housing stock, which, in the absence of new building projects, made social housing less available. The policy also reinforced the discursive framing of council housing as an absolute last resort and inferior to home-owning or private renting, an understanding that tainted those who live in it as insufficiently hard-working.¹⁹ Recent events speak to the extensive harm that follows the marginalisation of both council estates and their residents. The 2017 fire at Grenfell Tower, owned by the local government in one of the wealthiest parts of the country, revealed the stark dangers of the marginalisation of council housing: 72 people died in a fire which became so destructive because legal building standards had not been met.²⁰ Residents point out that their warnings about fire safety were simply disregarded.²¹ The combustible materials which intensified the fire have been used in many other tower blocks across the country.²²

Imogen Tyler argues that in contemporary Britain, council estates function as 'abjectified zones':²³ spaces which are at once intensively surveilled and marginal to society. Anxieties about class, race, and gender have a particular pertinence to the abjection associated with the estate. For example, the subject of estates and so-called broken families has frequently been a focal point in national discussions around class morality and respectability.²⁴ The trope of the single working-class mother also reoccurs in popular representations of working-class life with different degrees of sympathy, ranging from the 'chav mum' depicted in the comedy show *Little Britain* (2003), the sympathetic struggling mother in *Fish Tank*, to the single-mother matriarchy in *Dirty God* (2019). Arguably, television (especially reality television) and the press (especially the conservative press) have created the most stigmatising portrayals of working-class families, aligning familial dysfunctionality, hyper-femininity, and excessive fecundity – often represented through young white single mothers of multi-racial children.²⁵ This portrayal undoubtedly informs works of estate literature which seek to add nuance to the negative connotations attached to estate families. In Lustgarten's *Seven Acts of Mercy*, for instance, the father character works for the firm seeking to demolish the council flat inhabited by his estranged son and grandfather. By using three generations of men to dramatise familial dysfunction (it is mothers, rather than fathers, who are notably absent in the play) Lustgarten acknowledges and reverses one of the most pervasive images of the estate. As Lynette Goddard argues, the discourse around urban youth culture is racialized, with young black people represented as both victims and perpetrators in the public debate around 'black-on-black crime' and gangs in London.²⁶ These anxieties are frequently represented in the media (especially in dramas such as *Kidulthood*, *Top Boy* and *Ill Manors*) through depictions of male youth culture in the estate.

The settings of all three literary texts in this article are associated with violent events which are significant not only on their own, tragic terms but also because of the debates they instigated about social exclusion. The murder of soldier Lee Rigby in 2013, which is lightly fictionalised as the major precipitating event in the plot of *In Our Mad and Furious City*, was widely connected with the alleged failures of multiculturalism.²⁷ Bootle, the setting of Lustgarten's play, was the site of the abduction of two-year-old James Bulger, who was then murdered by two ten-year-olds. Seeking explanations for the child murderers' behaviour, some commentators in this last

case drew attention to the poverty and social deprivation of their upbringings.²⁸ The 2000 murder of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor on the North Peckham Estate, the setting for *Poor*, led to public outcry against gang culture (especially among black youth) on estates. Once housing over 1400 homes and 65 multi-storey blocks, North Peckham was later demolished. The heavy symbolism attached to council estates underscores the usefulness of cultural sources in both upholding and disrupting the stereotypes outlined above, which – as the last cases indicate – can often transform into policies targeting estate life on various levels.

'Collective moments': *In Our Mad and Furious City*

Our approach to the estate and the collective in this article is an attempt to think beyond the limitations otherwise implied in a broad term like estate literature. While we embrace this categorical label to identify the shared concerns and methods evident in literature written about the estate, we do not mean to suggest that the estate and its social formations are in some way fixed. Rather, what estate literature shows us is how literary forms express something of the array of actors which gather in and around the estate. What we term estate literature does more than simply represent life in public housing; it can also intervene in the way readers imagine the individuals as well as the groups who together constitute the communities residing there.

