

## Judith R. Walkowitz Interviewed by Sharon Marcus

**Sharon Marcus (SM):** Where and when did you grow up?

**Judith R. Walkowitz (JRW):** I was born in 1945 and spent my first nine years in the North Bronx. In 1954 my family was part of a Jewish middle-class population that migrated from the outer boroughs to the suburbs of Long Island. We moved to Baldwin, a Catholic and Protestant enclave; by the time I got to high school it was about 25 percent Jewish. I think my brother, who's four and a half years older than I am, experienced a fair amount of anti-Semitism at school, but when I went there, it didn't feel very Jewish, it didn't feel very non-Jewish: you could have bagels and share them with your non-Jewish friend.

**SM:** What expectations did your family and teachers and friends have of you?

**JRW:** My family was a conservative Jewish family whose basic expectation was that I should go to college and find a husband. Their great disappointment was that I was a better student than my brother, and this was the big family secret. I grew up knowing that my parents were both proud and troubled about that. There were a lot of smart kids at that school; I was by no means the smartest. I have subsequently heard from some men at my fiftieth high school reunion that at the time they were amazed at the formidable young girls in this group. They already knew in 1963 that women could take over the world.

**SM:** What was your undergraduate and graduate education? How did you decide to go to graduate school?

**JRW:** I went to the University of Rochester on my brother's recommendation, as an undergrad and as a graduate student. It turned out to be an excellent choice. I was going to be a premed, because in high school the best teachers were in science, and we were taught that science was the most important subject. But then I

**Public Culture**

saw what premeds were like, and I didn't want to lead my life that way. Ironically, my first book was underwritten by the National Institutes of Health because it partially dealt with the social history of venereal disease. Anyway, I turned my back on the premeds and gravitated toward the faculty in the history department, who were striking iconoclasts.

**SM:** Do you remember the first history class you took?

**JRW:** The first class was with Norman O. Brown, called "Mystical Traditions in Literature." That showed me that I was really in a new place. He was a Jungian critic, a plump little man who put his feet up on the table, got himself completely covered up with chalk, and tried to invert every set of conventions that he thought anybody possessed at the time. My second teacher was Hayden White, lecturing on the history of Western civilization. Most academics don't think of Hayden White as someone who would deliver a master narrative of Western civilization, but that's what he was teaching at the time.

**SM:** Were you encouraged to go to graduate school?

**JRW:** In terms of familial expectations, my father kept asking me if I wanted to take a teacher preparation course or at least stenography. I don't think my professors recommended graduate school to me, despite the fact that I was first in my class. But no one objected. They were happy to write the letters of recommendation, and I proceeded forward.

**SM:** How did the political movements of the sixties and early seventies inflect the choices you made in your scholarship?

**JRW:** I became involved in the civil rights movement in high school. I see my class of 1963 as a real tipping point, because we grew up in the fifties, but my group was on its way into the sixties even before we exited high school. I remember participating in secondary boycotts of . . . I think it was Woolworths, with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] in high school. I remember having arguments with my parents because they didn't approve of secondary boycotts. In college and in early graduate school I joined Students for a Democratic Society, the women's movement, and the antiwar movement. I was suspended from school for sitting in against Dow Chemical—it was my first year of graduate school. The

history faculty came to our defense, and the president of the university was forced to reinstate us.

I wanted to connect my political engagement and my scholarship. One way I pursued that was to look at how social actors in different positions of power made sense of their world and how they came to imagine they could change things. I was also a member of a women's liberation group in graduate school and over the next few years worked with women fighting for welfare rights. This community work led me to ask historical questions about feminism and cross-class alliances.

**SM:** How did you come to be interested in nineteenth-century British history?

**JRW:** I was going to work on the Italian Renaissance, but it was 1967 and I decided that in order to engage with certain kinds of political questions I had better turn myself into a modernist. I now think that was shortsighted. But at the time, I wanted to do a subject related to the history of feminism. I also wanted to be a Europeanist, because to me that was as far away from my suburban background as I could get. To the extent that I understood the history of European feminism, I regarded the British feminist movement as the most vibrant one of the nineteenth century. I tried to think of a subject that would deal with the history of feminism and cross-class alliances because I was committed to that in my own contemporary politics. But I followed Victorian feminists in their obsessions and interests rather than my own and ended up studying a feminist campaign against the state regulation of prostitution.

**SM:** How did you first learn about prostitution, even before you came to study it as a historian? I think every person has a story about how they first learned it existed.

