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Nocturnal Ethnographies: Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night

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INTRODUCTION

Nocturnal Ethnographies: Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night

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The idea of publishing a special issue of *Ethnologies* around the theme of “nocturnal ethnographies” came as a need to answer some of the questions that arose while we were undertaking ethnographic fieldwork on the nocturnal hours in Cuba (Boudreault-Fournier and Diamanti 2018; Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021). As we were engaging with the night through our bodies, sound recorder and camera, we came to ask ourselves a series of questions which are reflected in this issue: How do ethnographers conduct research at and on night? Are there specific sensibilities linked to the segment of the 24-hour cycle that emerge when night falls? What sort of imaginaries and aesthetics do the nocturnal hours invoke? The articulated and rich responses that we gathered around these questions in the current issue testify to the urgent need to address them, especially in a field – social sciences – that has been historically tied to diurnal practices and day-centered methods (such as observation and visual methods that are so deeply linked to light and clear vision, see Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021).

Moreover, the focus on the aesthetics and imaginaries of the night aims to bridge the social sciences and the humanities gap, in an attempt to enrich the discussion around sensory, creative and interdisciplinary methods. The eleven contributions to this issue reflect on how the imaginaries and the aesthetics of the night affect the work and methods of ethnographers, their fieldwork experiences and their approaches, as well as humans and more-than-humans alike inhabiting the night. By adopting such a lens, we recognize the affective and performative dimension of the imaginaries of the night and the relational quality of its aesthetics.

The work done in the humanities on the aesthetics and imaginaries of the night is of great inspiration to our interdisciplinary approach. Scholar Elisabeth Bronfen (2013), for example, engages with the cultural imaginaries of the night in Western visual culture, film, philosophy and literature showing how these rich imaginaries set themselves in relation and contrast to our daily experience, in being informative and performative. Bronfen claims that nocturnal imaginaries have evoked the night either through personification (mainly feminine) or as a journey from dusk to dawn. Night then appears as a site for the formation of imaginaries and aesthetic experiences that silently inform and affect our daily routine “through the hidden, forbidden, and forgotten”: “a journey into the night is a journey to the end of a night, from which we wake up in a day that has been changed because of this passage” (2013: 21-22).

In the same way, *Le dictionnaire littéraire de la nuit*, edited by Alain Montandon (2013), provides a rich and comprehensive understanding of the imaginaries of the night in literature, poetry, theatre, cinema and photography. The entries of this extensive dictionary speak to how cultural imaginaries inform nocturnal experiences. Furthermore, this volume shows how works that focus on night insist on its sensibilities and sensory aspect, by presenting themselves as an ode, a poetic tribute, to the night; a *fil-rouge* that can be traced through the articles of this issue.

Night is thus conceived of not as a mere extension of the day, nor as its negative counterpart. On the contrary, scholars increasingly working on night argue for the necessity of an interdisciplinary understanding of nocturnal times and spaces from a social, cultural, biological, ecological, political, and media-related perspective (Becquelin and Galiner 2020; Candela 2017; Kyba *et al.* 2020; Gwiazdzinski, Maggioli and Straw 2020). Ethnography is often used as a methodological access point to study the night in relation to urban life, infrastructure, media, rituals, and ecological matters.

Night has emerged as a field of studies and an object of research for ethnographers working in a number of disciplines. Specifically, the study of the night has received attention in relation to rituals, dreams or sleep (Bulkeley 1999; Schnepel and Ben-Ari 2005); the introduction of public lighting and the historical emergence of nocturnal activities in western cities (Koslovsky 2011; Palmer 2000; Schivelbusch 1988); nighttime economies, the increasing 24-hour economies and contemporary urban nightlife (Bianchini 1995; Caquelin 1977; Gwiazdzinski 2005; Lovatt and O'Connor 1995; Melbin 1978; Narboni 2012; Roberts and Eldridge

2012; Talbot 2009; Sagahon and Leon 2014); and the gendered dynamics of nocturnal spaces (Colleoni, Vitrano and Ferrario 2017; Day 1999; Deschamps 2017; García-Carpintero et al. 2022; Phadke 2011), to name but a few.

