

MARA LEE GERDÉN

# Journeys into the Night

Othering Figures, Figurations of Otherness

## ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to bring up to discussion how processes of othering may be enacted within figurative language use. The tropes that will be examined are a few examples of “the night” and “the journey,” and how they may take on different meanings depending on how, and by whom, they are embodied. Entwining literary texts with cultural and postcolonial theory, this essay wishes to complicate the idea of the night in the Virginia Woolf essay *Street Haunting*, whose female protagonist steps into the role of the flâneur for one night – a night that traditionally is coded as a feminine entity for a male flâneur to excavate. My question is: How does nocturnal meaning transform, and into what or whom will it transform when the subject conquering the supposedly feminine night, is coded as feminine just as well? Furthermore, this essay wishes to complicate the notion of the “journey” by turning to Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Claudia Rankine; all of whom – despite their differences – share one common thing: They have written about the journey in terms of metonymical, figurative language, namely the train seat. The aim of this essay is to shed light on and interpret these findings, adopting a critical, queer reading that to a certain extent unlearns the conventional content of these tropes. Instead, the endeavor of this essay is to trace more obscured and forgotten connections and paths that hopefully may indicate how some of our most common literary tropes are imbued with both a racialized and gendered meaning, which bespeaks the need for inventing new tropes.

**Keywords:** poetic language, othering, tropes, *Street Haunting*, flâneur, night, journey, train seat, bus seat, Claudia Rankine, Sara Ahmed, embodied language, racism

**IN THIS ESSAY**, I will explore how processes of othering may take place in figurative language by approaching the poetical tropes “the night” and “the journey” from a postcolonial perspective and by employing queer reading tools. The night that I will try to illuminate is found in Virginia Woolf, and it could be described as a peak expression of high modernism, but also as a turning point where its chief features are on the verge of transformation. My examples of the journey are drawn from different sources: poetry, personal accounts, and theory. Their common denominator is people of color on public transportation. Examining these tropes from a notion of a critical queer reading and a postcolonial perspective, means activating dissonance, leakage and residual meanings. It means reading *across* expected paths and histories in search for obscure(d) connections and forgotten genealogies in an attempt to show how the distribution of value in meaning production shapes our ability to inhabit both social and linguistic space.

Just as in other types of work, a both gendered and racialized division of labor can be detected in literary language use. Language ascribes power and agency to certain bodies, while others are deprived of it. You do not have to go to explicitly abusive language or hate speech to perceive how mechanisms of power imbue meaning production, as this takes place in ordinary language as well, but in a more concealed way. And maybe it is not overly hazardous to presume that the concealment is exactly what enables some semantic layers to come across as “neutral.”

For this reason, I will neither focus on highly innovative poetic or explicitly abusive language in this text. Instead, I will highlight images that are supposedly self-evident, whose meanings are more or less taken for granted and perceived as stable and neutral: the night and the journey. My undertaking will be an effort to de-neutralize them, trying to trace how some of us embody these metaphors differently.

But before I begin, I would like to mention that both the night and the journey could be understood as time/space figurations that are not only descriptive. Similar to the Bakhtinian chronotopes, they possess the capacity to shape whole narratives: plot as well as theme, topic and genre (Bakhtin 2010). However, they also share some features with Sara

Ahmed's (2017,12) "sweaty concepts," as they, as we shall see, are permeated with work, and with the material traces of histories we would prefer not to acknowledge.

In other words I wish to complicate two seemingly uncomplicated images, suggesting that conventional space/time configurations as the night and the journey are especially interesting when examining how language manages to sustain constructions of both gender and race, and how this allows for displacements that often will reinforce prevailing orders, but at other instances, on the contrary, will manage to create entirely new meanings, by way of relations of subordination.

## **Night**

My first example is the night.

In a literary context, the night is a founding metaphor for poetry, but it also installs a privileged relation to femininity. In the study *Night Passages*, literary scholar Elisabeth Bronfen (2013, 30) points out that the night is often grasped as a figuration of the threshold, positioned in between formless darkness and a clear feminine shape. From the early creational myths, through Odysseus' frightful, yet victorious encounter with the sirens, and onto the dawn of enlightenment; night is a source of both fear and aesthetic, it carries a double lineage. Maybe its most blatant example is the myth of Orpheus and Eurydike. I shall however not linger upon this myth here, or on its impact on the mythology of the male genius.