**JRW:** I remember being a teenager on the Long Island Railroad, in a nice dress, going to the junior prom at Columbia, when I realized I didn't have any money to pay my train ticket. I started to talk to the man next to me about this, which alarmed the entire train compartment. I realized I was stepping into dangerous territory even though the situation was innocuous. I wrote him a thank-you letter at the end.

**SM:** So you did get money from him?

**JRW:** Yes, I did. He was happy to help out, so I could get to the junior prom at Columbia!

**Interview:**  
**Judith R. Walkowitz**

Public Culture

**SM:** When you first began to write about prostitution, what was the extant scholarship like? Had it been studied as a topic before?

**JRW:** As a historical subject, prostitution was largely uncharted territory. It certainly wasn't a decorous, canonical subject of history. I was lucky to be working at Rochester, where the general attitude, set by Hayden White, was, "You can do anything you want, as long as it's interesting." Their perspective was, "Make me interested!" Nothing was too undignified for historical research.

**SM:** Was it difficult to get people interested in the topic of prostitution?

**JRW:** I was given permission to proceed. "You're welcome to pursue this, but you're on your own, we provide no guidance," so I had to sort it out myself.

**SM:** What was it like to undertake a research project where there was so little historiography?

**JRW:** Socialist feminist historians like myself built on the humanist tradition of British cultural Marxism epitomized by the writings of E. P. Thompson. We treated prostitutes as workers and agents in history. Interpreting prostitution as a form of labor—not noble or dignified, but labor nonetheless—enabled us to locate prostitutes as highly visible participants in the survivalist economy of the laboring poor. I also borrowed research strategies from labor history, learned from my husband, Danny [Daniel J. Walkowitz], who was training with Herb Gutman, to track women through case records of poor relief and hospitals, or through court cases reported in newspapers, and then back to the household census and to streets and neighborhoods of working-class communities.

**SM:** Your first book, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, focuses on the Contagious Diseases Acts and the drive to repeal them. What were those acts, and who were the different players trying to repeal them?

**JRW:** The Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s established a system of police and medical registration of street prostitutes in military depots of southern England and Ireland. The purpose of registration was to control the spread of venereal disease among enlisted men. When medical men and civil authorities tried to mount a campaign to extend regulationism to the rest of Britain, their efforts provoked massive political opposition. An alliance of feminists, middle-

class moralists, and radical workingmen mobilized against them and secured the repeal of the acts by 1886. Regulationists never imagined that feminists would spearhead this campaign or that they would visit subjected districts and encourage prostitute women to resist the acts. Nor did they foresee a successful alliance between feminists and a newly enfranchised working class—

**SM:** Enfranchised by the 1867 reform act—

**JRW:** That's right. Feminists were tapping into new political formations, and their repeal propaganda appealed to the chivalry of working-class male voters to save working women from medical torture and perpetual subjection to the police.

**SM:** An influential strain of Victorian thought resisted a strong central state and any state interference with the private lives of citizens. The Contagious Diseases Acts defined public women as having no privacy, and Josephine Butler and working-class men insisted that these women did have a right to bodily privacy and to freedom from the invasion of the speculum, a freedom women lost when subjected to mandatory gynecological examinations.

**JRW:** At the popular level, the most powerful argument against regulation was that it subjected women to “instrumental rape.” Butler and her colleagues would mount platforms and detail the medical outrage of the internal examination, how women were invaded by male bodies, male laws, and by the steel penis, the gynecological speculum. Denunciations of medical rape were the most powerful and sensational part of their political propaganda. And the speculum exam seems to have been the feature that most affronted working-class women brought under the acts. That was a shared value.

**SM:** What were some of the stereotypes about Victorian prostitution that your research ended up overturning?

**JRW:** To begin with, I challenged the moralist argument that the wages of sin are death. Few Victorians speculated about the life trajectories of prostitutes because they considered it self-evident that they would fall into an early grave. But using census data for women living in streets where prostitutes resided, I found that they were overwhelmingly in their mid-twenties. And by comparing census data to mortality rates, I also found no evidence that women engaged in prostitution died young. In fact, mortality rates on those streets showed that the casual labor-

**Interview:**  
**Judith R. Walkowitz**

**Public Culture**

ing poor were more likely to die of tuberculosis and malnutrition than anything else. Second, I challenged the notion that prostitutes were social outcasts, cut off from family and friends. Finally, I challenged the notion that prostitution was a question of working-class supply and middle-class demand—the primary clients of street prostitutes were sailors, not gents.