To be sure, the emphasis on collectivity in these texts is not an invention of estate literature but an extension and expansion of literature's more general capacity for representing complex social relations. Realist novels from the nineteenth century, to name only one example, registered a tension between the imagined space of the novel (which is implied to be a totalising picture of a community or world) and the inherently limited presentation of the characters who exist in this imagined space. As Alex Woloch argues, a simple economy of representation rules in novels where characters 'jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe'.²⁹ The narrative method Woloch identifies is but one of the ways narratives consider collective narration; we touch on it here to help place into context how literary form draws from and informs the social imagination around matters of class and community. All characters in a given text exist relationally: a character is minor only in relation to a major character and vice versa. Moreover, this relational estimation stands even if the thread which ties one to another is not immediately apparent. Characters may not interact within the confines of their respective stories, but their presence within the structure of the text means that they nonetheless shape each other with their actions, inactions, or even absences from the narrative.³⁰

For our purposes, Woloch's explanation of the economy of representation provides a point of departure for clarifying how estate literature conjures collective voices. In other words, we are less interested in world building in literature than in the social traces that literature can assemble. Simply put, we learn little about social relations when we approach a given group or setting with a preformed sense of who all the meaningful actors are or what their relations are to each other. Instead, scholars must always account for the 'number of associations' which, in ways seen and as-yet unseen, might gather in potential collectives.³¹ Placing discussion of networks in dialogue with the literary theory above helps explain the type of collective voice we argue is present in our examples of housing estate literature. First and foremost, these texts caution against reductive accounts of who lives in the council estate and any totalising sense of what their experiences (past, present, and future) might be. In other words, they foreground social groups whose coherence cannot, and should not, be predetermined. Instead, the more critical observations occur when we look for 'surprising movements' which confound our sense of what this community consists of in the first place.³² Foreknowledge of a given group can stifle new insights to the extent that we stop looking for agents, actors, or assemblages which might spring up before our eyes. This approach is especially relevant in relation to housing estates, whose communities are prone to entrenched stereotypes and generalisations.

To elaborate on this point, we turn to Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City*. From its earliest pages – indeed, from the title itself – the novel proclaims its investment in the collectivity of the estate. The prologue exemplifies how the novel, while consisting of several first-person narrators, nonetheless foregrounds what Uri Margolin terms the 'collective narrative agent' which is 'capable of forming shared group intentions and acting on them jointly'.³³ 'We were London's scowling youth. As siblings of rage, we were never meant to stray beyond the street. We might not have known it with our eyes so alight, but it was true [...] Violence shadowed our language and our lines tagged the streets'.³⁴ In the act of speaking for this collective group, the narrator also reveals much about this group. The narrative places this collective in a specific location while also delineating what they share – in this case 'our language', apparent in the dialect phrases (e.g. ennet) and non-verbal teeth kisses which proliferate throughout the text.

At the same time, accounts of collective narration risk oversimplifying the specific social dynamics centred at the housing estate, which at once are thoroughly fluid and subject to entrenched stereotypes.³⁵ Although the protagonists in *In Our Mad and Furious City* are 'siblings of rage', their social bonds are always at risk of fraying in ways which they are unable to anticipate. The novel's interest in the relationship between individuals and social groups is reflected in its fragmented structure. Between the prologue and the epilogue are three major parts – 'Mongrel', 'Blood' and 'Brother' – whose titles already express a concern with belonging. These three longer parts are then subdivided into sections. These sections are further split into sub-sections, each of which (except one) is narrated in the first person from the perspective of one of the novel's five major characters, all of whom live on or near the fictional Stones estate in North West London: Yusuf, Selvon and Ardan, school friends in their late teens, plus Selvon's father Nelson and Ardan's mother, Caroline. The novel thus weaves its first-person voices together to create, in a piecemeal fashion, a narrative mode which both tracks individual speakers while also reflecting a social group. Moreover, the reader only gradually works out the relationships between different characters whose limited viewpoints are presented in short chapters. This narrative form imitates the way a stranger might enter this community and gradually experience the coherence of what initially seems disjointed, as friendships as well as family constellations become apparent. Yet, because the narrators keep switching, there is no bird's eye perspective which can unify the characters and give them a common purpose or direction; they are constantly moving in different directions and at different paces.

A series of separate first-person accounts does not necessarily imply a collective, of course. The novel reflects self-consciously on the meaning of group belonging, in a way which brings this idea to the forefront of the reader's attention, but some conventional signifiers of shared identity are shown in the novel to be empty or counterproductive. For example, Yusuf visits a chicken shop which has just had its windows smashed by a racist mob. The shop owner, 'Freshie Dave' attempts to appeal to a 'we' which includes himself and Yusuf together: 'To Freshie Dave there was no difference between me and him. Pakistan was the linkage. That faulty logic revealed the gulf between us'.³⁶ Although Yusuf's family is from Pakistan, this is not, to him, a meaningful point of connection: 'I watched the back of his head and saw only differences'.³⁷ Instead, Yusuf believes what ultimately ties the two together despite those differences is not nationality but the experience and expectation of racism: 'That was how we were really linked, ennet, by the threat of smashed-up windows and pictures of our mums crying in the *Guardian*'.³⁸ Such conflicted forms of belonging are

