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Night stories: urban narratives of migrant lives in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

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Night stories: Urban narratives of migrant lives in Europe

ABSTRACT

This introduction provides an overview of this Special Issue: 'Night Stories: Urban Narratives of the Migrant Lives in Europe', which originates from work undertaken within the collaborative HERA-funded research project 'Night spaces: Migration, culture and integration in Europe' (NITE). It argues that experiences and representations of the urban night are often overlooked in Humanities research. It contends that understandings of this overlooked dimension of the urban night can provide important and more nuanced insights into questions of migration. It surveys the collection of academic and artistic contributions to the Special Issue, which provides a transdisciplinary survey on the storytelling that emerges from diverse experiences of migration and their connections to the urban night.

KEYWORDS

nocturnal city
migration
diaspora
nocturnal aesthetics
public spaces
artistic activism

This Special Issue on 'Night Stories: Urban Narratives of Migrant Lives in Europe' stems from work undertaken by the collaborative research project 'Night spaces: Migration, culture and integration in Europe' (NITE) (<https://www.nightspace.net/>), funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) (2019–22). NITE's interdisciplinary research engages with current debates on how cities are imagined and experienced and the critical role these dynamics have on communal well-being, as recognized in the UN Development Plan's recent assessment of its 2016 New Urban Agenda (Xu and Tuts 2021). NITE proposes that an important, yet largely overlooked, dimension of urban life that needs to be taken into account more fully is the urban night and its relationship to migration. Bearing in mind the prominence and divisiveness of the question of migration in current social, political and cultural debates, we contend that a fuller understanding of how different migrant communities imagine, experience and narrate everyday life in cities 'after hours' can provide key insights into how to ensure more cohesive and resilient urban spaces for the future.

The research teams from the universities of Leiden, UCL, Humboldt, Aarhus and Limerick that make up the NITE network consider diverse migrant communities across eight European cities of varying sizes, histories of migration, social make-up and location, spanning the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Portugal and Germany. Research has focused on long-established migrant communities as well as more recent migration movements. A selection of case studies from these diverse experiences are also represented in this Special Issue, in which some contributions consider the significance of night spaces for the well-established Cape Verdean community in Rotterdam, for example, as well as the recent migration from African countries into Ireland.

As the NITE project got underway in 2019–20, it suddenly faced the unexpected scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the ravages that COVID was leaving in its trail, it very quickly became apparent that the pandemic was having a particularly devastating impact on cities' nightlife. Curfews and the closing of the entertainment and cultural sector across successive lock-downs were, from the start, having a serious negative knock-on effect on the viability of night-time venues, the livelihood of artists as well as a range of night-time workers, who are disproportionately made up of migrant workforce. At the same time, the pandemic sharpened our awareness of the vital role of night-time culture for personal and communal well-being. As several contributions to this Special Issue illustrate, the night provides often unique opportunities for intercultural encounters and cultural expressions that help bridge cultural divides, and support the development of a sense of belonging for diverse urban constituencies. Stories of migrants' experiences and imaginaries of cities 'after hours' help provide a multifarious picture of urban life. This is one of the ways in which NITE, through the Special Issue presented here, has attempted to query the traditional association made between the night-time hours and potential disruption of public order and criminality (Beaumont 2015; Schlör 2016).

In recent years, a number of cities around the world have followed Amsterdam's trailblazing move to appoint a dedicated night-time policy advocate. Amsterdam's appointment of the city's first Night Mayor, in 2012, paved the way for the creation of similar posts in other cities around the world. This move in policy has reflected the increasing recognition of the potential of the night for urban economies. In fact, the concept of the so-called 'night-time

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economy', which first emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, has acquired resonance elsewhere ever since, thanks to a growing acknowledgment of the advantages of harnessing the night in urban development, regeneration and tourism (Roberts and Eldridge 2009). Known as night mayor office, as in the case of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, or night czar, as happens in London, the creation of a dedicated local government body for nightlife has gained increasing traction globally (Seijas and Milan Gelders 2020).

Yet, beyond the economic opportunities that the night presents, there is an increasing awareness that questions of accessibility, diversity and inclusion at night need to be addressed, something that has, in fact, taken on added urgency in the light of the pandemic. Indeed, this is reflected in the recent policy recommendations included in the ambitious Global Night-Time Recovery Plan produced by VibeLab (2021). There are also questions that resonate from the articles and artistic contributions collected here, which survey how the arts can powerfully convey how cities shape and are shaped by migrant lives at night, whether in narratives of night-time home life, leisure or work.

