

Why Shadows Were Invented by Bayo Akomolafe

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Since we are on about darkness, can I briefly revisit the playfulness of light, dear? I know I tend to sound like a broken record, what with all this talk about double slits and particles and complementarity and all that. But I keep returning here because the material world really does show that just because a thing is commonsensical doesn't mean it is "true." Well, I also keep returning here because—according to your jealous mum, who is now side-eyeing me—I also want you to see me as smart!

Consider this. In the shadow of a perfectly round object, you will find a rebellious glimmer of light—a bright spot in the middle. I'm not being metaphorical here. I really mean to queer the essential and disturb its eminence. What better way to do it in this case than to point to light at the heart of darkness, and vice versa.

Again this phenomenon points to "diffraction," which literally means "breaking up." I like to think of it as porosity—that there is such a primal mutuality between "things" that nothing "becomes" unless it "becomes-with."

When the inventor of the word diffraction, seventeenth-century physicist and Jesuit priest Francesco Grimaldi, directed a focused ray of sunlight into a dark room, managing the ray so that it struck a thin rod and produced a shadow on a screen, he found that "the boundary of the shadow [was] not sharply defined and that a series of colored bands [lay] near the shadow of the rod." Up till then, the general views established that light waves interacted with surfaces by reflection and refraction. Reflection is when waves hit a surface and bounce back toward to source—which is how you are able to observe yourself in a mirror. Refraction works when waves penetrate a surface, displacing some angles away from the general direction of the waves. For instance, when you dip your hand into a pool or a bucket of water, your hand might seem cut off from the rest of your arm, or just plain funny. When Grimaldi performed his experiment, it showed light behaving in unexpected ways. It was as if the light bent around the edges of things to form fuzzy edges and colored bands:

Replacing the thin rod with a rectangular blade he observes diffraction fringes—bands of light inside the edge of the shadow. Bands of light appear inside the shadow region—the region of would-be total darkness; and bands of darkness appear outside the shadow region.[1]

Grimaldi's work would later inspire Thomas Young in the nineteenth century to assemble his double-slit apparatus. However, Grimaldi's work was already showing that "there is no sharp boundary separating the light from the darkness: light appears within the darkness

within the light within.” In fact, “darkness is not mere absence.... [It] is not light’s expelled other, for it haunts its own interior.”[2]

This is true for everything physical. Nothing is complete; everything undergoes a “breaking up” in its co-emergence with “other things.” Look closely at light, and it is haunted by shadows—then observe shadows, and you’ll see traces of light. Light and dark are not opposites or estranged cosmic forces that one side must defeat—for there are no “sides.”

Gloria Anzaldua writes:

There is darkness and there is darkness. Though darkness was “present” before the world and all things were created, it is equated with matter, the maternal, the germinal, the potential. The dualism of light/darkness did not arise as a symbolic formula for morality until primordial darkness had been split into light and dark. Now Darkness, my night, is identified with the negative, base, and evil forces—the masculine order casting its dual shadow—and all these are identified with dark skinned people.[3]

Even though darkness is restated as evil or absence, this is not simply the case. Think about it, dear: don’t things grow in dark places? Seeds tremble and crack open in the dark of the soil; babies grow in the darkness of the womb; photographs need darkrooms to properly develop; and, even though light is often centralized as the main “ingredient” in the production of biological vision, seeing would not be possible without the agency of darkness (if the occipital lobe’s work, shrouded in shadow, is anything note-worthy). Little wonder Jung observed that darkness “has its own peculiar intellect and its own logic which should be taken very seriously.”[4]

Darkness is not the absence of light as we’ve been so forced to believe. It is the very dance of light—it is light in rapturous contemplation of herself, in poetic adoration of her own contours and sensuous nuances. And we will never see this except we join her, unless we marvel at her rapid steps, unless we get caught up with her in her festive charade of realness, in her chaotic performance, in her heady spin, in full embrace of her extravagant sweaty waltz—for when we do, we will realize that shadows are merely the spaces she has tenderly left for us to place our feet.

What diffraction thus shows is that the world is continuously differentiating and entangling (simultaneously) in copious productions of phenomena. This reiterativity has no set pattern, and doesn’t produce a final formula. As such, “there is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new.”[5] Drawn out into its extensive nuances, Barad implies that even life and death, the animate and the inanimate, inside and outside, self and other, truth and falsehood are not estranged from each other. The things we call opposites are already actively implicated in each other.

However, we live largely in a world governed under a kingdom of Light, and this light implies a violent and forceful dichotomization of the world. It needs everything neatly arranged and easily categorized. It cannot afford that things spill into each other. It needs binaries—an inside and outside. The things that fall on the outside are thus thought to be evil, chaotic, and corrupt. As Stanton Marlan notes in his book *The Black Sun—the Alchemy and Art of Darkness*, this violence is endemic to modernity, which embodies this quest for totalizing light, and harbors the metaphysics of separation—a phallic, “male-dominated” rejection of anything that is “other,” and demonization of the darkness. Modernity “sets the stage for a massive repression and devaluation of the “dark side” of

psychic life. It creates a totality that rejects interruption and refuses the other from within its narcissistic enclosure.”[6] Identifying this violent dichotomization of orgasmic life as the actions undertaken by the mythical/alchemical figure of a Sun King and his “helio-politics,” Marlan feels that we need to approach the Black Sun we often rule out in our hunger for fetish light.

