# Nocturnal Urban Natures

## Multispecies encounters in the pandemic city after dark

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**Abstract**

The coronavirus pandemic has manifest itself spatially in various ways through forms of lockdown, restriction, and curfew. This has significantly disrupted the activities and rhythms within many urban places after dark, especially in relation to the night-time economy. In the UK, this has meant cities at night have temporarily become the preserve of designated key workers, with a degree of this labour operating precariously. Frequently exhausted and overworked, some of these workers have sought to find restoration and recuperation in spaces of the nocturnal city that pre-pandemic would not provide such respite.

By contrast, sites of urban nature which were previously occupied by individuals and groups after dark, each with different, sometimes competing, interests upon the demarcation and use of these places are noticeably devoid of human activity. Access to green space, meanwhile, has been a prominent feature of stories concerning health and wellbeing during lockdown yet this has nearly always been framed as a daytime activity. This paper, therefore, examines the appropriation of spaces in the nocturnal city for those undertaking nightwork while simultaneously investigating temporarily abandoned sites of urban nature to understand their character when their usual human occupants are absent.

Drawing on a series of nightwalks across the city of Manchester, UK, to illustrate the entanglements between light and dark, work and respite, presence and absence, humans and non-humans, this paper considers how urban places change when dynamics of human movement and occupation are profoundly altered. In doing so, it explores alternative futures for the city and urban nature after dark by giving expression to how we might engage with multispecies places at night to present a preview of the post-pandemic nocturnal city as a landscape that is in a process of becoming.

**Keywords:** nocturnal cities; urban natures; temporality; multispecies places; nightwalking

# Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has manifest itself spatially in various ways through forms of lockdown, restriction, and curfew. This has significantly disrupted the activities and rhythms within many urban places after dark, especially in relation to the night-time economy. In the context of the UK, this has meant cities at night have temporarily become the preserve of designated key workers. A notable proportion of this labour has been working precariously through the gig economy to fulfil the demands of the city and its people while under lockdown. Although there have been newcomers to gig economy work, evidence on the impacts of COVID-19 upon this workforce remains limited, fragmented, and uneven (Fairwork, 2020). Often exhausted and overworked, a number of these workers have sought to find restoration and recuperation in spaces of the nocturnal city that pre-pandemic would not provide such respite. They have identified safe spaces where they can rest, leave their bikes as appropriate, and support one another.

By contrast, sites of urban nature which were previously occupied by individuals and groups after dark, each with different, sometimes competing, interests upon the demarcation and use of these places are noticeably devoid of human activity. Access to green space, meanwhile, has been a prominent feature of stories concerning health and wellbeing during lockdown yet this has nearly always been framed as a daytime activity (Slater et al., 2020; Pouso et al., 2021). This paper, therefore, examines the appropriation of spaces in the nocturnal city for those undertaking nightwork while simultaneously investigating temporarily abandoned sites of urban nature to understand their character when their usual human occupants are absent. Drawing on a series of nightwalks across the city of Manchester, UK, to illustrate the entanglements between light and dark, work and respite, presence and absence, humans and non-humans, this paper considers how urban places change when dynamics of human movement and occupation are profoundly altered.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides this introduction to the premise of the paper. The context for the fieldwork conducted during the pandemic, the city of Manchester, is presented in the second section, along with a rationale for the selection of the site of urban nature studied at night, the first part of the Irk Valley. Images are provided to aid the reader's understanding of these places after dark. The third section outlines the 'pandemic nocturnal praxis' undertaken as a methodology and explains its relevance to comprehending the different characteristics of place at night, at locations within the city centre and sites of urban nature. To illustrate how nightwalking can be applied in this way, the fourth section gives a condensed account of a five-hour nightwalk taken on 10 February 2021, which traversed the city centre before walking around the adjacent section of the Irk Valley. The fifth and final section of

the paper concludes by reflecting upon the how this approach might enable us to rethink urban policy and design practices. Through this process, the paper hints towards alternative futures for both the city and urban nature after dark. In giving expression to how we might engage with multispecies places at night, it aims to present a preview of the post-pandemic nocturnal city as a landscape that is in a process of becoming.