So most women were not working in brothels, their clients were overwhelmingly working-class men, they didn't die young, they weren't condemned to a permanent life of prostitution, and many of them ended up married or in common-law relationships with someone who might have known about their past and felt the past was past. Prostitution wasn't an irrevocable career path leading to hellfire and social exclusion.

**SM:** What was the relationship of prostitution to a woman's life course?

**JRW:** Women moved in and out of prostitution as they did with other forms of casual labor. Prostitution is an economic strategy that you have to measure against other strategies available to these women. When I looked at how a prostitute's neighbor got by, she might be doing laundry work, or needlework, or other forms of menial labor that were seasonally variable. Residents on those streets were engaged in a gray economy. There was no clear demarcation between the criminal and noncriminal poor. And these survivalist strategies were an acquired art, a learned set of responses to chronic underemployment.

**SM:** How did the move to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts help initiate the feminist movement for women's suffrage in England?

**JRW:** A small-scale women's suffrage movement preceded that campaign, but the campaign transformed women's rights from a decorous drawing-room affair into something more like a mass movement. It brought feminists out of doors, literally, as platform women speaking in public. It also helped to recruit women into feminism decades before a massive women's suffrage movement developed in the early years of the twentieth century.

**SM:** Your book about prostitution addressed many topics besides prostitution: the rise of the British state, the rise of feminism, and the history of medicine. The point of the forced examinations was to lock women up if they had venereal disease in order to prevent its spread. Can you talk a little bit about the history of contagion?

**JRW:** Victorian environmentalism connected crime, disease, and poverty as more or less equivalent. The Contagious Diseases Acts continued a strategy to control epidemic disease by segregating the laboring population that seemed to be emitting disease, both morally and physically. Many philanthropic and social observers including Charles Dickens regarded the poor as more or less equivalent to the dirty environment in which they lived and believed that disease emerged from that environment.

**SM:** You were working on this book in the 1970s. Did you end up seeing any parallels between the ways Victorians debated prostitution and venereal disease and how people in the United States were talking about AIDS, especially in the early years before *AIDS* was coined as a name for what was at first a very mysterious illness?

**JRW:** At the time I was writing the book, neither prostitution nor venereal disease was on the political horizon. Syphilis was regarded as a disease that could be cured, so I seemed to be writing about sexually transmitted diseases in a different epidemiological era.

**SM:** In the 1970s, when you started your work.

**JRW:** But I took so long in publishing this research that my book came out in the middle of a new epidemic. Victorians were incredibly anxious about syphilis, a disease that was incurable and ultimately killed but could lie dormant for decades. Doctors regarded gonorrhea as a secondary problem not least because many men were asymptomatic, even though it was extremely harmful to women, who were blamed for transmitting clap to men. A state power structure was mobilized to deal with these diseases by stigmatizing selective groups, by spatially segregating them, by refusing to assess how the disease was actually being transmitted by men as well as women. Similar fears and strategies of containment surrounded the outbreak of AIDS: fear of contagion, fear of the unknown, the need to identify specific groups and establish false boundaries around them.

**SM:** Did the Victorians ever link homosexuality and prostitution?

**JRW:** Josephine Butler, the repeal leader, certainly linked prostitution, venereal disease, and homosexuality in her private letters, stating that it was wrong to inspect women alone and not their sailor clients and that by blaming women,

Public Culture

regulationists obscured how men acquired syphilis and gonorrhea aboard ship before they landed. She was very explicit that authorities wrongly focused on venereal disease as a consequence of illicit sex between men and women, when sex between men was also at play.

**SM:** So she saw both as sources of disease, danger, lack of purity, lack of order. And her point was, why blame only one group? Let's spread the blame around.

**JRW:** That's right. Don't blame it on women when it's really about what men are doing with each other, and no one wanted to talk about that. Jeffrey Weeks, one of the pioneering historians of homosexuality, thought that my work showed some alignment between Michel Foucault's point about the nineteenth-century creation of the homosexual as a distinct individual type through legal and medical discourse and the stricter delineation of the prostitute in the Victorian period. At many other historical junctures, prostitution and homosexuality have been linked via new legislation seeking to define and regulate dangerous sexualities.

**SM:** Are there also parallels between how a scapegoated group moves from being deprived of rights to being a rights-bearing group?

**JRW:** It seems to me that gays have succeeded better than prostitutes in asserting their legal rights and identity. What strikes me about prostitution is how *little* progress has been made in recognizing prostitutes as rights-bearing subjects, in rectifying the fundamental inequities of solicitation laws, in pragmatically assessing commercialized sex as an urban economy and as an urban problem, something that requires negotiation among different members of the community. Second-wave feminists and unions have been very reluctant to make alliances with sex workers, and only some sectors of sex workers have been able to organize themselves as workers. That's changing somewhat now. And it's not like this is a small population; there is a tremendous number of women—and men—engaged in one form of commercial sex or another.

