Reading London
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Conclusion

Throughout this book I have argued that by closely reading the metaphors that eighteenth-century writers developed in London—as well as contextualizing these metaphors in terms of London’s government following the Glorious Revolution and the proliferation of printed text in London during the late eighteenth century—we may understand how eighteenth-century literature tried to reimagine London. In their attempts to reimagine London, these writers design projects that speculate upon (or “conjecturally anticipate”) not only an alternative urban present, but also a more socially engaged role for the urban writer. This role casts writers as indispensable managers of a reader’s imagination. Since this role was imagined, we may claim that these projects were destined to fail, especially if we wish to define “failure” as the inability to produce political change. As the speculative goal of late-century writers changes from governing others to governing the self, we witness their desperate attempts to reverse this failure and to make writing valuable to the individual. Yet their inability to cause substantive political change does not render them culturally ineffectual; instead, these eighteenth-century projects are important in London’s cultural history since they represent imaginative alternatives to the type of politics that now organize London as we know it. These eighteenth-century projects imagine alternative futures, and these imaginative acts are crucial to defining London’s imagined sense of community. From this perspective, urban imagination indeed serves a social function.

Analyzing these imaginative and speculative techniques has allowed me to outline three conclusions as well as define several fields where more research is necessary to grasp the full extent to which printed text projected and speculated upon futures for eighteenth-century London that are distinctly different from the one twenty-first-century Londoners (and other urbanities) are living. The first conclusion involves the fluctuating status of eighteenth-century genre and how this fluctuation represents eighteenth-century writers’ acknowledgment that both topography and
textual traditions have the potential to become convenient tools for categorization and organization. For example, John Gay recognizes that London’s geography was a physical manifestation of social change, and Gay seizes this fact to explore the ways that changes in literary form could attend to changes in urban form. All of these altered textual traditions, such as Gay’s mock-georgic long poem, Fielding’s civil prose, Pope’s verse epistle essay, Boswell’s journal, and Burney’s nonepistolary novel, provide the terms in which writers and readers attempted to negotiate these geographical changes. In the end, genre and geography constitute familiar templates that writers are able to fill with new meaning. In particular, these writers use genre and geography to train readers to understand the metaphor of conduct as a natural and inherent structure of the mind.

The second conclusion suggested by my study clarifies the governing role that eighteenth-century writers in London shaped for themselves. This role may be likened to a conductor—a figure who, in the wake of 1688, led readers to recognize the boundaries of London’s geography as well as the boundaries of literary genre. The writers that I examine in this book cater to these urban needs by creating texts that sketch experimental modes of interiority (Burney and Boswell), yoke abstract notions of morality to a literal cityscape (Gay), recast the relationships between textual traditions and civic projects (Pope), and advertise writers as credentialized artisans of London’s administration (Fielding). In this way, the metaphor of conduct sometimes offers to instruct public behavior, and at other times it refers to the imaginative guidance which only a writer could provide. For Pope, conduct referred to the practical execution of an abstract theory, and for Boswell and Burney, it referred to and outlined what we now call the conscience. Most importantly, conduct refers to emerging theories of genre—as well as how to read these genres—because it could accomplish imaginative tasks in excess of its literal meaning. In particular, eighteenth-century writers transformed conduct to resemble a commodified object that printed texts could transmit to readers as well as guide them to functional models of urban self-government. London’s literal, physical geography helped to legitimize the figurative work of the metaphor of conduct.

A final conclusion is that the tradition of imaginative writing about eighteenth-century London is much larger than previously assumed. In each chapter, I have attempted to recover the subtle nuances of what it mean to “imagine” in eighteenth-century printed text about London; however, literary criticism is far from comprehending the eighteenth century’s
alternate conception of the imagination (if there is one) that preceded the romantic imagination. This is where more work in eighteenth-century studies may be concentrated. With this work, we may discover that London’s urban setting performed the same function for eighteenth-century writers that nature performed for Wordsworth; that is, the local conditions of the urban environment encouraged writers to imagine their role in new ways.

I have also stressed throughout this book that much of London’s eighteenth-century literature offers an archive of alternatives to our notions of not only genre but also urban phenomena. For example, Gay’s *Trivia* promotes not only “an Art of Walking the Streets” but also an art of reading street-level behavior as the main strategies for knowing London. Gay imagines a future city in which citizens inhabit and indulge in street-level experience not as a means to an end, but as a communal experience in its own right. In fact Gay’s street level is where the urban community organizes itself and where it interacts. In this way, Gay’s street-level, interpretative techniques stand as distinct alternatives to knowing a city by gaining a bird’s-eye view of its geography—a perspective so common with modern maps. From Gay’s perspective, one need not disengage oneself atop a skyscraper’s observatory or a Millennium Wheel, surveying ant-like citizens in order to know the city. Instead, Gay considers the way street-level interpretation and social engagement enact the proper form of urban knowledge. Another notable alternative is presented by Boswell’s *London Journal*. In particular, Boswell internalizes Gay’s interpretive skills and applies them to his textually represented self. For Boswell, disciplined writing and rereading offered the possibility of successful self-government, especially in their attempt to become viable substitutes for the police forces outside one’s head.

I have not highlighted these urban alternatives to suggest that we try to recover these eighteenth-century alternatives or (impossibly) reinhabit their conditions of possibility; instead, I have written this book to provoke questions about the ways we have been trained to read eighteenth-century literature about London. The self-evident truth that all of the different alternatives presented in this book ask us to question is, quite simply, the inevitability of our urban present. For example, how have we come to privilege maps rather than street-level experience? How have we come to rely upon police rather than experimental forms of self-discipline? And most importantly, how have histories of writing in nineteenth-century London as well as histories of reading literature during the twentieth and
twenty-first centuries been able to virtually erase these eighteenth-century experiments in imaginative social engagement? These are questions whose answers are likely to be found in the distance between Frances Burney’s and Ian McEwan’s London. They are also questions whose answers will help us approach an understanding as to why eighteenth-century London appears historically foreign yet architecturally familiar at the same time.

Exploring the intersection of these issues in eighteenth-century London’s imaginative writing may also assist us in finally tracing imagination’s alternate history—a history that suggests how our ideas about how to create, manage, and police centralized populations in urban settings do not have to be viewed as the culmination of an inevitable process. Indeed, when the 9/11 Commission Report proclaims a “failure of imagination” to be the reason for a twenty-first-century city’s vulnerability, it uses imagination in a very practical way. This usage suggests that the post-romantic concept of a unified imagination has apparently retained its eighteenth-century usage. And from this perspective, writing about eighteenth-century London may present twenty-first-century readers with not only histories of their present government, but also solutions for realizing a different future.