

On The Biogeoastronomical Night and Cautious Theory: *The Nocturnal City* book review forum response

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In the final chapter of *The Nocturnal City*, I state that I wanted to try and answer two questions for myself when I started writing the book. The first question was whether ‘the night is a time outside of “everyday” social conventions and restrictions’; the second question asked about the ‘urban night’s relation to the (planetary) urbanism of the day’ (110). On reflection, these two questions are actually very similar, insofar as they are an attempt to consider, first, the specificity of the night as an object of study, and, second, what this distinctiveness in an urban setting may tell us more broadly about the social world. It’s satisfying, then, to see that both Natalie Marr and Michele Acuto’s kind reviews of *The Nocturnal City* deal mainly with issues surrounding these themes. It is a luxury to be able to respond to their reviews, something that authors often do not get to do in print, so I thank them and CITY for this opportunity.

Marr identifies my opening attempt to deal with the specificity of night. As she puts it, far more neatly than I do, night’s ‘thingness cannot be gathered up or neatly delineated.’ The format of *The Nocturnal City* follows this logic, with the themes covered within it, therefore, a selection of different nocturnal moments and case studies. In other words, the book is not an attempt to capture the totality of night, but aims to point to various routes that academic study both already explores and may choose to follow in future. Along with this assemblage inspired understanding of night, I am keen to always question the ‘given-ness’ of its components—often viewed as natural, as outside the social order. It is for this reason that, rather than describing elements of the night as ‘natural’ and by implication therefore not-social, I use ‘biogeoastronomical’ to describe the darkness that comes with night. This points to the evolutionary adaptations that organisms have made in relation to night, and the ways in which these adaptations are differently distributed according to latitude and climate. Although I don’t acknowledge this in the book, the phrasing is somewhat inspired by Protevi’s ‘geohydro- solar-bio-techno-politics’ (2013, 41), and similarly to him I enjoy both the ‘barbarous’ nature of the phrasing and also the way that the string of prefixes highlights the ‘nonhuman elements implicit in the construction of . . . the social and the somatic’ (41). In other words, and in relation to my first question, the word biogeoastronomical deliberately highlights that the night is in part produced by a series of nonhuman elements that have some provenance outside the social realm.

Marr highlights the role that the biogeoastronomical plays as a concept in my thinking, helping to decentralise the human experience as defining the nocturnal. I thank her for the reference to Spivak’s work on planetary subjects; Marr is right that this concept speaks to some of my concerns about the biogeoastronomical, though it is an idea which I have only encountered since the publication of *The Nocturnal City*, specifically via its discussion by Derickson (2018). Marr also picks up ways in which notions of the biogeoastronomical could have been further developed within a more consistently post-human approach to exploring the night-time city, for example, in my chapter on the aesthetics of the night-time city. Certainly, the notion could be developed further, although I note that aside from work on light pollution (e.g. Meier et al. 2014), the engagement between urban studies and non-human actants in a nocturnal context is very limited to date, and that as such the work in *The Nocturnal City* is opening up ground for this more extended engagement. Further developing visions of the night-time city, which better address the relationship of self with the world and its inhabitants, are a good proposition.

So in answer to my first question, I come to the conclusion in *The Nocturnal City* that there are components in the production of the night which have biogeoastronomical origins that might sit outside the social, but which, through their imbrication in the production of the city at night, cannot be disentangled from it. This merging of economic, political and social forces with biogeoastronomical forces that produce the night-time city also forms an important part for me in how I answer the second question, that is, as to night's distinction from the planetary urbanisation of the day. My approach to answering this is where Acuto finds what he describes as his 'quarrels' with my work; in the spirit of his overall positive reception of my book, I'd like to outline here a few responses to these. To summarise, Acuto finds the extent of the discussion of planetary urbanisation within *The Nocturnal City* as something of a distraction from the broader aim of outlining and developing a more nocturnal vision of urban studies. The result, for Acuto, is a book which doesn't quite manage the impact that it might. One example that he cites is that the book lacks the global vision he'd have hoped for, for example, in choosing case studies that he characterises as a 'relatively located story of light pollution, artificial lighting and the advent of LEDs.' I will start with my agreements with Acuto's critiques— he's right that there is a locatedness of my empirical knowledge and choices, which is by and large the case for any single authored text. He's correct that a strong addition to the account of *The Nocturnal City* that I give would be to bring in workers from a range of sectors and places, exploring how they operate together a globalised world through the night: this could potentially build on work done exploring call centre workers and night shifts, for example (Patel 2010; Tadié 2016). To that end, Acuto's suggestion of an edited compendium or reader on the night-time city would be a useful addition to the literature. There are such compendiums on specific thematic nocturnal areas—on urban illumination (Isenstadt, Maile-Petty, and Neumann 2014) and on nightlife (Nofre and Eldridge 2018) for example—but one which sought to follow the common thread between these would be welcome indeed.