**SM:** Maybe prostitution is such an intractable problem because, despite efforts to contain and delineate it, exchanging sex for money doesn't lend itself to an identity, whereas it has been easier for homosexuality to be mobilized as an identity, both for good and for ill.

**JRW:** I don't think that prostitution is a single thing by any means, and you could also say that's true about homosexuality. In good part due to the Internet, the past two decades have seen a precipitous decline in street prostitution in every major city, accompanied by a proliferation of indoor commercial sex of many forms. This means that sexual labor appears to be safer and more profitable, but it is often under the control of sex entrepreneurs. The interests of the women involved are really varied; their conditions of labor are different, so even as a labor question, it's not a single thing. It is hard to organize workers under these conditions.

Apart from the problem of organizing sex workers, I am still unsure why prostitution presents such a challenge to effective legal reform. It should be possible to decriminalize prostitution, protecting sex workers from abuse, exploitation, physical violence, and extortion by applying ordinary statutes that do not mark them as a special group. It should be possible to come up with a set of guidelines that makes commercial sex amenable to urban policy, just as we create policy around other forms of commerce, even other forms of street labor. Yet, so far, it has not been managed. That leads me to think that, apart from the resistance of authorities, male privilege, and other material interests, the politics of prostitution has to do with some deeply affective investments about their bodies that divide women.

Prostitution manifests the troubling relationship between commerce and the female body, which remains deeply fraught and stigmatizing. Prostitution was compelling to Victorian feminists, especially to those who didn't concern themselves too much about other kinds of women's labor, because they identified so strongly with the abject figure of the prostitute. Feminists sensed some symbolic connection between prostitution and women's dependent status and sexual subordination in marriage. A hundred and fifty years later, feminists remain divided over it.

**SM:** Prostitution remains a powerful way to divide women into camps; there is still a lot of shame attached to the category that makes it hard to talk about, and a lot of illicitness. Was prostitution illegal in Victorian England?

**JRW:** In Britain, to this day, prostitution has never been officially prohibited or clearly defined. In the nineteenth century, legal sanctions against street prostitutes and brothels were mostly anchored in centuries-old vagrancy laws. To be arrested, a prostitute had to commit a breach of the peace—cause a nuisance or be deemed disorderly—but police and magistrates determined what constituted a breach. When the 1824 Vagrancy Act added the term *common prostitute* and

**Public Culture**

defined her as female, the term carried with it a presumption of guilt and allowed for arrest without warrant on police evidence. When brought before magistrates, women labeled as common prostitutes were stripped of ordinary legal rights. Such women were punished more severely than others brought up on disorderly or nuisance charges. Later legislation introduced to protect women from exploitation by pimps, white slavers, et cetera, simply exacerbated the situation. Although solicitation per se was not illegal, almost every form of activity related to prostitution became criminalized—including brothel keeping, advertising, being any individual who benefited from the trade, et cetera.

**SM:** Did you ever interview present-day prostitutes or emulate Josephine Butler by forming political alliances with sex workers?

**JRW:** I am always having students come out as individuals engaged in various forms of commercialized sex. This has happened to me over many decades in many institutions. When I published my work in the 1980s I was invited by legal scholars to participate in a series of conferences on women and the law, and I found myself on panels with prostitutes' rights organizers who became friends: Dolores French from Atlanta and Margo St. James, very well known from San Francisco. They had read my *Signs* article on the politics of prostitution. I met judges and lawyers working for the American Civil Liberties Union who also appreciated my historical work. I participated in a number of panels with them, and I invited Dolores French to come speak to my class at Rutgers.

**SM:** What class?

**JRW:** It was a class on the history of prostitution. And then she said, "Can I bring my boyfriend?" I didn't know what I was getting myself in for; I still had a certain fantasy about what the boyfriend of a person who worked in escort services might be like. I worried about whether it was going to cause me any difficulty in my day job, since I was bringing them into the academy. It turned out her boyfriend was a nice Jewish boy who worked for the Civil Liberties Union in Atlanta. So much for my anxieties.

But Dolores did surprise me constantly. She gave a lecture in the class, and I thought she was going to talk about the legal issues related to prostitution, but in the middle of the class she stopped and took out a banana and used it as a prop to demonstrate how when you're doing oral sex on a guy you can insert a condom on him surreptitiously.