In anthropology, night, as a spatio-temporal dimension, has long been left in the shadows of the day, and only recently has it received attention from ancient to contemporary contexts (Becquelin and Galiner 2020; Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021; Galinier et al. 2010; Gonlin and Nowell 2018; Schnepel and Ben-Ari 2005). One of the main arguments brought to the fore to support the claim for ethnography to have a long-established day-centred tradition in the discipline of anthropology is the privilege we, as humans and researchers, have given to sight as the main access point to experience and knowledge. This becomes even more central for some specific approaches to night in subdisciplines such as audiovisual ethnography, that relies so heavily on a sense, namely sight, that is actually impaired by darkness, while having the extremely rich access point that is sound, or sensory ethnography, that provides tools to study night from a sensorial perspective. We argue that the many constraints that the nocturnal dimension imposes on the researcher – bodily, sensorial, physical, but also technical – should be understood as a starting point to better study the night with a specific nocturnal approach, in exploring its aesthetics, imaginaries, and sensibilities, as imaginaries of the night have been nurtured by writers, poets, and filmmakers in what Elizabeth Bronfen call the “aesthetically reimagined night” (2013: xiii).

This issue of *Ethnologies* aims to foster the debate by gathering interdisciplinary contributions on ethnographic studies that engage with the night from an imaginative and aesthetic perspective. Our goal is to map nocturnal ethnographies and understand how night affects scholarly research, as well as to contribute to the field of Night Studies that has emerged in the last twenty years (Gwiazdzinski, Maggioli and Straw 2020), and is today a thriving community of scholars. If histories, geographies, urban studies and the politics of the night are burgeoning fields of current research, we aim at exploring the aesthetic, sensory, and imaginative dimensions of night from an ethnographic perspective. By adopting an interdisciplinary method of inquiry, ethnography, and a common object of study or terrain, that is night, we aim at bridging different disciplines that might not be in dialogue otherwise. This work stems also from the conversations that have been conducted through the International Night Studies Network, with which many contributors are affiliated or where

they have been discussing their perspectives.

Urban media scholar Will Straw brings the reader through a journey in the African-American nightlife of the first half of the 20th century. Reading columns by journalists such as Geraldyn Dismond, also known under the pseudonym of “Lady Nicotine,” the author ventures into urban nightlife as reported in the northeastern African-American press (1920-1940). Particularly, he investigates the emerging genre of Harlem nightlife columns, showing how this journalistic style mutates from previous forms that covered urban social and cultural events, and gossipy reports. The genre explores the exciting nocturnal hours through a narrative and a style that testifies to the reporter’s own immersion and journey into the nightlife that not only reports back on the events and people that inhabit the night, but also on the sensations, affects and atmosphere attached to it. Like ethnographers, these journalists conduct fieldwork at and on the night, by immersing themselves in the nocturnal hours and conversely being affected by it.

In her paper, political scientist Rebecca Krisel explores the strategies put in place by event organizers, venue owners, performers, artists and patrons to respond to the COVID-19 lockdowns. Through interviews and digital ethnography, with case studies from Western cities, such as New York, Berlin, and Toronto, the author investigates virtual forms of sociability that enabled people confined in the domestic space to perform rituals of social dancing. From live streams, to virtual-event platforms, and Virtual Reality dance parties, she provides a rich analysis of the diverse communities that inhabit such spaces. The article concludes with a comparison between in-person and online social dancing supported by interviews, showing that, contrary to being perceived as isolating, virtual social dancing has offered a ground for an inclusive, anonymous, therefore protected and joyful enjoyment of the night. Both articles, by Straw and Krisel, deal with festive activities related to nightlife as represented or lived through media, and with the aesthetic atmospheres and sensibilities related to it. While Krisel inquires into how youth responded to the sense of alienation brought by social distancing by engaging in virtual dance parties, the paper presented next focuses on the ways young Montrealers occupy their nocturnal hours with ordinary activities that defy the capitalist overstimulation of nighttime economies.