# Presence within Absence

The pandemic city has been subject to multiple forms of reorganisation across different temporal scales due to enforced lockdown, restriction and curfew. Many headlines have been generated in relation to how different cities are, especially at night, when emptied out of their usual rhythms and civic buzz. As a result, numerous cities around the world have been noticeably quieter, cleaner, and calmer. The lack of people, traffic, and the urban choreographies usually found in a busy urban centre have led to greater attention being possible upon those aspects of the city that have endured or even become more pronounced. This 'presence within absence' is particularly evident as various forms of labour which would operate in the background, supporting the city with vital services, maintenance, and repair, or responding to the fluctuating demands of its citizens through gig economy work, are more explicit since many other people are no longer accessing the urban night. In addition, places of urban nature close to the city centre, which typically would have been populated by those living nearby, were also much less visited by humans during lockdowns and restrictions. This has meant that hitherto barely detectable presences of non-humans have become more prominent through the reduction of anthropogenic activity.

Throughout the three national lockdowns I continued my practice of nightwalking in my home city of Manchester to understand how these different measures were impacting upon the city at night. Across the second national lockdown, 5 November to 2 December 2020, I conducted twelve nightwalks around and through the city centre. The absence of the usual night-time business and people were palpable (Figures 1-3). Instead, occasional pockets of activity would appear then fade, all the more curious and conspicuous without the background hum and thrum of the city at night. During the third national lockdown, I conducted a further eight nightwalks between 3 February and 29 March 2021 along the first two-kilometre section of the Irk Valley nearest to the city centre (Figures 4-6). The rationale for selecting this section of the Irk Valley is two-fold. First, it represents an area which is very much neglected and, at least on initial appearances, unremarkable in terms of its non-human activity. Compared to other sites within the Irk Valley that have significant biodiversity, including that of nocturnal creatures, and are established and protected, this section is very much in flux. Second, it forms an important part of a major regeneration strategy, the Northern Gateway (2017) masterplan, which makes documenting its current status even more relevant before it undergoes significant change. Encountering this section

of the Irk Valley at any time of day, it is hard to ignore the qualities that suggest a place to quickly move through rather than spend any time. Flora is overgrown, the environs are strewn with litter, unmanaged coppices, burn-out vehicles, and abandoned domestic and trade waste occupies multiple sites.

The multiple and uneven distribution of darkness across the urban landscape at night offers cover for the latent, subcultural, and marginalised to be manifest in ways that are distinctly different from the quotidian routines and confines of the daytime. Such transformations are psychological, physical, and symbolic. People are able to move around differently at night, perhaps under less scrutiny than during daylit hours and outside of the roles and responsibilities they may be committed to in the daytime. When transposed to a situation of the pandemic city, where there is a heightened presence of absence, these nocturnal urban conditions offer a distinctive spatio-temporality that can reveal insightful yet often hidden rhythms, interactions, geographies, and patterns. In this way, exploring the pandemic city after dark when greater attention can be given to the built environment, largely devoid of people, also allows us to reimagine "how articulations of architecture – envelopment, permeability, scale, edge, recess – influence nocturnal spatial practice" (Downey, 2020, p. 16).

Investigating the pandemic city after dark, therefore, presents a rare opportunity to observe and document how its various elements and dynamics are profoundly disrupted. Given the lockdown rules and restrictions that were in effect during the three national lockdowns, it was not possible to engage with people at night beyond fleeting exchanges. Although a number of short conversations with bicycle couriers, cooks, drivers, health workers, security guards, streetcleaners and other service providers were encountered, apprehension amongst the pre-vaccinated population regarding transmission of COVID-19 was understandably a major concern, including from my own perspective as the researcher, and it was not possible to engage with the usual formalities and protocols of ethnographic research in a practical way. In order to think through an appropriate way to explore this unusual period – to date – for the urban night, it is worth considering how a pandemic nocturnal praxis might be formulated and applied.


Figure 1. Nightingale Hospital North West, city centre Manchester, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn.

Figure 2. Deansgate, city centre Manchester, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn.

Figure 3. Sacred Trinity Church, Salford, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn.

Figure 4.  River Irk, looking towards Collyhurst, Irk Valley, 25 March 2021. © Nick Dunn.

Figure 5. Post-industrial coexistences, Collyhurst Road, Irk Valley, 25 March 2021. © Nick Dunn.

Figure 6. Illegal waste dumping, Smedley Road, Irk Valley, 25 March 2021. © Nick Dunn.

