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Nomadic London: Reading Wandering in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Ben Okri's "Disparities"

Kristine N. Kelly

Abstract: This article presents a way of reading that recognizes migrancy, wandering, and fragmented experience as fundamental narrative features in colonial and post-colonial literary contexts. Drawing on contemporary network theories and discussions of walking as a social practice, the article argues that Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Ben Okri's "Disparities" (1986) demonstrate the creative potential of wandering insomuch as it allows migrant characters' ground-level views to be incorporated into textual representations of London's topography and its concomitant meaningfulness. The analysis identifies a narrative practice in which metropolitan space is constructed by the lived, mobile experiences of colonial migrants and post-colonial immigrants who sidestep the controlling pressures and modulating flows of local and global network systems, especially as they are exerted by urban design, social organization, and immigration policies. This reading of mobility as aesthetic practice proposes a way of understanding these stories of im/migrants as composed of complex paths and unexpected intersections rather than as confrontational or hierarchal. It suggests that critical attention should be paid to networks as compelling structures of order and influence that, paradoxically, also offer potential for an indirect, multilayered agency.

Keywords: migrancy, mobility, wandering, networks, postcolonial London

> 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.
>
> Francesco Careri,
> *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* 42

In *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Sam Selvon compiles vignettes of colonial migrants who travel both across the globe and in metropolitan London. At the very beginning of the novel, Moses Aloetta, a "nine-ten year" migrant in London from colonial Trinidad, boards "a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train" (Selvon 23). Selvon's description of this route sets up the novel's focus on travelers' ground-level experiences on the local network of city streets and its overview of the global passages that comprise the network of the British Empire.[1] Selvon's opening connects London with its West Indian colonies and highlights Moses' ability to navigate London; the narrative can thus be read through a local lens that pays heed to imperial links and recognizes that late- and post-colonial travelers' experiences of places are mobile and multi-focal. These perspectives form complex networks rather than the clearly defined binaries of here and elsewhere that are characteristic of many imperialist travel paradigms.[2] *The Lonely Londoners*' persistent references to urban topography provoke a spatialized, mobile reading that resists a direct linear connection between 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 (BNA), 1948, travel between colonies and the metropole appeared to be unrestricted for all colonial subjects. Such a mobile way of reading attends to the late-colonial novel's networked texture 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 to exclude the majority of Commonwealth immigrants. Both texts 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]

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 narratives and social orders that are hierarchal, directive, and exclusive. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau suggests that by focusing on the transitory experiences of "the ordinary practitioners of the city"—that is, pedestrians who move, often unseen, at ground level—a "*migrational*, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (93; emphasis in original). Such slippages follow from the theory of the *dérive*, or drift, defined by psychogeographer Guy Debord in 1958 as a 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, especially cities, are organized to produce particular meanings. However, as walkers drift on and off the usual paths, they can follow or diverge from established city plans. 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; emphasis in original). For Careri, walkers, rather than being passively shuffled along by the designs of architects and urban planners, can understand a space through their own mobile experiences and add to its meaningfulness through the traces left by their footsteps. In this way, wandering is a powerful practice of intervening in 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 particular destination "not only . . . discover an alternative, possibly alien, physical reality but also . . . 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 who 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, as a practice for the digressive creation of place within existing metropolitan urban networks.

In this article, I consider wandering as a narrative practice and a way of reading. To do so, I focus specifically on how Selvon and Okri allow their im/migrant characters to participate in London's metropolitan space outside of 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 consider 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 (69). In my discussion, I shift the focus from mobility on a global, empire-wide scale to actions and interactions in local metropolitan space. Hence, I argue that Selvon's and Okri's 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 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 offered by writers like Manuel Castells and Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker and make use of associative reading and writing practices, such as those used to engage with hypertext and online spaces. Additionally, I refer to deliberations of mapping and walking. While such diverse modes of inquiry might, at times, seem postdated in 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 digital media 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. This mobility is the key structural feature of these traveling texts and enables diversions from established narratives about nation, empire, and metropolis.

