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Annalisa Pes

Ben Judah's *This is London*: Stories of Encounters in the Landscape of Migration

Abstract I: L'articolo offre una lettura del reportage letterario *This is London* (2016) del giornalista e analista politico Ben Judah. Analizza la rappresentazione delle comunità di immigrati nella Londra globale e multiculturale e il ruolo che assumono gli incontri relazionali in questa società, mostrando come la metropoli venga percepita come un paesaggio della mente. Indaga i concetti di identità e appartenenza in relazione all'appropriazione e alla riconfigurazione dello spazio e del luogo. Affronta inoltre la funzione dello stile letterario utilizzato dall'autore per trasmettere emozioni e per restituire centralità all'essere umano in un approccio che sfida le dinamiche di razzismo ed esclusione che affliggono le società globali postcoloniali.

Abstract II: The article focuses on the literary reportage *This is London* (2016) by the journalist and political analyst Ben Judah. It analyses the representation of immigrant communities and relational encounters in global and multicultural London, showing how the metropolis is perceived as a landscape of the mind. It investigates the concepts of identity and belonging in connection with the appropriation and reconfiguration of space and place. It also tackles the function of the literary style employed by Judah to convey emotions and to give back centrality to human beings in an approach that challenges the dynamics of racism and exclusion affecting postcolonial global societies.

Keywords: Ben Judah, London, landscape, migration, encounters.

Published in 2016 to widespread acclaim, *This is London: Life and Death in the World City* by the foreign correspondent and political analyst Ben Judah is a documentary collection of portraits and first-hand experiences that provides a composite picture of the hidden world of the city's immigrants. The UK's most populous, richest, and most powerful capital city, London stands out in this book as a world apart from the rest of the country, an undiscovered island within the island, a multilayered metropolis that many Britons, foreign diplomats, and readers have only a vague awareness of (Oliver 2016). Through an experimental and fascinating journey – literally, a journey in which Judah walks and takes the bus with the people he meets – the author shows how, in the global environment of this "world city" where life and death overlap, the identities of Londoners are continuously redefined and reconfigured by power dynamics of social, cultural, and economic disparity.

In his highly influential work on black diaspora and the struggle against coloniality and racial capitalism, Paul Gilroy employs the concept of "routes", in a play of contrast with "roots", to express the hybrid identities and cultural forms produced by the transnational passage and circulation through multiple material and figurative locations (1995: 3). It can be argued that the characters inhabiting Judah's London are fully representative of the condition of "routed" characters: natives or foreigners, rich or poor, legal or (mostly) illegal migrants, whose dynamic and hybrid identities have been formed by the routes they have travelled and the borders (be they geographical, social, or cultural) they have crossed throughout the experience of migration and of cultural exchange. The stories reported by Judah prove that their unfixed and negotiated identities are being shaped every day, not only by the migratory paths they tread upon, but also, and above all, by their encounters with a world that is rapidly changing, that is, in its turn, constantly shaped and reshaped by their presence.

In this light, the aim of this paper is to show how in Ben Judah's non-fictional narrative the representation of relational encounters across cultural, geographic, and social borders may contribute to redefining our understanding of identity and belonging and to challenging enduring dynamics of racism and exclusion that still affect global postcolonial societies. It is a matter of fact that encounters are rarely neutral and that they are often governed by prior histories of racialisation and (non)belonging that determine power asymmetry. It is my concern to show that encounters in Judah's work reflect the systemic inequality caused by hierarchical structures of power, but they can also be read as sites of resistance. In this sense, the physical, sensory, and affective interactions of the narrator with the people he meets result in "embodied" encounters that develop multisensorial empathy and that, ultimately, challenge the lack of knowledge on which the process of otherisation is based. In other words, Judah's narratives of encounters with Otherness in the multicultural landscape of London release the Other from the condition of being unknown, unheard, and unseen: the Other is given visibility, their story is heard, and this can provide a more comprehensive, inclusive and adaptable understanding of human identities.

