LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Elizabeth F. Evans (2019) *Threshold Modernism: New Public Women and the Literary Spaces of Imperial London*, Cambridge University Press (Hardcover) 227 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-47981-3.

There is lively and burgeoning interest in the figure of the urban walking woman, partly due to the success of Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (2016) along with Leslie Kern's *Feminist City: Reclaiming Space in a Man-made World* (2020). *Flâneuse* and *Feminist City* may have received the more attention, given their popular appeal, but Elizabeth F. Evans' monograph offers a wealth of material about women's visibility in urban spaces, including the city streets which feature prominently in Elkin and Kern's texts. Although women were everywhere in the streets of London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – and represented as 'exemplary subjects' in various literary forms - they have not been subject to enough sustained critical analysis.

Evans teaches in the Department of English and the Program in Gender Studies at the University of Notre Dame. She specialises in British and Anglophone literature of the long twentieth century, with particular attention to modernism. She has previously co-edited *Woolf and the City* (2010). Woolf's 'Street Haunting' essay (1927) which narrates her walk around London ostensibly in search of a pencil, is perhaps the most cited when it comes to women's mobility in the city. Evans returns to Woolf here, looking closely at *Night and Day* (1919) and *The Years* (1937). Falling at the early and late ends of Woolf's career as a novelist, Evans argues that these novels 'portray physical movement and psychological development as intertwined and contrast the freedom of flânerie with the physical and psychological restrictions of the family home' (109).

Interweaving spatial analysis, cultural history, narrative theory, and literary studies, *Threshold Modernism* moves beyond Woolf to consider the influence of London and its literature on ideas about gender and race in Britain through a wide range of texts. Evans looks at canonical novelists such as George Gissing, Henry James, Dorothy Richardson and H. G. Wells alongside understudied British and 'colonial' writers including Amy Levy, B. M. Malabari, A. B. C. Merriman-Labor, Duse Mohamed Ali, and Una Marson.

From the 1880s to the 1930s 'in an astonishing range of genres and venues, the modern woman and her sites take centre stage' (1). Evans observes that this resounding presence has been hiding in plain sight like Poe's purloined letter. She explores how and why these women and the spaces they inhabited attracted so much interest and 'registers their impact in both thematic content and narrative form' (1). Evans describes these women as *new public women* to signal the primacy of their public presence, which signalled a world in transition (5).

She contends that spaces beyond the home were newly accessible – and often seen as dangerous – for 'respectable' women. The liminal spaces occupied by working women offered possibilities that were unavailable elsewhere. The sections of the book are organised around particular spaces: Shops and Shopgirls, Streets and the Woman Walker, Women's Club and Clubwomen. While only located firmly in London, looking at the same spaces can reveal forms of trans-nationalism (10).

Maps and mapping are crucial elements of Evan's monograph. One of the most strikingly original parts of the book are the maps of Evans's own making that chart the sites inhabited by the characters of the novels under examination, although they are very tiny and require magnification to read them. Maps of Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), George Gissing's *The Odd Woman* (1893), H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909) and Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919) point towards the possibilities for a larger scale digital project.

The central contention of this book is that middle class women tended to be apprehended as 'spectacle', which might be seen as the flipside of their freedom or mobility, however limited. Evans challenges the idea that that women cannot be subjects of the gaze at the same time as being observers of the city – instead, she contends that they are both spectators and spectated at the same time. Evans wishes to emphasise qualities *outside* the orbit of a unidirectional gaze. The texts she discusses tend to imagine women as active managers of what Ouida calls their 'publicity' – in other words they appropriated their status as spectacles to manage their perceived roles (28). Evans uses the term 'spectacality' to capture the way in which women were in fact *active* negotiators of the male gaze, and made dynamic use of their status as spectacle (28).

In Chapter Three, in which 'street love' meets flânerie, Evans draws attention to problems with debates about the flâneur, particularly the ambiguity of Benjamin's definition and its elision of race, class and other social constructions of identity. She draws on the work of critics who agree that women faced greater difficulties than men when trying to occupy the role of flâneur/ flâneuse (89). Womens' experience of flânerie may have been more fleeting than those of men, but this liminality is precisely what interests Evans and the writers she studies: 'this hovering on the threshold between observer and observed, perception and self-consciousness' (90).

Matthew Beaumont's *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London* (2016) discusses the challenges to reputation for women walking abroad at night, who were automatically considered to be prostitutes, no matter what their reasons for being out and about. Women who worked in public establishments were not quite as reviled, yet the connotations of their work clung to them nevertheless. The liveliest parts of Evans' book revolve around barmaids and shopgirls in certain literary texts. 'The Barmaid of the Modern City' considers the barmaid type which was created by her place of employment but was always poised to leave it – in other words, it was a precarious position that she occupied historically.

In 'The Afterlife of the Paradigmatic Shopgirl in the Early Twentieth century' Evans argues that shopgirls are familiar types that represented mobility but only in terms of 'stopgap employment between childhood and marriage'(87) – it was seen as a brief window in which women could be exposed to the rigours of public life, but it could continue for much longer for unmarried women. Evans discusses Katherine Mansfield's short story 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' and Jean Rhys' 'Mannequin' – in both stories the shopgirl and the shop model or human mannequin are performing roles in the public eye and are liable to abuse and 'degradation' (86). Trapped in the space of their respective shops, they glimpse the lives of women who are better off, creating fantasy and bitter disappointment. Tellingly, both these authors were 'colonials', with a lived knowledge of marginality and oppression.

The last part of the book explores women's clubs like the Ladies Reading Room (established 1860) which 'raised fears that women would abandon the home' in favour of enjoyment (135). Obviously, these clubs were not available to all, particularly working class women but there was more diversity within them than you might expect. The discussion of clubs offers an opportunity to sample from texts that Evans terms 'reverse imperial ethnographies.' There is an extant body of lesser-known writing by Indian (usually male) visitors to London which displays intense interest in the attributes, habits and health of women in the city's spaces, with a view to what was happening back home.

Evans delves into reverse imperial ethnographies by Indian men which are often playful in their treatment of English women who often dress like men and are easily fooled into believing they have two hundred and fifty wives back home (198). These accounts challenge the idea that black English literature began with the Windrush generation by pointing toward this rich vein of writing by black and brown writers from British-held territories who migrated to London.

Evans feels keenly the lack of reverse imperial ethnographies by colonial women of colour (225). Una Marson's lost, unpublished *Autobiography of a Brown Girl* (circa 1937) could have partially filled this gap, but we may never know at this distance in time. Interestingly, there was a sense of commonality and solidarity between British women and colonial men of colour in 1910, aligning calls for suffrage with colonials' calls for self-government, which had dispersed by the 1930s when women got the right to vote (227). Evans notes that 'reverse imperial ethnography' shares traits with high modernism because it's a hybrid genre blending travelogue with memoir and reportage, with authors slipping between roles as spectator and spectacle – in this way, the narrators of these texts had much in common with mobile women of this era.

At first sight, it seems that Evans is taking us along a well-worn path – due to the book's discussion of walking and flânerie – until we realise that we have strayed into strange and unfamiliar territory. Evans does not always emphasise the book's most unique elements, yet these should be evident to attentive readers. This is an accessibly written monograph which makes a vital contribution to the field of literary geographies and ought to be warmly embraced by all reader-walkers.

Works Cited

Beaumont, M. (2016) *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London*, London: New York: Verso.

Elkin, L. (2016) *Flâneuse: Women walk the city in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* London: Vintage.

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