I. Reading Networks in the City

The travel along the network of London pathways depicted in *The Lonely Londoners* and "Disparities" shows migration as an everyday practice. A cartographic representation 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 distant reading, Franco Moretti outlines a method of literary analysis whereby a reader might prepare a literary map, or a schematic representation of a narrative, to better visualize the structural forces at play (36–37). Moretti suggests that by taking note of recurring events, objects, or processes and plotting them onto a visual rendering of the narrative world, a critic can see "'emerging' qualities, which were not visible at a lower level" (53). Literary mapping in this fashion enables an overview of a text's topography. While Moretti's practice of distant reading offers useful insight into general trends in a literary work, it does not sufficiently attend to the grounded travel of individuals, as suggested by writers like de Certeau and Careri. For instance, a bird's eye view of London's topography in *The Lonely Londoner*s and "Disparities" would show an imperial metropolis wary of the travel of colonial subjects who roam the streets and act in and on its spaces. My discussion of these texts, however, focuses less on overviews and more on the paths of individual im/migrants whose travel through the city crosses "spaces that cannot be seen" from above (de Certeau 93) and allows for deviations from established practices.

In *The Rise of the Network Society*, 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 power dynamics in social, cultural, and economic contexts (502). Networks are pervasive, and within a network, sources of control or origin are often difficult to locate.[4]

In *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, Galloway and Thacker describe networks as forms of organization that are as political as they are 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 also highlight the difficulty of ascertaining sovereignty and sources of agency within a network, where it seems that, although "no one is at the helm making each decision" (40), individual mobility is nevertheless controlled and modulated (41). Speculating on the mechanism of such control, Castells notes that "[s]ince networks are multiple, the interoperating codes and switches between networks become the fundamental sources in shaping, guiding, and misguiding societies" (502). He theorizes that flows, movement, and intersections are fundamental features of network space that affect 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 indicate that "the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power" (500). Because networks are complex, they often resist hierarchal organization or binary oppositions in favor of movement and the 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; passages, tangents, and parallel paths within and among texts reveal diverse social relationships and barriers. In this spirit, it is notable that 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 such as Waterloo Station, the Employment Exchange, Piccadilly Circus, and other mapped and already-defined places. In doing so, Selvon recognizes an urban network in which his characters' routes run parallel, overlap, and intersect with existing paths and sites. Selvon's London becomes a plane of action and interaction, a ground-level, mobile enactment on networked space.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, migrants' first engagement with London's urban and global networks occurs at Waterloo Station, a site where the

radiating routes mark it as a major node, "a place of arrival and departure" (Selvon 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 go there just to see the familiar faces of the arrivals and learn about current events back home. The connecting lines between colonial West Indies and metropolitan London are, in this context, geographically linear and binary even while this word-of-mouth news trafficked over shipping lines suggests informal, as well as official, layers of exchange between the colonies and London. *The Lonely Londoners* sidelines this kind of binary global view of interactions between center and margins and focuses instead on a networked and localized exploration of contested spaces and sub-networks among West Indian and African migrants in London. Such sub-networks persist despite, as the narrator recognizes, discouragement by the existing metropolitan authorities who, as they guide migrants toward often unsuitable housing and employment, try to marginalize colonial subjects even within the city. Along these lines, Ashley Dawson suggests that the storytelling circle that Moses brings together in *The Lonely Londoners* forges "a cosmopolitan sense of diasporic unity" that allows black Britons to find relief from and resist the dominant, ordering pressures of racism in the city (34). While this migrant gathering is a relevant feature of Selvon's novel, Dawson's description of the meetings as occurring in a liminal, sheltered space draws on the conventional polarizing discourse of metropole and colony and maintains the opposition of center and margin even within the boundaries of the city. In distinction from Dawson, I argue that, insomuch as the stories collected in *The Lonely Londoners* present a complex urban topography, the storytellers who gather in Moses' room every Sunday narrate their own acts of nomadic wandering within that space. Their sub-network of walked paths interposes itself into an even more complex urban network shaped in part by a history of travel in Britain's empire. Rather than existing outside in a separate or liminal space, these migrants' stories travel within and alongside existing metropolitan paths and sites, claiming both their engagement with and deviations from that network.

