

‘Street level view’: spatial orientation and metropolitical boundaries in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* and Nell Dunn’s *Up The Junction*

Ailsa Davies

‘London is a place like that. It divide up little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to’ (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 60). Here, Selvon’s protagonist reveals the cultural climate of London experienced by the characters in both *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Nell Dunn’s *Up the Junction* (1963). The city contains internal borders and distinct area disparities which serve to delimit and control their navigation of it. Alongside this, the texts also explore moments of mobility, when characters cross, stretch or reconfigure these boundaries, loosening the city’s grip. They frequently map out their own social geographies, building their identities through and beyond the socio-economic boundaries imposed upon them. In Selvon’s novel, the Caribbean boys’ near nomadic wandering allows them to transcend the ordered and bordered arrangement of London, whilst also signifying the instability of migrant life. Dunn’s characters’ movements, although rooted in a different literary geography, reveal a similar disjunction: their confinement to a local world heightens their awareness of a larger, often inaccessible London, even as it fosters a tenacious sense of community and class solidarity. Drawing on what Lee terms a ‘spatial turn in the humanities’ (Lee, 2022: 4), this research paper examines how both texts use a street-level view to explore how classed and racialised subjects navigate, integrate into, and at times subvert the spaces they occupy.

Ground-level perspectives and restricted vision

Street-level views work to ground the text’s narratives in close-up interactions and encounters with their environments; this grounding, however, carries the trace of a framing or limiting of perspective. As Kelly elucidates, Selvon’s characters in *Londoners* experience a ‘ground-level, mobile enactment on networked space’ (Kelly, 2019: 68), entangling their social encounters with the urban infrastructure. While

Kelly's assertion links grounded experiences with a freedom to move around, I extend this to consider the restrictive, figurative implications: a certain flatness and attachment to the street. This dual notion is encapsulated in an incident when one of the Caribbean boys' mother, Tanty, boards a bus in an attempt to familiarise herself with the city. Forced to the top deck, she is consequently so 'frighten that she didn't bother to look out of the window and see anything' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 71). The bus offers an aerial view, and hurries her across London, a perspective and speed neither of which her primary dwelling in 'Harrow Road' (Ibid.: 68) allows her. Whilst the view from the window offers her a chance to experience the magnified scale of the city, this vantage point is so unfamiliar to Tanty that she is unable to look out of it. Phillips regards Tanty's experience of the city as 'limited, if not ghettoised' owing to an inability to 'alter the city to her needs' (Phillips, 2011: 116) and move beyond the boundaries of her locality. While her attachment to a singular road anchors her within a social environment where she feels like she belongs, it simultaneously denies her full integration. Thus, her predominantly ground-level experiences reveal the city's capacity for othering and frequent underscoring of her migrant status.

In Dunn's *Junction*, it is an absence of windows which display the systemic spatial trappings the characters are subject to. The characters navigate and encounter their environment on a ground level, simultaneously revealing their spatial delimitations and providing a close, intimate narrative framing. Throughout, the narrator Suzy heeds the material reality of her immediate surroundings. This is particularly acute when confronted with the enclosing features of the factory where she and the other girls work. Positioned amid boisterous conversation, the narrator notes that 'there are no windows in the room where we have been sitting since eight in the morning' (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 25). Suzy's optical impotence expounds her, and the factory workers', physical bordering in, as well as a containment of their perspective: they are occluded from the world outside the factory walls. This does not reduce or curtail their social encounters, however, as the 'subjective and desiring density of the collective exchanges' (Alcalá & Chung, 2016: 52) mediate and fill the space. Within the next instance, the narrator observes a uniting exchange, when they decide to have a break and call 'tea's up. Go and get some sugar, Bent Sheil!' (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 25).

Thus, despite the isolating potential of their workspace, it becomes a distinctly social domain. The women working in the factory move through the space with social purpose, forming an intimacy and rapport with each other. Hence, this complicates the implications of ground-level encounters. Here, they have a levelling capacity, stifling hierarchies amongst the characters who are limited to them.