With « Chiller et autres faits ordinaires : les jeunes, la nuit à Montréal », urban ethnographers Sarah-Maude Cossette, Mélissa Moriceau, Amani Braa, Chloé Couvy, Noah Oder, Nathalie Boucher and Valérie Amiraux

provide a comprehensive study of how young people aged 15-25 populate public parks in the City of Montréal at night. The study shows that while the City of Montréal has recently engaged with time-oriented politics and nighttime governance, little attention is given to teenagers and young inhabitants of the city and their relation to the nocturnal hours. Based on mixed methods combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews of Montréalers, it provides a cartography of the ways in which young people live through the nighttime. The main outcome of the study is the observation that the night is perceived as a recursive ordinary time, in which the principal activity is chilling, an act of resistance and transgression to the requirement of productivity that the day imposes on them. The sensory and aesthetic experience of the ordinary night is for these young people one of the most relevant parts of their nightly routine that allows them to foster sociability, intimacy and a sense of calmness that counteracts the sparkly, overstimulating and exciting aspects of the nighttime economy.

In his contribution, urban design scholar Nick Dunn develops the concept of 'nocturnal praxis' to refer to the strategies adopted by researchers to conduct qualitative research about the night. Based on ongoing fieldwork in Manchester, UK, Dunn explores the values associated with light and dark, how they are manifested in the urban nights and how they assert notions of power and inequality. The shift in our senses and our physical attunement to the night reveal other forms of walking and of interacting with the city after dark. How can darkness provide ways of designing the city and its architecture in the future? To develop this idea, Dunn conducted a thousand hours of nightwalking, along with autoethnography, photography and audio recording – methods that are integral components of a nocturnal praxis – to explore the night and its underrepresented spaces. Based on his multisensorial description of the 'everynight,' Dunn proposes new ways of imagining the urban night to redesign the city after dark in a more accessible and equitable manner. Dunn concludes that to fully grasp the experiences of the city at night, which are situated and relational, we need to work with darkness rather than against it. This way, we can fully consider the temporal dimensions of the night in the reimagining of a more inclusive and accessible city.

Similarly to Dunn, anthropologist Derek Pardue explores the night through photography, nightwalking, and cycling in his creative photo-text essay titled "'Cover the Fire' or Live in the Dusk." Pardue provides an ethnographic and performative interpretation of dusk from both an

empirical and metaphorical perspective. He explores the potentialities of dusk through affect, movement, and mobility to rewrite the city with a focus on the Muslim youth in Aarhus in Denmark and West African migrants in Lisbon, Portugal. Pardue argues that a more sensorial engagement with dusk may provide different visions of how marginalized migrant communities relate to the night. Dusk is understood not as a time when we lose lights, but rather as a generative temporal space for the revelation of new forms of knowledge. As much as dusk can be considered as a transitional space, Pardue explores the temporal and spatial imaginaries of darkness between anthropology and fiction in order to carefully consider the sensorial and epistemological aspects of darkness. Most of the images included in his manuscript were collected during the COVID-19 lockdown and are not accompanied by captions to better connote the ambiguous space of dusk leaving space for narration and fiction. This way, dusk opens for alternative ways of imagining migrants engaging with and belonging to the city.

Visual artist and scholar Chantal Meng also invites us to engage with darkness rather than to illuminate the night. Yet, she proposes to do this through drawing. With the help of pen and paper, Meng developed a method she refers to as *Night Drawing* that aims at perceiving the nocturnal illumination of the night, more specifically in relation to darkness. Her attention to darkness through embodied perception echoes Dunn and Pardue's perspective on a sensorial approach to the night. Through group events organized in London and New York, Meng explores how drawing *in situ* at night allows for active seeing and reacting. Being attentive to the shadows, contours, forms, dark spaces, and contrasts contributes to the emergence of alternative and changing perspectives of darkness. Drawing at night is difficult and requires the translation of our perception, the transcription of the visible (rather than the visual) through imagination and accepting that not everything is present to sight. It is through the gesture of drawing that bodies correspond with the night and that perception becomes a way of knowing, feeling, and sensing the darkness. And in asking "How do we acquire knowledge via drawing?" Meng suggests that drawing allows for affective encounters with the night that connect with nebulous expressions of night aesthetic and atmosphere.

