Darkness Pass
A Nocturn

By Stacy Hardy | Peer Reviewed

'night opens
I enter
night shuts
I don't leave'

— Alejandra Pizarnik, The Galloping Hour: French Poems

In the title for his most recent book, Out of the Dark Night (2021), Achille Mbembe echoes Aimé Césaire, who describes the postcolony as an enervated landscape, seen and felt 'at the end of the small hours.' From this liminal time-space—betwixt what Césaire calls 'the strand of dreams and the senseless awakening'—Mbembe rejects both nihilistic suspicion (toward language, identity, meaning), and the false oases of scientific-epistemological certainty. Threading their twilight perspectives through the nocturnal lens of Édouard Glissant's opacity, Andrew Culp's 'Dark Deleuze,' Jason Mohaghegh's philosophy of the after-dark, Fred Moten's fugitivity, and more, I explore night as a third route beyond the tabulations of masochistic skepticism and sadistic truth. Working between fact and fiction, autobiography and critical theory, I delve into the fascinating paradoxes of nocturnal experiences through the tactics of some of its most dynamic practitioners, those post-apartheid artists, writers, and musicians who reject both the glaring fallacies of rainbowism and the self-defeating nihilism of afro-pessimism; those who keep strange hours and navigate the hidden potentialities of the after-dark: the thief, the runaway, the dreamer, the drunkard, the insomniac, the revolutionary, the prophet, the madwoman, the sorcerer, and the trickster.

night opens
I enter
night shuts
I don't leave

— Alejandra Pizarnik, 2018

Dark night babe
toss and turn
the clouds above
you make the sober go drunk

— Isabella Motadinyane, 2016

In the title for his most recent book in translation, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2021), Achille Mbembe echoes Aimé Césaire, who, in *Notebook of A Return to The Native Land*, describes the postcolony as enervated landscape seen and felt 'at the end of the small hours'[1] (Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2013). From this liminal time-space betwixt and between night and day, 'the beach of dreams and the insane awakening' (Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2013: 3), Mbembe rejects both nihilistic suspicion (toward language, identity, meaning) and the false oases of scientific-epistemological certainty.

Césaire's gloaming recalls the hour of the guillotine as well as the concluding line of Apollinaire's 'Zone' (Apollinaire and Padgett, 2015), 'Soleil cou coupé', which he borrowed for the title of one of his own collections (translated by Eshleman as 'Solar Throat Slashed' [Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2011]). As Césaire's epic poem progresses, the emphatic repetition of the line acquires an unsettling urgency. The promised dawn, the relief of morning, never arrives. Instead, we remain suspended in eternal night.

For Césaire, and Mbembe after him, this prolonged nocturn opens up a time-space of shifting, slipping, dislocations and hidden emissions – a time of violence and upheaval, yes, but also one of revolutionary possibility. Through the force of language and image, darkness begins to suggest a subversive impulse; an insurgent negativity that I propose we need to summon and seize against a contemporary world characterised by compulsory happiness, decentralised control, and overexposure. At a time when Black Studies has been institutionalised, 'black lives matter' is a t-shirt and decolonisation is official university policy, and against the urgent interest and over-exposure of black art – 'black lives, black bodies, black portraiture' (Jamal, 2021) – I propose that we must, to paraphrase Fred Moten, 'refuse what has been refused to us'[2] (Moten, 2013: 242) and return to the night.

'The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity,' writes Mark Fisher (2009: 80). He goes on to suggest that the very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalism means that even a 'glimmer' of alternative possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect.

In order to perceive this glimmer, however, we require darkness. As Pier Paolo Pasolini teaches us in his 1975 essay, 'Where have all the Fireflies Gone?', written against fascist foreclosure and its attack on the imagination, it's very easy to make fireflies disappear: just turn on a strong-enough light. The converse is also true: to make fireflies and their embodiment of hope reappear, all we have to do is render to the night its powers of potential, of latency. All we have to do is accept the night, in order to access its darkness. Simultaneously, the reappearing fireflies make the night itself appear, as the visual space through which precious signals come to us.

This paper is precisely such an attempt, an experiment in turning out the lights and inviting the darkness. Silently, then, the fireflies might send us their pulsations, their luminous emissions. Are they secret messages? Distress signals? Love letters?

