# Introduction
## Pleasure and Place in Soho

'Soho is not always pleasant, but it is never dull.'[1]

This is a book about working in a particular place, a place 'built around enjoyment and entertainment'[2] as well as exploitation and excess. It is about how that place 'works' to shape the experiences and identities of those based there. Occupying less than a square mile, London's Soho is something of a simultaneously global and local space. With its golden squares, red lights, black markets, pink neon, blue films and, most recently, rainbow flags, Soho has, throughout its history, been a colourful place in which to live, work and consume. Described rather affectionately by cultural historian Judith Walkowitz as a 'land of lost causes',[3] and by author Nigel Richardson, who experienced Soho bohemianism in the 1950s first-hand, as both 'bad and beautiful', it is a place of 'backstreet industry and below-stairs debauchery', where those who want to stand out can and those who want to blend in can become invisible.[4] 'By reputation the most exciting and tempting part of London'[5], Soho has been at the heart of the capital's sex industry throughout its history.[6] In his substantial biography of London, Peter Ackroyd highlights how sex in the city has commonly been 'associated with dirt and disease; if not with these, then with trade'.[7] In Soho these three elements are definitively, even doggedly, intertwined.

Despite considerable changes in recent years, Soho continues to have an international reputation for commercial sex in all its many forms. An urban village in the heart of one of the busiest cities in the world, Soho is 'both homely village and red-light district', as Judith Summers puts it.[8] A magnet for consumers, it is also a vibrant workplace and a thriving residential community. Throughout its history, Soho has welcomed outsiders, and, as Figure 1 illustrates, those who live and work there today are keen to emphasize that this is still very much the case.

In *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London*, Judith Walkowitz notes how Soho has 'long been a storied place'.[9] Legends abounding in Soho credit the area with the unique ability to continually reinvent itself as a bohemian enclave, sustained for over three centuries; others claim that Soho is no longer what it was, having caved in to gentrification and


Figure 1 'Outsiders Welcome', waiter's apron, Old Compton Street

sanitization or, at the very least, a 'blandification' of its character.[10] Walkowitz challenges both interpretations, and I follow in her footsteps, arguing that Soho is neither timeless beauty nor terminal disease, but a little of both, and more. What makes Soho what it is as a working community is its capacity to thrive in the most adverse of circumstances. And this distinctive character, I will argue here, sustains its ability to continually evolve through reinvention and recitation, often of its own historical and cultural reference points. In this sense, Soho is the outcome of a dynamic combination of meaning and materiality through which social and material processes collide in order to produce this distinctive, somehow excessive and irrepressible, sector, setting and space. Soho's pleasure markets of food, theatre, fashion, music and sex interlink with the specifics of the area's history, location and urban geography to enable Soho to literally 'take place'.

Yet although much has been written about the area, little is known about the work experiences of those employed in the many sex shops for which this very particular place has a global reputation. How does Soho's global association with commercial sex impact upon the work experiences

of those employed there? What is it like to work in one of Soho's many sex shops? What are the emotional, aesthetic and sexual demands of the role, and how are these demands shaped by the place itself? How does the constantly 'changing face' of Soho shape the experiences of those who work there?

Drawing on an ethnographic study of sales-service work in Soho's sex shops, this book aims to respond to questions such as these by emphasizing that *place matters*; in other words, place is not a neutral backdrop but plays an active role in shaping the ways in which work is perceived and experienced. In this sense, the book aims to convey a strong sense of what it feels like to work in this particular place, at this particular point in its history.

*Soho at Work* has four specific aims. First, it seeks to provide a rich, detailed account of Soho as a place of work at this point in its evolution. In this respect, the aim is to offer both a contemporary and historical account of Soho as a working community, by situating current experiences in their historical context, and with reference to the accumulated meanings and associations that are materialized in Soho's commercial sex industry. Second, *the books* draws on the findings of ethnographic research to document the working lives of some of the many men and women who are employed in Soho's sex shops. Extracts from interviews, excerpts from field notes and vignettes will be woven into each chapter to bring the place and its characters to life and to convey the themes considered in each chapter through rich, ethnographic detail. As Peter Speiser has written in his history of Soho, 'there are so many sides to Soho and so many things going on that it is difficult to know where to begin'.[11] Although much has been said and written about Soho, the area is as fascinating as ever, arguably more so at this particular point in its history than it has been for some time, as it seems to be (once again) on the cusp of a resplendent re-emergence, or of going down all together, depending on whose point of view is being expressed. One of the aims of this book is to explain why these different views abound and to consider what impact they have on those who work there, with reference to Soho's reputation for sleaze, style and shabby sophistication.