It is worth saying that, despite the journalistic acclaim and commercial success of Ben Judah's *This is London*, the text has received surprisingly little attention from academic literary criticism. While the book has been widely praised by reviewers for its immersive, reportage style, a significant void persists in literary scholarship, especially if compared with fictional representations of multicultural London. To date, no comprehensive academic articles have been published that critically analyse the text's narrative strategies and architecture, its depiction of contemporary urban migration, or its contribution to twenty-first-century metropolitan literature. Therefore, an article dedicated to analysing this book through the theoretical lenses of postcolonial and migration studies will contribute to filling this gap, offering an investigation, with an attention to genre and style, of how Judah's literary reportage represents transnational encounters, displacement and power asymmetries in the new global metropolis by using knowledge not as a source of power, but as a challenge to otherisation and to invisibility.

Having said that, it is crucial to begin by highlighting that the undisputed "protagonist" of Judah's book – as the pride of place in the title proves – is London, a postcolonial multicultural metropolis that is not just a geographical location, but a complex and contra-

dictory way of being; a city that, borrowing the famous words of Zadie Smith, "is a state of mind" (Bollen 2012). It should be pointed out in this regard, however, that the term "protagonist" is not used to convey that sense of imperial centrality that London embodied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when, as Clement Ball argues, it "projected itself to the inhabitants of its pink-stained territories as the centre of the world" (2004: 4). On the contrary, London is represented as a metropolis that has been transformed demographically, ethnically, and even nationally, and so, borrowing Ball's words again, it is the protagonist of a process of "transnational decentredness [which] has become its most visibly constitutive feature" (2004: 5).

Hence, defining Judah's London is not an easy thing. It is a fluid and multisensorial "landscape of the mind" in which the border between hopelessness and illusion is continuously redrawn and crossed. It is a decentred and reappropriated cultural and political space that is struggling with a sense of "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy 2004) after having lost power and control over a previously dominated part of the world. It is a landscape perceived through the mind of the invisible underworld that inhabits it. According to the American author and essayist Gretel Ehrlich, the outside "scape" (the physical land) is always connected to an observer's internal reality (the subjective meaning we assign to it): "Landscape does not exist without an observer, without a human presence. The land exists, but the scape is a projection of human consciousness, an image received" (1987: 24). In this light, in Judah's book, London exists through its sounds, smells, glittering lights, illusory images of wealth, and stark realities of destitution and privation – all projections of the consciousness of the people who live in it, see it, and think of themselves in it. Hence, the space is redefined by the encounter between mind and sight: sight is "the dominant sensory mode" to acquire knowledge of the external world, and it ultimately leads to insight and to the exploration of the inner space that lies within ourselves (Porteous 1990: 3).

If encounters are, therefore, fundamental in *This is London*, as they reconfigure the concept of space and the understanding of identity, they are also essential to understanding the author and his book. Indeed, this collection of stories is an encounter of different genres, written by an author who is himself an encounter of different cultures and identities. Ben Judah was born in London into a family of Baghdadi Jewish descent. He spent most of his childhood in the 1990s in the Balkans (where his father worked as a reporter) and travelled extensively in Central Asia and the Middle East. Back in London, he was educated both in French and in English before graduating from Oxford University. Judah is not a novelist, but he is the author of three books: *Fragile Empire* (2013), *This is London* (2016), and the most recent *This is Europe* (2023). All three books show the author's interest in the relational dynamics of encounters in contact zones, and they are all written in the approach of the frontline reporter. Judah, in fact, is a journalist: a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Evening Standard*, and *The Financial Times*. He has also had an active role in politics, until early 2026, as the adviser of David Lammy, the Labour deputy Prime Minister of the UK, and previously foreign secretary (Oliver 2016). This multi-layered identity of a successful writer[1] with plural interests in the political, social, economic, psychological, and

[1] This is London was longlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-fiction 2016 and shortlisted for the

relational dynamics of the contemporary multicultural world makes Judah an "embodied encounter" of commitment, competence, ethical involvement, and empathy for human beings and the way they live.

All these elements converge in the more than four hundred pages of *This is London*, in which Judah chronicles the new contemporary London by reporting his encounters with the immigrant underclass. The book is structured in twenty-five chapters, each one named after a different area of London, starting with Victoria coach station and expanding throughout a conurbation of districts many visitors have most likely never heard of: Neasden, Catford, Plaistow, Harlesden, and Beckton.