Make no mistake, choosing the night, its shades and shadows, is perilous. As Ashraf Jamal's insomniac narrator in the title story from his 2002 collection *The Shades* reminds us, night is bloodthirsty, it is a hawk, 'silently swooping, plucking day from the sky with its talons':

> 'He looks through the window. The red earth of the driveway is turning black. No stars, only glittering talons, plucking, stitching, forming its patchwork of black... There are maleficents abroad. Beasts of prey. They come like fate, without reason, without pretext. This is South Africa where the night is red. Ribbons of blood like a kite's frayed tail cutting through the black. Ink in the brain. Blood too.' (Jamal, 2002: 2)

Rereading this passage, I'm immediately struck by the uncanny[3] semblance between Jamal's hawk and Nicholas Hlobo's now infamous sculpture, 'iimpundulu zonke ziyandilandela'[4]. Constructed from black rubber inner tubing and an animal skull, and trailing frayed tail of multicoloured ribbons that cut through the black, Hlobo's 'lightning bird' is a seducer, a deceiver, a messenger. Prophetic and blasphemous, intertextual, and hybrid in form, it presents a revisioning of history through the motif of divine descent.

Like Pasolini's fireflies, and the glistening talons of Jamal's hawk, 'iimpundulu zonke ziyandilandela' is both a harbinger of dark forces and unspoken celestial mysteries. It reminds us that to return to the night is always a 'fatal wager'[5]. One must stare into what one already realises intuitively as a paradoxical object: night is where horror thrives, but also passion and infatuation; night conceals things, but things are also said to 'come out at night'; we are caught off-guard by a sudden rustle of wings, a flash of talons, while also welcoming the safety of its dark feathered cloak. As Jamal's insomniac characters know only too well, even night's love child, sleep, provides no respite, bringing dreams and nightmares to the vulnerable slumberer.

Fortunately, we have excellent guides on this journey to the end of the night[6], a handful of its most fascinating practitioners: namely, those artists and writers who have chosen to forsake the well-lit glare of the white cube and the frigid sterility of white monopoly capital, in favour of the darkest passages and most dangerous alleyways[7]. Figures who keep strange hours and navigate the different potentialities of nocturnal experience – both of terror and enchantment, destruction and magic: the criminal (fugitive, thief, dealer, prowler); the wanderer (nomad, sojourner, sleepwalker); the revolutionary (rebel, insurgent); the lunatic (madman/woman, maniac); the outsider (exile, stranger, misanthrope); the dreamer (utopian, visionary, romantic)[8].

The Revolutionary

'My Blackness cuts up the Light / The light cuts up my blackness.' It's 2 a.m. and Lesego Rampolokeng's unmistaken voice floats over the speakers, staining the darkness of these times with a fierce guided by the light. Simultaneously razor sharp and gutter-sunk, mesmeric and exilic, Rampolokeng's prose and poetry have consistently, over the past half century, decentred and defied subjectivity and an identity politics that's tied to the dominant order of national, ideological, and stereotypical blackness.

'The light descends and strikes / To the heart of the night / Dusk around my head / The night,' Rampolokeng continues on 'Blackness and Light', a recording from his album *Bantu Rejex (a half century album)* created with Warrick Sony (Rampolokeng and Sony, 2017). It's a voice that is solely entwined with a nocturnal tongue, the ultimate language of destabilization, amplified by Warrick Sony's dark, illbient dub beats.

Refusing to sing the bright hymns of the age, or to compromise his vision for commercial acceptance, Rampolokeng's dark tones exhilarate, infect, inflame. Like a postcolonial Aimé Césaire or deep South Tchicaya U Tam'si, he is a poet who exudes radiance even as night falls in his poems.

An insurgent poet, a rebel, and revolutionary, he rages against oppression and the damage wrought on the black body in our contemporary world. Night, as Iranian theorist Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh tells in his 'philosophy of the after-dark', promises a revolution against the archetypal. It overthrows the 'dominant hierarchies and universal myths' in favour of the 'beautiful disarray of the masquerade or bonfire' (Mohaghegh, 2019). And Rampolokeng is its most seditious son. In his mouth, language is both a revolutionary tool and a device to conjure a new world that transcends the one we know. Polyvocal, intertextual, and hybrid in form, his many books – spanning jazz-infused, linguistically experimental, free verse, aphoristic fragments, and lyrical prose narratives – are a call to arms, a reminder to stay vigilant and wakeful throughout; to keep watch while others close their eyes.