Conveying something of Soho's many layers, historical and contemporary, and depicting the multiple traces of its past in its present and possible future is an important aim that underpinned the ethnographic approach taken to the research. With this in mind, the third aim of the book is to develop a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the significance of place to understanding lived experiences of work, mapping out the analytical potential of an organizational geography for studying and understanding the relationship between sector and setting in interactive service environments. Drawing on observational, photographic and

interview data, the book aims to provide a detailed analysis of the emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour performed by men and women working in Soho, teasing out some of the distinctions as well as the overlaps in how these different aspects of interactive sales-service work are experienced in and through the particularities of their work setting.

Finally, and on this basis, the book strives to make an interesting contribution to research on 'dirty work', work that is associated with multiple physical, social and/or moral taints, by focusing on lived experiences of abject labour or forms of work that provoke a simultaneous sense of fascination and repulsion for those who perform them. In its discussion of the latter, the book aims to emphasize the significance of place to understanding how abject forms of work, and abject work *places*, are experienced, perceived and made sense of.

What remains of this Introduction will try to set the scene for the rest of the book, providing an overview of current issues shaping lived experiences and perceptions of Soho. The complexity of the place now, and historically, makes it impossible to reflect the full range of these, but I hope to 'conjure up' a feeling for the place and to be able to convey a strong sense of the lived experiences of those who work there, in the sex industry, at this particular point in time. With this in mind, the discussion will focus on three key themes: (i) the changing commercial culture and character of Soho; (ii) current issues shaping the regulation and licensing of Soho's many remaining sex shops and entertainment venues, and finally; (iii) current concerns and debates regarding the gentrification, urban rebranding and sanitization of Soho.

Judith Walkowitz asks in her account of cosmopolitan London, '[H]ow did this tiny space ... become a potent incubator of metropolitan change?'[12] To find answers to this question – and there are many – Walkowitz considers the commercial economies that connect Soho to its peripheries and to the world beyond, charting how these economies enabled Soho to 'gain fame as a relaxed zone of freedom and toleration, [as a place] ... where the usual rules did not apply, while also producing a social scene marked by segregation, tensions, and inequalities'.[13] In addition to considering this contextual focus, the aim is to map out the main chapters of the book, explaining their respective focus and outlining how the chapters connect together in order to meet the aims just described. But first we need to give some thought to where, and what, Soho is.

## The Name, the Place and the Experience

As Daniel Farson puts it in his book *Soho in the Fifties*, 'Soho has always been a state of mind rather than a boundary',[14] a sentiment

that is captured in the details of the origins of its name.[15] As literary critic Alec Waugh wrote in 1920, Soho epitomizes the idea that 'certain words and certain names seem to contain within them the very essence of the things and places which they designate'. He goes on: '[T]here is a glamour about the word: it is crude and rough.'[16] Thought to be an exclamatory Anglo-French call originating in the mid-sixteenth century when Henry VIII acquired hunting fields following the dissolution of the English monasteries,[17] Summers notes how the term 'So-hoe!' seems to have been used specifically to signal the discovery of a hare. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* adds that the name most likely evolved as a localized synonym for 'tally-ho!'.[18] It is perhaps apt that these predatory associations continue to the present day, as the name has come to mean something well beyond the hunting ground to which it originally referred. One of the earliest recordings of the term 'Soho' originates from 1562, when the Lord Mayor of London and his retinue hunted and feasted in the area after undertaking a formal inspection of the conduits, which brought water into the City. This combination of business and pleasure has been another enduring (if not always endearing) characteristic of Soho ever since.