Victoria station is introduced as the gateway to the book, to London, and to a new life, "our miserable Ellis Island. The point from which our society is changing" (Judah 2016: 1). It is the limbo of the city, the borders of a nation and the boundaries of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) where two thousand migrants arrive every week, tens of thousands every year, "the equivalent of a whole city, the size of Basildon or Bath. They are all part of the same thing: the new London" (Judah 2016: 3). The station is a concentration of metaphorical images and symbolic meanings that give the sense of a place where identities are reshaped and redefined in terms of belonging/unbelonging, inclusion/exclusion: "Automatic doors slide and close. Crowds are dazed with arrival" (Judah 2016: 1). The environment is unwelcoming: it is raining and cold, the freeze steams every pane, the air is damp. The station is not only a culturally and emotionally shaped landscape, it is also a soundscape where the sounds (as well as the smells) charge the place with meanings and evoke a sense of belonging (or not belonging) to a community (Ingold 2011): wheels crash, coaches bleep and reverse, pigeons flutter, ventilators moan, and incomprehensible languages echo incessantly – all this conveys the idea of confusion, dizziness, and bewilderment. It is interesting to note that this sensory description of the place does not just set the scene; it also establishes the ethical and political framework that dictates how the reader relates to the migrant and the host community. Disorientation and daze function as dehumanising elements in the migrant's journey and the reader, who is captured by these perceptions, is forced to acknowledge the structural estrangement and racism embedded in everyday spaces.

The division of the book into place-chapters with a specific ethnic, cultural and social connotation reflects the image of a metropolis that has been rewritten from the outside as a decentralised centre: a cluster of mostly peripheral areas populated by transient and hybrid communities of people in constant flux. The expression coined by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to describe the way in which, in the modern world, fixed identities and stable communities are destabilised by global migratory movements – a "warp" that "is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion" (1990: 297) – perfectly fits Judah's representation of a dismembered London. London, indeed, is portrayed as an "ethnoscape", that is "a landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists,

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Ryszard Kapuscinski Award for Literary Reportage 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/ben-judah/ (consulted on 28/08/2026). In 2024, the New Statesman named Judah as one of the 50 most influential people shaping the UK's progressive politics, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2024/06/new-statesman-left-power-list-2024 (consulted on 28/08/2026).

immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and persons" (Appadurai 1990: 297). Movement and change are key words in this process of reconfiguration of the complex landscape of migration, where different communities are dislocated and relocated, and where the experiences of integration, adaptation, and estrangement are connected to the perception, appropriation, and redefinition of space.

When Judah introduces London as the city where he was born, he is dismayed to realise he cannot recognise it:

> I was born in London but I no longer recognize this city. I don't know if I love the new London or if it frightens me: a city where at least 55 per cent of people are not ethnically white British, nearly 40 per cent were born abroad, and 5 per cent are living illegally in the shadows. I have no idea who these new Londoners are. Or even what their London really is (Judah 2016: 3).

Reading between the lines of this apparently ethnophobic assertion, one can indeed detect an implicit critique of the sensationalist press, spreading populist words of terror and hostility and fomenting the fear of "invading" migrants. Judah's bewilderedness seems to imply – especially in the last quoted line ("what their London really is") that shifts the perspective on migrants – a challenge to what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson call "the assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture" (1992: 7), that is a perception of the world based on a natural association of culture, society, and place: in this case, the deceptive belief that London is where the English live. In fact, the fluid and dynamic experience of space in the modern global world requires that this association of places and peoples, of a culturally unitary group and "their" territory, must be challenged (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 11).

The above-quoted passage also underlines how, besides being a space of identitarian encounters, London is also a place of social inequalities and economic exploitation. A gleaming capital city that hasn't lost its imperial allure, London continues to be "the place for me"[2] in the collective imaginary of immigrants, caught between "the realities of having to move [and] the fantasies of wanting to move" (Appadurai 1990: 297). But if capitalism, the product of an enduring colonial past, is now sustained by migrant money and migrant workers, Judah's protagonists prove that they are nonetheless forced to live their invisible lives in poverty and in largely inhumane conditions. The Romanian fiddler Judah interviews in Hyde Park Corner, one of the beggars who live unseen on the streets of Knightsbridge, clearly conveys his sense of frustration at being caught between reality and fantasy:

> I want work. I want to feel like a man again. I'll be a painter, a decorator, a sweeper, an animal feeder, anything. I can't keep sleeping here like a rat. I want an address, I dream of an address, and then I want to have a pension […] We're all here to beg to work off our debts. We give the enforcers all the money. They told us to come here. But we are never going to make back the loans they gave us to come here. We're trapped (Judah 2016: 30).

