

*Talking Like a (Foreign) Man: Diaspora Teenage Languages Shaping Urban Spaces in Gautam Malkani's Londonstani*

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The IAFOR International Conference on the City 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to disclose the role of language for the British Indian diasporic community teenagers of London, for whom the research of an identity also includes the definition of belonging within a postcolonial frame. The issue will be tackled by reading Gautam Malkani's debut novel, *Londonstani* (2006), in which the issue of identity is played into language. Language is a means that becomes the message, thanks to its multiple code-mixing: British English becomes one with Punjabi and African American English. The latter is adopted in the form of a stereotype shaped by the media, an exogenous model adopted to fill in a void of identification. Being *Londonstani* is an existential condition, it means being a new kind of Londoners, trans-cultural and trans-national, but still urban.

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## **Introduction**

This paper aims to investigate the role of language in shaping urban space and environment, in a practice that seems to recall a role play, but at the same time reveals a much deeper identity issue. The analysis will focus on the teenagers of the British Indian diasporic community of London, for whom the research of identity that is typical of their age also calls belonging into question. The issue is tackled by reading Gautam Malkani's debut novel, *Londonstani* (2006). The amazing ability of Malkani is to create a multilayered linguistic and narrative structure, able to disclose how the issue of identity is played into language, which can simultaneously reflect and determine belonging in itself, thus becoming able to modify an urban environment where the Londonstani feel they do not fit completely. In fact, according to the author, the Londonstani are "a bunch of 19-year-old middle-class mummy's boys trying to be men [...] trying to talk and act as if their affluent corner of a London suburb is some kind of gritty ghetto" (Malkani, n.d.). The whole novel is focused on the speech patterns enacted by the main characters, and on the way they create reality. That is the reason why the analysis of the linguistic peculiarities of this text will show the transforming power of language and its role in the shaping of the urban landscape.

## **Theoretical background**

To understand how language can have such a strong impact on identity and reality, it is necessary to re-define language, beyond the mere concept of words and grammar rules. While talking, speakers interact, socialise and establish relations. Alastair Pennycook affirms that "once we accept that language is a social practice, it becomes clear that [...] the speakers that negotiate what possible language forms they want to use for that purpose" (2002, p. 129). The constant development of urban space and its ever increasing multilingualism has triggered a growing interest in the topic since, in shaping space, interacting languages in the urban context also serve to define and negotiate identities (Gogolin et al. 2013, p. 9), especially among adolescents in multiethnic contexts (Rampton 2005).

To understand the importance of space when it comes to language practice, it is important to specify how space has not to be regarded as a mere container, but as a "relational concept" (Schroer 2006, p. 175). Such a space cannot be one-dimensional, but has to become more complex, like in Laple's (1991) "matrix space," in which there are a series of interacting layers:

- the physical constitution of space;
- the normative and institutionalised regulatory system, result of social practices: its role is to regulate the treatment and occupation of physical space and can be respected or violated;
- the social practices, interactions, structures and processes enacted by differentiated actors when producing and occupying the physical space – they are intertwined with both the physical restraints and the normative system, as they are influenced by them but can also alter them;
- the system of signs, symbols and representations enabling to recognise the social function of spaces and potentially allowing identification of the individuals with the

spaces; they can be considered “appropriate” or “not appropriate,” according to the existing norms and consolidated practices.

Language, being both a social practice and a system of signs, inevitably acquires a vital role in the shaping of such a multilayered space, whose complexity increases along with the multifaceted ethnic and linguistic configuration of contemporary metropolises (Breckner, Peukert and Pinto 2013, p. 216).

