

Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London

Review Number: 1350

Publish date: Thursday, 15 November, 2012

Author: Judith Walkowitz

ISBN: 9780300151947

Date of Publication: 2012

Price: £25.00

Pages: 400pp.

Publisher: Yale University Press

Place of Publication: New Haven, CT

Reviewer: Kevin Guyan

Bordered by Oxford Street to the North, Regent Street to the West, Charing Cross Road to the East and Leicester Square to the South, the area of Soho can be depicted as an exotic island within the oceanic sprawl of London. Judith Walkowitz's latest book, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London*, explores the cosmopolitanism of this geographical enclave and asks how this area, not more than 130 acres and with a population that has never exceeded 24,000, came to be regarded as a 'potent incubator for metropolitan change' (p. 3)?

Walkowitz's mission is to present an account of Soho from the streets, fixing the inhabitants and the area's daily flood of visitors as central characters in her study of its history, discussing both the positive and negative dimensions of cosmopolitanism and how this has shaped the Soho we know today. In her introduction, Walkowitz astutely suggests that Soho may in fact be read as a blueprint for how London would later develop from the 1960s onwards, with the social heterogeneity and negotiations of cultural similarities and difference evident in today's London modelled upon the cosmopolitan history of Soho life (p. 3).

Nights Out opens with an exploration of Soho from around 1890, beginning with discussions about the built environment and efforts to preserve Old Soho, most notably the preservationist campaign of 1914 to save Hogarth's Soho House.

This discussion is followed by a chapter entitled 'Battle of the Empire', focussing on events at the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square. Highlighting the purity campaigns targeted at the theatre throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian period and the ever-present spectre of prostitution and sexual depravity associated with West End venues, Walkowitz expands her analysis to look beyond London and notes the venue's links to the wider themes of international cultural exchange. Interestingly, it is also suggested that performances at the Empire Theatre chimed with debates taking place across the Empire itself, particularly in regards to concepts of masculinity and pleasure around the globe.

Chapter three presents an engaging account of dance in Soho, importantly considering dance as exhibited at theatres and popular dancing at halls and nightclubs. Walkowitz is keen to argue that the dancing body can be studied for expressions of how people responded to cultural imports and changes in society, particularly for women. Through the observation of dance and engagement in its practice many women, for the first

time, accessed previously 'forbidden spaces of the nocturnal city' (p. 91). The impact of the popularity of social dancing is also highlighted and how this leisure activity shaped other aspects of life in Soho, including the production and sale of female dresses.

The dominance of Italian catering in Soho between 1890 and 1940 and the evolution of eateries in this area, reflective of the shifting tastes of their metropolitan clientele, is the theme of the Walkowitz's chapter 'The Italian restaurant'. Links between those who worked at Italian restaurants and broader political shifts on the Continent are explored, most importantly the spread of fascism during the 1930s and the impact this had upon Italians living in Soho. Unlike the East End of London, however, battles between fascists and anti-fascists were primarily kept indoors – perhaps the result of Soho's spatial geography and its maze of small streets, courtyards and absence of any conspicuous assembly point.

Continuing the theme of commerce, 'Schleppers and shoppers' details the history of Berwick Street Market, its link with Soho's Jewish community and its function as a working-class alternative to Oxford Street. The style of business adopted by market traders and the importance of this space for the livelihood of many Soho residents is stressed, serving as an important reminder of the commercial aspects underpinning this area.

This chapter is packaged alongside the following chapter, which transfers the focus from the actions of the market traders by day to the nocturnal activities of the young people who worked on Berwick Street. Walkowitz explores the spaces frequented by the young people, most notably Lyons Tea Shop on Oxford Street, and how, in these locations, people expressed their bodies in new and exciting ways. Whether this be how women applied their makeup or male fashion choices, 'going out' offered a new language of bodily practices.

This codification of the body is a trend also discussed in Walkowitz's chapter 'The shady nightclub', which explores the nighttime venues of Soho, with a particular focus on those run by Mrs Kate Meyrick. The nightclub is framed as, among other things, a site of interracial mixing, both through the provision of entertainment by black performers and the opportunities presented to form romantic and sexual relationships. Mrs Meyrick's skill in juggling the dual threats of Soho's criminal underworld and the scrutiny of the Metropolitan Police emerges as particularly important, raising questions as to what extent the history of Soho has been driven by big personalities.