It could be worth mentioning though, that the nocturnal heritage of femininity in literature, is closely linked to the writerly compulsion to kill *her*. In an earlier book, *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), Bronfen grappled with exactly this question, observing how literary history was built on a pile of dead women (Bronfen 1992). In most Western master plots, both the woman and the night are conceived as obstacles to be conquered for the male protagonist. Whether the woman dies or not, depends on what kind of development he awaits. If he is to be a (romantic) hero, plain and simple, then he saves the girl. But if he is to become a genius, then the stakes are different, and the sacrifice more deeply

felt, and the girl dies. The making of the male genius requires a dead woman. And one practical way to get rid of her, is by precisely stressing her nocturnal heritage.

Fast-forwarding quickly into modernity, the night becomes an increasingly inhabitable place due to the growing metropolitan areas, partly enabled by infrastructural development as street lighting. This is also reflected in literature, where the city, the street, and the crowds are recurrent themes of modernity. Night came closer to the everyday, to the living. Having a “nightlife” became a possibility, and the existence of this very expression is attested from 1852 as a “habitual nocturnal carousing” (according to the Online Etymology Dictionary).

By the turn of the century, poets and artists ranging from Edgar Allen Poe to the *poètes maudits*, had already explored and, to be quite honest, almost exhausted, the poetic motive where the urban night situates the male subject in new, challenging ways. This said, the masculine modernist imagination brought us the flâneur, an observer who exercised his right to idly stroll around, disappearing into the crowd, thus combining tropes of freedom, invisibility, and disguise. For the flâneur, the night remains feminine, she is a devourer, a temptress, a divertissement, she is even pregnant in the words of the – at the time – young Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun (1890, 171).

In the highly gendered urban space, the idea of a female flâneur was more or less inconceivable. Women were mostly grasped as a part of the environment, or as commodities to consume (Dreyer and McDowall 2012, 33). But there are exceptions. So, what happens then, when a female protagonist, who is not cast as a commodity, a pleasurable object for the male gaze – what happens when this agentive, feminine subject decides to step into the urban night? What features will the night manifest and what kind of feminine subjectivity will be possible to inhabit?

Let us turn to Virginia Woolf and have a look. In her essay *Street Haunting* from 1930, the night plays a crucial role. It is an essay where the female writer makes an excursion into the city to buy a pencil on a dark winter evening. So, she starts roaming the streets all by herself, in the footsteps of the urban flâneurs. She says that in the night, “[w]e are

no longer quite ourselves” (Woolf 1930, 2). This far, she follows the fear and desires of the strolling male subject, in her endeavor to leave the everyday behind.

In the course of her wandering, Woolf (1930) embraces the experience of dissolution that the darkness brings about:

And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (Woolf 1930, 34–5)

Woolf indulges, she revels in the freedom of exploring the feeling of being dissolved, lost, she shows no fear.

*Street Haunting* is an essay that does a lot of things. But most importantly, it temporarily reallocates subject positions. Woolf manages to transcend her destiny to embody the nocturnal as an object, and instead, she becomes the active part, the penetrating gaze. How does she make this happen? I would say, through the pencil. The pencil is the key to the understanding of the subjectivity that Woolf claims and inhabits, in at least two ways. First of all, the claiming of a feminine nocturnal subjectivity is in this case inextricably bound up with Woolf’s identity as an upper-class writer, and the pencil is the emblem for this identity. The whole text can be read as a meta-reflection upon precisely the art of writing essays – so in the end, the idle strolling is not so idle after all, but its purpose is very clear – the writing of this text. Secondly, the essay begins and ends with the pencil, reminding the reader that the feminine subject cannot just stroll around aimlessly in an urban context at night; she needs a pretext.<sup>1</sup> Her momentary “freedom” is premised on her having an “errand,” a mission and reason for her being out there. So, even if her excursion into the night resembles an emancipated and free act, it is also conditioned – in fact it is completely conditioned by the shaping of the nocturnal feminine subject as a *dutiful* subject, she is out there with a plan. The whole framing of Woolf’s essay assures the reader that the respectable feminine subject is eventually resurrected by her return home, with the pencil.

But for a short while, Woolf manages to bring about a momentary annihilation of the gendered space of the night. How? What, or whom then, embodies the night that Virginia Woolf steps into, if it is not the feminine body?