Interior spaces in a divided city: marginalisation, collectivity and confinement

Private, interior spaces provide relief for the characters in both texts, in a metropolis in which they also find themselves lost and isolated. The rooms that the Caribbean boys in Londoners occupy are in markedly decrepit condition, yet they discover them as places of paramount and vibrant social encounter. Moses's room, for example, is where the 'boys generally congregate' (Jeon, 2022: 170); they literally make 'room' for each other, in conditions where it is nearly impossible to do so. Jeon notes Bakhtin's notion that 'proximity to others in the same space' generates a feeling of 'collectivity' (ibid.: 178). In this context, 'collectivity' amongst the characters migrating from the Caribbean is somewhat imposed upon them. For Galahad, upon being collected from the station Moses' room is the first interior space he enters, and where he receives initial hospitality. Somewhat begrudgingly, Moses offers Galahad to 'sleep on them two chairs' for a night because "'both of we is Trinidadians and we must help out one another'" (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 17). The gesture is altruistic, offering furniture instead of the floor, but ultimately signifies his material poverty and spatial impediment. Galahad makes frequent visits just as the other boys do, working to establish 'a temporary space where they are no longer strangers but an essential part of the urban landscape' (Jeon, 2022: 178). While, indeed, this gathering often augments solidarity and builds a sense of Caribbean community, Moses also has little control over his dwelling as a site of ingress and egress, with Cap for example repeatedly 'dropping in and [won't leave at all]' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 44). The room becomes a site of temporary encounters hidden from public view, which ultimately suspends full integration into the urban landscape. Thus, this illustrates how classed and racialised characters are constantly exposed to a disorientating paradox: the very space that provides them protection also provides harmful limitations.

In both texts, London emerges as a city explicitly structured according to race and class. As well as situating private interaction separate to public monitoring, housing articulates borders within the metropolis and positions implicit boundaries upon the characters. In *Londoners*, Moses ruminates upon the exclusionary geography of London, analogising it as 'divide up into little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 60). With this, London is reduced to territories and split into 'worlds', a word which implies independence and distinction in opposition to the 'other'. It points towards the capacity for space to delineate and fix identity.

Furthermore, Moses defines himself in opposition to areas where he is made to feel unwelcome by 'them rich people' (ibid.: 60). The distancing pronoun 'them' and the notion of discrete 'worlds' underscore the social and spatial alienation produced by these divisions. Though the phrasing 'London divide' is (ibid.: 60) reflects the speaker's non-standard English vernacular, the grammatical construction places 'divide' under the city's command, assigning the city agency to impose order. This renders the infrastructural arrangement and splitting of space as nameless and systemic. A similar sense of London as a divided place and a 'complex and socially dense canvas of...systemic traps' (Alcalá & Chung, 2016: 50) is evident in *Junction*. The characters intermittently reference slum clearances, where they 'lived till it got demolished... they moved us out to lousy Roehampton' (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 34). Here the character Dave recounts his displacement from Battersea and spatial uprooting. He reveals how private dwellings become vulnerable to metropolitan planning bodies concealed beneath an anonymous 'they', illuminating the characters' lack of agency and subjection to a wider system of marginalisation. This shows how street-level life demands continual negotiation, as characters navigate the imposed limits on where they can live and what spaces they can claim as their own.

Material landscapes and knowing one's 'place' defined by class and race. An up-close, street-level perspective also permits rich details of the material reality of local environments. In both texts, such descriptions are inflected with a sense of fondness and intimacy, as well as injustice. With this, social class emerges as a 'tangible formation felt most

distinctively through the experience of “knowing one’s place” (Lee, 2022: 1), as illustrated by the critic Lee. This sense of ‘knowing’ is layered, denoting a pride in the local and familiar, alongside a recognition of imposed spatial boundaries and expectation to stay in one’s ‘place’. In *Junction*, when describing the landscape of Battersea, the speaker observes the configuration of the housing, which form ‘little rows’ that ‘cluster round the gasworks’ (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 31). The description is fraught with tension: the word ‘cluster’ carries a condemnatory tone, as if from someone living outside of the area, suggesting overcrowding and insalubrity, while ‘little rows’ conveys a sense of affection and familiarity. *Londoners* contains a similar recognition of the characters’ material poverty, evidenced by the narrator’s observation of ‘old and grey and weatherbeaten’ (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 59) housing. Moses wields these material details as creating a ‘communal feeling with the Working Class and the spades’ (ibid.: 61) and a shared experience of poverty, which forms a moment of imbrication across communities integral to the *Londoners* text. While *Junction*’s material attention unites those already familiar with the place, *Londoners* presents these marginalising environments as also uniting people who are forced to move there. In this case the Caribbean immigrants operate under similar deprived circumstances as the working-class communities they live adjacent to. Thus, while street-level perspectives are broadly marginalising, they also facilitate moments of intimacy and togetherness.