The network of walked routes displays the novel's effort to integrate the migrants' discursive and physical agency into an otherwise unwelcoming metropolitan space. In reflecting on 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 Bailey is specifically interested in virtual or "online territories" (256) 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. She categorizes the Internet as "not just a technological innovation but a discursive formation that has taken on a global scale" (259) and speculates how, in virtual and physical network landscapes, diasporic identities are unstable and under negotiation and immigrants engage in "a process of becoming" (257) by redefining self and place across borders. Bailey argues that the Internet offers an exemplary structure through which 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] In a similarly discursive fashion, *The Lonely Londoners* presents a networked landscape both in its structure, which connects 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" (Selvon 25). Spaced throughout the city, the migrants, through Moses' orchestration, become cartographical signposts that mark subroutes and extended connections while trying to sidestep local concerns about migrants congregating.[6] Such networked communities exist alongside 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 map-

ping of space in *The Lonely Londoners* renews and develops the identity of the metropolitan, soon to be post-imperial, city. We might thus see London as undergoing "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 the binary, destination-driven travel implicit in the rhetoric of both colonial expansion and "reverse colonialism."[7] The novel's narrator tells stories of West Indians who, after World War II, migrated to London to find work and opportunity during a time when borders were seemingly fluid. Dawson explains that the BNA, 1948 affirmed the legal equality of all British subjects throughout the empire and freedom of movement between the United Kingdom and its colonies (10).[8] While this open-door policy was impeded by subsequent legislation that imposed restrictions and regulations on colonial migrants, *The Lonely Londoners* presents, at least in its early chapters, a somewhat positive outlook on the possibilities for colonial subjects to thrive in London, even while it acknowledges that colonial migrants are not particularly welcomed. For instance, Henry Oliver, a migrant from Trinidad that Moses meets at Waterloo Station, arrives in the city without luggage, a coat, or booty from the duty-free store on the ship. Indeed, he arrives with nothing but the clothes on his back, because he didn't see "no sense to load up [him]self 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. The narrator nicknames Henry "Galahad" and 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 as well as 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 raised in matters of housing, employment, and hospitality—foresees problems for this questing Galahad. His story and his enthusiasm are 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 to admit a 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 speed of the underground train, and he feels connected to metropolitan center of the Empire and in command. For a short time on the ship and train, he believes in a linked-up world where the national borders that separate inside and outside (or metropole and colony) are irrelevant to his sense of the smooth flow between destinations. The following day, however, he tries to make his way alone to the Employment Exchange, a common destination for West Indian migrants. 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; in this passage, he is invisible to the people around him (42). He has no conception of the whole, recognizes no signposts, and is immersed only in his immediate situation. He begins to "drift down to Whiteleys" (a shopping center in the Bayswater area) and panics at the thought of losing his sense of where he started. In this scene at ground level in London, Galahad is both unseen by passersby and unseeing; he is neither monitored nor is he able to determine the way to his desired destination. Subsequent story threads depict him confidently wandering in the city and deliberating its meaningfulness on foot at ground level. The lack of oversight and insight in this early journey informs and even enables the agency of his later travel along city networks; that is, Galahad comes to find that being unseen offers potential for autonomy from controlling gazes and wandering offers a means of exploiting that autonomy.

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 both the empowering and

unconventional 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 can be 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 through London streets, and it demonstrates a structural resemblance to such networked narratives. Silvio Gaggi notes that in hyperspace, readers have choices that seem to enable control and 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, "[t]he 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). Participants in an associatively linked textual environment may 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 potential routes and without a view from above or a gridded map of London, he drifts 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 position to be swept along by the progress of the text without any sense of direction. Hence, while hypertext and networked spaces can provide individually empowering structures that subvert linear, destination-driven authority or hierarchal arrangements of people and space, they also provide structures that are potentially overwhelming to individuals whose agency might get lost in a system of invisible orders.[9]

Lisa M. Kabesh argues that Selvon's 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" (5). Similar to Gaggi's claims about the limits of choice in a hyperlinked environment, Kabesh warns against equating "freedom of movement with *political* freedom" and notes that the former in no way guarantees the latter, especially in these late-colonial border crossings (5; emphasis in original). I argue that Selvon recognizes this problem of passages but posits, through Galahad, that among the dangerous potentials of walking outside of allocated city routes is the equally threatening possibility of migrants assuming shared authority within a space. With knowledge of routes and a reasoned willingness to get lost, Selvon's characters find 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 the city leaves him abject until Moses arrives. As a guide, Moses physically connects Galahad to places and people in London and figuratively brings him into the novel's network of stories. In later episodes, Galahad finds his way joyfully, as he discovers how to drift. He learns, as I will show, to embrace ground-level modes of navigating the city.