repeatedly contrasted in the novel with more static forms of group identity. Throughout, the text makes clear that social groupings should not be taken for granted; characters bristle against their membership in a given community, whether it be one based on race, class, or blood relations. Yet, as we will also see in *Poor*, the estate is figured as a site which facilitates the formation of meaningful, if fleeting, forms of alternative collective identity. Yusuf thus affirms

the distance between himself and Freshie Dave with the declaration that 'Home for me was Estate'.³⁹

In a section entitled 'Estate', the novel presents chapters of first-person narration from the perspectives of first Selvon, then Ardan, Yusuf and Nelson. Selvon's inclusion here is provocative since, of the five protagonists, he and his father are the only ones who do not live on the Stones Estate. Moreover, their position as self-fashioned outsiders is significant to them both: at one point, Selvon even considers himself 'blessed I never grew up in Estate proper'.⁴⁰ In this instance, Selvon understands living on the estate to be a misfortune and distinguishes himself from those who experience it: 'every time I run here I think about my mates living up in these council flats with all this haggard muck'.⁴¹ At the same time, he nonetheless also perceives himself as belonging there:

In my mind this place owns a part of me too-tho, with its silence and grey. It's part of me by association, ennet. Because I bus with Ardan and Yoos and they know me. And I run here. And I play footie here. Even though I live up in a proper house with a proper fam.⁴²

Here we see the pervasive association of the estate with broken families, a stigmatisation whose history we described above. To live there is, in Selvon's view, to be automatically a member of a less-than-proper family. His words and opinions echo those of his father, Nelson, who explains that he wanted Selvon 'to grow up in a home we own, a property proper, to raise him right'.⁴³ Nonetheless, Selvon is still intimately connected with the estate, which influences his sense of self even though he does not reside within its walls. The estate symbolises a collective which is not wholly celebrated but which also provides genuine connection and belonging.

Although the novel features many intersecting plot lines, and its central focus is the murder of a soldier and the social unrest it provokes, the novel's description of a football match is most significant for our purposes. It is here that the novel's narrative form most clearly produces a fragile collective identity. The scene is described not from any single point of view but, in turn, from the perspectives of Selvon, Ardan and Yusuf. The match, which takes place on 'a patch of level grass in the Square between the four Estate blocks',⁴⁴ is not organised by any group or club. The participants come together slowly and, eventually, form teams which span various national, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Yusuf's narration reflects explicitly on the way football and the estate – or football played on the estate – facilitate a sense of belonging:

Ardan and I could not be more different on the surface. But that didn't matter when our common thread was footie, Estate, and the ill we felt against the rest of the world. [...]

All I could hope to do that morning was take as much time, catch normally and steal as much love from my breddas, from Square and football, as I could [...] There was a lightness to these collective moments, I see that now and miss it badly.⁴⁵

Here football produces collective identity, linking and connecting a disparate group of individuals whose backgrounds and histories are varied. Because this one event is described from the three characters' perspectives it emerges formally as the 'common thread';⁴⁶ it does not belong to one character's experience, but represents the shared, inevitably transient moment of brotherhood which emerges as football is played in the estate's Square.

This collective is time-limited. Midway through the match, Selvon abandons his friends to go and talk to the woman he is interested in, Missy. Ardan, meanwhile, remains despondent and alienated: 'I think about how I feel good when I'm with this lot but I am never myself, like'.⁴⁷ For a moment, the spontaneous social gathering, framed by the four estate blocks, generates a collective sense of belonging which bridges outward differences – before it begins to collapse.