Subverting urban boundaries through movement

While space is largely presented as fixed and unyielding in both texts, the boundaries of the city are also occasionally broken and twisted by the characters. The Caribbean boys in *Londoners* possess an awareness of the regions they belong in and the ways in which space is demarcated for them. However, their frequent wandering and spontaneous encounters across the city work to generate ‘space with their gestures, movements, and spatial relations’ (Colombino, 2013: 1). Their activities are not guided by boundaries imposed upon them, partially emancipating them from their environment, which determines their otherness. For example, although Cap is homeless, he deploys his nomadic state as a liberation. In pursuit of a girl he desires, he is able to ‘comb the whole of London...taking tube ride on the inner circle just in the hope that he might see she’ (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 51-2). Thus, his

wandering is not strictly aimless, but is in fact subversive in its impulsivity. The verb 'comb' implies meticulous observation and engagement with his environment, yet it is tinged with irony, as his method involves travelling around the underground repeatedly in the mere 'hope' of encountering the girl. While his wandering is constrained by the tube's fixed routes, he also asserts authority over his journey in refusing the notion of a predetermined destination. Kelly describes this wandering, exhibited by many of the Caribbean boys, as an 'unstable but potentially creative position of mapping the city with their own grounded footprints' (Kelly, 2017: 78). So, whilst the characters' unpredictable manipulation of space upsets the order of the metropolis, acting as a mode of productive resistance, it is also a method of survival.

In mapping out their own social geography, the characters in Selvon's Londoners often find themselves invisible and able to traverse the city with command. This invisibility is simultaneously liberating and symptomatic of their marginalised existence, as they remain unrecognised as permanent citizens. As Kelly points out, their deviations from conventional pathways allow the boys to cross into "spaces that cannot be seen" from above' (de Certeau in Kelly, 2017: 67). While their race often makes them highly visible, their poverty and nomadic status keeps them off the metropolitan radar. For example, Cap's act of repeatedly 'taking tube ride on the inner circle' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 51-2) provides subterranean concealment, hidden from a panoramic view of London and below the city's threshold of visibility. Kelly also notes this as a condition specific to the Caribbean boys' status as immigrants, propounding that 'late-and post-colonial travellers' experiences of places are mobile and multi focal' (Kelly, 2019: 64). In fact, this is represented in the structure of the novel itself, which assembles multiple character experiences, fluidly transitioning and shifting between them. This parallels the wandering movement of the characters, unsettling the conventional structures of a chaptered book just as they destabilise the boundaries of an ordered metropolis. As well as going underground, Cap remains difficult to trace on ground-level; moving between areas of London, the narrator remarks that 'one day you would hear he living Caledonia, another time he move to Clapham Common' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 34). Undeterred by the borders enforced by area distinctions, Cap acquires an almost animal-like nomadism and mythical status, unable to settle anywhere but liberated in the process. With this, the text

demonstrates how classed and racialised subjects adapt to, and at times subvert, urban space.

Reclaiming space through idioms and place names

Place names operate as both marginalising and empowering ways of constructing borders in the two texts. The boundaries in Dunn's *London in Junction* are sharply enforced and realised. The novel's short, vignette-style chapters mirror the fragmented, ordered, and bordered arrangement of the city. The names of the chapters are also specific to working-class Battersea, for example 'Dinner Hour' (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 35) refers to the time they go to the local café. With this, the manipulation of idiomatic terms reinforces the localised shaping of space, and thus the 'boundary between working-class Battersea and the rest of the city... [is] acknowledged and policed' (Brooke, 2012: 431). When a male character approaches the narrator and her friends, he describes a job 'cleaning the windows in some posh flat in Kensington' (Dunn, [1963] 1966: 34). Despite the physical proximity of the area to Battersea, the character signals the narrowness of his permission of access to it, which is entirely through work. The addition of the modifying and othering terms 'some posh' further underscores the distance he feels from the 'posh flat'. Here, housing acquires political significance, serving as a marker of class, authority and wealth, and delineating social division. By contrast with the distant Kensington, Battersea is deliberately rendered intimate, delineated through familiar names. The narrator navigates the street according to 'the sweet smell of cow-cake from Garton's' which 'blows up the road with the violet smoke from the Power Station' (ibid.: 49). The attention to the small business 'Garton's' anchors her spatial understanding in repetition and familiarity, reinforcing a linguistic bordering, and thus a sense of belonging. Here, the narrator's street-level navigation reveals her intimate understanding of her area, a fact of her exclusion from the broader city which she embraces.