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

II. Layered London: A Space of Going

In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Bertrand Westphal suggests a new classification of "geographic fiction" that "categorize[s] [texts] according to the realms they explore" and encourages literary analysis of works to explore how they contain a compilation of mobile, multifocal perspectives (117). Westphal explains that in this mode of analysis,

"[r]epresentation 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 "[a]lterity 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 to recognize that literary representations of places, like London, are composed by a plurality of views, and then to navigate the diverse strata comprising the city's identity. This approach visualizes power in contested spaces not as binary but as complexly layered and, I suggest, dynamically mobile. In *The Lonely Londoners,* the diverse storylines 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 inscribe an individual view of metropolitan space and speak to earlier, or contemporary, views. 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 observes "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 to "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 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" (Selvon 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" (84). It is a common meeting spot in the city and a space where trains and world time zones converge—a juncture where here and there join and a divergent place that leads people somewhere else in both time and space. This place, at least insofar as it is represented in the 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 he is fully engaged in his present experience. 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 is thus a crucial feature of the drifter's authority. As Galahad walks by the Arch on his way to the Piccadilly Circus, he passes 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" (Selvon 89–90). Galahad defers confronting these practices of exclusion and walks on. Racist undercurrents flow throughout the novel but in this moment he does not 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 on the way to someplace and going somewhere else than with destinations and con-

frontations. As Galahad walks to Piccadilly Circus, he thinks: "[T]hat 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" (90). It is a place of transience and Galahad places himself in this mobile space: "Galahad Esquire, in all this, standing there in the big city, in London. Oh Lord" (90). He sees himself at the center of the world, perhaps recognizing that he, like the people he sees, will pass through this place and that his position at the center is only a momentary stop along many radiating lines of travel. Froome-Lewis suggests that drift can allow a walker to become empowered, find pleasure in "teasing apart and reforming established certainties" (378), and gain a discursive authority over the ordering features of city space. In his discussion of the results of his drift map project, he notes that "[t]he 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 occur on a plane of action along with others' narrative accounts of going places in the city. *The Lonely Londoners* presents space not as confrontational but as complexly networked and mobile.[10]

Galahad's digressions through the city reflect the novel's networked structure. In many of the 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, maze-like 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, elderly Tanty comes to London with her extended family and settles with her nephew Tolroy in an area of London where she lives "like how some people live in small village," never leaving the safety of her own local sphere (Selvon 80). Tanty is interested in London places and names, but she refuses to travel outside her familiar space on foot, by bus, or by train until one day when her daughter goes

to work and accidentally takes 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 decide to brave London" (81). 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 would do with a lottery win and whether he would travel back to Trinidad, Moses thinks how "[h]e 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). The persistent mobility of these migrant Londoners drifting "no place in a hurry" is both empowering and debilitating. It places colonial migrants in the 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 that separate black and white in England and undergird the British Empire's legacy of global binaries of metropole and colony. Suman Gupta suggests that cities like London and 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 the idea of being both directed by the history of imperial expansion and of forging new post-colonial paths.