A tenuous web of solidarity: *The Seven Acts of Mercy*

The ephemerality that Gunaratne's novel discusses explicitly is likewise front and centre in Lustgarten's play, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, but in a manner that takes full advantage of the formal toolset associated with the stage. The backdrop to *The Seven Acts of Mercy* is the neoliberal project we touched on briefly above, first initiated by Thatcher and then extended by New Labour, of privatising former council-owned housing. Formerly affordable council housing is sold to private investors, who gentrify it and pass it on to the better-off classes – thus pushing even more people into precarious housing and sometimes into homelessness. The play is an example of what has been called the 'theatre of the precariat': while clearly a political drama and an example of engaged literature, it does not offer any traditional political solutions to the social and human problems it addresses.⁴⁸

In one scene, all major British political parties are humorously compared to football clubs and found deeply wanting:

United are the Tories: evil, arrogant, incompetent ... Chelsea are UKIP: bitter, racist, relentlessly unhappy ... Which leaves Liverpool Football Club as New Labour. Sold out, bloated, bombastic, delusional, a million miles away from the working-class roots and values it pretends to espouse ... In many ways the most disgusting of the lot.⁴⁹

It is more than suggested that no political party is aligned with true working-class ideals and interests. In this absence of meaningful political representation in the party system, the play directs the audience's attention to an alternative political framework, founded in mercy and compassion. As Lustgarten says in the foreword to the printed playtext, 'compassion is a political act. It rejects cowardly but understandable selfishness and isolation in favour of human decency It builds the solidarities and connections that have always been the basis of political change and resistance, that are the only things we really have against the official order. It's brave'.⁵⁰

The play dramatises the idea of solidarities built through compassion. The drama's main characters are Leon Carragher, an ill and disillusioned grandfather who used to be a prominent union organiser, and his grandson Mickey. In its three generations of white, working-class men, the play uses an inter-generational rift to capture the postwar era's rise and fall of the working class and the emergence of a neoliberal agenda which puts the pursuit of money over the creation of sustaining communities.⁵¹ Leon is described in the play text as '*mid-seventies. A ruined castle on a hill. Once a union leader, a man of influence in the local community. Not any more*'.⁵² He has lost hope in this world which he perceives as a broken 'heap of shite'.⁵³ He is terminally ill and in danger of having his flat taken from him due to the so-called bedroom tax: a room he thinks of as a wardrobe is now classified as an extra bedroom.⁵⁴ With one more bedroom than people inhabiting the flat, he faces a big rise in rent. Unofficially, the council needs him out so they can sell to a private contractor. Leon's son, Lee Carragher, could never understand his father's idealism and abandoned his own son, Mickey, for easy money working in the Spanish property market. Losing everything after the financial crash of 2007, he seeks employment by helping a private enterprise incentivize people to move out of their council houses so they can be gentrified. In effect, Lee becomes the agent of his own father and son's evictions from their home, his father's place of habitation for 57 years.

The play forms an imaginative exploration of the forceful dismantling of communities – while also showing how these communities themselves were experienced as traumatising for those who, like Lee, didn't understand or share the collective dream because they were more attuned to the capitalist alternative. At one point, Lee is inspired by a businesswoman, Emily, who declares in a speech on 'Harnessing the transformative dynamism of market-based solution'

that 'Bootle is now the single most profitable location in the UK for those investing in buy to let properties'.⁵⁵ This language he can understand, because, as he explains, the message he grew up with was never aspirational: 'Just get back in the box and don't you dare dream of bigger things'.⁵⁶ According to Lee's father Leon, to the contrary, he chose not to buy his own flat so as to be *able* to dream big: 'I could've bought this place under the original right to buy. Could've had it for a song. Become part of Maggie's great property-owning working class: little men in little boxes who'd never dare dream of a better world in case of negative equity'.⁵⁷

Against this background, the play assembles another vision of solidarity and community. This potential community is brought into being by art, which expresses the compassion Leon believes is missing in the present. Together with his grandson Mickey, he observes reproductions of classic artwork by Van Gogh ('the artist of labour'⁵⁸) and Caravaggio. Looking at these paintings for signs of labour and love is the only thing he can give his grandson – and the audience, which is also looking at projections of Caravaggio's art on the stage. According to Leon, Caravaggio's 1606 painting *The Seven Acts of Mercy* stands for 'A statement of a better world. A world that starts, unlike this heap of shite, with human decency'.⁵⁹ The painting represents the seven acts of mercy performed by ordinary people: providing food and drink to those who need it, taking in a stranger, clothing the naked, supporting the sick, visiting the incarcerated and burying the dead.⁶⁰

Mickey then embarks on a project aiming to show his grandfather that such a thing as 'mercy' still exists in post-austerity Britain, and that solidarity and community based on acts of spontaneous kindness towards others can still be imagined. He goes to the local food bank for his grandfather and begins to use the camera on his mobile phone to document actual instances of Caravaggio's seven acts of mercy in the present day, in which ordinary people demonstrate spontaneous goodness. The seven people he photographs are not related to one another nor to Mickey, but they ultimately cohere into a small community in the form of a virtual web or digital network which offers a glimpse of hope. First, he photographs a young woman, Jennifer, and her younger brother, Danny, who has special needs. Asking for their permission, Mickey photographs them while the audience sees in illuminated letters at the back of the stage: 'For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat' and 'I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink'.⁶¹