[2] The reference is to the famous song by the Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Kitchener, "London is the Place for Me", written onboard the Empire Windrush in 1948.

It is through recurrent testimonies like these that *This is London* becomes a systematic critique of the modern world and of models of society that continue to advocate the inherent dominance of a Eurocentric world.

A peculiar aspect of *This is London* is its style that presents both the straightforwardness of Judah's journalism and the influence of the language of literature, with a recurrent use of metaphors, symbols and impressionistic descriptions. Belonging to the relatively new, multifaceted genre of "literary reportage" or "narrative journalism", Judah's book is an encounter between rigorous factual reporting and the narrative techniques of fiction, which immerses the reader in true stories with an engaging rhythm. It is a genre in which the events are not reported as completed, like in news articles, but as ongoing and the style implies two kinds of representations: "*mimetic representation* (a scenic representation style, also known as *showing*), and *diegetically narrating representation* (also known as one kind of *telling* and opposed to *diegetically informing representation*, the neutral style that is standard in news language)" (Aare 2022: 1-2). And, indeed, the author opens the book declaring that he is not interested in reporting statistics and numbers (though, in the end, he gives quite a few when the journalist prevails over the writer), but in giving his own subjective and true-to-life experience:

> I have to see everything for myself. I don't trust statistics. I don't trust columnists. I don't trust self-appointed spokesmen. I have to make up my own mind. This is why I am shivering again, in Victoria coach station, at 6 am (Judah 2016: 1).

This thirst for knowledge and need to see, to listen, to understand the reach of the human cost of migration and of the inhuman price of the global economy reveal an attention to feelings, emotions, and the psychological sphere that can more aptly be conveyed through the language of literature rather than through the often aseptic or informing approach of journalism.

> I write down my emotions as it rains: ambiguity first, uncertainty second. We need the N21 for the city. But the rain hardens, slows, then showers – until that sound seems to swallow everything. The night glows more intensely orange. We are becoming numb [...] This is just the night shift for the 250,000 migrant cleaners of London. The rush hour, before the rush hour, that makes sure all of our offices are clean (Judah 2016: 206).

As Marina Gerner notes, journalistic discussions on globalisation generally focus on economic structures and political institutions, whilst they are devoid of individual actors. Judah, instead, captures the deeply personal experiences of London's migrant communities (2016: 11). The real strength of his book is the intimate portraits and the voices, reported with ethnic cadences, errors, ellipses, and repetitions, of persons that are called by name and have, each of them, a personal story to deliver in a sort of therapeutic flow of storytelling.

The encounter with the "other" London means for Judah immersing himself in a hidden world: he walks, notebook in hand, down grubby streets and casts a light into the lives of people inhabiting decentred suburbs. He is keen on knowing, observing, understanding,

but his gaze is nothing like the "fixing gaze" of the racialising subject that objectifies the raced Other into an inferior and subdued identity (Fanon 1986). In spite of the problematic ambivalence intrinsic in his indisputably privileged position as a journalist, and therefore as someone who observes, selects, arranges and mediates the stories of the Others, the author distances himself from an exclusive metropolitan culture that, in the words of Edward Said, produces knowledge of the Other and controls the representation of what it sees as marginal and powerless (Said 2003). As a matter of fact, when Judah meets the protagonists of his reportage, he puts himself in their position.

Walking in their footsteps and taking advantage of his own non-purely Anglo-Saxon features, which help him move around without attracting much suspicion, he wears a sort of counter-Fanonian black mask and becomes one of them for one night or for days:

> I need to know what it feels like to be invisible. I need to know what it means to become unseen on plutocratic boulevards. I need to know what it is like to be glared at like a mangy half-man. This is why I am wearing beggar's clothes: worn out, third hand brogues, thin joggers, a torn puffa jacket and a tight woolly hat (Judah 2016: 12).