The place itself, as a geographical location, is bound roughly to the north by Oxford Street, to the west by Regent Street, to the east by Charing Cross Road (formerly 'Hog Lane', immortalized by Hogarth – see later in this chapter) and to the south by Shaftesbury Avenue. Cross any of these boundaries and the change is palpable. Step into Soho and one immediately, even now, can feel a sense of being somewhere distinctive in the heart of a bustling metropolis. Part of the reason for this, and a contributing factor to much of Soho's history throughout the twentieth century, is that no public transport runs, or ever has run, through its streets. Indeed, the imminent arrival of London's Crossrail network has caused some concern that the accessibility the development is likely to bring to this part of London's West End might threaten Soho's relatively geographically 'protected' status. Speaking on the ITV News in February 2017, actor and presenter Stephen Fry explained why he had launched a petition to 'save' Soho from the transport scheme, saying that Crossrail posed a threat to Soho's 'authentic soul':

> Soho is not just a metropolitan enclave . . . [I]t is a focus, a magnet for the young, creative and open-minded around the country. I believe and hope that this petition will do a great deal to focus public awareness and understanding of the dangerous waters lapping up against Soho and the very real and exciting possibilities that arise from retaining the area's spirit.[19]

As this evocation of Soho as a 'magnet for the . . . open-minded' emphasizes, the place is much more than simply a name or a geographical location. Many commentators have described Soho primarily as a sensory experience. As Summers puts it when she evokes the place's distinctive aroma:

> Soho smells by turn of soy sauce, dust, exhaust fumes, lust, strong coffee and cheap perfume, good wine and old beer, urine, ripe melons and rotting cabbage leaves[20].

Richardson similarly describes the place's distinctive smells and chromatics when he recalls his bohemian adventures in 1950s Soho:

> There were smells that rotated me through the compass points of Europe and beyond – Polish cabbage and Russian tobacco, French bread and Italian sausage, Swiss cheese and Turkish coffee . . . Miraculously, while the rest of Europe nursed a monochrome post-war hangover, Soho had colour.[21]

Added to this, for those who work in Soho's sex shops – especially those located, as many of them are, in the basements of 'lifestyle' stores or remainder bookshops – Soho's distinctive odour is one of Victorian drains and latex. On damp days especially, the smell can become so overwhelming that (between bursts of customers), cans of air freshener will be liberally sprayed at regular intervals, to avoid the smell becoming 'too off-putting', as one sex shop worker explained to me on a particularly rainy Sunday afternoon.

Indeed its olfactory distinction signals some of the ways in which Soho has, throughout its history, been a series of contradictions and conundrums. Again Summers sums this up when she says: 'Soho is always acrid, often dirty and sometimes sordid, yet it is never intimidating. It is a humane place, built on a human scale'.[22] While many would take issue with this rather romanticized view, Summers' sense that the distinctive 'spirit of Soho', the area's 'authentic soul' as Stephen Fry describes it, is a humanitarian one is widely shared, as is her emphasis on Soho's characteristic generosity in providing shelter, hope and opportunity to generations of immigrants, all of whom have added to its skills, tastes and flavour.[23] This way of thinking about Soho has a long history. Thomas Burke's *Nights in London Town* (1915) describes Soho as 'the heart of Bohemian London' where 'every street is a song'.[24]

Writing at the end of the 1980s, Summers puts particular emphasis on Soho as a place where there is no pressure on people to conform or to homogenize; rather, 'Soho is Cosmopolis, and its residents are cosmopolitan by birth and in outlook.'[25] Above all, the people of Soho are working people, so much so that – more than its name, or its geographical location – the place *is* its working community. As Summers puts it:

> Soho is a tired chef having a quick smoke in an open doorway. A shop window hung with a lethal display of kitchen knives. A black leather harness studded with steel, better suited to a horse than a person . . . A woman in thick make-up and thin clothes enticing a man to come down to some dimly-lit cellar staircase. Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club at any time of the night. A Chinese nun saying a prayer in St Patrick's church. School gates sandwiched between a kebab restaurant and a hostess bar[26].

As Summers also emphasizes, in the composition of its workforce, Soho is infinitely varied. But as she also notes, throughout its history Soho has had a hard life, kicking off with delusions of Georgian grandeur, from which it soon moved on in order to get on with the more mundane tasks of making a living and sustaining a community.