# Pandemic Nocturnal Praxis

Over the last eight years, I have spent many hours nightwalking through various urban landscapes after dark. I have been particularly interested in how my physical and psychological relationships with place alter in relation to different coexistences of light and dark. This accumulation of experience has framed a specific and personal view of the urban night. However, over time it has also become apparent to me that nightwalking offers a useful spatial practice through which it is possible to gain knowledge and insight into places through direct encounter and recognise how the identity of places changes throughout the timeframe of night in relation to the day. Inquiry initiated in 2014 was preoccupied with recording how the comprehensive replacement of 56,000 sodium street bulbs with LED lights by Manchester City Council was altering the night-time ambiances within the city and the wider borough (Dunn, 2019). This fieldwork has resulted in several thousand hours of nightwalking in different urban conditions after dark and the production of an archive of photographs, maps, and autoethnographic notes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed the ways in which we relate to one another and interact with the places we live, work, and play. Yet, even pre-pandemic, I contend that the city after dark is always in a process of becoming, with nocturnal urban places providing spaces of possibility. In this manner, nightwalking contributes to the ways we might rethink how to undertake sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) and support more-than-human participatory approaches (Bastian, 2017). Night redefines the framework of thought and of action, proving a fertile realm for the imaginary, the speculative, territorial planning, and the practice of landscape (Dunn, 2016; Stone, 2018). It also raises critical issues with regard the multiplicities of night, in particular notions of safety and security, and understand how we might deconstruct the fears associated with urban darkness to provide alternative and empowering experiences of the city (Vincent 2020).

Exploring the multispecies city after dark is potentially insightful since night “offers and interesting lens because of the ways in which it straddles the social and the natural. ...The natural and social elements cannot be untangled; they work in unison…not always in harmony” (Shaw, 2018, pp. 2-3). In addition, it is useful to acknowledge that nightscapes are “neither uniform nor homogeneous. Rather they are constituted by social struggles about what should and should not happen in certain places during the dark” (Williams, 2008, p. 514). I suggest that the practice of nightwalking provides a means through which overlooked and neglected sites of urban nature can be recognised as an ecological formation (Barua and Sinha, 2020), and help detect the multispecies city inhabited by manifold, often unseen, inhabitants. Nightwalking, thus, forms part of an experimental approach which seeks to make legible certain characteristics of the pandemic city, including the nocturnal urban biome (Griffiths and Dunn, 2020).

There is an emerging body of work on walking as a methodology to investigate the more-than-human world (Springgay and Truman, 2018), to date this has only been applied during the daytime. Through engaging this approach at night, it is my intention to contribute to such methods. It should be recognised that my practice of nightwalking is inseparable from my identity as a white adult male moving through urban space after dark. Therefore, I recognise that my experiences are subjective and far from universal as gender and race, for example, may influence how other people encounter nightwalking both physically and psychologically. Through this inquiry, I aim to stimulate further research by a wider range of researchers to better understand the diverse spectrum of experiences that nightwalking as a methodology can disclose concerning the entanglements between human and more-than-human, bodies and landscape, and place and time.

Nightwalking is therefore offered as integral to a pandemic nocturnal praxis of mixed methods, which, in conjunction with autoethnography and photography, can make legible certain characteristics of the city under lockdown. To convey the embodied and embedded aspects of this approach and describe how the pandemic city after dark appears and alters by moving through place, I share an extract from an autoethnographic account of one of these nightwalks in the next section. This specific nightwalk took place on 10 February 2021, starting from the southern edge of the city centre, moving around its various areas, then traversing the adjacent section of the Irk Valley. It commenced at 10pm and lasted approximately five hours.

# Nightwalking the Pandemic City

I walk along the canal, its black molten surface gently wobbling reflected lights from adjacent apartments. My feet stake out their progress along the towpath. The damp and chilly air of early February is embellished down here by the water. It is very quiet. Behind glass on high, domestic lives are largely in slumber but the occasional window flickers with the utterances of a television set. Passing under a bridge, an articulated lorry stretches its low rumble above before blending away with the night. I take the incline of a ramp to street level and step out onto dark grey-brown baldness of cobblestones. Back down near the water a tent quivers in the gentle breeze, its material pegged into the earth of a forgotten piece of the city.