Walkowitz concludes with a further exploration of bodies, considering the activities of the Windmill Theatre during the Second World War and whether the wartime spirit of the venue (performances continued throughout The Blitz) masked deeper problems regarding its presentation of English womanhood and its solidification of white, feminine beauty.

Chapters in *Nights Out* offer a thematic spread of Soho life, each loosely presenting an episode with similar threads running throughout, notably dancing, food, sex, commerce and politics. Walkowitz's decision to chart Soho's history thematically rather than chronologically is ultimately a wise decision and there is arguably some sense of linear development across chapters. The downside of this approach, however, is that readers will undoubtedly favour certain chapters above others.

Walkowitz's strongest chapter discusses the social and leisure pursuits of the young, Jewish market traders of Berwick Street. She presents an engaging account of Lyons Tea Shop and the difficult work of the tea shop's waitresses, affectionately known at Nippies due to their speedy service, and the financial limitations placed upon the events of a night out, forcing many of the young people to enjoy little more than a 'meal' of egg mayonnaise.

Her study of Lyons Tea Shop is equally engaging in its flirtation with ideas of space and the impact this had upon the history described. Walkowitz explains that certain spaces of the Tea Shop would be frequented by certain clientele, as 'Jews, Nippies and queers maintained distinct identities and spatial enclaves within the broad expanse of Lyons' commercial spaces' (p. 207). This is undoubtedly a theme that would be worth

exploring further in future works.

Nights Out makes no claim to offer an insight into 'real' London life, whatever this foggy term may entail, and instead focuses primarily on the exotic, the interesting and the marginal. For this reason, Walkowitz's work reads very easily and holds the reader's interest throughout. Accounts of the dancing girls working at the Windmill Theatre during the Blitz or the links between Italian restaurateurs and plots to assassinate Mussolini during the 1930s will excite interest among even the most reluctant reader of history.

However, it is also important not to be distracted by the exoticism of the material presented, as *Nights Out* arguably mirrors a wider trend among those writing about the history of twentieth-century London. Recent works by Frank Mort (1) and Matt Houlbrook (2) offer equally fascinating insights into the world of sex and scandal in central London in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, after reading these three books one does feel perhaps satiated. As interesting as the lives of prostitutes, homosexuals, strippers and gangsters operating within a small pocket of London may be, it is possible for readers to simply have too much. There is clearly a need to apply an academic lens to this exciting period of London's history but it is also vital to question whether this recent glut of research on marginal activities in London's zone one romanticises sleaze at the expense of exploring the experiences of average Londoners.

At times, it reads as if Walkowitz is conscious of this risk and makes efforts throughout to avoid the accusation that writing about music, food, sex and dance in twentieth-century Britain is little more than a light foray into 'pop-culture'. Phrases like '[Maud Allan's] American body seemed to embody many of the qualities associated with Anglo-Saxonism: innocence, racial purity, and the cherished freedoms of a liberal political heritage' (p.75) are indicative of her need to address this challenge and, although at times these sections can be unnecessarily wordy, they do remind readers that this work is more than a quick read and is instead a detailed, academic examination of one of Britain's most formative periods and geographical locations, by an established, international, scholar.

As argued by Mort in *Capital Affairs*, Soho is as much a state of mind as it is a bounded physical environment.(3) When attempting to explain how Soho was experienced, one must utilise as much material as possible and look beyond the traditional sources of print media, state archives, censuses and business records. Walkowitz does well in this respect, yet it would have been interesting if her research had explored the psychological experiences of Soho more deeply and more frequently departed from reading Soho as a physical space that simply *contains* the events depicted. This could have been achieved by considering more fictional literature, films and paintings that depict the area, breaking down the divide between Soho as 'real' and Soho as 'imagined'.