Significantly, Rampolokeng's revolutionary stance extends beyond the page. Unlike the rest of us, content to rail against white-washed visions of blackness, while happily supping at the well-lit altar of capitalism, he has continually chosen the dark path of true rebellion, courting the night as one of the revolutionaries' most powerful allies. Like Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko before him, he knows that genuine revolution is

necessarily fugitive and violently negative. His skin is scarred with war wounds from previous battles. From another time, under different light, at a different angle of looking. His whole face is sculpted. His eyes are deep set. He shakes his head. Laughs then stops too suddenly, says, look at his fingers, the police smashed my hands. Everything crooked. A piece of paper, ripped in three. Edges curling, the writing is red. I can't read it. The lines are claw marks, they tear up the page. He has an unlit cigarette hanging off his lips. He can't find the lighter. It is buried somewhere in the wreckage of the house: loose papers hand-scrawled; books with covers torn and missing – all of them, pages sunk in yellow and words eroded from being fingered and fingered again.

Later, he collects up a pile – *The Antipeople* by Sony Labou Tansi, Marechera's *Black Sunlight*, a monograph on Dumile Feni, *The Madman and the Medusa* by Tchicaya Tam'si, Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, a worn copy of Staffrider Magazine open to a page of artwork by Fikile Magadlela – and forges an impromptu syllabus for his regular night school. Having been thrown out of Rhodes University for being too outspoken, too black, Rampolokeng has taken his teaching underground. Like Senegalese writer and film director Sembène Ousmane, who saw cinema as *cours du soir* or 'evening classes,' (Nyampeta, 2019) informed by the traditions of orality, sensuality and conviviality, Rampolokeng is forging a new pedagogy of the oppressed: a carrion call for a future generation of dark outsiders to master night's formulas and learn its conceptual-experiential relations to time, space, fear, nothingness, desire, death, forgetting, enigma, solitude, secrecy, monstrosity, and the body.

The Outsider

If any South African artist is worthy of the mantle outsider, it's Dolla Sapeta. A prolific painter and a poet, working in diverse media, and across forms, Sapeta's work seldom makes it to the podiums of conferences such as this. Nor is it exhibited in the galleries that feature contemporary South African art. It's simply too township, too black for the elite art scene; yet also too dissonant and ugly for the commercial 'township' market.

As Sapeta writes in his debut poetry collection *skeptical erections*:

> every day i wear judgment on my way to work
> at the home affairs department
> where i am found dancing inside a gumboot
> flooded by the blankness of my conscience
> and remain armed with nothingness
> i stink that too (Sapeta, 2019: 9)

The stink Sapeta is referring to permeates his work. His electric poems burn and reek, 'snitch and guzzle' (Sapeta, 2019: 11), seduce and jeer. They bend language and lore and strain against dominant discourse to painstakingly document the township as nocturnal space permeated by the 'cadmium stink of meat' and populated by 'men without tongues', 'frustrated prostitutes', starving dogs, and 'voluptuously throbbing bodies' (Sapeta, 2019: 15–19).

Similarly, his painting has ceaselessly documented the township as an outside in, an inside out. It is where one fathoms otherwise, the time-space of the visionary, the imaginary, the unreal, the unknown, the elsewhere, the outside, and the emergent. Beauty here is the experience of the limit, an autonomy beyond that of life itself; beauty that can be discerned in the ugly and the scarred, the dysfunctional and the erotic, the derelict and the obsessive.

His new body of painted works, collectively titled the *Meat Eaters*, exudes a similar thick stench. Foregrounding the irreducible concomitance of flesh, thinking, and personhood, it is both a critique of capitalism and consumption, and a joyous celebration of black bodily desires and pleasures.

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Here the body itself, the sacred human body, its cock and tongue and fingers, heartbeat and lungs, is no more than flesh, a machine constructed by a dead god to murder and shit. Flesh grown from other flesh, blood and come, bloodshed and consumption, carcasses slick with filth and skin, wild matted hair, the frozen grin of a smiley. It continues, even in the still night, even in a universe silent and asleep, the creatures, perhaps their souls, spirits, spasming, eating, shitting and baying. The shriek of awareness, and howl of death[9], the glimmer of a blade against a throat. It is true, what they say, 'at night all blood is black'.[10]

From this bleeding, this blending and bending, an art of resistance emerges, ever at odds with imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and xenophobia, while challenging and rethinking prevailing notions of otherness.

The Wanderer

Few figures of the night are as enigmatic as the night-traveller, those who master patterns of nocturnal movement and intricately choreograph their 'infiltrations or escapes' (Mohaghegh, 2019) around the hours of oblivion. While the revolutionary seeks to overthrow the dominant hierarchies and universal myths in favour of the beautiful disarray, and while the outsider fathoms otherwise, seeking out the shadows, the unreal, the unknown, the elsewhere, the night traveller deliberately defies a motive or destination. Against tradition, structure, reason, and systemic orders of the mind, the nocturnal *flâneur* is inescapably tied to discourses of chaos, chance, obscurity, and fragmentation.