### **Place and language in *Londonstani***

Londonstani teenagers live in a state of geographical displacement – they are diasporic, *non-white* young men living in a wealthy condition that would associate them to the dominant *whites*. The displacement is also linguistic: in fact, although they have access to education like their white counterparts, they still come from a linguistic community associated to poverty and migration (the “freshies”<sup>1</sup>). Their multilingualism contrasts with the (nationalist) idea of nations held together by a shared language, rather seems to confirm that “the English language has always evolved through corruption” (Malkani, n.d.). This brings their identity into question. The complexity deriving from such issues is hard to tackle especially during the adolescence, the age of uncertainty *par excellence*. That is probably the reason why, instead of dealing with complexity, the Londonstani choose to imitate an exogenous model, the media stereotype of African American rappers, anti-heroes that become rich and prevail thanks to (alleged) non-legal activities and have their revenge against white oppression, becoming a new elite subverting the power relation. In so doing, they use the language to articulate the meanings of physical space, but also to create a fictional space – the ghetto that only exist when they perform it (Jänicke & Lenehan 2010). However, this cut-and-paste language has a high level of syncretism, holding together the numerous minimal selves (Hall 1987) that create their identity. In fact, they blend in part of their Punjabi linguistic heritage, repurposing it to mark a new locality (Dyer 2002). Language is also crucial to narrate the self, making sense of one’s existence (Bruner 1989) in a coherent story. A credible story needs the right scenario – but if a wrong scenario is given, the only solution is to alter it through language, in a pretend game with profound implications. Through language, they become Londonstani, a new kind of Londoners.

### **Code mixing**

The multiple layers that constitute their language collapse on one another as they create their fictional space through a particularly complicated code mixing – (British) English, Punjabi and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Heritage Punjabi and AAVE are used in different ways, to different extents and with different purposes.

Punjabi mostly appears in the form of lexical loans, both when English translation is possible or a term is linked to untranslatable aspects of Indian culture: the first category of loans worth noting in this context is that of the familiar words. Such

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<sup>1</sup> A “freshie” is, as found on the Urban Dictionary, “Someone who has just entered a English speaking country, and has poor English skills and has a very odd and mocked accent.” (Freshie, n.d.).

words have the particular function of “desifying” everyday life, making London seem closer to India. They include terms linked to:

- names of *family members and people* in general, e.g. Auntyji/Uncleji: respectful term for elder Indian women; Bache: kids; Desi: a typical Indian person; Kurhiyaan: girls;

- common *attributes*: Mohti: fatty; Shareef: innocent; Sher: lion; Gandh: dirt; Sona: nice; Gandh: dirt;

- *clothing*, e.g. Salwar kameez: typical Punjabi outfit; Chapples: flip flops; Banaan: bra;

- greetings and *politeness*, e.g. Satsriakaal: formal greeting; Shukriya: thank you; Theekh hai: ok; good; Kiddan (informal): how are you?;

- typically Indian concepts and *values*, e.g. Izzat: “the Muslim word for a family’s honour (...), but non-Muslims use it too.” (Malkani 2006, p. 93); Nakhra: drama; Tamasha: covering someone with shame, especially in public.

Moreover, using Punjabi words for expressing racism has an important function. It means to establish a hierarchy, on top of which there are the Desi kings of the ghetto. White people are the main objective, clearly inverting the “paki” insult, generally used by white people referring to any Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bengali etc.); since they also represent a role model, black people will be mostly referred to as “brothers.” The word for a white person is Gora (pl. gore, f. gori, f.pl. goriyan). Although it would not have a pejorative meaning, it is often used as an insult, especially when preceded by “dirty” (at times in Punjabi “gandah,” otherwise in English but spelled in the rap-like style “dirty”).

The general use of Punjabi insults may represent an empowerment practice: the insults in Punjabi are not understood by white people, which become “foreign.” Some examples: Bhanchod: motherfucker (literally “sisterfucker”); Khota: donkey – stupid; Pehndu: someone from a village – stupid; Tutty: shit; shitty.

The Londonstani speech is especially created for turning them from wannabes into rudeboys<sup>2</sup> with street credibility. This is made evident by their stereotyped Black talk, which comes from a keen replica of African American English – or, better, of its media stereotypes, seen on MTV and copied without any interest in its history. The author, speaking about his characters, reveals their different levels of street credibility can be evinced from their way of speaking: “I adapted the slang for different characters depending on how hardcore they were” (Malkani, n.d.). AAVE proficiency is the primary skill to convert and re-signify the urban space they occupy.