Interview:

Judith R. Walkowitz

**SM:** How did your students react?

**JRW:** A few of them walked out of the room, and I thought, I have finally found a way to be de-tenured, but it turned out it just enhanced my capital in the class. As I thought about it later, I interpreted what she did as a way of saying: “Just because I look like a respectable professional, don’t think I am not what I say I am. Don’t think that you know everything you need to know about prostitution because you’re taking a class on prostitution. Here is my demonstration of the knowledge that I have and you don’t.” The point of it was to command intense attention.

**SM:** What’s the scholarship on prostitution like now?

**JRW:** One avenue that I think is really fruitful is following the money, recognizing that commercial sex is a significant urban economy and that there is a lot of money that moves around. Some historians have looked at the extent to which some women profited from that. Work done on settings from Nairobi to New York to Helena, Montana, shows that women historically controlled the trade and that some small-scale female sex entrepreneurs were able to expand their profits into real estate. I myself have looked at how respectable working-class residents of so-called red-light districts—which were really mixed working-class neighborhoods—profited from the sex trade.

Another lively area is the geopolitics of prostitution. Scholars have explored the proliferation of regulation around Victorian Britain’s global empire. In the past decade, there has been a tremendous uptake of interest in commercialized sex as part of the contemporary story of globalized labor migration, both forced and voluntary, and in the ways that national policies aimed at sex trafficking remain key mechanisms of immigration control. I could list about six other new frontiers of research. Overall, I am struck by a surprising degree of consensus among successive generations of historians: prostitution is and remains a form of sexual labor; intensified policing has negative effects on women in the sex trade; feminist interventions on behalf of their lost sisters have had a decidedly mixed outcome.

**SM:** Your first book is very much about work; your second book, *City of Dreadful Delight*, focuses more on men and women of leisure: the flaneur, female shoppers in London’s West End, intellectual networks like the men’s and women’s club. How are your first two books related?

Public Culture

**JRW:** *City of Dreadful Delight* asked why the Victorians believed so fervently in the social stereotypes of prostitutes I had exposed in my first book. To answer this question I looked at some powerful repercussions of the feminist repeal campaign: it forged new meanings about prostitution and ushered in a new regime of repressive policing and moral crusades against forced trafficking or white slavery. I shifted my focus from the port towns of Southampton and Plymouth to London in the 1880s and to media narratives of sexual danger with prostitution at their center. Why were Victorians so invested in those stories, how did they shape their experience of themselves and others in urban space, and did those narratives become cultural resources for individuals reconfiguring themselves in a transforming urban environment?

**SM:** What were the 1880s narratives of sexual danger?

**JRW:** They were melodramatic narratives that often involved triangulated relationships between a powerful villain, some sort of victimized figure, usually a working-class woman, and a hero who only intervenes toward the end of the story. Melodrama emphasizes not only action but also observation and visibility. Melodrama fuels a desire to move across urban space to experience both exciting and dangerous activity and to participate in social change. So melodramatic narratives of sexual danger weren't simply threatening or disabling; they also incited men and women of many different classes to political action and even encouraged some people to refashion new stories about sexuality.

**SM:** How did writing about London's Soho in your most recent book, *Nights Out*, allow you to develop some of the ideas of *City of Dreadful Delight* but also track how London changed in the twentieth century?

**JRW:** By fixing my gaze on Soho, I again gravitated to a district that played an outsize role in the history of London—a storied place, both dreadful and delightful, a space of urban spectatorship and a stage set for new social actors. As the most cosmopolitan space in London, Soho was also a central laboratory for cultural and social changes in London. It was both old and new, English and foreign. Its old unimproved buildings evoked the dark Victorian labyrinthine city, but its commerce also capitalized on modern technologies of the body, consumer goods, and opened up a new politics of race and geopolitics.

**SM:** What made Soho such a cosmopolitan space?

**JRW:** There were the usual suspects, the bohemian intellectuals and artists who made Soho their pleasure ground but didn't live there. There were also local ethnic entrepreneurs who exploited the cachet of Soho as a bohemian cosmopolitan space to attract clientele to their restaurants, theaters, nightclubs, and markets.

**SM:** What ethnicities?

**JRW:** Heavily Jewish and Italian, but a little of everything else. By the 1930s, Soho became a destination space for members of the African diaspora playing and working in black clubs. I was less interested in the bohemian flaneurs than in the people providing the services that made Soho a pleasure zone. As in my previous two books, I asked who produces knowledge, in this case of Soho, and who exploits that knowledge at different levels of the cultural and social spectrum.