III. A Roaming Reading of Okri's "Disparities"

Like *The Lonely Londoners*, 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 meditates

on the meaning of the cosmopolitan urban center and charts a weary 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 of "Disparities" 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 placelessness in London, and, paradoxically, suggests how nomadic wandering becomes a consistent feature of "home" in the late twentieth century. By reading this story from what Careri calls the "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), 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 was the culmination of increasingly restrictive immigration legislation enacted in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Randall Hansen notes that in the 1970s, for example, 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). From 1968 on, many white Britons supported immigration restrictions based on the racialized criteria that Powell advocated in his public rhetoric and speeches, 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 1968 (Hansen 187). The BNA, 1981 repealed the BNA, 1948 and defined British citizenship "to the exclusion of the colonies for the first time" (Hansen 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 UK: the BNA, 1981 included "British Dependent Territory Citizenship" and "British Overseas Citizenship, both "hollow shells" (Hansen 214) granting almost no rights associated with citizenship. People in the former category were residents of Britain's remaining territories, primarily Hong Kong. Those in the latter category were Commonwealth citizens who, before the BNA, 1981, were considered Citizens of the UK and the Colonies (CUKC); post-BNA, 1981, these individuals were considered honorary British "citizens" but had no guaranteed rights to enter or work in the UK (Hansen 213).[11] The provisions of the BNA, 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, 1948, which underpins 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 meanings of home, drift, and invisibility in the city.

The paths of the story are bookended by the narrator's occupation of two separate dilapidated homes. Between these two temporary houses, residences that designate two different beginnings, he wanders the streets of London where he is hungry and "always aware of a chill in [his] marrow" (Okri 37). At the start, he describes feelings of comfort, pride, and safety in the decrepit house he occupies, explaining that "[t]o 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 his 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; emphasis in original). When he confronts these

seemingly progressive intellectuals, he finds "group desolation" (39) and broken mirrors and hears empty rhetoric that confirms his disenfranchisement despite his erstwhile sense of being at home.

In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said writes that "[t]he 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 Theodor Adorno's work, 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] 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. Elaborating on the untethered condition of exile, Said suggests that "[t]he pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question" (183). This idea 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" (Okri 50–51). The narrator looks for home even as he recognizes that he is caught within 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, which compels and

assists his travel. The narrator explains: "When I had a fever, only the streets saw me through it" (47). For the narrator, the maze-like network of streets takes on a life of its own—it is responsive and alive and it contains him. This network holds the story together and presents the only certainty the narrator knows: drift. Telling his story also becomes 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*. Careri observes that "[t]he 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, has architectural potential—it is constructive of space within an already organized network of streets and sites. In both Selvon's and Okri's narratives, wandering offers im/migrant characters opportunities to build into and onto the cultural, social, and fictional features of the existing city.

Unlike the London of Selvon's novel, the London in "Disparities" is mostly bereft of those place names and obvious signposts that allow both readers and character an overview of the city's real spaces. In a dreamlike flow, the narrator moves from site to site through 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 that use 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. They offer a traditional overview of a place. Such a view is necessarily abstract and also part of the rhetoric of global power structures in both contemporary contexts and 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 physical space shows a limited and self-serving understanding of the fluctuations and dynamics of lived space (589). The mapper sees, in the mimetic map, an authoritative, 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 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; emphasis in original). Their discussion emphasizes the importance of recognizing that maps are not static; indeed, they assert that in a navigational mapping process, "*everything is on the move*" (596; emphasis in original). Such modes of mapping, whether they are cartographic or narrative, recognize transformation as a necessary feature of physical space and human geography. The authors suggest that from this viewpoint, "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). This discussion of navigational mapping, like that of wandering or drift, relies on paying attention to the lived, on-the-ground experiences of people on the move and according agency to the individual traveler. Signposts and their meanings or indications might fluctuate depending on who encounters them and when; such chaotic traveling is difficult to oversee or to modulate.

"Disparities" and *The Lonely Londoners* offer such navigational maps with characters who sometimes make their ways or, other times, get lost amid 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, disorientation, and persistence. For example, the Tube stations are sites where the vagrant narrator is noticed and chased away rather than places of convergence and transport. In another instance, as the narrator

stands on a bridge over the Thames, he literally loses an opportunity for independence and economic prosperity when he drops a suitcase full of money left in a taxi 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 a city on the move, a mobile and changing network in which the existing order does not sufficiently promote belonging or ensure exclusion. Such experiential mapping intervenes in 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" (40), he searches for signposts but sees only shit. Commenting on this path of feces, he notes, ironically, how this shit "is the height of civilization" (40). His view of the street, marked by waste and decay, adds an often unacknowledged layer to the urban narrative. At the park, he watches people living superficial, lives: "They laughed, nice little laughs without any depth and without any pain. Insipid love; cultured laughter" (Okri 41). On one occasion, he is seen by a group of school children whose attention he draws by yelling at them while they inspect a dead bird. The narrator's comment that the children "stared at [him] and stared at the bird. . . . Fear trembled in their eyes" suggests that the children draw a grammatical and metaphorical connection between him and the dead bird (43). The children regard him as somewhere 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 chooses not to see the narrator, dismissing, in language and in imagination, his very existence (44).