David Koloane is our guide here. While many of his paintings portray the city during the day, his vision is always nocturnal in that it is simply not invested in time; it stilt-stalks over it, or makes its own time. Travelling in what jazz musician Herbie Tsoaeli called 'Cycle in circles' or 'in the meantime' (Tsoaeli, 2020), Koloane's city is always viewed from the perspective of the afterdark. All his works engage the mysteries of encounter, wanderlust, rootedness, the slippery lines between object and subject, and our uncertain place in a startling world. Tracing trajectories more insinuating and twisted than the straight line into the heart of darkness that is the unrequited death wish of an undead urbane West, he challenges easy division between night and day.

Significantly, it's only in Koloane's many paintings overtly set at night (his street and township dogs series, as well as his 'Mgodoyi' series) that time seems to stop. Or maybe we move outside of time completely, out into another realm? As Fred Moten tells it, 'we wanted to be outside…the sacrality of aeration… of unbounded…of outness itself…our intention…is that the undecidable local of light/sky/shadow/air is precisely what is at stake/issue…outness…outside ness…if not outsider ness…it is the outdoors…that which resists enclosure' (Moten and Hartman, 2016).

The Lunatic

Tracy Rose has long been dubbed the 'madwoman' of South African art. But if she is indeed this, she does not suffer from any of the fashionable contemporary disorders brought to us by Dr Freud and the psychoanalytic vicious circle – depression, anxiety, self-destructive behaviour, disorders of identity, etc. Rather, she is the maniac – the one disorder radically side-lined by psychoanalysis. In a fascinating reading, Mohaghegh makes the claim that psychoanalysis turned away from mania or rather turned the maniac away because he/she decentres the subject (Mohaghegh, 2021). Unlike depression, anxiety, etc. – which focus inwards, which foreground 'me, me me' – the maniac looks outward into the world, fixating and obsessing. Wracked by 'accelerated speed' (racing thoughts); 'elevation of mood' (expansiveness, insatiability, playfulness, energetic gesturing, agitation); 'hyper-sensitivity' (arousal, provocation, immanent triggers); 'hyper-expressiveness' (overflowing language); 'sleeplessness' (ultra-vigilance, concentration, temporal imbalance); 'risk taking' (impulsiveness, recklessness, destructive pleasure-seeking), the maniac is a destabilizing force (Mohaghegh, 2019).

Through her multiple performances, Rose enacts an obsessive mania, deliberately courting entrancement, excess, and delirium to rewrite femininity and reckon with colonialism, all while guiding us toward the mythic possibilities of creation: how constellations are formed from the pits of our stomachs and the darkness of our mouths. And how involuntary, how compulsive, and

how merciless the relationship between artist and subject can be.

Her performative practice and multiple personas have seen her art interpreted as exploring identity, but if Rose does engage identity, it is to shatter rather than affirm it. And if Rose's work is personal and confessional, what she is confessing is not a set of personal problems: it is a fatal disappointment with the world at large. Her work is less a self-exposure than a self-evisceration. These are not brooding laments but bricks hurled at empires, at the art world, at any pre-packaged lie that parades itself as the only available truth. Rose's feminism is profound and complicated. Ecstatic and erotic, its truth is both the deep wound against the black female body and the 'fuck it' that follows.

The Thief

In a world where thievery has been commercialised and institutionalised via both colonialism and capitalism, the thief is a fraught figure. But unlike those who perpetually practice daylight robbery – the gallerists, curators, funders, etc. – the nocturnal thief embraces larceny, not as an act or action, but as a practice and a way of life, born of techniques of cunning, camouflage, dissimulation, decryption, secretion, and dark allegiance.

The nocturnal thief – the trickster, the highwayman, the pirate, the vigilante – robs his audience of reassuring truths. It's Fela Kuti's 'Authority Stealing': 'You be thief [I no be thief]' (1980). It's Johannes Phokela stealing from thieves and then reselling the spoils back to those same thieves. It's Nolan Oswald Dennis lifting methodologies and language from other fields (astrology, physics, cosmography, and jazz) and turning them to his own use[11]. It's also Robin Rhode, not just for drawing a car then stealing it, but also for how in performing this, he steals reality out from under our feet.