I never assume that meanings are produced at elite levels and simply trickle down; instead, I focus on a multitude of different social actors producing meaning, intervening in discourse, inciting others to act, and being subjected to unexpected consequences as a result. When writers in the 1890s started to resurrect the glamour of eighteenth-century Soho as a space of old English bohemia, canny Italian restaurant owners exploited that reinvented history of Soho to attract metropolitan consumers to their dingy spaces.

**SM:** Gender politics and feminist reform are less prominent in *Nights Out* than in your two previous books. Did your interests change, or did British cities change in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century?

**JRW:** I was frustrated that I couldn't keep a dominant feminist thread throughout this book—it's a feminist book, but it's not about the history of feminism in urban space. I think that's partly due to the fact that feminists were less visible and less engaged with the politics of space and spectacle in the 1920s and 1930s than in the nineteenth century. But the book does document changes in sexual regimes and women's urban pleasures: it features working women as new urban adventurers emboldened to enter Soho, previously regarded as dangerous male territory.

**SM:** What kinds of spaces within Soho do you focus on in *Nights Out*?

**JRW:** Commercial spaces where there was an enormous amount of mixing of culture, bodies, and material goods: the variety theater, the restaurant, the nightclub, the street market, and the strip club, all spaces where diverse people mixed

Public Culture

in rather compressed circumstances. I started with two definitions of *cosmopolitanism* that were imprinted on these Soho spaces at the time. On the one hand, cosmopolitanism implied deracinated, unplaced masses; foreignness; transgression; and danger. On the other hand, it signaled a privileged extension of the self beyond the nation. Soho became a place where pleasure could simultaneously be located in London *and* feel attached to something outside the nation.

By the 1920s, some of these commercial spaces began to take on new political meanings, both right- and left-wing. The prevailing myth of Soho is that it was a stronghold of free spirits—home to revolutionary, left-wing émigrés. This is only partly true. In fact, the Soho Italian restaurant and catering industry was heavily penetrated by Italian fascism in the 1920s. Alternatively, by the 1930s, certain black nightclubs became spaces of the Popular Front, a broad-based political alliance of British left-wing groups dedicated to fighting fascism. These were not nice, clean, progressive spaces. They combined sexual labor and racial exploitation; some club owners forced black performers, who were mostly from the West Indies, to impersonate African Americans so that white urban adventurers could think they were getting an authentic form of Harlem jazz.

At the same time, these nightclubs were a meeting place for a loose network of left-wing participants: left-wing bohemians, Jewish communist musicians, and black pan-Africanists. All of this was happening in illegal nightclubs periodically raided by both police and gangsters. Unexpected things happened in these spaces. Hostile witnesses and police described the dancing scene there as perverse: you could see men dancing with men, women with women, whites dancing with blacks.

**SM:** How has being a lifelong New Yorker, living in Chelsea for the past thirty years, affected how you write about London?

**JRW:** I live in a neighborhood that for many years had, and still has, many of the same elements on display as Soho. Danny and I raised our daughter in a neighborhood that had leather bars, motorcycle gangs, and three sex shops around the corner. I know what it is like to live in a dense heterogeneous space, where people live together and apart. There are points of exchange and interaction between very different groups, and no-go areas.

**SM:** Let's switch gears and talk about the history of history as a discipline. What would you say has been the impact of women's history—or lack thereof?

**JRW:** Women's history certainly occupies a more recognized niche than it had when I first started. It has readers, and I think it still has some institutional support in most universities. But I also think that most departments think they have enough historians of women—and they also probably think that they have enough women historians. When the number of female faculty hits somewhere around 25 percent, many think that looks like parity.

It's hard for me to assess the impact of women's history in its totality, partly because I am in the middle of it. On the one hand, I was reading a recent article in the *New York Times* about new views of John F. Kennedy that cited recent American history textbooks by Mary Beth Norton and Carol Berkin, feminist historians who have woven women's history into their tomes. So, the good news is that feminist historians are writing important textbooks in the field of US history.

On the other hand, there are older traditions in historiography that don't want to know about gender and are indifferent to it. A new direction, which has a lot of promise and is very appealing to left-wing historians, is a shift from labor history to political economy and the history of capitalism. Often a focus on large-scale developments and structures of power is accompanied by diminishing interest in the social distinctions around gender and particularly in the differential experience and consciousness of gendered actors. The newfound interest in the history of capital tends to return to elite players, to be teleological and determinist, and obscures social actors like women. When gay squatters and feminist communal households make an appearance in urban histories of gentrification, for instance, they tend to feature as enabling forces for urban capital that help to "soften up" marginal areas for subsequent gentrification. I'm not fully challenging that interpretation; I just don't see it as an adequate rendering of their experiments in living.