In this obsession with fieldwork and the need to live deep down into the experience of the encounter, several reviewers and critics have seen the influence of George Orwell's journalism, noting that Judah's immersive, on-the-ground style of reporting on the hidden underclass of London, relying on direct personal observation rather than on statistics or conventional media, strongly echoes *Down and Out in Paris and London* (2009) (Curtis 2016; Waywell 2016; Colvile 2016). What is interesting, however, is that Judah himself has rejected Orwell's legacy as an outdated model. In a provocative 2017 essay titled "Why I've had enough of George Orwell", Judah argues that Orwell has "nothing to say about social fragmentation, financialisation, ethnic splintering, unaccountable corporations, offshore kleptocrats, or echo chambers" (Judah 2017) and that his rigid, often binary moral framework cannot comply with the complexities of the twenty-first century global systems.

These words are important to understand that *This is London* is deeply rooted in the contemporary global world from which it is generated and, indeed, the representation of the multicultural microcosm of the metropolis cannot be thoroughly understood without referring to the macropolitical situation of the time. In Judah's book, contemporary London is a world that has been strongly inflected by history over the years. It is different, for example, from the London portrayed in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Far from being simply a non-fiction version of Smith's novel, with the same thriving multicultural society in the background and a similar critical eye on racism and on the ongoing consequences of colonialism, *This is London* depicts a city that by early 2016 had changed and was about to change even more dramatically later that year. Smith's vision of London very much had to do with the early years of Tony Blair and a Labour government, but sixteen years later, the initial enthusiasm for an emerging multicultural society had worn off and societal pressures – like unregulated labour markets, housing crises, and working-class alienation – were fuelling the Leave campaign that would lead, just months after the publication of Judah's book, to the Brexit vote.

The connection with contemporary politics explains both Judah's distance from an old-fashioned Orwellian vision and the impossibility for him to draw a generally optimistic picture of multicultural London, having written the book, as he admits, "in the shadow of Brexit" that was, in his opinion, "mainly the result of bad migration policies"[3]. In any case, the hybridisation of the language of literature with the approach of immersive social reportage that Judah, unequivocally of what he says, shares with Orwell, is a narrative method that allows him to avoid a patronising tone or the intent to shock when reporting the stories of the voiceless, thus taking a firm stand against the anti-immigration sentiment and national sovereignty debates of the time.

In this respect, one should be aware, once again, that the reporter Judah enters precarious migrant spaces with the aim of knowing and giving visibility to an underworld of marginal voices that, in the end, he converts into a marketable literary product. This certainly generates the ambiguous position of someone who has the power to aestheticise and authorise these voices, even though, in fact, the author never uses knowledge of the Other as an orientalist weapon to prevail over what is knowable. His fieldwork methods make him listen to the people he meets with attention and take notes, and his receptive rather than imposing role is attested by frequent statements like: "I record their voices" (Judah 2016: 12), "I write what I see" (Judah 2016: 26), "I need to see every story from the other side" (Judah 2016: 34). Besides, another interesting narrative strategy that I think should not pass unnoticed is the way in which Judah describes his characters going away after telling their story: "the fiddler turns his back on me, and descends into the dinge of the underpass" (Judah 2016: 9); "Prince walks out of the tunnel, I hear him praying" (Judah 2016: 32); "Mukhtar seems emotional, and tells me it is time to go" (Judah 2016: 310). If, on the one hand, this seems to be a narrative device to underline the social and political invisibility of migrants disappearing into their underworld, on the other hand, it is my contention that it can also be read as an active strategy of agency and self-determination given to subjects that are usually represented through an epistemic approach of domination and exploitation. The disempowered character is, in this way, given the narrative power to decide what to say and when to leave, reappropriating a reversed position of absolute control over the Western listener.

Having said this, it is necessary to point out that if by using these narrative strategies Judah gives visibility and voice to the underworld of migrants – a voice and a visibility usually covered by the media with sensationalist and racist representations – the fact of writing from the perspective of a western-educated intellectual remains, as mentioned above, a critical issue. The risk is what Gayatri Spivak calls "epistemic violence", that is the systematic marginalisation and subjugation of non-Western knowledge systems by Eurocentric colonial discourse. According to Spivak, the assumption that the subaltern can speak freely within dominant discourse needs to be dismantled because, in fact, the subaltern cannot speak within spaces where any attempt at political articulation is inevitably subsumed and normalised by dominant interpretative grids (Spivak 1988). The crucial point, Spivak (1985) also argues, is that Western critics are often unable to recognise their epistemic privilege and