The play repeatedly thematizes the ethical problems involved in photographing the pain of others, as Susan Sontag would put it.⁶² Through this thematisation, Lustgarten consistently questions who has the right to represent those deprived of public articulation, the vulnerable precariat class who, as we have argued, are frequently subject to stigmatising stereotypes. When Mickey takes the photos at the foodbank, the play self-consciously tries to shield itself against charges of staging a poverty safari. The leader of the food bank, for instance, tells Mickey that she thinks photographing people at foodbanks is a bad idea because the subjects 'are humiliated'.⁶³

In response, Mickey explains he will only show his grandfather: 'He's in despair now He thinks his whole life's been a waste of time, scrapping and fighting to make things better and all they ever do is get worse. He doesn't think there is any goodness left in people, only in art and books. And I want to show him there is, there's tons of it'.⁶⁴ When Sandra voices more concern about the project, Mickey – who in this instance acts as a stand-in for the dramatist Lustgarten – promises that he 'won't make a spectacle'.⁶⁵

Alert to the danger of the exploitative spectacle, Mickey uses his snapshots to create a new work of art in the form of a network or assemblage of different photographed bodies in different, vulnerable situations. These disparate subjects are combined only in Mickey's camera and only complete when the last act involves the documentation of Leon's death. Before he dies, he

declares in response to the photos, 'I never could create something. I always tried but I never could'.⁶⁶ The final words are expressions of love by both men.⁶⁷ The play thus both gives us a brief glimpse of compassion as a source of possibility and hope in the present and as a potential force against the forces of destruction – but also of the extreme tenuousness of this hope. After all, the fragile collectivity only exists in photos caught on the same device; the artwork is stored in the mobile phone of a 14-year-old who has promised not to show it to anyone, and it is only meant for the eyes of a dying man, the disillusioned grandfather. Against the background of the transformation of social housing into buy-to-let properties, and the destruction of socialist ideals symbolised by Leon's decline and disillusionment, the play suggests the formation of another kind of solidarity which comes into being even as council estates are under brutal attack. The fact that the collective in this play is established in the act of performance also demonstrates how the broad category of estate literature enables one to see formal or genre-based distinctions between individual works of art while affirming their shared commitment to envisioning alternative collectives. In Lustgarten's case, this project is evident in the deeply identificatory and affective link between the performers, the pictures of mercy, and the audience. Although this connection is born out of a shared hope for a better society, the play also staunchly gives no clear indication if this hope is enough to make a difference.

Concrete and community: *Poor*

As we have claimed throughout this article, the central aesthetic problem confronting estate literature has to do with representation, or how to respectfully represent a community burdened by damaging cultural stereotypes. To avoid stereotyping, any literature of the contemporary estate must necessarily be fraught with tension and mixed feelings. For many residents, the estate is simultaneously a place of social marginalisation and a source of strength, and artworks which seek to represent estate life need to grapple with this central contradiction. We earlier saw how the conflict between belonging and unbelonging was expressed in Gunaratne's vision of the estate football match that momentarily brought various disparate peoples into sync through the rhythms of the game. And we saw how Lustgarten imagined a fragile relief from the precarious suffering of the estate in fleeting acts of mercy that endure. To conclude our account of the conflictual aesthetics of estate literature across different literary forms, we consider the bricolage structure in Caleb Femi's poetry collection, *Poor*, which mixes media and voices to insist on ambivalence and complexity in the evocation of collective identity.

