**Nomadic London:**

**Reading Wandering in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* and Ben Okri’s “Disparities”**

The nomadic city is the path itself, the most stable sign in the void, and the form of this city is the sinuous line drawn by the succession of points in motion. The points of departure and arrival are less important, while the space between is the space of going. (Careri 42)

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Sam Selvon compiles vignettes of colonial migrants, who travel across the globe and who are going places in metropolitan London. At the very beginning of this 1956 novel, Moses Aloetta, a “nine-ten year” migrant in London from colonial Trinidad “hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to Waterloo to meet a feller who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train" (23). Selvon’s opening description of this route sets up the novel’s focus on travelers’ ground-level experiences on the local network of city streets and, also, its overview of global passages that comprised the network of the British empire.[[1]](#endnote-1) Selvon’s opening connects London with its West Indian colonies, but it highlights Moses’ ability to navigate London; Selvon, thus, situates his narrative for reading through a local lens that pays heed to imperial links, recognizing that for late- and post-colonial travelers, views of places are mobile and multi-focal, forming complex networks rather than clearly defined binaries of “here and elsewhere,” characteristic of many imperialist travel paradigms.[[2]](#endnote-2) *The Lonely Londoners*’ persistent references to urban topography provoke a spatialized, mobile reading that resists a direct linear connection among places and, instead, draws attention to the experience of mobility in post-World War II London, where under the auspices of the British Nationality Act of 1948, travel between colonies and metropole appeared to be fluid for all colonial subjects. Such a mobile way of reading attends to the networked texture this late-colonial novel and sets a precedent for my discussion of Ben Okri’s “Disparities” (1986), a post-colonial story of wandering in 1980s London, where British borders and legal policies have been redefined (culminating with the British Nationality Act of 1981) to exclude the majority of Commonwealth immigrants. Both fictions critique the idea of London as a fixed and stable center of the (post) empire and explore how belonging is linked with mobility for colonial and postcolonial im/migrants.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Additionally, by privileging passages, intersections, and the shifting motion of experience over destinations, closed sites, and static settings, an experiential, mobile way of reading explores digressions from narrative and social orders that are hierarchal, directive, and exclusive. In *The Practice of Everyday* Life, Michel de Certeau suggests, in this regard, that by focusing on the transitory experience of “the ordinary practitioners of the city,” that is, pedestrians, “A *migrational,* or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (93). Such slippages follow on the theory of the dérive, or *drift*, defined by psychogeographer Guy Debord in 1958, asa process of actively, and without prior design, engaging with a landscape through the experiences one has while wandering without destination through a constructed space (62). Debord’s theory of walking in the city with both algorithmic calculation and an openness to chance relies on the premise that designed spaces, particularly cities, are organized to produce particular ways of meaning. However, as walkers drift on and off the usual paths, they can follow or diverge from intentional directives. In this vein, in *Walkscapes*: *Walking as an Aesthetic Practice,* architect Francesco Careri describes walking as “an aesthetic tool capable of describing and modifying those metropolitan spaces . . . to be *filled with meanings* rather than designed and *filled with things*” (26).For Careri, walkers read and write spaces by the traces of their footpaths rather than being passively shuffled along by the plans of architects and urban planners. In this way wandering presents a powerful practice of intervening on a dominant spatial organization. Speaking of his contemporary drift-map project in which he surveyed and recorded the topographical experiences of a select group of city walkers, architect Oliver Froome-Lewis explains that travelers who allow themselves to wander a city without a focus on destination had “not only been helped to discover an alternative, possibly alien, physical reality but also to gain a subversive form of critical authority over the city, together penetrating the city’s exquisite armour of complexity” (387). Similarly, Selvon’s and Okri’s narratives feature migrant characters that drift along the main roads and byways of London and present wandering, an unstructured mobility, not just as a metaphor for displacement but also, I argue, importantly, as a practice for the digressive creation of place within existing metropolitan urban networks.

In this paper, I consider wandering as a narrative practice and also as a way of reading, focusing specifically on how Selvon and Okri allow their im/migrant characters to participate in London’s metropolitan space outside or parallel to the networks of order imposed by official urban planners, principles of commercial exchange, and histories of empire. Using *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities,” as exemplary texts, I intend to consider further what Susheila Nasta refers to as a “poetics of migrancy,” a concept that directs attention to the passage of migrants and immigrants between Britain and its former colonies as a movement of both connection and intervention into established hierarchies (*Home Truths* 69). In my discussion, I shift the focus from mobility on a global, empire-wide plane to actions and interactions in local metropolitan space. Hence, I argue that these fictions use wandering in and among the city’s network of streets, institutions, and policies as a strategy that is integrative, digressive, and layered and that, thus, allows the narratives a share in authority over the city’s topography and its concomitant meaningfulness. In making this argument, I rely on contemporary network theories by writers like Manuel Castells and Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, and I make use of associative reading and writing practices, such as discussions of hypertext and online space. Additionally, I refer to deliberations on mapping and walking. While such diverse modes of inquiry might, at times, seem post-dated to regard to the two narratives I discuss, I contend that a network structure, composed of complex systems of points and lines, pervasively underpins many modern local and global orders, yet is most compellingly recognized in contemporary discourses about computers and the Internet. Networks, non-linear writing styles, and topographical textual mapping are appropriate forms for understanding the narrative practices of mobility, wandering, and digression presented in *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities.” Both narratives map a mobile and shifting sense of place for im/migrants as they navigate London, and this very mobility becomes the key structural feature of these traveling texts, a feature that enables diversions from established narratives about nation, empire, and metropolis.