As a workplace and a home for 'artists, con-artists, artistes and artisans', as Summers put it,[27] there is no other district in London, arguably in the world, like Soho. The skills brought to England by French Huguenots following the repeal of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 resulted in the proliferation of literally hundreds of workshops within Soho's borders. By the middle of the seventeenth century, almost every street contained the premises of a master clockmaker, jeweller, toymaker, silver- or goldsmith. Soho has been a magnet for artists and writers ever since. Yet, by the end of the eighteenth century, wealthy Londoners had deserted the area almost in their entirety, making for more affluent areas such as Mayfair, abandoning Soho to its migrant populations. Large family houses were broken up, particularly in and around Soho Square, and the freeholds were sold off to landlords who subdivided them into cheap tenement rooms. The area fell into decay, and – although the number of houses stayed fairly constant – by the end of the 1800s Soho's population soared and over-crowding became a significant social problem.

As the backdrop to many of Hogarth's satirical engravings, the streets of the West End of London have always been a place of vivid contrasts, of elegance and squalor, indulgence and destitution. Hogarth's *Noon*, produced in 1738, depicting a mixed group of parishioners leaving the French (originally Greek) church in Hog Lane (now Charing Cross Road) shows this most clearly, with the people spilling out into the space between the church and tavern.

But Soho is not only a place of contrasts within its own boundaries. Separated off as it is between expansive Georgian boulevards designed for display, Soho constitutes the 'back stage' of West End life, serving as 'a back region of sweated labour, artisan production, and street prostitution for the front stages of pleasure along the boulevards' and in the neighbouring corridors of power.[28] Surrounded by these commercial

theatres of increasingly conspicuous consumption, Soho 'became the dark, industrial back region that serviced the spectacular front stage of the West End', its 'plebian world of industrial labour and toil' constituting a vital but unsightly backstage.[29] Architect John Nash recognized the stark division between neighbouring Mayfair and Soho when drawing up his plans for a new road to connect Marylebone Park with Carlton House, the home of the Prince Regent in the early nineteenth century. Regent Street was designed to provide a complete separation between the spaces occupied by the leisured nobility and the narrower streets inhabited by the West End's working poor. Commenting on this contrast in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Frederick Engels wrote of Soho:

> It is in the midst of the most populous part of town, surrounded by broad, splendid avenues in which the gay world of London idles about ... It is a disorderly collection of tall, three or four-storied houses, with narrow crooked, filthy streets, in which there is quite as much life as in the great thoroughfares of the town, except that, here, people of the working-class only are to be seen ... Here live the poorest of the poor, the worst paid workers ... [in] the whirlpool of moral ruin that surrounds them.[30]

Noting the especially foul smells emanating from the fruit and vegetable market and fish stalls ('naturally all bad and hardly fit to use'), Engels writes of the houses in Soho that 'their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them'. It was the dwellings in the narrow courts and alleyways between the main streets that Engels was particularly horrified by, noting how their 'filth and tottering ruin surpass all description'. It is the inhabitants of these places that Engels found to be 'losing daily ... their power to resist the demoralizing influence of want, filth, and evil surroundings'.[31] Charles Dickens wrote similarly in *Nicholas Nickleby* of Soho's Golden Square as a once grand but now 'bygone, faded, tumble-down street'. A widely cited illustration of the squalor that characterized Soho at this point in its history is that Dr John Snow traced the source of a cholera outbreak to a water pump in Broad Street, attributed to waste from nearby stable blocks that was found to be contaminating the water supply.