As I said above, Woolf displays fascination, curiosity without fear. She delights in the way the night in fact *produces* otherness. She says that it “seemed actually to *create* the humped, the twisted, the deformed” (Woolf 1930, 13; my italics). Her fascination with the other is impossible to disregard: “What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?” (Woolf 1930, 9)

As you can tell, Woolf does not even try to simulate concern for the socially deprived. Instead, her gaze observes them, curiously, takes them in to feed her hunger for adventure. She is out there hunting, and ultimately she is looking for herself, and for material to write about.

Reading *Street Haunting* today is an ambivalent experience. On the one hand, you feel excited about her acquiring a subject position in relation to the night. But on the other hand, her descriptions of the impoverished, the blind and the halt and the crippled and the dwarf, and the wild bearded Jew, are at best ambiguous, at worst naively appropriating. Not because of the harshness, but because Woolf so obviously uses them as vehicles for the liberation of *her* mind, not theirs. The main conundrum is that the constraints of the feminine body are overcome by transfiguring the night into a backdrop for *her* struggle, and a metaphor for the challenges and riches of the creative mind. But the price for this liberation, her adventurous fulfillment as a writer who knows no limits, is paid by the obscure bodies of Others; the twisted, the deformed, whose chief function is to populate her imagination. So, while defying the scripts of patriarchal modernity, Woolf’s emancipation however seems to be premised upon the *objectification* and the *dehumanizing* of the Other – reminding us that in the realm of colonial logics, women’s liberation and agency were often closely linked to the oppression and subordination of Others (Amos and Parmar 1984, 5; Mohanty 1988, 63).

What does this imply for the definition of the night, onwards? Does the night still have a female sex? Or does it mean that the rules of exclusion and division are finally eliminated? Not really.

About the same time as Woolf situates the female writer as an agentic subject of the night, the psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski presents his ideas on psychopathology in the book *Le temps vécu* (1968), published for the first time in Paris 1933. Minkowski argues that darkness is not just a separate feature indicating the absence of light, but rather that it possesses a special kind of materiality that is more tangible, more obtrusive than brightness and clarity. He suggests: “The night is no longer something dead, it has a life of its own.” (Minkowski 1968, 372; my translation) And remember, this is supposed to be science, not myth or fiction. Minkowski continues:

Yet I do no longer have the black night, the complete darkness, right before me; it covers all of me, it penetrates my whole being even more, it touches me in ways much more intimate than that of the brightness of visual space. (Minkowski 1968, 372; my translation)

The impact of the phenomenological approach of Minkowski on other thinkers of this field cannot be denied. For instance, only a few years later, Maurice Merleau-Ponty will push the description of Minkowski even further, suggesting:

The night is not an object in front of me; rather, it envelops me, it penetrates me through all of my senses, it suffocates my memories, and it all but effaces my personal identity. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 296)

In this representation, night is no longer the mere opposite of daytime; it possesses a materiality of its own, capable of piercing human consciousness, as well as the human body. It has also taken on a life of its own with the capacity of *almost* annihilating us, and our identity.

I can not help but finding it interesting, that the phenomenological ideas of Minkowski, where dark and nocturnal matter is cast as a living, organic threat, that these ideas happen to coincide in time and place, Paris in the beginning of the 1930s, with the organization of the Négritude-movement led by Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor.

How come the medicinal sciences launch the idea of a dark night as living, threatening matter, *exactly* when the decolonial struggle of the Négritude movement in Europe sees its dawn? Minkowski describes this night as original, and primitive, and threatening to penetrate him. It might be a coincidence.

The time when night had predominantly feminine features may officially be over. The threat of the night, both as an imaginative and as a real space, might have found other embodied shapes. What I am trying to suggest is that there are tropes that will insist on structuring the world according to rules of exclusion. And as soon as the night becomes inhabitable for the feminine body, processes of othering will invent a new threat, “something like a shadow behind me,” as the dreams of the analysands of “Monsieur Mannoni” indicate, quoted by Franz Fanon (2008, 82) in his scrutinizing of the mechanisms of colonialism in the psychoanalyst Mannoni. Clearly, there is always someone, someone *other* doing the job, when it comes to the circulation of fear and hate.