**1. Reading Networks in the City**

Travel along the network of London pathways depicted in *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities” shows migration as everyday practice. A cartographical schematic of Selvon’s novel, for instance, would show that wandering, modes of ground transportation, and efforts at relocation propel the narrative’s flow and provoke meaning; characters and stories are always in motion. Writing of narrative networks and distant reading, Franco Moretti outlines a method of literary analysis where a reader might prepare a “literary map,” or a cartographical representation of a narrative, to better visualize the structural forces at play. Moretti suggests that by selecting “a unit like walks, lawsuits, luxury goods” and then finding their “occurrences [and placing] them in space,” a reader can produce a narrative rendering that “will possess ‘emerging’ qualities, which were not visible at a lower level” (53). Literary mapping, or narrative networking, from an overseeing perspective enables readers to see an urban topography, marked in *The Lonely Londoner*s and “Disparities” by an imperial metropolis wary of the travel of its colonial subjects who roam the streets and act in and on spaces. In this case, distant reading presents, in the first instance, an overview that informs a subsequent ground-level (or “lower-level”) analysis of narrative topography.

In *The Network Society*, Manuel Castells offers a “networking logic” with which he deliberates complex organizations marked by the flows of people, goods, and information in social and global networks (76). Castells defines a network as a set of interconnected points and lines whose organization reflects relationships and the dynamics of power in social, cultural, and economic contexts (502). Networks are pervasive, and within a network, sources of control or of origin are often difficult to locate.[[4]](#endnote-4) In *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker describe networks as a means of organization that is as much political as it is technical (27). They explain that networks are complex, non-linear structures that can be composed of anything from computers to streets to cultures (33). Galloway and Thacker point out, also, the difficulty of ascertaining sovereignty and sources of agency within a network, where it seems that, although “no one is at the helm,” individual mobility is nevertheless controlled and modulated (40-1). Speculating on the mechanism of such control, Castells notes that “since networks are multiple, the interoperating codes and switches between networks become the fundamental sources in shaping, guiding, and misguiding societies” (502). In Castells’ theory of network space, flows, movement, and intersections are fundamental features, effecting every aspect of our lives: economic, political, and symbolic (442). Sources of authority are, thus, diffuse and often unrecognizable, while movement within and along a network is persistent; it is a space of going. For Castells, this persistent movement and dynamic change indicates that “the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power” (76). Because networks are complex and dynamic, they often resist hierarchal organization or binary oppositions in favor of movement and enabling of relations (Galloway and Thacker 35). In regard to literary studies, a theory of networks promotes a view of literary works as variable participants in fluctuating social, political, and topographical contexts, where passages, tangents, and parallel paths within and among texts reveal diverse social relationships and barriers. In this spirit, it is very notable how Selvon’s novel focuses on the footpaths and local travel of colonial migrants as they wander, looking for work or pleasure, along roads and familiar sites in metropolitan London, like Waterloo Station, the Employment Exchange, Piccadilly Circus, and other mapped and already-defined places. In doing so, Selvon recognizes an urban network where his characters’ routes run parallel, overlap, and intersect with existing paths and sites. Selvon’s represented city become a plane of action and interaction, a ground-level, mobile enactment of networked space.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, migrants’ first engagement with London’s urban and global network occurs at Waterloo Station, a site where the radiating routes mark it as a major node, “a place of arrival and departure" (25). Waterloo Station offers access to the territories and colonies of the British empire and connects the novel’s colonial expatriates to their places of origin. Sometimes long-time immigrants would go there just to see the familiar faces of the arrivals "finding out what happening in Trinidad, in Grenada, in Barbados, in Jamaica and Antigua" (26). The connecting lines between colonial West Indies and metropolitan London are, in this context, geographically linear and binary; however, this word-of-mouth news traffic over shipping lines suggests informal, as well as official, layers of exchange between the colonies and London. Selvon’s novel sidelines the global view for a more localized presentation of contested space and a sub-network among West Indian and African migrants in London. This subnetwork persists despite, as the narrator recognizes, discouragement by existing metropolitan structures guiding housing and employment. Ashley Dawson, in *Mongrel* *Nation,* suggests that the storytelling circle that Moses brings together in *The Lonely Londoners*, forges “a cosmopolitan sense of diasporic unity” where black Britons find relief from and resist the ordering pressures of racism (34). While this migrant gathering is a relevant feature of Selvon’s novel, Dawson’s description of this underground community as a liminal, sheltered space uses a conventionalized discourse of center and margin. I argue that, in so much as these collective stories compose this novel’s structure and content, the storytelling and talk that goes on in Moses’ room every Sunday presents a network of accounts about acts of nomadic wandering that interpose themselves onto a complex urban network shaped by a history of travel in Britain’s empire.

The network of walked routes displays the novel’s effort to integrate the migrant’s discursive and physical agency into an otherwise unwelcoming metropolitan space. Speaking of networks and diasporic-ethnic identity creation, Olga G. Bailey considers how immigrants and marginalized ethnic groups develop complex and uneven connections in transnational spaces (256). While Baily is specifically interested in virtual or “online territories” that diasporic individuals and communities can inhabit and in which they can produce new subjectivities, her discussion is grounded in theories of networks as producing complex, interwoven, and international landscapes on which collective identities can be enacted. Thus, considering the Internet as “not just a technological innovation but a discursive formation that has taken on a global scale” (259), Baily speculates how, in virtual *and* physical network landscapes, diasporic identities are unstable and under negotiation, and, indeed, how immigrants engage in “a process of becoming” (257) by redefining self and place across borders. For Baily, the Internet, thus, offers an exemplary structure to consider how social and political networks among immigrants produce a multidimensional, in-flux space for identity-building, where “migrants can be active agents of their lives even when living under difficult circumstances” (259).[[5]](#endnote-5) In a similarly discursive fashion, *The Lonely Londoners* presents a networked landscape both in its structure, as a connection of often tangentially and geographically-related stories told by colonial migrants, and within the narratives, as the characters travel along London routes and places. Helping new migrants to find lodging, Moses acts “like a welfare officer, . . . scattering the boys around London, for he don’t want no concentrated area in the Water” (25). Spaced throughout the city, the migrants, through Moses’ orchestration, become like cartographical signposts marking sub-routes and extended connections through the city while trying to sidestep local concerns about migrant’s congregating.[[6]](#endnote-6) Such networked communities exist along and within existing social structures but allow for a dynamic, mobile reconfiguration of place and person. If, in the spirit of writers like Debord, de Certeau, and Careri, we read walking and other forms of mobility through complex urban and literary networks as physical and aesthetic enactments of spatial identity, then we might also suggest that the mapping of space in Selvon’s novel renews and develops the identity of the metropolitan, soon to be post-imperial, city. We might thus see London as in “a process of becoming” rather than as a preexisting, static space filled by old and new inhabitants.

