

Night Haunts: A Journey through the London Night. By Sukhdev Sandhu. 2007. London: Artangel and Verso. 144 pages. £10.99 (Hardback)

“Night Haunts” is an engaging and esoteric work that graphically and poetically depicts London after dusk. In London’s incarnation as a fluid and timeless global city, illustrated by Doreen Massey in her recent tome on the “World City,” night is no longer the apex, but the extension of day. Night for Sandhu is personal, and he explicates this, flaneur-style, from his unorthodox subjects: avian (helicopter) police, tube cleaners, Samaritans, an exorcist, the flushers of London’s Dantean sewers, mini-cab drivers, urban graffiti writers, a Thames barger, an urban fox-hunter, sleep technicians who help those with slumbering disorders, and the nuns of Tyburn whose nocturnal Pater Nosters keep the denizens of London’s night protected from malevolence.

Certain leitmotifs permeate each chapter. The “gaze” beloved of the human geographer indicates perceptions of London, past, present, and future. This gaze is not masculine; irrespective of gender, perceptions are intimate and individuated. Whether modified by the height of flying helicopters, the Augean substratum of sewage tunnels, the sterility of a hospital, the to-ing and fro-ing of an ancient barge, or the constant nervousness of graffiti fanatics, each opinion of London is subjective. As a tube cleaner aptly states: “we see things in a way that other Londoners don’t,” (p. 32) while Norman the exorcist preternaturally notes a “parallel London that the real or physical London doesn’t know about” (p. 57). The gaze can be visual (police), aural (Samaritans), sensory (exorcist), or tactile (sleep technicians). For the Nuns of Tyburn, the silence is alive with the presence of God.

Sandhu’s interviewees present strongly held views. Alan, the 62-year-old barger who has worked the Thames since he was twelve, complains about London’s “must have” culture of excess: “How good can free enterprise be if it’s causing poverty for so many people?” (p. 94). Tube cleaners, many of them immigrants, whose documents are occasionally of questionable vintage, alternate Janus-like between desire and scorn, regarding the teeming multitude of commuters who visualise cleaners as phantasmagorical effigies rather than the functioning bodies whose dedication ensures Falstaffian City Gents and Bacchanalian club-goers arrive at their disparate destinations still intact (p. 33). The male cleaners have a traditional view of London’s teeming throng of young people who have too much leisure, lucre, and libidinousness (p. 33). Mini-cab drivers perceive change as negative: the heterogeneity of their youth deracinated by globalised always-on London where personal small stores or independent pubs are denuded by Ikea-like buildings, challenging the conventional idea of post-modernity as subjective and ephemeral (p. 72). This is a personal tome, rather different from the sociological study of night (“Regulating the Night” by Deborah Talbot) reviewed on this website earlier in the year. No matter how insignificant, the author’s interviewees are in London’s unwritten hierarchy, their views are keenly

articulated: one gets the impression that the soi-disant successful businessmen are robotic; the cleaners and bargers are the free-thinkers.

Desires like night-time fun and sex that were once exceptional are now commonplace. They are economic, so available. The economy permeates these tales graphically depicting the commodity fetishism not of night per se, but of nightlife. Those who work for free or are unconcerned about materialism are outcasts in a new London which is no longer a city but an economic unit that valorises everything. With the exception of exorcist Norman Palmer, and his wife Yvonne, who work gratis, the anonymous Samaritans, and the graffiti writers, London as monied is a consistent theme. Complaints about low pay and the lacuna between rich and poor are unceasing. The bargers and tube cleaners earn a pittance, reminiscent of contemporary demands for a living wage. Even the nuns of Tyburn have resorted to an internet site where well-wishers can donate online.