**SM:** Why study history?

**JRW:** That's a good question. I used to think that you studied history because it would illuminate contemporary political choices and debates, and I do think that history can identify some of the bad roads taken that lead to the present. Whether it can tell you how to solve the problems of the present, I am not at all sure, and I am not sure I ever fully believed that. I used to think that you could study history to find an inspiring historical precursor for the political position [you] wanted to embrace in the present. But now I am more inclined to register the alterity of the past. In part, I've learned that historical actors can only draw on the cultural resources available to them: they can't invent something completely new. They

**Public Culture**

can combine those elements in innovative ways, and there is not one single historical consciousness that arises out of a culture. I still try to identify subjects who possess a critical consciousness of their world. But I also understand how implicated they are in a world that is not mine and in the limitations of that world. I am even less likely than my younger self to look for alter egos in the past.

**SM:** What was the most surprising change you've seen in the discipline of history in the past forty years, and what has been the most surprising thing that has stayed the same?

**JRW:** The most surprising thing that has stayed the same is the peculiar kind of practice that historians engage in that puts a high premium on deep empirical research and a very low premium on theory and interpretive strategies. Those are still in the footnotes. Cultural historians are a lot more sophisticated about analyzing the meanings embedded in their documents. But they feel compelled to narrate their stories with very little innovation in the writing. Historians have acquired new forms of interpretive insight, but the way they write has really not changed.

**SM:** What has changed in the past several decades?

**JRW:** There are new levels of sophistication about materials, and also a desire to go beyond national boundaries to look at networks of connection that link different geographies, to move beyond comparative history to genuinely transnational histories. That has set up some real challenges about the kind of deep description to which historians are still committed, but which becomes difficult to sustain when you are addressing more than one space. I tried to go deeper and deeper into a smaller space in my own perverse way.

**SM:** A smaller space that was, as you said earlier, a laboratory of transnationalism.

**JRW:** But as other historians go farther and farther afield, linking politics, economy, and social movements beyond national borders, I go deeper and deeper into their sedimentation in a small space.

**SM:** That's a good segue to talking about your research methods. Would you give an example of a time when a source transformed your thinking about a topic?

Interview:  
Judith R. Walkowitz

**JRW:** When doing my research on prostitution in Victorian society, I realized that I had to consult a whole range of sources to understand how the state regulation of prostitution in Plymouth was operating. I was looking at war office and admiralty papers, and I was looking at hospital papers; I was looking at the police columns in the newspaper, I was looking at reformers' commentaries, and I was piecing together a story based on all these sources housed in different locations.

At a certain point I realized that instead of this being simply an impediment to speedy research, the act of linking these scattered files *was* the story that I had to tell: how a state apparatus arose out of piecemeal efforts to regulate prostitution. The way the archives had been organized was telling me about a new phenomenon called the Victorian state, which wasn't unified and wasn't homogenized. Instead, it was a set of networks in the process of being constructed over the bodies of women.

**SM:** Say more about how as a historian you navigate between the macro and the micro, the local and the global.

**JRW:** *City of Dreadful Delight* was bookended by two campaigns around sexual danger, two forms of media scandal, both immediately internationalized: a scandal about child prostitution and the Jack the Ripper murders. Those were local stories, but they came to dominate the imagination of people around the world because of London's centrality as a site of communication and power.

**SM:** Has the expansion of digital media affected how you work as a historian?

**JRW:** Of course. Digital humanities makes it possible to assemble the kind of linked sources that allowed me to trace the life trajectory of prostitutes—while remaining at my desk at Hopkins. Digital sources allowed me to track cosmopolitanism as a keyword, a mental and material formation, and to see how and when it became aligned to urban space in the pages of the *London Times*. The downside of a digital search is that you're not turning pages of the newspaper, so you're less likely to see the material contiguous to the item you need, and therefore you don't get as full a sense of the issues contemporary with the topic under investigation.

**SM:** Are there particular works of historical fiction that you've found interesting to teach?

Public Culture

**JRW:** I have taught *Regeneration* by Pat Barker and thought it worked very well for undergraduates as almost a replay of the materials that we had read over the course of the semester. Indeed, they have said, “She’s saying almost the same things we’ve been reading!” And I say, “Because she’s been reading almost the same things you’ve been reading!” But what I haven’t tried to do—and should have—is to talk about her late twentieth-century rendering of Freud and how much her work is filtered through a late twentieth-century feminist sensibility. Historical fiction both refines and enlivens the primary and secondary readings and reprocesses historical meanings into a new formation.