Selvon’s walking stories are, at times, subject to Britain’s authority over urban space, but they also resist a binary, destination-driven travel, implicit in the rhetoric of both colonialist expansion and “reverse colonialism.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The narrator tells stories of West Indians who, after World War II, migrated to London to find work and opportunity during a time period where borders were seemingly fluid. Dawson explains that the British Nationality Act (BNA) of 1948 affirmed legal equality of all British subjects throughout the empire and freedom of movement between the United Kingdom and its colonies (10).[[8]](#endnote-8) While this open-door policy was impeded by subsequent legislation imposing restrictions and regulations on colonial migrants, *The Lonely Londoners* presents, at least in its early chapters, a somewhat positive outlook, even while it acknowledges racist and exclusionary sentiments among white Britons. For instance, Henry Oliver, the newly arrived migrant from Trinidad that Moses meets at Waterloo station, arrives in the city with no luggage, no coat, no booty from the duty free store on the ship, indeed with nothing but the clothes on his back, because he didn’t see “no sense to load up [himself] with a set of things” (Selvon 33). His arrival in England is fluid and, to him, a non-event, like taking a walk from one station to the next, like never really leaving home. Nicknaming Henry, “Galahad,” the narrator comments that he is “a kind of fellar who does never like people to think that they unaccustomed to anything, or that they are strangers in a place, or that they don’t know where they going” (38). Henry refuses a polarity between home and away or the hierarchal power structures attached to that binary in colonial contexts. Moses, now a veteran-London dweller and aware of the racial and economic restrictions placed on West Indian migrants -- the double standard invoked in matters of housing, employment, and hospitality -- foresees problems for this questing Galahad. Henry Oliver’s story and his enthusiasm is taken up at several points in the novel, and his drift along city routes is exemplary of *The Lonely Londoners*’ discursively networked structure.

Once in the city, connections between distant places are less fluid and clear for Galahad, and it seems, at first, that circumstances will compel him recognize the distinction between his mobility in Trinidad and his unfitness to navigate London routes. Accompanying Moses to his flat in the Bayswater on the London Tube, Galahad is amazed by the power and the speed of the underground train, and he feels connected and in command. For a short time on the ship and train, he believes in a linked-up world where national borders separating inside and outside (or metropole and colony) are irrelevant to his sense of the smooth flow between destinations. However, the next day when he tries to make his way alone to the employment Exchange, a common destination for West Indian migrants, and as he stands perplexed and a little afraid near the Queensway Tube station amidst a jostling, busy crowd, the narrator asks: "You think any of them bothering with what going on in his mind? Or in anybody else mind but their own?"(42). Galahad becomes terrified as he finds himself “walking stupid,” lost and unconnected; he is precisely placed nowhere in particular in this passage: on the ground, beside the newspaper box, and invisible to the people around him (42). He has no conception of the whole, recognizes no signposts, and he has only immersion in his immediate situation. He begins to "drift down to Whiteleys" and to panic at losing his sense of where he started. The legal mandate of the colonial-metropole connection and the Nationality Act of 1948 marked by his “non-arrival” at Waterloo is empty in everyday practice. At ground level in the city, Galahad only knows his place at the moment without any sense of control over the whole. His later story threads depict him learning to map the city and deliberating its meaningfulness on foot at ground level.