Fear in the city is the substratum of these people's emotional geographies. The avian police patrol vigilantly for ne'er-do-wells; fear of foxes creates a lucrative living for Bruce; fear of being kept awake drives the sleep-disordered; even the tube cleaners see the fear in passengers: fear of being late for work, fear of missing out on an experience, the fear your friends will have done something without you. The Samaritans listen to calls about fears of life: relationships, bad neighbourhoods, addictions, loneliness, and suicide attempts. A cab driver repines about being ossified with fear when he hears the "sudden tiny noise when a knife is being unsheathed" (p. 75). Yi-Fu Tuan explicated fear of the city in *Landscapes of Fear* (1980) but the fear Sandhu's subjects perceive is not fear of strangers, witches, nature, or public execution, but fear of individuality, of not being conventional, of not being part of Edmund Burke's "swinish multitude" (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Volume III, 1790). Fear of the physical bogeyman in the early hours is not novel; undoubtedly Jack the Ripper's depredations and disembowelments caused greater unease than today's pixilated jobs. Yet, this psychological fear is new and its detection in "Night Haunts" is through inference rather than intent. Immigrant cleaners are fearful of advancing years since they may never escape a harsh life of drudgery. Their efflorescence is waning, their employment status uncertain, and they are scared of being stuck. Fear of the countryside ensures Bruce eats: the urban fox denotes that a cadastral boundary between city and country is mythological and that CCTV, intimidating gates, and private security cannot restrain some ambitious predators. Compared to the modernity (or post-modernity) of London, fear represents anti-modernity; a retrogressive groove that no amount of "Cool Britannia" warpaint can camouflage.

Sandhu is nostalgic for the London of old, hence the heterodoxy of his subjects. He wishes to promote the diversity of the city as a challenge to capitalist monism. His diversity is not that of race or religion but of occupation: how often do we associate employment with exorcisms, sewer flushers (euphemistically named "water technicians"), urban fox-hunters, and sleep technicians? He is almost medieval in his approach and one can suspect he may have been happier in Arthurian times.

He clearly dislikes the commercialisation of nightlife, especially its manifestation through nightclubs and debauchery. Consequently, this volume is an indictment of what Roy Jenkins called the “permissive society.” None of Sandhu’s interviewees seem mean-spirited but they have an appreciation that permissiveness goes only so far before it encroaches with ardour on innocent victims. Going out is an emotional activity as Phil Hubbard’s study of “Emotion and Embodiment in the Evening Economy” in “Emotional Geographies” (2005) revealed. Consequently, experiences of night-time can result in euphoria replaced by depression since experience rarely equals anticipation. Such notions tie into contemporary debates about youth crime, alcoholism and drug abuse, 24-hour drinking, increases in state powers such as ASBOs, and the surveillance culture, making the Panopticon of London the most watched city in the world.

Sandhu enjoys his terminology: words, phrases, neologisms, and deliberate malapropisms like “eldritch forestry,” (p. 10) “effluence of affluence,” (p. 63) “vomit and kebabify,” (p. 70) and “aesthetic cherryknockers (those who knock on doors and flee),” (p. 81) permeate the text. He has done his research into archaic London terminology: he comments with vigour vis-a-vis boulevardiers (frequenters of fashionable locales), rubberneckers (gawping onlookers), and spelunkers (those who explore caves), for the sake of nostalgia rather than comprehension. I found this irksome at times.

Ultimately, “Night Haunts” is a metaphor for a global city in an arena of universal capitalism. For the wealthy, London is like Babylon; for the poor like a desert. The polyglot of participants are by-and-large invisible; he ignores more conventional occupations. He is uninterested in night futures traders, all-night casino gamblers, or Z list celebrities gyrating at faddish clubs. Perhaps he feels that such people would be too diaphanous. Instead, he illustrates those who stand outside the circle; making their own way through life, unencumbered by the increasingly conventional desires of the city.

Sandhu’s prose is descriptive; he allows his subjects to speak rather than prescribing normative morality for them. This can veer into complacency as he sees all his subjects in a uniformly positive manner. The chapter about graffiti writers portrays them as urban artists fighting the banal conformity of modern city life. It may be that “his” graffiti artists produce work depicting visually appealing images that enliven drab surroundings. However, other commentators might argue that graffiti is spray-painted text delineating gang territory that informs interlopers to “be off with you” but in less polite terms. Some level of criticism, however minor, might have been useful.

The full text of Night Haunts is available at www.nighthaunts.org.uk. A chapter was published each month last year since “Night Haunts” is not merely a book but an artistic project in written form.

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