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<sup>2</sup> As stated by the protagonist/narrator, Jas:

First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits. These days we try an use our own word for homeboy an so we just call ourselves desis but I still remember when we were happy with the word rudeboy. (Malkani 2006, p. 5)

For what concerns the morpho-syntactic level, the use of *auxiliaries* is often calqued from AAVE, mostly their frequent omission, e.g. I been there, man (Malkani 2006, p. 193), or in the construction of questions without “do,” e.g. Hear wat my bredren b sayin, sala kutta? (Malkani 2006, p. 3). *Negations* are also adapted to AAVE, for example with negative inversions and multiple negations, like in the sentence “ain’t nobody callin nothing off” (Malkani 2006, p. 189). In addition, the *verb “to be”* (often spelled “b”) is used as uninflected auxiliary or omitted completely (Tottie 2001, p. 221-222).

The lexical loans also come from the media representations of rappers and tough ghetto people (Taronna 2005). Through the set of words concerning gang friendship and competition, they transform themselves from shareef munde to bad bad boys, making their performance more credible: an argument becomes “beef” or “dissin,” and friends become “brothers.” Some examples: Beef: feud; Blut: mate; Bredren: brother, homeboy, close friend; Diss, dissin: shorter version of “disrespect” (Tottie 2001, p. 225).

Being “cool” is also crucial. In fact, the Londonstani could not be real gangsters if they were not as “cool” as their African American counterparts, first of all by possessing objects that show their status, which is the case of the “bling” jewellery inspired by those gangsta rappers wearing remarkable quantities of heavy jewelry, and especially chain necklaces that jingle one against the other producing the “bling bling” onomatopoeic sound. Also, they define themselves with “fly” attributes, like in the case of Da G: someone really cool; Da mack: often referred to a pimp, in AAVE is used for a man who is “conspicuously successful, especially through the use of flattery or deceiving talk” (Lighter 1997, p. 493). Dangerous ghetto people also have natural enemies: the police. In particular, the Londonstani call ordinary police, or even traffic wardens, with the typical rap attribute “feds.” It clearly is an hyperbole, as it is originally a shortening for FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

While some words are exclusively borrowed from one language or the other (Punjabi or AAVE), the derogatory terms are multifaceted. In fact, some insults will be drawn from the African American rap vocabulary, probably because they (especially shouted in public) convey a strong idea of ghetto. Insults (especially racial and homophobic) are particularly efficient, because they show disrespect for the rules and practices of a wealthy suburb, e.g. Batty boy (originally Jamaican; “batty” is someone’s back): homophobic insult, can be referred to someone that actually is homosexual or just is not being “man” enough in a given situation; Muthafucka: the typical rap-like spelling for “motherfucker;” Honky: derogatory term for a white person, normally used by black people only (Cagliero and Spallino 2010, p. 371).

Thanks to their keen listening of MTV rap music, the Londonstani teens also make sure they “play the role” of their idols, impersonating characters of dangerous men who have to run away from the police, as in the following quotes:

Don’t b needin no shit wid da feds (Malkani 2006, p. 132)

Yeh, bredren, knock his fuckin teeth out (p. 9)

Fuck you, man. Do you think you da only one who’s been there, done dat, shagged that bitch, done dat ho? (p. 20)

Many times they will recall speech events, especially woofing (Green 2002) as in the following excerpt:

Come out wid dat shit again n I'ma knock you so hard u'll b shittin out yo mouth 4 real (Malkani 2006, p. 3)

Fuckin five-ounce white gold, innit. Call me a Paki n I whip yo ass wid it (p. 4)

They will also resort to toasts filled with braggadocio boasting:

Yeh you know it, Ravi. Back then when I boned Mandeep I was jus using a large size [condom]. Now I need extra large, you get me? (p. 20)

An as 4 dis organised trouble u chattin bout, u'd b surprised how organised our shit (illegal business) can b when we proply incentivised. (p. 118)

Yeh, man, nobody mess wid us, we bad muthafuckas (...) da gangsta, da killa n da dope dealer (p. 122)

All my sperms are men, innit. Matter a fact, my sperm cells got bigger dicks then that chota maggot you got between your legs, you get me. (p. 180)

### **From Rudeboys to shareef munde: the performance disruptions**

Malkani will use a series of characters to ridicule their attempt to mould the space; for example, white people representing institutions (policemen, teachers, receptionists etc.) but also the older family members of the Londonstani – especially their mothers and other Aunties, which represent the family as an oppressive entity but also their cultural heritage. The family plays a big role when it comes to performance disruption – the Londonstani know it, and the sole presence of an Uncle and especially of an Auntie leads them to change their register completely, like in the following example, when Amit (one of the rudeboys) calls his mum:

Soon as Hardjit hangs up, Amit takes his Nokia 6610 back an starts makin a call beside me. He's being all polite an in't using no swear words so is clearly chattin to his mum. But he makes sure he don't *look* like he's chattin to his mum, narrowin his eyes, suckin in his cheeks an noddin as he stares out the window. (Malkani 2006, p. 16)

The kids are in Ravi's car, a Beemer, acting tough around the city. However, Amit remembers he needs to call his mum for some food shopping. To her, he talks politely, mixing Punjabi and English but not AAVE, because he knows this would not be convenient nor appreciated by his mum. The same happens in other occasions, for example while the Londonstani are in the middle of their illegal business (phone unlocking), when the mother of the gang leader Hardjit enters the room:

Amit's kit [...] also included a money counter an some small weighting scales. He was settin it all up on Hardjit's bed when Hardjit's mum came in the room with her tied-back silver hair an matchin silver tray full a samosas, pakoras, glasses a Coke an cups a chai. [...] Coke not too flat an with slices of lemon an some crushed ice made by their top-a-the-range fridge. [...] I'm positive we din't look like we needed frilly pink paper doilies. – Shukriya, Auntyji, we all said like cheerleaders as she placed the tray on the desk. Each a us gives it another Shukriya again as she handed us a mini-plate an then Shukriya again as she put a dollop a that red napalm in it. Gotta respect your elders, innit. [...] – But please, beita, don't ruffle bed cover. Is made from really real, genuine silk. [...] beita, please, why not use desk Papa got for you? (Malkani 2006, p. 68-69)

This example reveals how their mothers represent their cultural heritage, but also their age and their “financial” status. Hardjit’s mother brings samosas, pakoras and chai, which are typical of the Indian tradition, but also glasses of coke – and “frilly pink paper doilies:” the behaviour of the Auntie actually projects an image of the Londonstani as even younger than their age and less virile. Masculinity is in fact another crucial reason for borrowing the African American gangsta style, as a rapper’s dignity and credibility are given by the fact of acting “like a man”. The allegedly dangerous ghetto rudeboys are wealthy, young shareef munde, ready to switch to politeness when talking to an Auntie, giving up on the masculinity and talking “like cheerleaders” to show respect. The consciousness of their choices reveals a real skill in code mixing. So, when they choose not to switch back to standard English while talking to white adults, they choose to keep their AAVE as a form of resistance to their wealthy environment, which they have to live in but does not represent them. In fact, most white people they interact with represent British institutions –it education, law and order or simple admin staff. These white people, however, immediately recognise the roleplay. In the case of a traffic warden who is going to fine one of the kids because of the way he parked his car, the appearance of the warden in the street will be sufficient to drag the Londonstani out of their fictional world of gangsters: The fucker’s standin right in front a me, wearin that yellow jacket that glows in the light an that traffic warden’s hat, the kind security guards wear to look like cops. [...] – Thirty fuckin seconds, man, dat’s all I wos, goes Davinder. – I got food poisoning, innit. Had 2 vomit in Nando’s toilets. Or wudyu prefer if I threw up in da street? (Malkani 2006, p. 37)

The traffic warden is disgusted by a detailed description of vomit and gives up, abandoning the scene. Obviously, real gangsters would have intimidated the traffic warden. The situation gets even worse when they face actual police, for example when a planned fight between the Sikh Hardjit and the Muslim Tariq, to which the gangs they lead and a number of girls are assisting, gets interrupted when a police car silently approaching the spot.

