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The Netherlands

## **Dark matters: recasting darkness with contemporary Latin American Art**

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### **Citation**

Noach, S. (2023, October 5). *Dark matters: recasting darkness with contemporary Latin American Art*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3643161>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Summary

*Dark Matters. Recasting Darkness with Contemporary Latin American Art* foregrounds the largely unrecognized potentialities of darkness through a close reading of six materially dark contemporary artworks from Latin America. It departs from the premise that from the 1980s onwards—that is, in the decades still under the shadow of military dictatorship, forced disappearance, organized crime, and structural racism—artists such as Cildo Meireles (Brazil), Carlos Martiel (Cuba), René Peña (Cuba), Maya Watanabe (Peru), Belkis Ayón (Cuba) and Maria Isabel Reuda (Colombia) developed artworks literally composed of dark matter that defy racist and colonial associations of darkness with irrationality, ignorance, barbarism, and mischief. Their installations and performances in pitch or partial darkness, photographs and prints of black skin or ink, and videos of obscure environments, reveal that darkness more so than having a theoretical and inert existence, flourishes as a vibrant matter that is capable of making things happen and producing effects. Among other things, this study demonstrates that darkness has the capacity to protect realities that elude capture, generate greater freedom, and resist, interrupt and disturb. It revolves around two complementary research questions: How do specific Latin American artworks recast the notion of darkness? And, to what degree does this recasting convey a counter-narrative to the modern perspective on darkness?

The predominantly black prints by Cuban contemporary artist Belkis Ayón exemplify one of the various ways in which Latin American artworks unfold the potentialities of darkness. They depart from the creation myth of the Afro-Cuban secret society Abakuá: the sacrifice of an African princess, Sikán, by her father, the king. In diverse shades of black, Ayón depicts the last hours of this legendary woman's life. She is shown while engaging in mundane activities, for example, fetching water or talking with her husband. Around her are several elements that arouse wonder: skins of wild animals covering human bodies, featureless faces, and religious signs and symbols from both European and African traditions. Although these figurative elements certainly account for the 'intangibility' and 'incomprehensibility' of Ayón's sceneries, this PhD research suggests that it is the black ink, which is tantamount to dark matter, that should be held accountable for the observer's lack of access to the artwork. To this degree, Ayón's works are suggestive of one of the undervalued and understudied potentials of darkness, namely, its potential to be what Martinican literary critic Édouard Glissant has called opaque: to leave things unrevealed and unsaid, and to recall a world that is inaccessible for outsiders. Opacity permeates Ayón's prints in a double sense: they are materially opaque, and prevent the observer from clearly seeing parts of the work, but also symbolically, the modern lack of knowledge on African spiritualities precludes them from understanding the scenes. To be opaque has far-reaching implications: it suggests a rejection of the modern doctrine of transparency by which the European colonizer intended to make the opaque 'Other' transparent, and thereby knowable and controllable.

*Dark Matters* accentuates that darkness has other potentials that exist alongside its potential to block access, and thereby appropriation as well as submission to Eurocentric colonial subjectivities.

These potentials offer the foundations on which this dissertation rests and are explored in relation to Cildo Meireles's installation in pitch darkness (*Volátil* [Volatile], 1980/1994), Carlos Martiel's performance unfolding in a dark room (*Penumbra* 2012), René Peña's black and white photographs of a black skin (*Man Made Materials*, 1998-2001), Maya Watanabe's video of fragmented human remains and clothes emerging from deep under the earth's surface (*Liminal*, 2019), Belkis Ayón's prints of black ink (*Aunque vayamos al cielo siempre se acordarán de nosotros* [Even If We Go to Heaven, They Will Always Remember Us], 1990), and María Isabel Rueda's animation film consisting of largely black drawings (*Horror Vacui*, 2007). Each chapter departs from a close reading of these artworks and advances by analyzing how the dark matters that constitute them challenge the modern, racist, and colonial, relationship to light and dark. Some of these chapters are relatively large, others are more succinct. Some of them introduce specific things that darkness can bring about, the actions it is capable of undertaking, or the alterations and effects it is able to produce, others reverberate the qualities of darkness already articulated before yet approach them from a different angle. In no way, the sequence of the chapters is indicative of a straight line that leads the reader directly to a fixed answer to the question as to how Latin American artworks recast the notion of darkness. Rather, the structure of the dissertation evokes the cyclic motion of the ocean, and hence its fluid, vibrant, and paradoxical spirit. Accordingly, the chapters are like higher and lower waves, enrolling backwards and forwards, that demonstrate how diverse materially dark artworks are capable of doing diverse and at times even contradictory things.