[3] Judah said this at a book presentation of This is London, held at the University of Amsterdam on 8 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXuckzydJAI&t=289s (consulted on 17/09/2026).

institutional location on which their writing is based and to which it is addressed. So, the danger for Western writers (and journalists in particular) is to aestheticise human trauma, poverty, and systemic exclusion into literary capital and consumable spectacles of suffering designed for a privileged, bourgeois readership. What in my opinion exempts Judah from this risk, which is ever present anyway, is the fact that he does not ventriloquise the Other, he does not speak for them: he records dialogues and transcribes them without correcting mistakes, without exoticising the accent, without translating their words with more politically correct expressions. As he keeps repeating throughout the text: he writes what he sees and hears. Of course, one should not forget that in the end the writer/journalist edits, frames, and arranges the stories for the sake of publication. Yet, I argue that the narrative space and control in *This is London* is left to the interviewed people, forgotten and ignored by most in real life, but masters of their own stories in the book.

Besides the narrative strategies discussed above, this is also demonstrated by the fact that Judah does not speak from the position of the writer who teaches, but from that of the reporter who learns:

> You never learn it all just watching. You never learn it all from the numbers. You have to go up and talk to people: completely, utterly different people from you. I refuse to let someone else tell me what they think (Judah 2016: 4).

It is this shift of the narrative stance from the privileged narrating subject to the peripheral gaze of the narrated object, which comes to occupy an authorial position, that prevents Judah from speaking for the other.

Reinforcing this view is the fact that the city Judah no longer recognises and wants to understand from the perspective of the Other is not a city of "strange" Londoners but of "new" Londoners. The focus on newness rather than strangeness makes me argue that his approach moves away from the hierarchical imposition of the Western point of view. Exploring the contradictory dynamics implicit in the construction of "strangeness", Sara Ahmed argues that the stranger is something which is recognisable, that is, something which is contingent to the self and is produced through a dialectic of proximity and distance. For Ahmed, encounters with others are often based on an absence of knowledge (of the Other) and this absence is necessary to constitute the subject in relation to what is strange: by being temporarily assimilated as the unknown within the encounter, strange bodies function as the border dividing the space the familiar body cannot enter from the space in which it is at home (2000: 54). So, when we meet others, Ahmed suggests, we need to read the signs of difference on their bodies because by fixing them in regimes of difference, we try to achieve recognition of the self (2000: 8).

In *This is London*, however, the categories of strangeness and knowledge are used interchangeably from different perspectives: Judah argues that he wants to know the new London and new Londoners, but he also wants to understand how immigrants view the English and what *their* London really is. In the eyes of Margarita, the Polish cleaner, "the English people are very lazy [...] They don't want to work when it is difficult" (Judah 2016: 176). They are also mean, ugly, cruel, and snobbish. For most Eastern Europeans, Britain is

"a 'mini-America'. But there is no British dream […] Britain is a land of opportunity. But they do not feel particularly welcome. Like they are living in a spare room" (Judah 2016: 182). The change of perspective is fundamental to understand the role of encounter in *This is London* as a site of resistance, where what Homi Bhabha (2004) calls the "denied knowledges" are allowed to enter the dominant discourse and undermine the basis of its authority.

The refusal to accept knowledge constructed by mainstream cultural power is further evidenced by Judah's learning through disparate field experiences. He sleeps rough in an underpass beneath Hyde Park Corner with homeless Romanians in an "invisible village" underground. He passes himself off as a Russian to enter a shabby dosshouse in East London. He travels to the derelict area of Beckton Alps with Polish builders who work night and day to renovate newly owned mansions of wealthy Russians. He takes the night bus with African cleaners who work at night to clean the offices of the City, before the sun rises and the business day begins. He speaks with Vietnamese gangs who furtively wrap little parcels of illegal fur.

In the descriptions of these often surreal encounters, a composite picture of synesthetic experiences emerges (and, again, the narrative switches from journalism to prose poetry) in which sights, sounds, tastes, and smells overlap and take the reader in. The combination and confusion of the senses create a narrative of encounters that is not only physical and cultural, but also sensorial. The senses influence each other and through this sensory response denied knowledges enter and challenge the dominant discourse:

> This is street life: disorientation, a jumble of snatched faces, and car noise. After dinner couples are strolling along Park Lane. Slavic blondes with sad-making eyes drift past on the arms of perfumed Saudi men; euphoric smokers in long coats, with whisky breath, come out of the hotels. When the one newsagent locks up, the Bangladeshi boys working there toss out buckets of foul water. I record their contemptuous voices: "The beggars they sleep here like mice. We have to keep the thieves away. This water means they can't sleep until it dries" (Judah 2016: 12).