One a the feds took his hat off an crouched down to inspect the bloody mess below Tariq’s left eye. – You alright, son? That’s a nasty injury. You may need some medical attention for that. – No sir, don’t worry, Tariq says in a fake poncey accent that I figure is his version a actin polite. [...] It was a shame the feds had snuck up on us stead a coming with the sirens cos then Davinder’s crew would’ve jumped around singin ‘Whoop, whoop, Dat’s da Sound A Da Police’<sup>3</sup> like they normly do. [...] only one cop car showed up. One shitty Vauxhall hatchback, two feds. [then Mr Ashwood, their former teacher, intervenes to save the kids] Vouching for our good character was one thing, sayin it so loud that even the girls heard it was another. – Absolute little angels, good to the bone, so to speak. [...] the girls carried on giggling. – Oh, Hardjit, you’re such a goody good little angel boy, said Priya. – Such a good shareef munda, I should introduce you to my mama. (Malkani 2006, pp. 111-113)

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<sup>3</sup> Refrain from a famous song by the rapper Krs-one, *Sound of da Police* (n.d.).

The official reason for fighting is the never-settled feud between Muslims and Sikhs, which traces back to the partition<sup>4</sup> of India. However, the main purpose of the rudeboys is to be noticed and appreciated by the girls, it is literally their showcase. The arrival of the policemen wrecks it, and the Londonstani are saved and at the same time doomed by the arrival of a former teacher of theirs, the white Mr. Ashwood. Saved, because the police will believe him and let the kids go with no further consequences. Doomed, because to achieve their safety Mr. Ashwood has to claim in a very loud voice the truth about them: they are “little angels,” who would never disgrace their families by causing real trouble. The girls laugh at them and, by stating that they are shareef enough to be introduced to their mothers, they once again emasculate them. The attempt to emulate the rappers is made even more evident by the fact that they normally use a rap song to signal the presence of the police officers – given that the police car enters the scene in the typical American movie style: big noisy cars, sirens full blast, police officers coming out screaming and pointing their guns. Right after being saved by Mr. Ashwood, they decide to steal his phone, in order to replace one that they have damaged. Immediately discovered, they talk to the teacher in his office to avoid prosecution. There, they try to maintain their performance; the teacher immediately recognises and discloses their intention, ridiculing it as out of context.

– Yeh, man, nobody mess wid us, we bad muthafuckas, Ravi said, getting all excited an usin the fact that he was standin up as an excuse to adopt one a his gangsta-rap poses. With his neck raised now an givin it anther lick-a-shot flick with his right hand, he continues: – Da gangsta, da killa n da dope dealer, [...] – I cannot believe you’re sitting here aspiring to be a gangsta rapper at a time like this, Ravi. Because if you want that kind of notoriety, then quite frankly I could fulfil your fantasy by calling the police and having you arrested while they search your houses for stolen phones. (Malkani 2006, pp. 122-123)

This is a key passage for their identity: as much as they present themselves as bad gangsters, the emulation does not work on adults and quickly becomes a childish pretend game. At the same time, this means a failure to transform the space – if Ravi wants to be a real gangster, he will have to go to a real jail. The points of view between the Londonstani and the whites are irreconcilable, until Jas decides to abandon AAVE and Punjabi, and talks to the white adults using a formal British English, like when they are trying to join a prestigious sports centre, but the receptionist needs prove that Hardjit’s exceptionally well built muscles are not obtained with the help of steroids before accepting them.

– Look, chief, ma cash is all good. I earn’d it doin ma business, a’ight. I’m a businessman, a successful businessman cos dat’s da way I do ma business, u get me? U lot shud b beggin me 2 b a member a dis place, not aksin me if I ever took no steroids n shit. – Sir, please keep your voice down. And I’d appreciate if you’d kindly refrain from swearing. The health club’s policy is to take signed assurances from new members when we deem it prudent to do so. [the argument goes on, until Jas intervenes] – Er, I think what my friend Hardjit means is that we’d really regret it if we couldn’t jin up today, I go. – We’ve come all this way with our gym kit, the lady

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<sup>4</sup> During the colonial era, Britain seemed to adopt a *divide et impera* policy with India, fomenting the conflicts among the numerous religions widespread in the colony, to then pose itself as the one holding the balance of power (Lal, *Manas*, n.d.).



on the phone said it'd be no problem. I appreciate my friend is well built but I've known him for years and trust me, he got his build through sheer dedication, six full meals a day and a protein milk shake in between each one. (Malkani 2006, p. 186)

Hardjit acts like a bad gangster, but the performance does not impress the receptionist: from the inside of the gang (and their role play) Hardjit is the toughest and most credible, but his behaviour creates a short circuit with the surrounding environment. At the same time Jas, who is the best one at switching to politeness and whose ability is appreciated outside the gang, is seen as a newbie from the inside. In fact, Jas himself is one of the main performance disruptors: sometimes, like in the previous example, he does so voluntarily to allow the communication with the white adults, while in other cases he does it by just not being "tough enough." For example, before the fight between Hardjit and Tariq, Jas and Hardjit are waiting for the rest of the gang, and Jas looks at the city environment around him and lets it "penetrate" their fictional space.