This Special Issue intersects with multiple disciplines and themes, all within the overarching frameworks of urban studies, migration and the night. In seeking to gain new and nuanced insights into how night spaces are imagined, produced and experienced by migrant communities in Europe, the issue also reaches beyond the continent in unexpected ways, mirroring complex migrant journeys and experiences. Thus, the geographical scope of this issue, while centred on the European urban experience, actually reaches other important cities through its storytelling, including Lagos, São Paulo and Praia. Furthermore, this Special Issue also seeks to cross metaphorical borders in reaching beyond the academy. Distinct in its approach, the issue includes creative inputs from non-academic partners. Within ever-increasing networked and complex societies, the notion of isolated academic spaces has become redundant (Kenny 2021; Rodin 2007). In looking outwards, we hope to move beyond traditional dominant paradigms such as the academic text to contribute to more recent developments in collaborative and arts-based forms of intellectual engagement and storytelling.

Through the focus on 'urban narratives', nocturnal spaces are viewed in this issue as sites of trans and intercultural exchange. Thus, we acknowledge the 'worlding' (Roy and Ong 2011) of various types of European cities as well as their differing histories of intra- and extra-European migration. Contributing to the ongoing discourse about 'urban imaginaries' (Lefebvre 1974), this Special Issue focuses on night-time migrant imaginaries and the need for such to be understood across material, symbolic, aesthetic and virtual forms. The night is presented then as 'a time for trying to be someone the daytime may not let you be' (van Liempt et al. 2015: 408), opening up to alternative identities, counter stories and spaces to be. Nick Dunn (2016) too speaks to the distinctiveness of the night and its rich potential for investigation due to its unstructured and unpredictable nature. He states, 'the uncanny character of the night-time city squeezes and stretches places', inspiring a 'jumbling of ideas and problems, the half-lives of previous projects and memories all stirred deeply within' (Dunn 2016: 9–10). The inputs in this issue too reveal a 'jumbling' of migrant experiences, memories, lives and half-lives, providing us with richly complex and contextualized night stories through multiple forms.

The urban night narratives in this issue also contribute to the ever expanding literature that examines how public spaces transform through mobility and interaction (Beaumont 2015; Cresswell 2006; Massey 2005). As Massey so eloquently puts it, 'you can't hold spaces still' but rather, space is 'the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made' (2005: 119–25). Our narrative approach also builds on the scholarship of Handelman (2005) and Schnepel and Ben-Ari (2005) who have underscored the qualitative aspects of human experience in darkness. Night spaces then, afford special social affinities, connections (and missed connections) that lead to particular types of engagements within the city. Just as we feel compelled to relate migrant experiences of the night through story, sound and image, as scholars, we are also motivated to find a more representative theoretical idiom to escape the diurnal mode of thinking (Fabian 1983; Tedlock 1991). Therefore, the urban narratives in this Special Issue aim to capture the phenomenologies of *everynight* life.

'Night stories' is an attempt to transform a multi-disciplinary collection of migrant narratives into a collective, transdisciplinary statement on the creative sparks provoked by darkness and the night among migrant communities in the city. Underlying all of the art and storytelling is a dynamic politics and economics of precarity. There are hard realities here and the contributors do not shy away from this to preserve 'art' for art's sake. Rather, readers of this dossier will encounter several attempts to bring together the sociological with the aesthetic. We believe such interdisciplinary experimentation is essential in *knowing* and *sensing* the role of the night in the material and symbolic construction of the contemporary city. There is an implicit suggestion throughout the pieces that what the night and darkness offer is a sensorial difference and thus art, broadly defined, is a fundamental mode of human engagement that should be more seriously considered and appreciated. In turn, we must strive to forge transdisciplinary projects moving forward to approximate a holistic perspective on the city.

The contributors to this dossier come from various walks of life and engage with 'the academy' in a wide range of manners. Some, like Jaspreet Singh, hold Ph.D. (in Chemistry), but almost immediately found a path in the arts. Others, such as Shp, are much less formally educated, roam the streets constantly at night and see 'scholarship' as an abstract expression of experience but one worth pursuing in partnership. Scholarship via the crew. Others of us are in the academy tenuously as Ph.D. candidates or post-docs spread across the humanities and social sciences in the Global North. Still others of us are veterans, who have pieced together career paths navigating the margins of disciplines, including anthropology, area/global studies, cultural studies and music education. We hang on, inspired by each other and the hopeful energies of ideational cross-pollination. In short, that is the hold night has on us. A spark to create, tell a story, step back and consider and jump back in and take a chance to push the boundaries of what counts as the city and who counts as a truthsayer, a beat maker or an artist.