A streetcleaner cuts through the calm, its whirring brushes hungrily gathering the dirt and debris out of the kerbside. Manchester Central, former railway station converted into a conference centre and as of 13 April 2020, the NHS Nightingale Hospital North West ready to accommodate up to one thousand people with COVID-19. Outside the main entrance in a small cabin, a security guard watches the night unfurl slowly around him. Moving alongside The Midland Hotel, its expressive Edwardian Baroque hulk bides its time waiting for future guests. Around the corner and St Peter’s Square unfolds ahead. Three health workers chatter their way across the plaza after a late shift. The brightly-lit public realm appears all the more eerie for its lack of people. Under the

arches of the town hall extension, a lone and empty drink can shares its death rattle. It is the nocturnal city in miniature, a hollow vessel with just the merest remains of its previous contents left inside. Weaving between the urban blocks, the shadow of narrow side streets and unkempt collages of packing materials, waste bins and other detritus offer a secluded gallery of the city's backsides. Closed bars and pubs stare back blankly on street corners, ghost saloons for a crowd that has long since gone. The usual warp and weft of aromas from Chinatown are barely detectable.

Piccadilly Gardens. Pre-pandemic this was a smorgasbord of urban life: workers and loiterers, dealers and dependents, clubbers and cleaners, homeless and well-healed. Now its arena anticipates the performance of a distant tomorrow when the flows and frictions of the city play out across its stage. The fountain does not font. The lights blaze. Former bit-parts actors of the urban night are suddenly cast centre stage. No understudies here. Each individual committed to their role and the city beyond that relies on them. A tired driver leans against his bus, dissolving into a plume of smoke from the waist up. Bicycle couriers take a brief respite from the beck and call of digital devices dotted around the city. They do not speak. Eyes closed and limbs folded up, temporary statues as testament to consumer conveniences, the supply and demand of urban life. The clink and clank of a truck as its operator punctuates his way across the city to empty waste bins ahead of their daily replenish. A pair of idling taxis gently thrum together, their black bulbous carapaces waiting for passengers of the future. Their tick tocking engines slowly fade away as I make my way along a side street towards Angel Meadow and the Irk Valley.

Standing at its perimeter, Angel Meadow Park tumbles down into the night. This former pauper burial ground now sits revamped and fending off the looming towers that increasingly attend to its edges. Sloping down Aspin Lane and into the dark volume under the viaduct (Figure 7). This is the gateway to a very different nocturnal city. Urban nature stretches far away and the urban grain loses its hold around here, a contested patchwork of development from yesteryear, wasteland, and wide pockets of broken ground ready for the next phase urban regeneration. Walking along Dantzic Street and the land rises quickly on either side, the city almost disappears. This is the Irk Valley.

The blues of television screens ensconced in caravans from the traveller settlement flicker into the night, their muffled stories inaudible. Silhouetted against a brick wall, my shadow suddenly slips onto the bridge crossing the River Irk and the gathered filigree of St Catherine's Wood holds the sky at bay. A few months ago, common pipistrelle bats would have been swooping around here at dusk but they are hibernating now, much like the majority of humankind amidst the pandemic. Below, a rat parades along a series of displaced bricks by the waterside. It stops to sniff the night's scents before merging with the shady fronds of overhanging flora. Turning around 180 degrees and Canada geese are drifting quietly along the arc of the river as it bends out of sight. A small cloud of moths flutter around the LED blaze of a streetlamp. Smedley Road peels away from

the main thoroughfare, steering my feet with it. Household and trade detritus spew out of swollen hoarding, fences, and brick wall. Nocturnal kin are not the least bit hindered by such interventions. They pass above, between, and under them. Insect wings hover up and over split plastic bags and a mattress. Rodent feet scratch their path across cardboard. Vulpine pads silently thread around a washing machine. Invertebrates worm their way underneath this palimpsest of abandoned building materials and obsolete domestic appliances and furnishings. The metaphor is sharp and explicit. The entangled urban future of the artificial and the natural appears less delirious at night. The compost city awaits rebirth and reclamation.


Figure 7. Aspin Lane, gateway to the Irk Valley, Manchester. 10 February 2021. © Nick Dunn.