In *Londoners*, names also uphold significance as a way of drawing attention to the boundaries within the city. However, the characters' recent migration to the city means they are unable to manipulate language as freely as the characters in *Junction*, and instead use their growing familiarity with the names of London areas in an effort to feel at

home. For the Caribbean boys, akin to their wandering, the ability to apply names to their spatial orientation often transcends the significance of their destination. For example, upon meeting up with a love interest, Galahad is described to 'make a big point of saying he was meeting she by Charing Cross... to say he was going there made him feel big and important' (Selvon, [1956] 2006: 71-72). The repetition of the word 'big' indicates his desire to take up space and uphold a metropolitan identity, as well as the scale of his wonder at his ability to travel to the place. The manipulation of iconic London names such as 'Charing Cross' also points towards the city's post-colonial identity as a 'symbolic centre of empire that coalesces around [particular] spaces and institutions' (Phillips, 2011: 107). Hence, Galahad's ability to freely utter and travel to 'Charing Cross' is ironically undercut by his inability to entirely assimilate into the metropolis, evidenced by his near veneration of the location. This reveals how the characters' attempts to map out their own social geographies are persistently marked by the discrimination that shapes their experience of the city.

Conclusion

To conclude, in both texts London acts as a 'psychic-phenomenological grounding' (Colombino, 2013: 4) where the characters' sense of personal identity and community is integrated into the urban infrastructure and the spaces they navigate. The city is predominantly presented as a place where its physical arrangements function to marginalise those deemed on the fringes of society. They are pushed out of sight and into segregated areas. The working-class characters in *Up The Junction* are repeatedly othered by their lack of mobility outside of the locality of Battersea, exacerbated by their shallow permission into other areas of London. Despite their fixity to the local, they navigate and animate their area through an intimate knowledge of their surroundings and lively social encounter. While Tanty experiences a comparable sense of locality in Londoners, the Caribbean boys remain unassimilated and unstable in both the interior and exterior spaces they traverse. Their wandering movements, however, provides a creative agency and allows them to surpass the order and divisions of the metropolis. Thus, Selvon and Dunn engage in changing the metropolis from a static, lifeless background into an unpredictable cultural labyrinth to be navigated and survived. Both texts draw attention to the characters' material poverty

and constant spatial uprooting, with references to slum clearances in Junction and the Caribbean boys' dwelling within singular rooms, or no rooms at all, in Londoners. While this deprivation often determines the characters' mobility, they also overcome the notion of the city as an agent of marginalisation and division through subtle methods of survival and resistance. Thus, this reveals a new consciousness of the systemic causes of poverty present in post-1945 urban fiction, as people rebuilt from World War II, subtly transcended the 'social scripts' imposed upon them and contended with the new world they found themselves in.

Bibliography

Alcalá, RDV, & Chung, M. 2016. *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.)

Brooke, Stephen. 2012. "‘Slumming’ in Swinging London? Class, Gender and the Post-War City in Nell Dunn’s *Up The Junction* (1963)", *Cultural and Social History*, Volume 9, Issue 3: 429–449

Colombino, L. 2013. 'Introduction' in *Spatial politics in contemporary London literature: writing architecture and the body* (Routledge: New York), pp. 1-23

Dunn, Nell. [1963] 1966. *Up The Junction* (London: Pan Books Ltd.)

Herald, Patrick. 2017. "‘The Black’, space, and sexuality: Examining resistance in Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol 52, issue 2: 350-364

Jeon, B. 2022. 'Between Transgression and Conviviality: Everyday Urban Space and the Carnavalesque Strategies in *The Lonely Londoners*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 64, no. 2: 163-183.

Kelly, K.N. 2019. 'Nomadic London: Reading Wandering in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Ben Okri's "Disparities"', *Ariel*, vol. 50, no. 1: 63-90.

Lee, Simon. 2022. 'Introduction', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities* (London: Routledge), pp. 1-19

Phillips, Lawrence. 2011. *London Narratives: Post-War Fiction and the City* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group)

Selvon, Sam. [1956] 2006. *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Group)