It's the last night I spent together with Robin in Cape Town before he flew back to Europe. A shitty bar in Salt River. How he draws a picture of my heart on a serviette, then pockets it and walks out the door. Carless and heartbroken, I take a taxi home. Over the speaker Tupac sings, 'Sweet lady, Dear mama…Don't cha know we love ya?' as we pass the place where someone did the Tupac graffiti. It is gone now. The wall where Tupac's face once rose defiant is stripped clean, painted white. The area is part of the city redevelopment initiative. All that remains is a hastily scrawled tag: 'One Settler one bullet. Viva Tupac.' But on the streets, it's not me who is dying.

The taxi lurches, turns right to take a short cut. We cross under the overpass. I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted. The road goes on and on. The path keeps forking, splitting like an endless atom, splitting like a lip against a fist, like the sky, the sun breaking through the clouds. The day cleaving into night.

The Dreamer

In an era of extinctions, including the extinction of hope, dreamers are perhaps night's most precarious figures. They are our fireflies, those artists whose tiny lights both incarnate the night and its limitless possibilities, and offer a glimmer of the dawn to come. Those artists who dare to dream and whose dreams are too often extinguished by a brutal system. They are the many many friends and comrades I've lost over the past two decades. Writer K. Sello Duiker who understood both the quiet violence of dreams[12] and their necessity; artist Unathi Sigenu whose drawing traces the fragile moment when joy bleeds into suffering[13] and vice versa; photographer Thabiso Sekgala who captured the beauty and horror of lived experience.

It is to them that this paper is dedicated.

It is Saturday night. The city is pulsing and somewhere a piano is playing, a jazzy knell tolling a structure of sadness into the tonality of joy and laughter. Again, I'm back there, the night Moses Molelekwa died; strangled his girlfriend then himself. Since then I have had a thousand conversations on why he did it. A friend says, maybe we can read his suicide as an act of defiance, a refusal not an abdication? I don't know how Moses has come up in the conversation. We are sitting in some hipster club in Cape Town. The music is trip hop. I nod my head slowly but really it is a default gesture, more about keeping time with the beats than agreeing. The truth is, no one knows what happened the night that Moses died. Nothing can explain it except what transpires in the moment, that split second when everything shudders and life passes into darkness[14].

Notes

1. Arnold and Eshleman's translation of 'au bout du petit matin,' an Antillean Creole expression for the low-lit time between night and morning.

2. Or, as Pasolini says it: 'Refusal has always been an essential gesture. Think only of the saints, the hermits, but also of the intellectuals. The few who have made history were the ones who said no, not the courtiers or the servants of the cardinals.' (Colombo, 2006)

3. Sigmund Freud allegedly conceived of his concept of the uncanny while walking the dark streets of Vienna at night (see Freud, 2003 [1919]).

4. Often incorrectly dubbed a 'dragon', Hlobo's giant flying lightning bird is part of collector Jochen Zeitz's personal collection and is on permanent display at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa.

5. See 'Night as Fatal Wager' in Mohaghegh, 2019.

6. A reference to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (Céline and Manheim, 2006).

7. The Congolese poet and artist Sinzo Aanza perfectly captures this spirit in a recent Facebook post he tagged me in about defying the pandemic curfew in the Congo:

   A police officer: you are 30 minutes late for the curfew!

   Me: I am the city poet!

   The policeman: give a coffee and go home!

   Me: I am the poet of this city!

   The policeman: daddy do you want to sleep at the police station?

   Another policeman: besides the jeeps rarely pass here to take the people we have arrested, you will spend the night with us, you will sleep in the dust of the sidewalk... I advise you to give even a thousand francs and we leave you go...

   Me: I patrol the pulsations of the city in the silence of the night, I am the poet of it all, you yourselves the city police are subjects of my poetic addictions.
   The first policeman: leave him, it must be a student who has lost his mind, how do you want us to keep our heads in the schools of this city where nothing is happening because everyone is running behind the money?

8. This formulation owes a huge debt to the catalogue of various 'figures' of the night in Mohaghegh, 2019.

9. Or is it the night that howls, as poet Isabella Motadinyane suggests in her poem 'My bruised soul': 'my night shrieks/shock the neighbours' (2016: 19).

10. From the title of David Diop's novel, *At Night All Blood Is Black* (Diop and Moschovakis, 2021).

11. This strategy, Felix Guattari suggests in 'The Idea-Thief', forges linkages and assemblages, i.e. between singularities within a particular field and into a range of components and fields in other conceptual territories, transversally (Guattari, Lotringer, Wiener, and Wittman, 2009).

12. Drawn from his second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (Duiker, 2001).

13. See Jean-Christophe Lanquetin's obituary 'All I Can Say for Now' (Lanquetin, 2017).

14. Listen to *Darkness Pass – Solo Piano* (Molelekwa, 2004).

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