Poor exemplifies how estate literature confronts reductive representations of council estates in the public imagination while still retaining a critique of estates as machines for social exclusion. The book consists of a mix of poetry and photography and includes references to a variety of cultural sources, from T.S. Eliot and urban planners to pop musicians and grime rappers like Giggs and Dizzee Rascal. Femi has described the mixed media method of combining poetry and photography as an attempt to 'police the imagination' by redirecting any associations the reader might carry regarding the youth culture depicted in the poems.⁶⁸ In the photographs which appear in *Poor*, harsh architectural surroundings are juxtaposed with young men who are presented as compassionate and full of joy. Femi knows estate life from first-hand experience, as he grew up in North Peckham after migrating from Nigeria at an early age, and has described the mega-estate as a 'giant international spacestation' which is both insular and life-sustaining.⁶⁹ Like many other mid-century estates, North Peckham was designed with utopian dreams but, by the time of its demolition, came to be associated with poverty, enclosure, and exclusion.⁷⁰ In one sense, then, the Brutalist design and architecture of mega-estates like North Peckham had the immediate effect of letting its residents feel imprisoned in a world set apart from the rest of society. On the other hand, the alienation that young people felt as a result of growing up in mega-estates also entailed an acute sense of belonging.

Evidence of this ambivalence is strewn all over *Poor*, which alternately describes the estate as a limit to the residents' lifeworld and as a community that keeps the residents safe from outside threats. For instance, the dialogue in the poem 'A designer talks of a Home / A resident talks of home (I)' brings the ideals behind public housing into contact with the reality of living in the estate. The poem is a simple juxtaposition of two very different voices which follow each other in a call-and-response pattern, alternating between the voices of an urban planner and the voice of a working-class resident:

00:02:39 design is a tool to enhance our humanity ... a frame for life

00:15:45 *don't that mean I will be the first treeboy on the estate?*

00:02:50 putting the human experience at the beginning of the process

00:17:39 *the guy said trees live as long as boys do here that's why we have concrete*

00:03:32 tactile memory

00:18:01 *at the back of our block there is a wall full of RIPs ... a thousand unlived lives of boys & trees*

00:03:46 empathy is the cornerstone of design

00:18:50 *y'know the architect that designed this estate killed himself*

00:03:53 it's all about showmanship and theatricality

00:19:20 *Mum reckons that's why they covered the rot with cladding*

00:04:01 it's about how things feel & smell as much as how they look

00:20:15 *'cause concrete smells like a siege ... when it rains I like to*

00:04:23 imbue people with a sense of wellbeing, empowerment, gentle joyfulness

00:21:09 *pretend I live*

00:04:56 translate the future life of a building into design language

00:22:23 *on the 19th floor you can see everything but the future.*⁷¹

In this exchange, the designer voices lofty ideals about the essence of design, which are debunked by the more mundane experiences of the resident. The contrast thus creates a vision of the site which goes beyond the two interlocutors' individual perspectives. As we are told later in the second poem in the series, 'A Designer Talks of a Home/A Resident Talks of Home (II)', 'we understand materials best by contrast; rough feels rougher by contrast with smooth'.⁷² Like Gunaratne and Lustgarten, Femi finds points of intersection between individual voices without taking for granted that this mingling alone generates solidarity. Neither the designer nor the resident speaks the whole truth about the estate, but each formulates individual perspectives which gain fuller context only in dialogue with the other's voice. In this exchange, the reader gains a sense of both the failed ideals of postwar urban planning and the daily life as experienced in public housing. For the resident, the estate is not simply a facilitator of marginalisation and lack but also the shield he puts up to guard himself against the outside world. As he ends the poem by saying: 'concrete makes me feel safe ... when I leave my block I don't feel safe'.⁷³

As this last example suggests, concrete assumes a symbolical prominence in *Poor* which exceeds its drab or utilitarian associations and provides an important point of distinction in relation to the relatively realistic conventions which characterise Gunaratne's and Lustgarten's texts. For

example, a group of poems entitled 'Concrete (I – V)' narrates the story of a community of young boys growing up in North Peckham. These poems follow defining moments in the boys' lives, which include the group being chased by police, falling in love with the same girl, and mourning the death of a friend. As the titles of these poems indicate, the most common image and reference point in *Poor* is indeed concrete.⁷⁴ As in other examples of post-war social housing fiction, *Poor* uses concrete as a metaphor for an upbringing in a marginalised housing area.⁷⁵ More than a building material, concrete has a deep cultural history which encapsulates the imagination of life in public housing along with the changing associations of the working class in the postwar period. In *Poor*, concrete blocks mark the estate grounds and reflect the various people, activities, and goods which circulate within its walls.