The contributors to this dossier have employed a range of methods, including anthropological fieldwork, in-depth interviews, close textual reading and interpretation of novels, musical compositions, theatrical plays and films. Other contributors used their experiences as migrants in European cities, e.g., Lisbon and Bremen, as resources for artistic production in the form of graffiti, video and literature.

OUTLINE

The dossier is composed of nine entries and one book review and is organized into three main chunks, according to genre of art/narrative. They include: music, literature and performance. The last section includes Cape Verdean diasporic communities as a point of coherence as well.

In the first article, Katie Young discusses the role of night-time Afro dance music in Galway, Ireland, as a space of community-building among African migrants. In particular, Young works with two extended interviews with Mitchell Okeke, the event organizer of G Afro Vibe. The night as a time-space of musicality and social membership is highlighted repeatedly by Okeke as he attempts to link his memories of childhood in Lagos, Nigeria, to the cultural spaces of Galway. In her article on Temporary Autonomous Home, Maria Giaever Lopez continues the intersectional theme of urban migrancy and night leisure. However, while Young investigates the spatial contours of memory, Lopez focuses more on the empirical practices of belonging in night-time leisure activities. Using fieldwork conducted in Bristol, England, among southern European migrants, Lopez argues that darkness affords certain qualities that break the standards of English society and foster a community sentiment organized around sound systems and partying.

The first section ends with a video excerpt produced and edited by Shp ('sheep'), member of the group Pregos (literally translated as 'nails') and the nickname of Eduardo Santos, Brazilian street artist and resident of Lisbon. The video is ten minutes in duration and features a night scene of *pixação* in Lisbon. This term refers to the Brazilian, and more specifically the variant of spray paint street art visible in the mega-city of São Paulo, which shares qualities with both tagging and graffiti, but explores the architecture of buildings rather than trains or other urban surfaces. In the video, Shp and Xiên chat about street art, the night and the importance of art as 'intervention'. There is a short text that accompanies the video.

The second section of the dossier concentrates on migrant literature. Deirdre Flynn explores the lives of four women illegally trafficked from Nigeria to the sex district of Antwerp in Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street*. The article examines how this novel and these four female stories portray structural and gender inequalities, legislative failures and migrant precarity that keep these women in 'darkness'.

Questions of invisibility are also explored in the article by Dorothee Leasing that follows. Here, the focal point is on the liminal condition of post-migrant identities in Berlin. The article studies Karosh Taha's 2018 novel *Beschreibung einer Krabbenwanderung* ('Portrait of a wandering crab'), uncovering the key role that the night sky plays for the development of a sense of belonging for the novel's Iraqi characters, as well as the preservation of personal and collective memory and place making in high-rise living in the German capital.

This section closes with a short story written by novelist and poet Singh, himself a migrant from the Kashmir region of northern India to western Canada. The story, 'Night on earth', turns on the memories of the character Ximena during a period of residence in northern Germany. The night is featured as a catalyst to write and to remember.

The theme of memory has been a staple resource for migrants throughout history and around the globe. Significantly, the role of the night continues to be implicit in the facilitation of remembering. The third section of the dossier further explores memory, storytelling, art and the city. Sara Brandellero and

Seeger Kersbergen shed new light on Cape Verdean migrant stories within the city of Rotterdam. Tracing the community's cultural and political activism over time, how urban night spaces were negotiated, culturally mediated and ultimately transformed is the focus here.

Still with a focus on Rotterdam's Cape Verdean community, Kamila Krakowska Rodrigues's article centres on the second generation of Dutch-Cape Verdeans through the work of women artists Lena Évora and Sonya Dias and their artistic productions revolving around personal and collective memories of arrival and homemaking, as well as negotiation of intercultural identities. Drawing on Gilliland and Caswell's (2016) concept of imaginary records, this article considers how arts play a key role in proposing alternative archives and narratives of migration, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Rotterdam's multicultural social make-up and its nightlife.

The issue closes with Derek Pardue's contribution of ethnographic fiction based on his visits to the marginalized migrant communities impacted by Lisbon's brutal gentrification process and his interactions with those whose plight has been glossed over by city administrations. Weaving connections between Portugal's colonial past and the city's present refashioning, Pardue's contribution dovetails theoretical reflections on memory, urban migration, night and darkness, writing and translation.

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