It was the morning a Hardjit's big fight and the two of us were kickin' bout on the corner a Hounslow High Street and Montague Road. Right outside the Holy Trinity Church. [...] The place looks more like some school sports hall than a church, and in case you're ever hangin' outside long enough to wonder why, there's a sign tellin' its history. – Bruv? I go to Hardjit. – Bruv, d'you know the original church got burnt down by two schoolboys in 1943? Hardjit's busy lookin' too hard and sick to be hangin' round with someone like me. So I try again. – This one here was rebuilt in the 1960s, in the exact same spot. – No shit, Jas. Does it look like I give a shit? Som'times I's embarrass'd 2 b hangin' round wid' chy. Why da fuck'd I wanna know bout some church's history 4? Do I look like a vicar? U da one wat probly likes choirboys. (Malkani 2006, p. 79)

Jas, the newbie of the gang, used to be a "book worm," devoted to studying and pleasing his family and teachers. Then, Hardjit decided to help him becoming "cool" and tough by allowing him in the gang. However, this operation is not fully successful. Jas is still aware of the space around them, and will often notice how it does not reflect their performance.

The world going by outside the window tells me that in olden times, before the airport, Hounslow must've been one of them batty towns where people ponced around on cycles instead of drivin' cars. Why else we got such narrow roads? [...] I hope the skint people who work for the council would just finish the fuckin' job and chop 'em all down. Make room for more billboards, more fuckin' road. (Malkani 2006, pp. 16-17)

Jas is hanging out in his friend's car with the whole gang, a ritual that serves to build their street credibility. The problem is, the street is not suitable for their fiction: the roads are too narrow for big American-style cars and there are trees instead of billboards. Probably, before the airport was built nearby, the town was not trafficked at all. Once again, the urban setting proves its crucial role – and so does his absence, leading the Londonstani to create a fictional one.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show how language as a social practice can influence the construction and perception of its context. The Londonstani teens transform their wealthy quarter in a ghetto, so that they can find or create a continuity between their complex identity and their space by resorting to a performative use of language. However, the lack of authenticity is revealed by language itself, when the white bourgeoisie ridicules their spoken ghetto performance or when their mothers take their newly-purposed urban Punjabi back to a more traditional use. Moreover, the whole process is described by Jas, who provides a particularly peculiar point of view, made even more dysfunctional by the final revelation about his identity: his real name is Jason Bartholomew-Clivenden, “aged nineteen, white, male” (Malkani 2006, p. 340). Thus, not only he pretends to be Black, but he pretends to be an Indian who pretends to be Black. His Punjabi is learned as much as his AAVE. The final revelation, apart from having strong political implications, once again stresses the performative aspect of their identity. There will also be bereavement in Amit’s family, when his brother Arun commits suicide, brought to the limit by the family drama triggered by his engagement with a girl from a different caste. This suicide will cause, along with the love story with the Muslim Samira, the banishment of Jas from the gang – Jas is blamed for Arun’s suicide, since he encouraged him to face his family. Moreover, while pretending to be gangsters, they will end up dealing with a real criminal, Sanjay, who has set up an international fraud in which the Londonstani will be involved. They face the complexity of their situation while their fictional world falls apart.

Ethnicity, gender, identity, language – both in their undeniable existence and lack of clear definition – permeate the life of this new Londoners, the Londoners that make the city what it is today. The very essence of London as a multicultural urban space is language, which has the amazing potential to represent heritage and contamination at the same time. Although with an often awkward result, the effort of the Londonstani teens reveals the need for a re-localisation of London: not just a Western metropolis, but the crossroads of a history made of colonisation, migration, contamination and reinvention of the most disparate, fragmented and complex identities.

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