**SM:** You have conducted interviews yourself as an oral historian. Can you talk a bit more about the context in which you’ve done oral history and the pros and cons of the interview method?

**JRW:** I am truly an amateur oral historian who has learned on the job at best. I first did some oral histories for my second book. As I was working on the media and public responses to the Jack the Ripper murders, I realized that I had material for almost every constituency except for the working women of Whitechapel. I thought to myself, they must have had a story, but it was not registered in print.

Then I thought, maybe there are some family stories about Jack the Ripper that I could access from older residents in the neighborhood. With the help of Jerry White, a London historian, I arranged to go to luncheon clubs for old-age pensioners in the Whitechapel area. I went with Margaret Hunt, who was a great interviewer, and we asked if people had any family stories of Jack the Ripper. People would say, “I don’t—she does.” And it turns out that instead of these being the kind of oral history encounters where you have to sit for three days and let people free-associate, there were already well-performed public statements about Jack the Ripper. They were all stories of “Mother Meets Jack the Ripper” in one form or another, told by Anglo-Irish Cockneys or East End Jews. These people lived in what seemed to be segmented populations, given how they spoke about each other in other parts of the interview, but their stories had similar structures and moral meanings.

The stories were urban folklore, about Mother meeting Jack the Ripper on a cold wintry night and talking her way out of a difficult situation, vindicating herself as a resourceful embodiment of female virtue. I learned that it is possible to ask leading questions about stories that are already highly publicized and already part of a communal repertoire. I learned that if you follow up on questions on prostitution, sexuality, and violence, you get some very interesting results. I

asked one woman if there was much fighting between men and women, and she said, “Men and women? No. Husbands and wives, yes.” No man would just go up to a woman and hit her, but husbands had that privilege regarding their wives. Husbands and wives were different categories from men and women. I learned a tremendous amount by asking the question incorrectly.

Interview:  
Judith R. Walkowitz

**SM:** Let’s end by talking about your current project, which also involves interviewing people but is different from what you’ve done in the past.

**JRW:** As part of a larger project on feminism and urban space in London in the 1970s and 1980s, I’ve begun to research the sexual politics of street prostitution and “kerb crawling” [driving slowly to pick up sex workers] in King’s Cross London between 1982 and 1985. The area around the King’s Cross train station was the new epicenter of London street prostitution after the police drove women out of Soho. Augmenting this local migration were street prostitutes arriving from the north of England on day return train tickets. They were fleeing a serial killer, dubbed the “Yorkshire Ripper,” who had been terrorizing women in Leeds and Bradford for over five years. After the English Collective of Prostitutes occupied a local church to protest police repression, the left Labour Camden Council’s women’s committee tried to negotiate between prostitute advocates and irate tenant associations. Anti-kerb crawling marches were mostly led by local women, but they had the support of squatters, who were a mixture of the London poor and countercultural hippies, political activists, feminists, and students. All of this occurred in the biggest space of redevelopment in Europe, where the very streets around King’s Cross were used as Dickensian stage sets for films depicting urban blight and degradation (*Mona Lisa* but also *Sherlock Holmes*). It was a London politically controlled by the mayor of London but under the thumb of Margaret Thatcher’s national government. It’s an interesting moment in the politics of prostitution, with new social actors and a new attention to the “client,” but also before drugs and international sex migrants began to dominate public debates over prostitution. And it was a time when some second-wave feminists, newly installed in municipal government, had to confront the policing of prostitution. I don’t think anyone emerges as a hero in this story (they rarely do), but it does dramatize the place of prostitution in the transformations of lives and land use—as part of the shifting terrain of urban capital, transport, household formations, democratic politics, and sexual identities.

**Works Cited**

- Barker, Pat. 1991. *Regeneration*. New York: Viking.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. 1980. "The Politics of Prostitution." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6, no. 1: 123–35. [www.jstor.org/stable/3173970](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173970).
- . 1980. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1992. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2012. *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

---

**Sharon Marcus** is Orlando Harriman Professor of English and Comparative Literature and dean of humanities at Columbia University. She is the author of *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (1999) and of the prize-winning *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007). She is currently completing a book on theatrical celebrity in the nineteenth century.

Until July 1, 2015, **Judith R. Walkowitz** was professor of British history and women's history at Johns Hopkins University. Her research has concentrated on cultural and social contests over sexuality and urban space. She is the author of *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980), *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992), and *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (2012). She has been an energetic promoter of the interests of female scholars within the historical profession.