However, perhaps the bigger gap between Acuto and me lies in his framing of the story of light pollution as somehow not 'planetary,' because of its locatedness. In *The Nocturnal City*, my aim was to present illumination as a key planetary issue, in order to show why I see the discussion of the urban night as particularly relevant in the context of planetary urbanisation. Indeed, one of my main reasons for finding night interesting is that it is a time in which intensified experiences of the relationship between 'earth as planet' and the 'earth as globe' —a relationship that I label as the 'fragmenting frontier of night'—occur. Marr helpfully identifies that 'Shaw seeks to trouble the often assumed equivalence of "planetary" and "global"'. In terms of my argument, when lighting systems change predator/ prey relations, we have a planetary impact of night-time society. When I encounter a landscape transformed, in which I feel comfortable in the day but nervous in the darker night, I am encountering the biogeoastronomical elements of the planet. When artificial light limits my view of the night sky, this is a techno-social transformation of a planetary or even interplanetary relationship. Exploring the city at night thus helps us reveal some of the ways in which the social world is dependent upon the earth as planet, and is therefore dependent on, to quote Marr again, 'how the planetary as something more-than-human comes to bear on the urban night as a mutually constitutive force'. In this way, I seek to answer my second question on the distinctiveness of the urban night by turning to the heightened presence of the biogeoastronomical in the social. In other words, the reason for the extended engagement with planetary urbanisation is in part because the night speaks more to this conceptual framing of the city than to many other areas of theorisation. Relatedly, Acuto, is also concerned that *The Nocturnal City* spends more time exploring the biogeoastronomical element of the night than it does the story of the night transformed by capitalist expansion. In particular, Acuto argues that 'to be more 'global' Shaw's nightology also needs to come to terms with Jonathan Crary's '24/7' thesis.' Acuto is correct that *The Nocturnal City* takes a

somewhat neutral stance on Crary's book (Crary 2013), and more broadly that I don't put this question of the expansionary demands of capital at the heart of my work. One key reason for this is that I feel that this story has been told: told via Crary's Marxist-narration of the inevitable desire of capital to vampirically consume all of time and space, but also via socio-geographical explorations of changing nocturnal societies, (Melbin 1987; Gwiazdzinski 2005), and via several histories of the technological expansion of illumination (Schivelbusch 1988; Schlör 1998). In other words, while Crary's account is one of the more recent and conceptually sophisticated insights into the shifting relationship between capital, time, space and subjectivity, the story of these changes has been well told in the wider body of literature. Beyond this, however, I also find Crary's discussion of sleep as emblematic of how work on the night has sometimes been poor at dealing with the biogeoastronomical. In some ways, Caray's argument echoes my own notion that there is a physical reality to night which resists the expansion of capitalism. So Crary, for example, argues that sleep shows 'the presence in the world of the phasic and cyclical patterns essential to life and incompatible with capitalism' and a 'remission, a release from the "constant continuity" of all the threads in which one is enmeshed while waking' (Crary 2013, 126). In other words, he presents sleep as a set of practices external to the capitalist expanding society of 24/7, and in so doing he offers a rather naïve account of the biogeoastronomical night. Indeed, I reject this element of Crary's argument in two ways. First, he presents sleep as somewhat isolated from the wider biogeoastronomical relations with which it is connected: for example, darkness and its annual rhythms; temperature; nocturnal vision; the diurnal cycle of light and dark. Resultantly, I don't feel that his treatment of sleep is particularly detailed. Second, these biogeoastronomical elements of the night are not as independent of capital as Crary would like them to be. As I point out in *The Nocturnal City*, even sleep is becoming 'open to practices of control and management' (99) as 'sleep-tech' encourages us to record, monitor and improve our sleep in order to be better neoliberal citizens. There is also evidence that sleeping practices have shifted in response to social changes of over time—Ekrich outlines these nicely (2006). This further dismisses the notion that sleep, or the biogeoastronomical, can function as an unchanging barrier, an outside to capital which can somehow halt the expansion of '24/7.' So it is that in answering the two questions

that I set myself in *The Nocturnal City*, I found myself writing a book that sought to hold to (almost contradictory) positions. Or rather, and to the frustration of my university's marketing department, I can't find myself able to fully reject or accept both a tale of expansionary capital, consuming all of time and space, and a tale of the night as an external, natural force that prevents this expansion. The result is that I hold off from the more normative and agenda setting comments until the concluding chapter, an approach which for Acuto leads to 'a very cautious execution only unveiling its true theory-setting ambition in the last few pages of the book.' In many ways, I'm quite happy with this—to have written a book which finishes by opening up ways of thinking, rather than seeking to close them down. It's satisfying that both Marr and Acuto ask for more: Marr for further development of the conceptualisation of the biogeoastronomical, Acuto for a globally expanded empirical base which more comprehensively deals with the capitalism-driven acceleration of society. My intention when writing *The Nocturnal City* was to encourage others to develop exactly such research programmes, and to that end, I'd like to thank Acuto, Marr and CITY in giving me the opportunity to urge others to do so here.

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