The linking and directive properties of networks, particularly as they are exemplified by a non-linear system like hypertext, offer insight into Galahad’s predicament as representative of the empowering and the dangerous aspects of a grounded mobility. Hypertext presents a writing space in which information or narrative elements (in the case of stories) are connected mainly by associative links; progression through a text need not be a linear movement from beginning to end but a vertical and horizontal flow on a plane of action. The overall structure of a hypertext work resembles a network of nodes and vertices. While *The* *Lonely Londoners* is clearly not hypertext in any technical sense, its collection of narratives shows a similar kind of associative linking in the different characters’ travels and wanderings among London streets, and it demonstrates a structural resemblance to such networked narratives. Speaking of both the complexity and the empowering potential of non-linearity and associative connections in *From Text to Hypertext*, Silvio Gaggi notes that, in hyperspace, readers have choices that seem to indicate control and a freedom of movement. A link or a path is a choice, and a hyperlinked, narrative might allow for digressions, diversions, and unusual associations. However, Gaggi points out that, alternatively, "The complexity of the web and the possibility of having to make decisions without sufficient information regarding where any choice may lead can result in a disorientation that precludes any meaningful freedom" (105). From the perspective of navigation, actors in an associatively-linked textual environment might become lost in a maze of diverging or intersecting pathways and meanings that compromise, even as they comprise, their subjective empowerment. In the scene described above, Galahad wants to go to “the employment exchange by Edgeware Road” (40), but with so many choices of way and without a view from above or a gridded map of London and his place, he only drifts and stagnates fearfully along unrecognized streets. Drift, in this scene, is debilitating. Having no “conceptual map of the whole" (Gaggi 105) puts the reader, or walker in Galahad’s case, in a way to be swept along by the progress of the text without any sense of direction. Hence, while hypertext and networked spaces can offer individually empowering structures where hierarchal or linear, destination-driven authority is subverted, it is important to note that they also offer structures that are potentially dangerous to the individual whose agency might become lost in a system of invisible orders.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Also writing of mapping the city in *The Lonely Londoners*, Lisa M. Kabesh argues that the narrative marks out the limits of freedom and mobility for colonial migrants in London’s racially organized and exclusive sectors: “*The Lonely Londoners* offers a detailed topography of racial hierarchy in the metropole: it puts in relief different gradations of mobility and freedom that are accessible, or, as the case may be, inaccessible to the text’s West Indian characters” (4). Similar to Gaggi’s claims about the limits of choice in a hyperlinked environment, Kabesh warns against equating “freedom of movement with *political* freedom,” noting that the former in no way guarantees the latter, especially in these late-colonial border crossings. Selvon, too, it seems, recognizes this problem of passages, but he also, I would suggest, posits through Galahad that among the dangerous potentials of walking outside allocated city routes is the equally threatening possibility of migrants assuming shared authority within a space. Knowledge of routes and a reasoned willingness to get lost brings a degree of autonomy and participation in the flows of pedestrian traffic through the city. In the scene described above, Galahad’s initial inability to navigate leaves him abject until Moses arrives. As a guide, Moses physically connects Galahad to London places and also figuratively brings him into the novel’s network of stories. In later episodes, Galahad finds his ways joyfully, as he discovers how to *drift*. He learns, as I’ll show below, to embrace ground-level modes of navigating the city.

*The Lonely Londoners* emphasizes walking in the city, and the perils and pleasures of getting from place to place drive the narrative action. As a cartographic-like work, this novel maps the city by the routes of its characters, paths that are, at times, problematic and dangerous. While *The Lonely Londoners* certainly presents the distrust and exclusionary tactics with which many white Britons and policymakers received their colonial compatriots in the 1950s, it also shows metropolitan London as a shared space, continually re-navigated, adapted, and reassessed, sometimes in unexpected ways.

**2. Layered London: A Space of Going**

In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* Bertrand Westphal suggests a new classification of “geographic fiction” where works might be “categorized according to the realms they explore” and where literary analysis of a work acknowledges a compilation of mobile, multi-focal perspectives (117). Westphal explains that in this mode of analysis, “Representation of space comes from a reciprocal creation, not simply a one-way activity of a gaze looking from one point to another” (113). By refuting the hierarchical privilege of a dominating gaze in favor of identifying multiple and, often, competing ways of seeing, Westphal argues that, “Alterity ceases to be the preserve of a gazing culture, because the latter itself is subject to the gaze of others” (114). Places are consistently renegotiated and recreated as they are experienced anew by travelers, dwellers, walkers, and writers. The work of a geocritic, then, is first to recognize that literary representations of a place, like London, are layered and composed by a plurality of views, and then to navigate among the diverse strata comprising the city’s identity. This approach visualizes power in contested spaces not as binary but as complexly layered and, I would suggest, dynamically mobile. In *The Lonely Londoners,* the diverse story lines that compose the novel map additional ways of seeing onto an urban space whose social and geographical composition seems historically predetermined. The novel charts a shifting cartographic representation of London.

Each pathway and encounter in each character’s story inscribes an individual view of metropolitan space and speaks to earlier, or contemporary, views. In her essay “Immigration, Post-war London, and the Politics of Everyday Life in Sam Selvon’s Fiction,” Rebecca Dyer notes the importance of sites in *The Lonely Londoners* and relatedly, the layers of meaningfulness that Selvon’s place descriptions bring to the literary history of London. Dyer points out, “Selvon's tendency to drop the names of London's geographical and architectural features--Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Bridge, the Thames--thus creating atmosphere by bringing up recognizable sites, many of which come to readers with imperialistic associations and literary precedents attached to them” (128). She notes that Selvon’s British colonial education informs his understandings of these place names (129) and argues that the novel transforms literary London by adding a “new life story” to it and making a political and cultural claim on “emblematic” metropolitan sites (128). In this way, *The Lonely Londoners* accrues some authority over the meaning of London without displacing existing structures.

In a later thread of Galahad’s (or Henry Oliver’s) story, the character brings together a global conception of place with his own lived experiences. For Galahad, the famous places of London have names full of romance and exoticism. For instance, he finds that “when he say ‘Charing Cross,’ when he realize that is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man” (*Lonely Londoners* 84). He is, in fact, a “new world” man with an old nickname traveling to an old city; he recognizes his subjective authority even in the face of the dictionary’s codifying authority. In this new-man spirit, he walks to the “Piccadilly Tube Station” where a clock tells “the time of places all over the world.” It’s a common meeting-up spot in the city and also a space where trains and world time zones converge—a juncture where here and there join and a place of transition, a divergent place that leads people somewhere else in both time and space (84). This place, at least in so far as it is represented in this novel, is emblematic of mobility and time-space slippages among places and people.