## **Journey**

I will now continue with my second example of time/spaces that reshape both the language, the narratives and the lives of Others: the journey. The journey already constitutes a very familiar chronotope, or a trope that organizes a great amount of classical narratives, from the *Odyssey* to the *Divine Comedy*, but also the pilgrimage, and the epic romances of chivalry. So, no, I have to revise this, I have to put it right. My second example is *not* the journey because it traditionally implies bodies that are able to transgress any border. As the writer H el ene Cixous (1993, 131) says: “How do we cross borders? [...] The person who doesn’t tremble while crossing a border doesn’t know there is a border and doesn’t cast doubt on their own definition.” The very notion of the journey can easily gloss over the multiplicity of reasons and coercions that may have necessitated it in the first place, and the traces from a colonial past are urgently present in its very notion. The journey is still associated with “[l]uxury, beauty, and pleasure” in the words of poet Charles Baudelaire (2008, 111); a journey “[t]o gratify / your least desire.” On the other hand,



the transatlantic and transpacific journeys provided the infrastructural foundation for the colonial and imperialist trade in bodies and human labor along with raw material and goods, in other words everything that the “[l]uxury, beauty, and pleasure” seeks to erase.

If the contemporary heritage of the first journey can be understood in terms of mass tourism and leisure, the contemporary traces of the second journey is harder to grapple with. Moreover, if “journey” simultaneously covers two such radically opposite movements, then this term proves to be next to useless. Needless to say, the journeys in the sense of Dante, Odysseus or Bruce Chatwin for that matter, has very little to do with the coerced movement of bodies across oceans. So, how is it possible to shed light on the heritage of the *other* lineages of the journey in terms of tropes and figurative language use? Obviously, the need to invent new tropes is paramount; especially tropes that *are able to materialize and manifest the heritage of forced movement*. So, hereafter I will turn away from the journey, and instead address *one of its metonymic figurations* that will hopefully expose the darker lineage of its production of meaning. Turning to the metonymic figure – as opposed to a metaphor – also points toward my attempt to avoid engaging in meaning production conceived as a comprehensive act.

### **Train Seat**

In an essay about anger and hatred, the poet and feminist Audre Lorde (1984) recalls an incident on a subway train to Harlem. She is but a young girl, with her mother, in the 1940s. It is winter, and the young Audre sits down next to a woman:

Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she’s looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. (Lorde 1984, 147)

The astonishing thing is that there is not anything there, between them. No roach, no nothing. The hate and the horror that is communicated by the woman, originates from nearness, the fact that they are sitting next to each other. Ahmed (2014, 53) returns to this scene as an encounter that clearly shows how emotions, just like capital, are produced by circulation, and in this case, hate. Hate is transferred from one body to another; it sticks to bodies, but not to all bodies. An alignment takes place: the imagined roach, the girl, the hate.

This encounter resounds and echoes another encounter told by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), which is often cited:

In the train, it was a question of being aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple. In the train, instead of one seat, they left me two or three. I was no longer enjoying myself. I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple. I was taking up room. (Fanon 2008, 92)

Fanon tells us how his body, on the train, carries with it not only his body, but his ancestors' bodies, the bodies of his whole race which leaves not one, but two, no *three* empty seats around him; this is the measure of the fear that surrounds the imagination of black male bodies. Centuries of fear populate these empty seats. Centuries of hatred, oppression, prejudice. This clearly demonstrates how the visual absence (of explicit oppression) caught in a single glance *in no way* equals the actual absence of oppression, but quite contrarily shows how the organization of oppression is operating with both presence *and* absence, both explicit iconography and quiet, foreclosed markers. This absence could be interpreted as the passing on of racial boundaries from Jim Crow to modern times, translated into the highly choreographed language of freedom and "free mobility." If we quickly compare it to the incident told by Audre Lorde, the most apparent difference is that she was a small girl, a child encountering racism in the shape of feminine adulthood, while in Fanon's account the subject is a grown man; but the construction of space differs very little in the two scenes.

So, let us see what happens in a similar situation when the adult's gender is not explicitly mentioned in the text. The following quote is from Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), and it takes place on an airplane, right before take off.

Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible – I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle. (Rankine 2014, 12)

This setting reminds us of the one with Lorde. An encounter between a child and an adult takes place, but the roles are reversed. Here, it is not the child, but the adult who embodies the abject thing, so that the mother of the child has to mediate, literally, by taking the seat between them, so that the child will not have to get in touch with the adult. The adult who is perceived as contamination here, is a frequent flyer, which means that they are probably upper middle class. About seventy years, a whole lifetime has passed between Audre Lorde's train incident and this one. But still, the mechanisms of hate that are put into play are exactly the same. They travel across decades, and obviously, they defy boundaries of age, class, and gender. The only constant perceived here, is the color of your skin, and the question of seating. If every journey risks aligning some bodies with hate, then the meaning of the journey will be entirely different for them/us.

One last example will demonstrate the pervasive impact of the displacement of the meaning of the journey. This is Claudia Rankine again. There is one poem toward the end of her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), that can only be understood as a direct reference Franz Fanon and his triple existence on the train, and so it must also be read as an answer to the experience of having not one, not two, but three empty seats besides oneself, whenever in the public transport system.

In Rankine's poem, we are on a train, again. A female passenger makes it clear to the narrator that there are no seats available. But in fact, there

is an empty seat. The narrator wonders, would not the woman sit down? And the poem goes: “No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.” (Rankine 2014, 131) By now, we know whom the woman does not want to sit next to. What happens next, is that the narrator breaks the tacit agreement that some people are a contamination and *must* be surrounded with three empty seats. So, she sits down next to the man, this man who is Franz Fanon, who is every black man who ever rode a train, the one surrounded with not one, not two, but three, empty seats. And then the poem starts meditating on this man, and his unoccupied seat, saying: “Where he goes the space follows him.” (Rankine 2014, 132)

By sitting down next to him, the narrator momentarily halts the circulation of hate. Seen as an act of reparation, this is of course a futile move. But as a spatial intervention that short circuits the affective flow, if only for a short moment, it is a beginning. Even if it is too late, or too early. It is a beginning.

What I am trying to demonstrate here, is that a journey is not always a journey that can be understood in terms of binary oppositions or habitual associations. For these bodies, the journey will open up an abyss of layered meanings, and histories of pain. Just as for some bodies the opposite of night, is not the day; for other bodies, the opposite of a seating is not standing, and the opposite of a journey is not staying.

When we refer to a journey, there is not only Odysseus, but also a history of arrested journeys. And when writing about seating on a train or bus, we never *only* talk about public transportation. We talk about a history of bodily presence and resistance, a history that is yet to be acknowledged in its full dimensions.

The train seat, the bus seat, and now, sadly enough the airplane seat, is for every person of color, a *founding metaphor* that eventually refer back in time, to the critical December day in 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat to a fellow passenger.

So, it is not mere coincidence that the first pages of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s book *Americanah* (2013) takes place on a train. It is not mere coincidence that one of the most persisting and thought-provoking short stories about racial violence in America takes place on a bus, and

that it is adequately entitled “Wilshire Bus” (2011). “Wilshire Bus” was written by the Japanese-American writer Hisaye Yamamoto in 1950; only eight years after the internment and incarceration of more than one hundred thousand Japanese-Americans into concentration camps all over the United States, and five years before the Alabama bus incident with Rosa Parks. It is not a mere coincidence that Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, Patricia Williams, Claudia Rankine, and many, many other influential thinkers and writers, that they keep coming back to this crucial image.

There are encounters, metaphors, and time/spaces, that for the untrained eye seem trivial and private, but in fact they are not, because in these seemingly everyday images, as the bus seat, the train seat, the night, dwells a universe of shared experience that does not only imply recognition, or a confirmation of the prevailing circumstances. Instead, it reveals other levels of signification: the corpo-reality and the circulation and accumulation of affects, of hate and fear that are vital for racist and sexist structures. These places and tropes become nodes of concentrated time, space, and meaning. And perhaps most importantly, in the case of the train seat and the bus seat, they become a paradigmatic site of struggle.

They are sites of struggle due to their ability to generate complex meanings where the production of Otherness seem to intensify, and will continue to intensify, as long as their painful histories stay unresolved, still aching.

Toni Morrison (2014) once said about race, that it “is designed to construct artificial borders and maintain them against all reason and all evidence to the contrary.”

That is the fiction that is played out in these sites: boundaries that exist “against all reason and evidence to the contrary.” And that is what we are up against.

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## NOTE

1. Feminine figures wandering the streets at night were at risk of becoming the targets of the Vagrancy Acts of 1824, 1838, and 1898.