Yet Nash's desire to separate Soho from wealthier parts of the West End has also served Soho well, enabling the area to retain its identity as London's 'oldest village' long after other areas lost any sense of distinction. And Soho's proximity to wealthier parts of the West End meant that, particularly during the Victorian era, it was harder to ignore the social problems festering there than, say, the equally poverty-stricken and overcrowded East End. Consequently, Soho became something of a 'project' for middle-class philanthropists during the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries (in the same way that it would later, for councillors and politicians concerned to 'clean' it up in more recent decades). In the second half of the 1800s alone, six hospitals were set up to tackle Soho's health problems, as were a number of missionary organizations, including soup kitchens and temporary housing shelters. One notable example of these institutions was the Soho Club and Home for Working Girls, established in 1884. Open each evening, the Club provided classes in drawing, singing, needlework, music, mathematics and gymnastics specifically for girls and women working in the sex trade. As Summers describes it, the Club also had a library, canteen, bank and low-cost medical dispensary for its members.[32] But despite the efforts of philanthropists and social reformers, the living and working conditions for Soho's population deteriorated throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although later periods, including the present, brought their own problems, as Summers concludes, the Victorian and Edwardian eras were among Soho's darkest times, when poverty, child prostitution and exploitation thrived.

Soho's proximity to wealthier and more powerful areas of the West End not only made it harder to ignore than its East End neighbour, however. It also meant that Soho took on the role of the West End's backstage workshop. And this meant performing the part of central London's 'Other'. Arthur Sherwell, of the West London Mission, wrote in his *Life in West London* (1892) that in practice this positioned Soho as 'outcast London', located in the heart of the West End geographically but marginalized politically, socially and economically. Sherwell equated the weak, enervated bodies of Soho's workforce with the area's industrial character, arguing that the root causes of Soho's distress were its proximity to the luxury tastes and wasteful excesses of the West End. The expansion of the pleasure and leisure industries in Soho's neighbouring areas had resulted, on the one hand, in increasing demand for the goods and services provided there. Yet, on the other, this expansion had resulted in the development of warehouses and workshops in the area, contracting available space for housing stock and raising rents due to the increasing value of available property. As wages remained low in Soho's industrial economy, this resulted in overcrowding and in impoverished living and working conditions. As Walkowitz documents, Sherwell identified a second weakness in Soho's economy: as no one particular industry predominated, the area lacked industrial coherence and bargaining power, thereby accentuating the vulnerability of its workforce. Sherwell deemed the growing sex trade to be an outcome, rather than a cause, of Soho's precarious economy and of its proximity to the West End's 'front stage'. As many households struggled to make ends meet, men and women increasingly

found their way into commercial sex as the only viable way to make a living. Again, Soho's proximity to London's centres of commercial and political power was significant, constituting an accessible and available market.[33]

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of complete destitution for Soho. Soho Square continued to be a relatively thriving space of commerce and social activity. By the late 1800s, local food manufacturer Crosse and Blackwell had moved to a large factory on the north-east corner of the Square, where it remained until the 1920s. As early as 1816, London's first department store also opened in Soho Square, located just off Oxford Street, in the form of the Soho Bazaar. Added to this growth in industry and retail, Soho has always been renowned for its connections to the worlds of music, theatre and entertainment, not least because of its proximity to the heart of London's theatre land, with Shaftesbury Avenue forming its southern border. As well as the exploitation referred to already, this provided the basis for an emerging cultural economy in Soho and for its growing reputation as the heart of London's creative industries. As Alec Waugh put it, writing in 1920, as a working community Soho was 'a place of infinitely varied occupations'.[34]

It was Reverend Cardwell, the vicar of St Anne's, who convened a meeting in November 1895 to consider the impact of the growing sex industry on Soho society. Not least, he and members of his parish were concerned that landlords were discovering that higher rents could be charged to brothel keepers than to residential tenants or other workers. This, Summers notes, marked one of the earliest of Soho's 'clean-up' campaigns, as the Parish tried to place restrictions on the numbers of properties that could be rented to 'traders in vice'. In 1911, *Twenty Years in Soho* reported its views on Soho's reputation for commercial sex:

> It is an unsavoury subject, but the story of the last twenty years in Soho would not be complete without some mention of the crusade against 'disorderly houses' . . . which has been carried on with a considerable amount of success . . . [T]he result is that Soho, though by no means perfect, is a cleaner and purer place than it once was.[35]

During this first clean-up campaign, Cardwell became a dedicated supporter of Soho and its people. Summers describes an exchange between him and Metropolitan Police Inspector Mackay reporting to a Royal Commission in 1906 that illustrates this well. Mackay claimed that Greek Street, in the heart of Soho, was one of the worst streets he had ever had to deal with, as 'some of the vilest reptiles in London live there or