From this place of convergences, Galahad meanders toward Piccadilly Circus. His walk is deliberately unstructured and fully engaged in Galahad’s present experience of walking. Ana McMillin describes drift as a response against the theory that an “individual’s movement in the city [is] a collection of ‘constructed situations’” created by urban planners, cultural groups, and consumer-driven industries (101). Noting how psychogeographers like Debord “proposed strategies of wandering and travelling, without direction, between the ‘situations’ in the city, for achieving individual freedom” (101), McMillin explains that a drifter narrates the in-between, unofficial, and often illegitimate places of the city. Mobility, itself, becomes the crucial feature of the drifter’s authority. As Galahad walks by the Arch on his way to the Piccadilly Circus, he passes by an acquaintance who asks him to pause and "listen here to the rarse this man talking, about how the colonials shouldn't come to Brit’n, that the place overflowing with spades" (89-90), but Henry walks by, on his way to other places, and defers confronting these practices of exclusion. Racist undercurrents flow throughout the novel but, in this example, Galahad doesn’t let them take over his narrative or locomotive flow. His route and those of other characters flow alongside and away from such racialized discourses without allowing them the final word.

*The Lonely Londoners* is more concerned with being there and going somewhere else than with destinations and confrontations. As Galahad walks to Piccadilly Circus, he thinks, “that circus represent life, that circus is the beginning and the ending of the world” (90). Anything might go on there and people are always passing through, “rich people going into tall hotels, people going to the theatre, people sitting, and standing and walking and talking and laughing and buses and cars.” It is a place of transience and Galahad places himself in this mobile space: “Galahad Esquire, in all this, standing in the big city, in London. Oh Lord.” He sees himselfat the center of the world, recognizing perhaps that he, like the people he sees, will pass through this place and that this standing at the center is only a momentary stop among many of radiating lines of travel. Commenting on the liberating qualities of mobility, Froome-Lewis suggests that drift can allow a walker to become empowered and to find pleasure in “teasing apart and reforming established certainties” (378) and to thus gain a discursive authority over the ordering features of city space. In Froome-Lewis’s discussion of the results of his drift map project, he notes, “The walker becomes owner and curator of the readings offered by the maps, adopts a methodology of interpretation and forms priorities” (382). Galahad’s walk and his growing confidence occurs on a plane of action along with others’ narrative threads of going places in the city. In this novel, space is presented not as confrontational but as complexly networked, fragmented, and mobile.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Galahad’s digressions through the city reflect the network structure of Selvon’s collection of migrant stories. In many of these stories, the narrator privileges movement over destination. Nigerian migrant, Cap, for instance, abandons his initial intention of studying law and instead adopts a nomadic, vagrant lifestyle in London. Cap is always on the move: he harnesses the vast, mazelike quality of the city, moving from hotel to hotel, engaging in sexual relations with many different women, and getting lost when he needs to make payments, escape legal authority, or evade a romantic partner. Alternatively, Jamaican-born old Tanty comes to London with her extended family and settles with her nephew Tolroy in an area of London, and lives there “like how some people live in small village” never leaving the safety of her own small sphere (80). Tanty is interested in London places and names, but she refuses to travel outside her familiar space on foot, bus, or train until one day when her daughter goes to work accidentally taking the key to the food cupboard with her. As it turns out, “Tanty was waiting for a good excuse to travel out of the district, and she decided to brave London” (81). Her story is about a journey as, with difficulty, Tanty finds her way to her daughter’s workplace, retrieves the key, and returns home, “feeling good that she make the trip from Harrow Road at last” (83) and that she experienced the flows and sites of the city. With these and other vignettes, Selvon adds these migrants’ footsteps and paths to existing literary maps of London, creating for his characters a sense of subjective authority marked by transience and movement.

To read this novel of metropolitan travel linearly as a set of orderly stories of journeys and experiences with clear destinations and objectives would overlook how its mobile, networked structure allows for unexpected travel, folds back on itself, and never really arrives anywhere. Speculating on what he'd do with a lottery win and whether he’d travel back to Trinidad, Moses thinks how, "He used to see all his years in London pile up one on top of the other, and he getting no place in a hurry, and the years going by, and the thought make him frighten sometimes" (98). This persistent mobility of these migrant Londoners drifting “no place in a hurry” is both empowering and debilitating. It places the colonial migrant in an unstable but potentially creative position of mapping the city with their own grounded footpaths. Selvon’s characters travel parallel to, and in spite of, existing social institutions separating black and white in England and the British Empire’s legacy of global binaries of metropole and colony. Speaking of cosmopolitan urban space, literary critic Suman Gupta suggest that cities like London or New York "represent the accruals of history which are not understood through any limited progression of history, which push such cities into an apparently unhistoricizable complex present" (43). Moses and the other West Indian characters in *The Lonely Londoners* exemplify this idea of being both directed by the history of imperial expansion and of forging new post-colonial paths.

**3. A roaming reading of Okri's "Disparities"**

Like *The Lonely Londoners*, Nigerian writer Ben Okri’s post-colonial story “Disparities” might be mapped according to street grids, footpaths, and the narrator’s mobility. “Disparities” presents a networked nomadism that deliberates over the meaning of the cosmopolitan urban center and charts a wasted homelessness. In *The Lonely Londoners,* Moses builds a communal narrative network, linking the traveling stories of various migrants. Dyer points out that Moses “interweaves migrants' individual stories, captures the swiftly changing community as it existed in the 1950s, and describes London and Londoners from migrants' perspectives and in their unique voices” (117). In contrast, the narrator in Okri’s story is isolated and unable to find community other than in an occasional sharing of public space; he travels a network of city streets without guiding landmarks or signposts. His drift through a relatively undifferentiated and indifferent city speaks to the post-colonial immigrant’s sense of cultural exclusion and placeless-ness in London, and, paradoxically, it suggests how nomadic wandering becomes a consistent feature of “home” in the late twentieth century. By reading this story from, what Careri calls, a “point of view of roaming” (23), one might visualize the narrative structure as a network of routes that has a physical as well as a metaphorical aspect and postulate that in this narrative, as in *The Lonely Londoners,* migrancy is both an aesthetic and a thematic element.