The sense of dizzying inebriation deriving from these impressionistic descriptions contributes to decentralising the power of London that comes out as a disrupted, multi-layered city with a prismatic identity: a city within the city divided up into little worlds of isolation and alienation; a contact zone where borders are crossed and, as in Mary Louise Pratt's well-known definition, disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other in highly asymmetrical relations of power (1991: 34). This internal division and fragmentation convey an idea of global London as a landscape of the mind, constructed by cultural elements and by the emotional sense of (un)belonging of different ethnic groups that stick to each other but remain separate from one another. The Lithuanian shopkeeper in Beckton puts it bluntly:

> I don't live in Britain…I live in Lithuania. I watch Lithuanian TV…I use Lithuanian internet…My friends they are all Lithuanians…This shop is Lithuanian…I only meet Lithuanians. The only thing I do in Britain is pay taxes to the British (Judah 2016: 184).

In this modern global mega-city, proud of her powerful past but ashamed of her powerless inhabitants, where thousands of people from all over the world encounter one another, integration is hardly an option, and separation often remains the only way to belong to oneself: "It's like this: Russian and Ukrainian people hate Polish and Lithuanian people. Eastern Europe peoples hate Indian people. Everybody hates the black people. Whites hate everyone". Not an enticing picture but, as the Ukrainian girl says to the author, "That's just the way it is" (Judah 2016: 186).

A few concluding observations deserve to be made on the book's ending. The last chapter of the book ends with a final image that seems to open up to a more hopeful future in which divisiveness can be overcome. In a Muslim graveyard, two boys – one Asian, wearing a red baseball cap, and the other Black, wearing blue jeans – stand in front of a grave under a baby elm tree. "There, they pull out the scratched leather hide covers of the book, sling their arms brotherly over their shoulders and begin to sing" (Judah 2016: 412). The sky is a powder blue and over the fields the blinking bright dots of light of distant towers can be glimpsed. In this symbolic final image, the periphery, the other London, remains separate from the centre and from its glittering skyscrapers (distant towers of illusion and inequality), but when human encounters break the barriers of division and difference, light prevails over darkness, open spaces over invisible underground places, and life over death.

Needless to say, it would be naïve to read this final scene of inter-ethnic friendship and cross-cultural solidarity as a conventional happy ending: there cannot be any "and they lived happily ever after" fairy-tale message in a context affected by day-to-day rivalries, inequality, and urban fragmentation. So, the message of hope is certainly fragile, but it seems to me that the author wants to close on a positive note to underline the wasted potential of contemporary migrant and diaspora London: "this *could be* London" in a different world, he seems to imply, but in actual fact, this *is* London.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated how *This is London* navigates a fragmented migrant landscape, utilising embodied cross-border encounters to challenge dominant forms of systemic ignorance, racialisation, and exclusion. Through a literary-spatial reading of Ben Judah's immersive reportage, this study shows how the text links lived migrant realities with postcolonial literary frameworks. By integrating documentary practice with questions of space, identity, affect, and structural violence, Judah forces a radical rethinking of the modern metropolis. His narrative charts a stark, subterranean geography of the city, replaces cold statistics with humanising oral histories, and directly confronts the ethical privileges and voyeuristic risks inherent in narrating poverty. Ultimately, Judah's work offers a vital contribution to migration and postcolonial studies, proving that the contemporary global city cannot be understood without unmasking the unequal spaces and invisible populations that sustain it.

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Annalisa Pes is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Verona where she teaches English and Anglophone literatures. Her research focuses on postcolonial studies, Australian literature, and black British writing. She has written on the fiction of Australian Nobel laureate Patrick White, on the short story genre and on female writing. Her publications include two co-edited volumes: *Ex-centric Writing. Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction* (CSP, 2013) and *Poetics and Politics of Shame in Postcolonial Literature* (Routledge, 2019).
annalisa.pes@univr.it