The narrator's existence is defined by his relentless mobility; his movement in the network of streets affirms his presence and he steps aside from the gazes that accuse or dismiss him. After the incident in the park, he "hug[s] 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 overlooked people (45). In this public space, 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 when, "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" (48). The road holds potential for mythmaking and remaking reality.

The competing pressures of mobility and exclusion in "Disparities" provide insight into how networked systems control interaction and modulate flows between locals and immigrants. Relatedly, in "Cosmopolitan Capsules: Mediated Networking and Social Control in Expatriate Spaces," André Jansson discusses the problem of "capsular civilization," which is produced in urban networks where individuals are both highly connected and isolated. Network nodes (like the house, the neighborhood, the ethnic enclave, the computer, or the TV screen) "operate in the form of capsules" that insulate individuals from real contact (239). 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 and marginalized 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 (239–40). With regard to transnational networks in a single urban milieu like London, Jansson explains that an active or agentive cosmopolitanism requires 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; emphasis in original). Without such a mindset, transnational spaces exhibit instead a "glocal logic of encapsulation" (243). Via processes of inclusion and exclusion, they become spaces "not for connectivity and exchange but for separation and dominance" (239) of people segregated by categories like nationality, race, class, or belief system. 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" (Okri 40) that acts on the narrator points to the underlying structural violence that drives him to a persistent nomadism. However, his wandering, while a likely consequence of systematic exclusion and a capsular logic of separation, also allows him to evade control and to influence the meaning of the city for himself and others through mythmaking. Wandering permits him a freedom of movement that both complies with and resists attempts to sideline and contain him.

IV. Conclusion

Both *The Lonely Londoners* and "Disparities" sidestep the dominant logic that orders metropolitan space. They demonstrate how a networked system, like a city plan, 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 pointless drift that evades pre-existing plans. As I have shown, in Selvon's and Okri's works, im/migrant wanderers along London's byways and passages participate in creating a mobile, transformative sense of place. Mobility thus becomes a resource for immigrant self-imagining in this metropolitan urban space that often inhibits movement by geographical directives or containment. In its focus on grounded mobility, this essay has attempted to provide a human-centered and experiential way of reading literary works depicting travel and migrancy in colonial and post-colonial contexts and thus 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 London 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, di-

gressive pathways, and fragmented experience as fundamental features of 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 to simply 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 in a networked system. They represent places as composed of layered and connected viewpoints and paths rather than as binary and discrete. These fictions suggest that further critical attention be paid to how network systems function in enabling control over places and people and how individuals might engage in creative practices of walking. Both narratives redefine conceptions of places as hierarchical and fixed and instead emphasize the grounded and mobile paths of their characters, promoting their tactile and dynamic connections with British metropolitan space.

Notes

1 My construction of grounded and aerial viewpoints draws, in this first instance, from the work of 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; emphasis in original)

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.

3 In this article, 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. For more, see chapters 2 and 9 of Hansen.

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 calls these network visualizations "narrative structures." A selection of his drawings can be found online in an exhibit record at the Pierogi Gallery.

5 See also 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" and 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 of how the traces of the traveler's origins influence a new sense of a place.

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).

7 See the introduction of Dawson's *Mongrel Nation*, in which 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).

8 See Chapter 2 of Hansen.

9 See also Part 1 of Galloway and Thacker.

10 See also Bentley's discussion of fragmentation as a narrative strategy in *The Lonely Londoners* (73).

11 See Chapter 8 of Hansen.

12 In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes: "For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. In it he produces, as his family once did, refuse and lumber" (87).

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