First published in the collection *Incidents at the* Shrine in 1986, Okri’s story closely follows in time the British Nationality Act (BNA) of 1981 which “repealed the automatic right of residence of Britons born outside the UK” and thus legally circumscribed the British citizenship rights of individuals from Britain’s former colonies (Panayi 212). This BNA seems to be a culmination of increasingly restrictive immigration legislation in Britain enacted in the 1970s and 80s. Randall Hansen details, for instance, how in the 1970s, conservative MP Enoch Powell promoted a belief that “mass immigration was itself a threat to nationhood. It created an alien presence in the national community” (181), and that from 1968 Powell’s public rhetoric and his speeches advocating for restricting immigration on racialized criteria (especially his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech in which he prophesized a Britain overtaken by black people, an abridged version of which was aired on the BBC in April of 1968) had large popular support amongst white Britons (186). The BNA of 1981 repealed the BNA of 1948 and defined British citizenship “to the exclusion of the colonies for the first time” (213). Hansen outlines two temporary legal categories devised for those who were not granted citizenship by way of relation to a British citizen or to a legal resident of the U.K.: the BNA of 1981 included the “empty” legal categories of “British Dependent Territory Citizenship” and “British Overseas Citizenship.” People in the former category were residents of Britain’s remaining territories, primarily Hong Kong. Those in the latter category are Commonwealth citizens who, before the BNA of 1981, were considered Citizens of the UK and the Colonies (CUKC); post-BNA of 1981, these individuals were considered honorary British “citizens” but they had no guaranteed rights to enter or work in the UK (213).[[11]](#endnote-11) The provisions of the BNA of 1981 and concerns that the Act was racially motivated reveal how patterns of movement and global flows were regulated and administrated along racial lines. In contrast to the effect of the BNA of 1848 which underpinned Selvon’s characters’ feelings of being theoretically (if not practically) at home in the empire, the later BNA defined home as a legal state of being and promoted the invisibility of the networked history of imperialism. While “Disparities” does not directly refer to Britain’s immigration policies, it does pay heed to ideas of belonging and exclusion as it explores the meaning of home, drift, and invisibility in the city.

The paths of the story are bookended at start and finish by the narrator’s occupation of two separate dilapidated homes. Between these two temporary houses, points of origin that designate a beginning and another beginning, he wanders the streets of London where he is hungry and “always aware of a chill in [his] marrow” (37). At the start, he describes feelings of comfort, pride, and safety in the decrepit house he occupies, extolling that: “To have a house, that is the end of the journey of our solitude” (38). Even as he claims this sense of place, he finds himself turned out from this home by new squatters, a group of ultra-hip students who move into the upstairs for a holiday party:

They brought with them a large tape-recorder and played reggae and heavy metal music. . .. They talked about Marx, and Lévi-Strauss and Sartre and now and then one of the girls would say how easy it was to appreciate those *bastards* (she said this laughingly) when one is stoned. (38)

When he confronts these seemingly progressive intellectuals, he finds “group desolation,” broken mirrors, and hears empty rhetoric that confirms his disenfranchisement despite his erstwhile sense of being at home.

Speaking of home in “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said speculates that,

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.” (185)

Drawing on the writing of Theodor Adorno, Said suggests that a feature of our mobile and migrant modernity is that “the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing” (184).[[12]](#endnote-12) In both Selvon’s novel and Okri’s story, the drive to create a sense of home is linked to the writers’ efforts to ground their writing in the physical space of London, to build a story on a grounded experience of the city streets. Further describing the untethered condition of exile, Said suggests, “The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question” (183), an idea that resonates in a mobile, or roaming, reading of “Disparities.” The persistent wandering in the narrative confirms paradoxically that, for this post-colonial immigrant, the most prominent quality of being grounded is mobility. As the narrator walks, he maps the space of the city, even while he is excluded from its ordering structures of residences and public spaces. At the story’s end, after much wandering, the narrator pauses at another dilapidated home: “I found a house. I had always wanted to own a house . . . I sat down and took in the smells of rubble and suicides and the decaying human structures" (307). This narrator looks for home, even as he recognizes that he is caught with a system of intersecting lines, a social network designed to sideline immigrants like him.

As he is driven from his first house, he comments, “Well. So. I was yet again unhoused . . . Anyway. That was that. And who denies that the system (monster invisible) has the capacity to absorb all its blighted offshoots? And so I took to the streets. The long, endless streets" (40). Resigned to homelessness and invisibility, the narrator wanders along routes and passages within a larger urban network. This network has a kind of power which he explains as, "When I had a fever, only the streets saw me through it" (47). The mazelike-network takes on a life of its own –the streets are responsive and *alive*. They hold the story together and present the only certainty the narrator knows--drift. Telling his story becomes, itself, an act of wandering along branching paths: "I just went on and on till I got so confused in the heart of what I was saying that all I wanted to do was fall asleep" (47). Careri’s descriptions of the walked city illuminate the kind of mobile structure and story that characterizes both “Disparities” and *The Lonely Londoners*. Considering urban organization, Careri points out: “The nomadic city lives inside the stationary city, feeding on its scraps and offering, in exchange, its own presence as a new nature that can be crossed only by inhabiting it” (2). Roaming, Careri argues here, has architectural potential—it is constructive of space within already organized network of streets and sites. In both narratives, wandering offers im/migrant characters opportunities to build into and onto the cultural, social, and fictional features of the existing city.