The dissertation starts with the observation that lately a range of scholars from different disciplines has conducted research into the still largely underrecognized potentialities of darkness. While thanks to the study of astronomers and biologists we have acquired groundbreaking insights into how, respectively, astronomical dark matter is foundational for the formation and maintenance of galaxies and biological dark matter can offer the key to mitigating climate change, in the *introduction* I argue that the research of darkness in the arts has been equally cutting-edge. Artists and humanities researchers alike, such is my argument, have profoundly challenged the modern perspective on darkness through their creation of and/or reflection upon materially dark artworks. Key to my argument is that in the works under analysis darkness figures as matter and thereby that it is not just inert or passive, but rather vibrant and lively and as such capable of making things happen and producing effects. Likewise, in the introduction I set the stage for what I insist on time and again through the dissertation, namely that the darkness that materially constitutes, and oftentimes also conceptually sustains, some contemporary Latin American artworks is capable of disrupting and resisting, of spawning imaginaries that elude capture, of protecting secret and sacred knowledges, of generating freedom, and ultimately, of reshaping the modern colonial and racist relationship to darkness.

In the following chapter, titled *Tidalectics*, I introduce this very concept by the Barbadian historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite. Suggestive of "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic...motion, rather than linear", in Brathwaite's work it offers a metaphor for

the Caribbean (Brathwaite 1991). Yet in mine, it has to do with structure. This chapter outlines how the concept travelled from Brathwaite's poetry to my dissertation and how it allows me to compose my dissertation in terms of fluidity, flux, and paradox.

After introducing the concept tidalectics, the first high wave arises. Chapter 1, *Cildo Meireles's Volátil Interrupting and Disrupting Luminous Regimes*, revolves around Meireles's multisensory installation *Volátil*. It starts by describing how this installation envelops the visitor in total darkness only to later surprise them with a small flickering light. Apart from the abrupt invocation of actual darkness and minor light, I argue in this chapter that the installation simultaneously generates sensations of great clarity and deep confusion. The term *chiaroscuro* covers for me this simultaneity between material and symbolic darkness and light, and allows me to develop the central argument of this chapter: the sudden and unexpected invocation of darkness and the subsequent equally unexpected invocation of a minor light, as well as the simultaneous experience of moments of great clarity and others of deep confusion, disrupts diverse photophilic regimes and imaginaries revolving around light.

*Carlos Martiel's Penumbra and the Becoming of Space* is the title of the subsequent chapter and therewith of the first small wave. It discusses Martiel's performance of his naked, black body lying on the floor of a pitch-dark room, *Penumbra*, and is the first to problematize the continuum between darkness and blackness—something that is central to this dissertation. There is yet another question that traverses this chapter and becomes increasingly important throughout my study: what is the relationship between being a person and having a body?

A big wave follows: *Black Skin in René Peña's Photographs: From Marker to Matter*. Elaborating upon the complex continuum between darkness and blackness, this chapter foregrounds a series of extremely close-up black and white photographs, *Man Made Materials*, of the artist's own fragmented, black body. It suggests that the images of Peña's skin invite the observer to touch them with their eyes rather than to look at them, to consider those things that make the skin singular rather than those things that it shares with others, and thus, so I argue, to look at the skin as matter than racial marker.

As the waves lower, the video *Liminal* (2019) by Watanabe emerges. The second short chapter, *Maya Watanabe's Liminal: From Zooming in on Liminality to Undermining Ungrievability*, puts the relationship between being a person and having a body in yet another perspective. It observes how the fragmented bodies of the disappeared in Peru are excavated from the dark earth and questions how this relates to, among others, the transition from disappeared to dead, from biological matter to corpse, and from non-person to person. Special focus is put on the manner in which Watanabe employs the camera—zooming in most of the times and losing focus—and to how this is suggestive of opacity.

Opacity is at the heart of the final big chapter, *Darkness Safeguarding Knowledges in the Collagraphs by Belkis Ayón*. It analyzes how the black prints by Ayón accentuate, simultaneously, the resisting vitality of darkness and its capacity to protect and safeguard secret knowledges. Specifically, those of the Afro-Cuban religious brotherhood Abakuá. The thinking of Glissant resonates throughout

this chapter. In dialogue with him, common perceptions on the position of darkness in Ayón's images—as being just a presence in the background or as determining the color of the human, botanic and animal figures—are challenged and yield to the more active and vigorous perspective on this notion. Likewise, his theory helps to sustain the assumption that Ayón's prints cannot be explained through their figurative elements: they can only be understood in relation to their materiality.

*Horror vacui* (2008) is central to the final chapter *María Isabel Rueda's Horror Vacui: Darkness in the Tropics*. The animation film composed of a series of largely black drawings, so I argue, evokes a stream of bewilderment in the observer that nearly gets them out of their depth. As I examine the film scene by scene, I advance towards the proposition that it challenges the observer's rational faculties as well as any fixed scheme of evaluation. Not the least because it brings together environments that are in some cases even lightyears removed from each other: our planet and the stars, the occult and the earthly, and the North and the tropics. Towards the end of the chapter, special attention is paid to how in Rueda's work obscurity, gloom and destruction traverse the torrid zone, recurring to a genre called "gótico tropical" (tropical gothic).

The last chapter of the dissertation equals the sedimentation of the insights acquired concerning the potentialities of darkness. At this point, all the things thought and said about this vibrant and lively matter made their way to the bottom only to settle and form a new sediment. Apart from disrupting the anti-dark and anti-black fundamentals of modernity, this sediment provides a fertile ground for future research about the photophile fundamentals of modernity, the potentialities of darkness and the role Latin American art plays in both issues.

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