Independent scholar Jayson Althofer argues that Friedrich Engels' multisensorial ethnographic description of the Manchester's factory night work in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England: From Personal Observation and Authentic Sources* (1845) has not yet received sustained focus. Engels adapted Gothic motifs to describe the exploitation of factory

workers by the bourgeoisie – described as new types of vampires who resist the artificial light and who lived with the blood of labour. Necessary for the rise of the pre-industrial world and its infrastructural machinery, artificial lightning also allowed for the 24/7 exploitation of the proletariat in the factory. Engels' thick description delves into the night work's debilitation of workers' eyesight – many of whom are children – caused by artificial lighting. He further criticized the work by Ure who describes the work of children in factories through a romantic light. In contrast, Engels builds an ethnographic account based on his embodied perception to deplore the zombie-like children who end their twelve-to-sixteen-hour shift and who are at the mercy of the light torture imposed by the bourgeoisie. The workers “experienced in their collective sensorium the grotesque terror by which capital forms and reproduces itself,” Althofer argues. As such, Engels anticipated Karl Marx's Frankenstein-influenced demonstration in *Capital* (1867) associated with the industrial revolution.

It is on board a publicity funerary truck that ethnographer Marie Lecuyer explored the City of Hong Kong, visiting one cemetery after another, and conversing with undertakers, funeral home directors, gravediggers and other people who entertain a daily relationship with death and spirits to explore how their memory survives in Hong Kong. With a focus on funerary rituals involving fire and effigy paper, Lecuyer explores the “ecology of the spectres” which most often appears at night and which is guided by sources of light. Lecuyer approaches fire as a medium which allows living humans to communicate with the spirits, and by extension, which permits the re-actualization of memory in contracting the spatio-temporal dimension. Yet, the capitalist economy, the pressure for urbanization and the politics of secularization contribute to the decline of this funerary ritual based on the consumption of paper. As a consequence, the “care for the spectres” through fire is made obscure and the ecology of the night is transformed. Yet the ephemerality of funerary practices reminds us of the precarity of our existence as well as the presence of the spirits among us.

Singer and peacebuilding scholar Lauren Levesque shows that lullabies are much more than what we may commonly think. The author argues that singing lullabies allows researchers to locate themselves at night in creating reflexive space in which they can critically imagine and navigate peace. Levesque draws on research in peace and conflict studies, music and peacebuilding as well as spatial approaches to peace to engage with the sensorial creation of an imaginary of the night that would speak to the aesthetics of resistance. More specifically, using autoethnographic arts-based

research, which involves composing, singing at night as well as personal listening practices, Levesque asks: “Can singing lullabies open a space to examine how sounding at night shapes a researcher’s “peace imaginary?” Singing at night, Levesque explains, helps constitute a form of attuning as it creates “moments of stillness where a deeper listening became possible.”

Media scholar Josh Dittrich proposes the category of *so(m)niferous media* that encompass media artefacts and mediating practices functioning as sonic sleep aids. The article highlights how such artifacts and practices include not only media that are designed to induce sleep and relaxation, but also, for example, media content that is supposed to grab the attention rather than reducing it. Through initial interviews and a literature review on the sociology of sleep, sound studies and a critique of late capitalist erosion of sleep times, the author intends to investigate how people re-purpose media and re-invent mediating practices. These techniques are used to mingle between circadian rhythms and the increasing erosion of sleep by 24/7 societies that perceive it as unproductive time, or extract data from it through technological devices. The article ends with further questions to be explored, such as for example, whether these techniques can be considered as potential politics of (non)-attention that try to subvert sleep-eroding capitalist trends.

Moving from auditory to visual media, artist Fiona Davies engages with hospital corridors as sites of transition and creativity, especially for patients, family and caregivers in Intensive Care Units (ICU). Her video-art piece shows the point of view of a patient lying down on a trolley being moved through the corridor and staring at the illuminated ceiling pointing to the loss of gradual day-night transition in ICU where light and noise make them almost undistinguishable. While the article recalls how corridors have been treated in art projects as liminal spaces, and shows how hospital corridors have also been studied as spaces where hierarchies are suspended, and where the medical staff approaches the patients in more creative ways, ICU corridors take a different note. Hence, Davies’ visual art projects explore ICU corridors at night as a site of temporal suspension, between life and death, occupation and staying rather than transitioning.

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