Unlike *The Lonely Londoners*, in “Disparities,” London is mostly bereft of those place names and obvious signposts that allow both readers and character an overview of the real London spaces of the story. In a dreamlike progress, the narrator moves from site to site in a network of generic reference points: houses, park, and pub. The drifting narrator constitutes, as well as occupies, this space, and “Disparities” maps London in its own (lack of) terms. Interrogating the correspondences between maps and real space, especially in the current age of digital navigation tools using GPS technology, Valérie November, Edouardo Camacho-Hübner, and Bruno Latour consider two modes of mapping, mimetic and navigational, each of which implies a particular correspondence of the mapmaker to the real and the virtual (585). Mimetic mapping techniques assume an aerial view, marking borders and delineating sovereignty over territories. It is a traditional overview of a place. Such a view is necessarily abstract and also part of a rhetoric of global power structures both in contemporary contexts and in those associated with the British Empire. November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour suggest that the mapmaker’s assumption of a direct and objective reflection between the paper map and real lived space shows a limited and self-serving understanding of the fluctuations and dynamics of lived space (589). The mapper sees, in the mimetic map, a self-indulgent, static image of borders and territories and fails to recognize inevitable changes caused by unpredictable human, animal, and natural forces. Alternatively, November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour reflect on the aesthetic and practical value of a “navigational” mode of mapping to interpret space, explaining that in this mode a traveler identifies signposts that might be linked to delineate a space or mark a path. Navigational mapping is experiential and grounded, “a deambulation between many successive stepping stones in order to achieve the miracle of reference” (586) Their discussion emphasizes the importance of recognizing that maps are not static; indeed, these authors assert that in a navigational map, “*everything is on the move*” (595). Such modes of mapping, whether they be cartographic or narrative, recognize transformation as a necessary feature of physical space and human geography. The authors suggest that from this view point, “maps now strike you not as what represent a world 'out there' but as the dashboards of a calculation interface that allow you to pinpoint successive signposts while you move through the world” (595).

Okri’s story and *The Lonely Londoners* offer such navigational maps with characters who sometimes make their ways or, other times, get lost among configurations of existing urban signposts. In Selvon’s novel, landmarks are often named and then renewed by the characters’ ways of seeing and walking. In Okri’s story, landmarks are ambiguous and their absence (and occasional presence) emphasizes the narrator’s exclusion, lostness, and persistence. The Tube stations, for instance, rather than being places of convergence and fluid transport, are sites where the vagrant narrator is noticed and chased away. In another instance, as the narrator stands on a bridge over the Thames, he literally loses an opportunity for independence and economic prosperity as he drops a suitcase full of money left in a taxi cab by a rich Nigerian. The city’s primary mobile conduits, subways and the river, increase the immigrant’s exclusion and invisibility. Both narratives, however, also show the city on the move, a mobile and changing network in which existing orders do not suffice to promote belonging or to ensure exclusion. Such experiential mapping intervenes on the idea of the city as an organized whole that can be statically overseen.

As Okri’s narrator wanders to the park through the maze of streets, inspecting houses and avoiding the "eye-sores that were human beings" (298), he searches for signposts but sees only shit. Commenting on this path of feces, he notes ironically, how it “is the height of civilization.” His view of the street, marked by waste and decay, offers an often unacknowledged layer to the urban narrative. At the park, he watches people living superficial, surface lives: "They laughed, nice little laughs without any depth and without any pain. Insipid love; cultured laughter" (41). On one occasion, he, also, is seen by a group of school children whose attention he draws by yelling out at them while they inspect a dead bird. The narrator comments, "They stared at me and stared at the bird . . . Fear trembled in their eyes," suggesting that children draw both a grammatical and metaphorical connection between man and the dead bird that lie alongside each other (43). The children regard him as somewhere in between agent and object. He is like the bird, but he is also a disruption to their stroll, a dangerous presence. Subsequently, a passerby, walking a dog who retrieves the dead bird, deliberately fails to see the narrator at all, dismissing, in language *and* in imagination, his very existence (44).

The narrator’s existence, as well as his lack of place, lies in his mobility; his movement in the network of streets is affirming and resistant to those gazes that accuse or dismiss him. After the park, he “hugged the streets again” (45) and travels to a local pub filled with other outsiders, “the very cream of the leftovers, kicked-outs, eternal trendies, hoboes, weirdos, addicts and peddlers” who, like him, are images of overlooked and looked over people (45). In this public space, too, he finds no interpersonal connection deeper than proximity. The narrator tries to tell his story to a fellow in the pub but leaves off in the middle of it, “glad to be rid of that whole bunch of depressives and trendies who mistake the fact of their lostness for the attraction of the outsider’s confusion” (48). Refusing to romanticize exile, he walks the streets again and finds solace where, “in that sweet-tempered solitude of the streets” he dreams of “a wonderfully small room in the sky that is composed of ten thousand taxi-cabs and pasted over with the quarter of a million pounds that belonged to a Nigerian.” The road holds potential for mythmaking and remaking reality.