# The Post-Pandemic Nocturnal City

The pandemic city has placed particular emphasis on access to green space and sites of nature during the daytime. It has also revealed a different version of the city, emptied out of the activity with which we are so familiar. During the periods of lockdown, a quieter, calmer, and cleaner city has often emerged, being as it is far less populated by humans. Although such a city

may have attractive qualities, it can also resonate with dystopian ideas where people are no longer a dominant characteristic of what constitutes a city. This notion has been pivotal to numerous works of fiction, wherein a pandemic has devastated the human population so it is unsurprising we find it uncanny, even frightening. Yet, it also represents an opportunity to pay attention to those aspects of the city that are often relegated to the background. Specifically, I am referring to, on the one hand, the labour of key workers and, on the other hand, the movements and behaviours of non-humans. In both cases, their presence manifests itself in a variety of ways, albeit very differently and occasionally in a novel manner, due to the general absence of human bodies in the city at night.

Through this research, I have sought to demonstrate how the different qualities of places after dark in the city of Manchester during lockdown present significantly different experiences than pre-pandemic. It is also my belief that within these shadowlands, the glimpses of the future city might be detected. By presenting us with a preview of the nocturnal city that is less in thrall to the non-stop, always-on culture that has pervaded contemporary urban life and stretched the consumer-driven aspects of the daytime deep into the night, if not completely around-the-clock. This work has illustrated that when the dynamics of human movement and occupation are profoundly altered, a different nocturnal city is revealed that might offer signals for thinking through a multispecies urbanism that is also more human in its shift towards inclusivity and equity.

Although I was fortunate enough to have a series of brief exchanges with bicycle couriers, cooks, drivers, health workers, security guards, streetcleaners and other service providers while conducting my fieldwork in Manchester, the restrictions on social activity combined with genuine concerns about COVID-19 meant these were informal and undocumented. However, my conversations with a number of different people working through the night during this period did suggest that the different dynamics of the city after dark enabled them to produce a different kind of mental map of it than was possible before the pandemic when the urban night was much busier, especially in the city centre. Clearly, robust evidence rather than anecdotal accounts is needed to substantiate such views but it does point towards an increasingly urgent matter. Labour conditions for a large amount of night work are frequently connected to dimensions of low socio-economic status, including poor pay, precarious work, and impacts upon health that result, both directly and indirectly, from having to work after dark. Therefore, by understanding how nightscapes are used differently by various people, this study presents an initial exploration into much-needed research that might usefully challenge existing approached to designing for the city at night. This is of critical importance if we are to recognise the multiplicities of experience that cumulatively compose the urban night, and provide us with the ability to rethink and reclaim it as a time and space that considers accessibility, inclusivity, and equity. As the character of places re-emerge post-pandemic, in different ways and at different speeds, the dynamics of the nocturnal city can be

supported through an ongoing process that adopts a more temporally sensitive approach to urban planning and design (Gwiazdzinksi, 2015).

In relation to the more-than-human aspects of the pandemic city after dark, I have also tried to illustrate how we might look at neglected sites of urban nature anew. This is move towards multispecies urbanism is important and valuable since it “shifts our vision to include other modes of urban creation and fields of political contestation and can alert us to the ways that urban nature itself helps us to locate and site the city” (Sharma, 2021, p.2). By focusing on an unkept area of urban nature, I have deliberately explored a section of the Irk Valley in Manchester that is considered by many as wasteland, effectively empty, and unproductive (Gandy, 2013). Despite there being an increasing demand for acknowledgement that such untamed natures exist, can add value, and have a right to the city, their qualities can provoke dismissive, derogatory, or even hostile responses from humans. Furthermore, they are very rarely considered at night outside of issues pertaining to safety and security. Current practice typically ignores such places until it becomes profitable for them to be regenerated, a process which will have ecological consequences, good or bad, depending on the new scheme in relation to extant flora and fauna.

I therefore suggest it is useful to turn our attention and open up sensitivities to those elements that are often underrepresented or excluded from design. Framed in this manner, it is possible to consider how we might account for our ‘unexpected neighbours’ (Stoetzer, 2018) and develop suitable practice-based methodologies that align with emerging theory concerning more-than-human approaches for rethinking nature in cities (Houston et al., 2018; Maller, 2021). By applying what I have termed in this paper as a pandemic nocturnal praxis, a mixed methods approach of nightwalking, autoethnography and photography, I have aimed to conduct some initial investigations into ways through which we might document and communicate the underrepresented and marginalised places of the pandemic city after dark as a means to rethink how we might design for a wider array of needs and behaviours, human and non-human.

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