Sections that push deeper with analysis than would perhaps normally be expected are successful, in particular Walkowitz's exploration of the popular dancer Maud Allan. Rather than considering the sensationalism of her act and its ensuing media attention, Walkowitz directs her attention at Allan's body and what this represented in regards to ideas of politics, culture and society. Motion, movement and reception of the female body arrive as an unexpected treat for readers with an interest in gender, sex and sexuality, who will welcome Walkowitz's decision to look beyond the expected historical dissection of dancers and scandal in 1920s Soho.

The methodological approach adopted by Walkowitz is generally effective. She excels at the case study, with each chapter adding a selection of characters to her narrative of Soho life. It would be expected that a work on cosmopolitan Soho would feature a cast-list of colourful names; however, in this respect Walkowitz goes above and beyond what would be expected, discussing everyone from Nancy Cunard to black jazz saxophonists bussed-in from Cardiff every weekend to entertain the capital's crowds. Using a mixture of memoirs, images, travelogues, press reports and criminal records, Walkowitz is able to bring to life the people who occupied the spaces of Soho and construct an account of a locale constructed by its inhabitants.

It may, however, seem odd how few experiences are explored through oral history methods, particularly

when discussing events of the 1940s. In her Introduction Walkowitz admits that she is indebted to Gerry Black's work *Living Up West* (4) and its oral histories of Jewish people living in London's West End. She is equally reliant on material sourced from the Hall Carpenter Archives and History of Jazz in Britain collection at the British Library. It would have been beneficial for her project if Walkowitz had spoken directly with the people she describes (for example, the girls who danced at the Windmill Theatre) rather than depending on the oral histories conducted by others and indirect source material.

To what extent is this a problem for *Nights Out*? Taking into account the wide pool of other sources utilised by Walkowitz, her decision not to include more direct, personal accounts of events discussed is not overly detrimental to her research. Certain sections might have benefitted from first-hand testimonies but generally this is not overly problematic. Simply because a historical project falls within the reach of lived experience does not always presuppose the need for oral histories, a point strengthened by the effectiveness of *Nights Out*'s use of source material.

The importance of the night to *Nights Out* cannot be overstated and it is clear that Soho exhibits itself most fully under the cover of darkness. The means by which the character of a space shifts according to the level of light is a fascinating observation and it would be interesting to imagine what type of work Walkowitz would have produced had she focused only on people's experiences of Soho before the sun had set. *Days Out* would unquestionably be a less interesting read.

Yet, Walkowitz is correct to confidently trample upon any claims that Soho should be understood as space that somehow stands beyond the march of time or the natural world, illustrating that the cosmopolitan nature of the area is 'the outcome of mental and material processes converging' (p. 286). *Nights Out* is a book, above all, about people and their importance in the historical construction of this exotic pocket of central London.

Critics may take issue with an American historian, based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, attempting to discuss the minutiae of a community far-removed from her own background or life history. Matthew Sweet, writing for *The Guardian*, comments upon the 'strangely Martian quality' of *Nights Out*, questioning whether this could be 'because its author is based on a campus in Baltimore' (5), seeming to hint at the inability of foreigners to write accurately on the history of Soho. The irony of this critique should be clear for all: Soho's history is rooted in the rootless and Soho has prided itself on its mélange of the new, the different, the foreign and the cosmopolitan. Who better, therefore, to write the history of Soho, than a writer penning her work from beyond the borders of London?

Notes

1. Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven, CT, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, IL, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p. 201.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gerry Black, *Living Up West: Jewish Life in London's West End* (London, 1994).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Matthew Sweet. 'Nights Out by Judith R Walkowitz – review', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2012.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/nights-out-life-in-cosmopolitan-london-by-judith-r-walkowitz-7582009.html> [2]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/may/18/nights-out-judith-walkowitz-review> [3]

Times Literary Supplement

<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1019490.ece> [4]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2012/03/soho-walkowitz-life-history> [5]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1350>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/40622> [2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/nights-out-life-in-cosmopolitan-london-by-judith-r-walkowitz-7582009.html>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/may/18/nights-out-judith-walkowitz-review>

[4] <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1019490.ece>

[5] <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2012/03/soho-walkowitz-life-history>