



Ben Judah, *This is London. Life and Death in the World City* (London: Picador, 2016), ISBN: 9781447272441, 424 pages, 101 pictures, £12, 18.

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With this book Ben Judah presents an exploration of London that highlights new dynamics in the metropolis, processes of transformation within the city as well as insights into seemingly hidden layers of urban space. Following the tradition of the flâneur's account of urbanity, in the footsteps of Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), the author aims at a first-person experience of the city's marginalised spheres. In addition to this, his personal approach is a journey into layers of London which exist often in plain sight and yet are thought of as inaccessible from the outside. These spaces, according to the author, constitute a different 'New London' (3). Judah's notion of urbanity draws on a relational understanding of space in which different layers exist in mobile and complex dynamic relationships. This book seeks to describe the city as a network rather than a container or a stage on which life stories unfold. The author travels through London's various sub-spaces, meandering the metropolis. With his movement, he connects his own observations to interviews and visual representations of the different spaces. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Judah foregrounds transformative powers such as migration in his representation of London. Different cultural and social spaces are shown to be shaping forces within the experience of the city. Although the author leaves the well-known facets of London behind to articulate a more deviant experience of the city, his text presents the reader with a picture of London that aims at highlighting the relationships of at first glance disparate elements of the urban and socio-cultural periphery. The 'New London' is inevitably linked to the old one, to the tourist-city, to Westminster's political power or to hipster bars in the East End. But these links have to be carefully excavated. London

is first and foremost a narrative, and Judah draws attention to discourses from marginal spaces to make them audible.

The idea of urban space as narrative also shapes the form of Judah's text, as the author links the 25 chapters to specific locations in the city: Each chapter is named after an actual place, except one, chapter 13 – the mid-point of the text – which takes its name after a postal code, 'N21'. Each chapter presents a different story from the polyphonic tale of London, and each one is then underlined by a visual narrative presented through photographs. Judah tells his journey through London in two different and yet interlaced modes: the text as story told by the author and his various interviewees as well as a visual narrative of over a hundred pictures. These visual impressions articulate a tale of their own, especially in the representation of the interviewees. At times, though, the text seems to be at odds with its visual tale, because the attempt to make voices from the peripheral spaces of London heard collides with pictures that seem to capture these voices from the outsider's gaze in the city's seemingly darker layers and thus trapping the interviewees in the perspective of the flâneur, who is only passing through and never actually part of the scene. The text presents the reader with the author's experiences when spending a night with a group of homeless Roma or working alongside Romanian labourers renovating million-pound apartments in parts of the city beyond the reach of the inhabitants of 'New London'. Judah speaks with a gang leader, a policeman and a teacher of Nigerian descent, a Russian maid, as well as many others and he walks the streets of a city in which one can see two forces at work: gentrification is counteracted by a process which turns large parts of the city into banlieues (183). The London the author seeks to discover is the London of the other, the city of migrants, of minorities, of the homeless, of cheap labour. Thus, 'New London' is in fact an Other-London, a spatial network often neglected and ignored.

The author's explorative journey into the layers of this Other-London has its beginning in the early morning hours at Victoria Coach Station. Judah initially approaches his project to experience 'New London' through being consciously in a place, locating oneself in the now and being open to the various impressions through which one can connect oneself to the urban network. The international coach station is presented as a place of diversity (African men, Polish meth-heads, Arab men; 1) and polyphony (Sinti, Turkish, Swahili; 1). It is thus seen as a nexus between the city and the world, a contact zone in which the self constantly encounters the other. From here on the author follows people through urban space in his attempt to experience different perspectives. He joins a homeless Roma street musician on Park Lane and tries to perceive how the world of rich tourists collides as well as interacts with the London of these homeless musicians who are often harassed by the police.

The author's endeavour to dive into these other layers of London opens the perspective to urban space's complex relational network. Herein, the text strives to achieve multiple points of view. The transformative power of the city as well as the residents' transformation of London through enacting spatial practices are captured through a series of interviews which highlight the city's powerful impact on human lives, or as a policeman with Nigerian heritage, one of the interviewees, puts it: 'London can crush you [...] Or London can transform you' (47). The Other-London as described by

the text is often linked to an urban space formed by illegal immigration. And yet, as Judah convincingly highlights, this illegal London is strongly intertwined with the upper-class-London, or the tourist-London. Dynamics between these different cities are stressed through the author's interweaving of interviews with personal impressions. When gang leader Moses X articulates his view on London life as dominated by crime, drugs and corruption, Moses locates himself in relation to a narrative of colonial history, as the British Empire is perceived as being likewise built on exploitation and addiction (137).

The author's journey into London connects different facets of the city's polyphonic space. Through the whole exploration the question of perspective remains a vital one. When Judah accompanies Romanian labourers, he is relying on an interpreter, which stresses that the author is, of course, not part of the peripheral layers of the metropolis and not likely to ever become one. In 'New London's' layers, he is only passing through, an outsider trying to capture how people live in these seemingly new sub-spaces of the city. This makes it all the more obvious that experiencing the Other-London first hand can only be an imagined narrative, a construct in which the perspective of London's population is told as a tale through the author's lens. Because the interviews are intertwined with Judah's personal experiences, the text does not give a voice to the 'New London'. Rather, it is bound to be a narrative from an outsider's perspective, similar to the muckraker-accounts of US-American slums in the nineteenth century, e.g. Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1890).

Which gives rise to the question, whether the 'New London' is new at all. Throughout the centuries London has been a focus point for hopes and dreams as well as a place of crime and unspeakable poverty. Migration has always formed the city and the idea of the different cities – rich ones, poor ones, the world of labourers' poverty and aristocratic indulgence – could as well have been and in fact was argued in the Victorian Age. Despite the term 'New London', Judah's text is providing an articulation of the author's view on London's less visible layers and it negotiates current dynamics, such as migration from Eastern European countries and the bleak disappointment of the idea of London as a space in which dreams and desires might find realisation. The text takes a look into un-walkable spaces within the city's relational network, it explores invisible demarcations between different spheres of London, and retraces dynamic processes going on between these spheres. Herein, it discusses all-too familiar developments in the world's metropolises in which certain spaces become more and more formed by neglect and violence, places in which 'everyone seems to hate everyone' (186). From human trafficking, illegal immigrant workers, homeless musicians to teachers, policemen and owners of small businesses, the text captures a panoramic view within 'New London' which highlights diversity within diversity. The Dickensian broadness of this perspective again is used to explore connections between the different facets of 'New London'.

Judah's book does on the one hand present a personal journey into the peripheral spaces of London and yet, on the other hand, it meanders through the metropolis in a quest to articulate an account of seemingly inaccessible marginalised sub-spaces of the city. Different life-stories are incorporated into the text, and although the connection at first glance sometimes seems to be vague, yet, the spatial tale of London foregrounds

the interconnectedness of these disparate parts, stressing the polyphonic character of the city. The schisms and rifts within the narrative are more or less inevitable as London can never be presented as one coherent narrative. The complex network of spatial and socio-cultural diversity finds its representation in Judah's attempt to connect the personal with his broader idea: to vacate the position of the narrative voice and hand it over to 'New London's' inhabitants. Narrative rifts thus express the polyphonic nature of space, so that Judah's text paints a personal picture of the metropolis, which is enriched by different perspectives to shed some new light on the complex network of London.

Works referenced

De Quincey, Thomas, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989 [1822]).

Riis, Jacob, *How the Other Half Lives. Studies Among the Tenements of New York.* (New York: Dover, 1971 [1890]).

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