These competing pressures of mobility and exclusion in “Disparities” give insight into how network systems control interaction and modulate flows among locals and immigrants. Relatedly, in "Cosmopolitan Capsules: Mediated Networking and Social Control in Expatriate Spaces," André Jansson discusses the problem of "capsular civilization" produced in urban networks where individuals are both highly connected and isolated, because network nodes (like the house, the neighborhood, the ethnic enclave or, in technical terms, the computer or the tv screen) “operate in the form of capsules" that insulate individuals from real contact. Jansson investigates a disjuncture between migrants and locals “for whom encapsulation operates as a protective cocoon, a means for distinctive connectivity and mobility, and those who are merely imprisoned by the logic of encapsulation" and suggests that these formulations of encapsulation do not necessarily accord with rhetoric that underscores the integrative, democratic potential of a network (239-240). With regard to transnational networks in a single urban milieu like London, Jansson explains that an active, or agentive, cosmopolitanism, would require that both transnational travelers and local inhabitants exhibit “a willingness and socialized aptitude to see ‘the other’ within oneself, to rediscover the national as the *internalized global*” (245). Without such a mindset, the transnational networks exhibit a “glocal logic of encapsulation" (241), where, by processes of inclusion and exclusion, they become spaces “for separation and dominance (239). In “Disparities,” the city is shown as a network of routes and sites that promote prescribed behaviors (at the bar, the park, the house) and set up inclusive or exclusive relationships. The “monster invisible” that acts on the narrator of “Disparities” points to an underlying structural violence that drives this migrant to a persistent nomadism in the city. However, his wandering, while on one hand a likely consequence of systematic exclusion and a capsular logic of separation, also, on another hand, allows the narrator to evade control and to influence the meaning of the city through sub-reality building at ground level and through his mythmaking. Wandering enables a freedom of movement that both embraces and resists attempts to sideline and contain this immigrant.

**Conclusion**

Both *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities” attempt to sidestep the dominant logic that orders and controls metropolitan space. They demonstrate how a networked system, like a city grid, can be insidiously controlling and how mobility can be a practice of both acquiescence and resistance to its flows and modulations. Urban networks draw individuals into their processes and orderly paths, yet they also allow for wandering, a point-less drift that evades the ordering and controlling plans of city spaces. As I have shown, in Selvon’s and Okri’s works, im/migrant wanderers along the byways and passages of London participate in creating a mobile, transformative sense of place. Mobility, itself, thus becomes a resource for immigrant self-imagining in this metropolitan urban space that often inhibits movement by social sidelining and geographical containment. In adopting a practice that focuses on a grounded, mobility, this paper has attempted to provide a more human-centered and experiential way of reading and thus to recognize the excessive and autonomous aspects of migrant travel, as well as the restrictive and exclusionary tactics in place in post-imperialist London.

Both *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities” construct stories in a metropolitan space that is already constructed. Their wanderers and wandering stories bring additional, and perhaps often unrecognized, layers to the city, highlighting that this city is not a static receptacle for im/migrants to arrive at and see, but a moving, shifting space of becoming. Both texts offer exemplary instances for considering a mobile aesthetic, or a way of reading that recognizes mobility, wandering, digressive pathways, and fragmented experience as fundamental features of composition in global and local networks and of narrative composition in such milieus. This mobile aesthetic sets up wandering as a writing and reading practice that enables otherwise subjected or lost voices to contribute to the meaning of a place, even if that meaning is itself the condition of being lost. Such a grounded practice is not intended simply to privilege an experiential understanding over a more global overview. More complexly, *The Lonely Londoners* and “Disparities” imagine a relationship between metropolis and (post-)colony from the perspective of mobility. They, thus, represent places as layered by complexly connected viewpoints and paths rather than as binary and discrete. These fictions provoke a need for further critical attention to how network structures function in enabling control over places and people and how individuals might engage in active practices of writing and walking. Both narratives redefine conceptions of places as hierarchical and fixed and instead emphasize the grounded and mobile positions of their characters, promoting their tactile and fluid connections with British metropolitan space.

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1. Notes

   My construction of grounded and aerial viewpoints draws, in this first instance, from the work of Michel de Certeau, who in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* writes of his own effort,

   To locate the practices that are foreign to the “geometrical” or the “geographical” space of the visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* ("ways of operating"), to "another spatiality"' (an "anthropological," poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an *opaque and blind* mobility characteristic of the bustling city. (93) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. At the time of *The Lonely Londoners* 1956 publication, Trinidad, Tobago, and Jamaica were British colonies. They claimed independence from colonial rule in 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this paper, I recognize that migrant and immigrant are contested terms. I use the former to refer to individuals who travel between Britain and its colonies under the auspices of the British Nationality Act of 1948 which among other provisions “defined as a British subject, anyone born within His Majesty’s dominions” (Hansen 41). I use immigrant to refer to post-colonial or Commonwealth travelers to Britain from former British colonies who did not qualify for citizenship or subjecthood under later legal provisions (See Hansen, ch. 2 and 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a compelling visual rendering of the complexity of network systems, see also American Artist Mark Lombardi’s diagrammatic drawings of networks of financial and political corruption. He called these network visualizations, “narrative structures.” A selection of his drawings can be found online in an exhibit record at the Pierogi Gallery (<https://www.pierogi2000.com/artists/mark-lombardi/)>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See also Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile.” Said suggests that because exiles are acquainted with at least two nations from the inside, they demonstrate “a plurality of vision [that] gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions,” which often gives the writing of exiles an unfamiliar and multi-vocal character (186). Said’s reflections on the effects of disparity of place provoke further consideration about how the traces of the traveler’s origins influence the production of a new sense of a place. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hansen cites a 1950 memorandum by the Colonial Secretary, James Griffiths, noting that among the problems associated with the influx of West Indian and other colonial immigration to Britain post-Second World War were “the concentration of migrants in inadequate inner-city housing, employer prejudice against black workers, and the occurrence of sporadic instances of civil unrest” mostly between black and white men (58). Such concerns led the Colonial office in the 1950s informally to discourage immigration (68). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Dawson, *Mongrel Nation,* Introduction, where she describes “reverse colonization” or the mass migration of colonial subjects to England as a movement that “overturned the spatial and cultural apartheid cementing colonial rule” (4). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-war Britain*, ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See also Galloway and Thacker,  *The Exploit,* part 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See also Nick Bentley’s discussion of fragmentation as a narrative strategy in *The Lonely Londoners* (73). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-war Britain,* ch. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes, “For a man who longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. In it he produces, as his family once did, refuse and lumber” (87). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)