An organising symbol for life in a council estate, however, concrete consists of both mundane and more fine-grained ingredients. The poem 'Ingredients & Properties of Concrete' for instance explains that concrete is a composite material consisting of a variety of components including cement, aggregates (such as sand) but also a number of added ingredients from the lives lived in the estate like 'Supermalt, flakes of beef patty, calcium,fn2 batter of a Morley's chicken, bleach'.⁷⁶ The language Femi uses to describe North Peckham is similarly varied. In 'Concrete (III)', for instance, the estate's concrete is described as the 'lining of a womb/ that holds boys/ [...] soft as a meadow might a lamb'.⁷⁷ The apparent disconnect between the hard material of concrete and the protective softness of a womb or a meadow heightens the council estate's contradictory nature. On the one hand, the estate is a machine used to exclude and alienate the boys growing up in it; on the other hand, it is also their home. Along similar lines, the physical surroundings of estates like North Peckham excludes the residents from the social fabric of society while also creating a shared sense of belonging. The collectivity arising in this space is not a positively defined community where all participants commit to a common project based on choice. Rather, an oppositional collectivity is often forced upon the residents as a product of living in the same marginalised place. As one poem in *Poor* goes: 'Learn to love what everyone sees as ugly'.⁷⁸ As the text makes clear, the estate fosters a sense of pride (and, perhaps, a sense of collective belonging) exactly because it is despised by the rest of society. The collective voice which arises out of the many fragmented voices in *Poor*, then, is one shaped by hardship but which also insists on a shared kindness and sense of belonging.

Theorising estate fiction

Lustgarten's *Seven Acts of Mercy*, Femi's *Poor*, and Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* showcase estate literature's formal range and generic diversity. All share an overarching concern for setting the record straight regarding the pernicious generalisations which popular media and politicians alike tend to attach to council estates. Separately, each applies dramatically different aesthetic forms to disrupt the negative associations attached to

everything from the concrete walls which surround the council estate to the families who reside there. But as we have argued, these texts do more than respond to or correct these stereotypes; they demonstrate how estate literature can produce alternative accounts of estates as social collectives which *also* avoid reductive logics of identity formation or solidarity. As our essay has stressed, this emphasis on new forms of representation based around ambivalent social collectives distinguishes these cases of estate literature from more general accounts of estates in literature.

By elaborating on the affordances of estate narratives in this essay, we highlight literature's capacity to unsettle foreknowledge about this setting. This element of readerly surprise has a direct impact on the way we – as readers of estate literature – might view the wider social situation around us. If there exists a social dimension to narrative form, it is to be found not so much in a text's ability to represent a social totality but in the inflection of characters around

each other.⁷⁹ The particular weaving of individual perspectives which mingle, collide, and contradict one another should not be read in isolation from the estate, which directs in unpredictable ways people, art forms, materials, and ideas. To be sure, racist caricatures and pernicious stereotypes also inform the daily experience of life within these networks, as our analysis above emphasizes. As we noted, moreover, the texts we have focused on primarily centre young men, imagining versions of collective belonging in stark contrast to the forms of violent and static collectivity with which urban masculinity is often primarily associated. The ambivalence across these texts reiterates that the estate-as-network is neither wholly good nor bad in its production of, for instance, mutual care and solidarity. Yet because the depictions of the social 'we' in these texts are so fleeting and fluid, they also imply that new social configurations can be made and remade in the imagined space of the estate. By shining a light on these networks and assisting readers with expanding their appreciation of the social traces within them, estate literature suggests that more affirmative configurations of estate collectivity are possible.

Notes

1. Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2012), p. 38.
2. Hanley, *Estates*, p. 11.
3. See, for example, *Fish Tank* (2009) and *Dirty God* (2019).
4. For example, *Benefits Street* (2014) and *This is England* (2010).
5. For example, Roy Williams' *Fallout* (2003) and Leo Butler's *Redundant* (2001).
6. Examples include Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon, English* (2011), and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012).
7. For example, Cash Carraway's *Skint Estate: Notes from the Poverty Line* (2019).
8. Susanne Cuevas, 'Societies Within': Council Estates as Cultural Enclaves in Recent Urban Fictions', in Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Christoph Reinfandt (eds), *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2008), pp. 383–95 (385).
9. Dominic Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', in James E. English (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 229–47 (230).
10. Katie Beswick, 'The Council Estate: Representation, Space and the Potential for Performance', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 16.3 (2011), pp. 421–35.
11. Emily Cuming, *Housing, Class, and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880–2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 212.
12. Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
13. Jon Helt Haarder, 'The Precariat as Place A Literary History of the Danish Ghetto', *Scandinavica: An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 59.2 (2020), pp. 29–50 (33).
14. The account of council estates as networks or assemblages in this essay builds on recent work putting these theories in dialogue with accounts of urban development. See also *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies*, eds Ignacio Fariás and Thomas Bender (London: Routledge, 2009).
15. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 29.
16. Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), p. 3.
17. Anders Lustgarten, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 9.
18. For literature on the stigmatisation of the working class in recent decades see for example: Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press); Beverly Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004); Gill Valentine and Harris Catherine, 'Strivers vs Skivers: Class Prejudice and the Demonisation of Dependency in Everyday Life', *Geoforum*, 53 (2014), pp. 84–92.
19. John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 169–77.
20. Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 'Phase 1 Report Overview', October 2019, p. 5.
21. Inquiry, 'Report Overview', 24.

22. Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, 1.
23. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 162.
24. See for instance: Sara DeBenedictis 'Feral Parents: Austerity Parenting Under Neoliberalism', *Studies in the Maternal*, 4.2 (2012), pp. 1–21; Beverly Skeggs, 'The Making of Class and Gender Through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation', *Sociology*, 39.5 (2005), pp. 965–82.
25. According to Tyler, the figure of the 'chav mum' and her crossing of racial boundaries 'embodies historically familiar and contemporary anxieties about female sexuality, reproduction, fertility, and "racial mixing"' (p. 17). Imogen Tyler, 'Chav Mum Chav Scum', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.1, pp. 149–62.
26. Lynette Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p. 12.
27. Luke Harding, 'Woolwich Killing: Residents Reflect on Murder of Lee Rigby', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/23/woolwich-attack-multicultural-multi-faith-community>
28. Audrey Gillan, 'Did Bad Parenting Really Turn these Boys Into Killers?' *The Guardian*, 1 November 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/nov/01/bulger.familyandrelationships>
29. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 13.
30. See Woloch's distinction between 'character-space' and the 'character-world' of a literary work. *Ibid.*, 14.
31. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 248.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
33. Uri Margolin, 'Telling in the Plural: From Grammar to Ideology', *Poetics Today*, 21.3 (2000), pp. 591–618 (592, 591).
34. Guy Gunaratne, *In Our Mad and Furious City* (London: Tinder), p. 4.
35. Given the recent interest among contemporary novelists and literary scholars in first-person plural or 'we' narration, the question of how individual voices can uphold or disrupt the cohesion of a larger social group warrants further elaboration. For accounts which contribute to this scholarship, see Bekhta, Natalya, 'We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration', *Narrative*, 25.2 (2017), pp. 164–81; Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006).
36. Gunaratne, *In Our Mad and Furious City*, p. 29.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 64
45. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
48. Peter Simonsen and Mathies G. Aarhus, 'Theater of the Precariat: Staging Precarity in Alexander Zeldin's *Love*', *Contemporary Literature*, 61 (2021), pp. 335–36.
49. Lustgarten, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, p. 55.
50. *Ibid.*, np.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
54. On the 'bedroom tax', see Kelly Brogue, *The Divisive State of Social Policy: The 'Bedroom Tax,' Austerity and Housing Insecurity* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019).
55. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

59. Ibid., p. 14.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., p. 20.
62. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).
63. Lustgarten, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, p. 15.
64. Ibid., p. 16.
65. Ibid., p. 18.
66. Ibid., p. 98.
67. Ibid., p. 100.
68. Claire Armistead, 'Caleb Femi: "Henceforth I'm Solely Preoccupied with Being a Merchant of Joy"', *The Guardian* 30 October 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/30/caleb-femi-henceforth-im-solely-preoccupied-with-being-a-merchant-of-joy>
69. Sarah Ozo-Irabor (host). *Psychogeography: Poor with Caleb Femi*. In Books and Rhymes: The Podcast (11 October 2020). <https://shows.acast.com/booksandrhythms/episodes/psychogeography-poorwithcalebfemi>
70. Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*.
71. Caleb Femi, *Poor* (Penguin UK, 2020), pp. 7–8.
72. Ibid., p. 107.
73. Ibid., p. 9.
74. The depiction of concrete in *Poor* is also discussed in Mathies G. Aarhus, 'Psychogeography on the Council Estate,' in 'Dossier: Precarity and Public Housing,' eds Emily J. Hogg and Bryan Yazell, *ASAP/Journal*, 8.1 (2023), pp. 13–39 (27–32).
75. Haarder, 'The Precariat as Place', p. 33.
76. Caleb, *Poor*, p. 68.
77. Ibid., p. 69.
78. Ibid., p. 129.
79. See also Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 17.