If the work of feminist materialisms is to crack open the sealed places, to dispute the ontological imprisonment of things in Cartesian categories, and to show how the supposedly righteous and separate are already complicit in the “crime” of entanglement (to stretch the legal metaphors!), then we should pay attention to the interesting proposal that our psychic lives are richly embroidered with darkness. And living with the inescapability of darkness, meeting the dark on its own terms, acknowledging that darkness has its own prerogatives that are different from illumination, instead of attempting to fix it or look past it or make it a means to light, becomes our fierce focus. That is, opening closures—one of which is the closure of the dark psychic life—can help us understand how, in our modern comings and goings, happiness is so easily fetishized, so passionately pursued, and yet so defiantly in short supply.

A friend of mine, Charles Eisenstein—whose son Cary you once played with in New York when you were in your second year—told me a story of a woman he met who radiated a heart-warming and magnetic joy. He went on the prowl, trying to sniff out a story. He asked her: “Why are you so happy?” The woman replied: “Because I know how to cry.”

If that seems at odds with what feels like common sense, then you are not the only one in this feeling. The feverish pursuit of happiness is so sacred to modern life and our understanding of human emotionality that it is literally enshrined in the constitution of a certain Western nation. We assume that happiness has Cartesian-Newtonian features—a given stability, determinate properties and weight—and that we can simply accumulate it. We can be happier than our neighbors on the other side of the fence if we gather more of the stuff to ourselves. It is easier to understand why—following the horrors of World War II and the rapid industrialization and proliferation of commercial products it engendered—global culture came to associate products and goods with happiness. With increasingly sophisticated advertisements, a dream was sold: buy more, get happier. An unfortunate culture of waste and planned obsolescence emerged with this helio-psychology.

I cannot help but imagine that this Fetish Happiness, this fixed “thing” frozen in modernity’s violent light—to the exclusion of its darkness—is also agential, and subtly organizes modern society in this fantasy of arrival. In a race for the finish line. In other words, total happiness co-constitutes colonial elisions and their reductionisms, excavatory capitalism, and even the teleo-logical pilgrimage for heaven and final rewards that characterizes the main religions. It is happiness stabilized as an eternal stretch—a “happily ever after”—without the corroding stain of sorrow that pulses mutely.

The Yoruba healer’s words come to me again: “You have driven away the dark with your big development and your pills, and now you must find it. You must head into the forest to find the dark.”

This generates quite a lot of feedstuff for our mutual consideration, dear. Let me see if I can parse them this way:

First, the invitation to “find the dark” or seek it on its own terms is shocking to

modern contemplation. If darkness is granted any effects at all, it is as a means to an end. One is meant to undergo the purging of the means so as to attain the end. As such, a “light at the end of the tunnel” conception of psychic life relegates the dark to secondary status. The shamanic invitation to seek the dark places turns that conception on its head, and grants darkness “equal” status: the dark is just as much a means to the light, as the light is a means to the dark.

In fact, the shaman’s tradition adheres to the archetype of the trickster. From the Yoruba Eshu (who is also described as the “first particle”—the one who brings balance) and Maui (the Polynesian deity whose tricks and deception gave us land) to Prometheus (the scamming Greek god who made mortals and gave them fire) and Pan (the horned guardian of the wilds), the trickster is the black sheep of the pantheon—not because his/her jokes are bad, but because he/she embodies the primeval generativity and diffractive ingenuity of things. The trickster is balance—not in mathematical terms of determining aggregates and averages, but in terms of entanglement. Psychic life is always poised in the middle of things, as the co-agentic mattering of “good” and “bad.” There is no solution to the dark. We are never not broken; we are never not whole.

Secondly, heading into the forest to find the dark brings us into encounters with nonhumans, thereby stressing some kind of intra-subjective ethos or transaffectiveivity. We are used to thinking of thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and choices as uniquely human attributes; those psychological events are supposedly happening in our heads or somewhere behind our skins. But in a world that leaks through and through, where nothing is granted the luxury of independence, we can no longer think in those terms. Personhood has changed address—no longer embodied in the human corporeal entity, but in diffractive enlistments spread out in the environment.

The idea that emotions are posthuman—part of the performativity of the world that recruits not just “humans” but nonhumans in its emergence—is not foreign to Western discourse. From the moment Freud deconstructed the myth of the pristine, rational self by introducing the wild unpredictable antics of the unconscious, the human figure has been composting ... like a seed acquainting itself with its own discombobulation. In other words, he brought the great outdoors into the great indoors, putting one more nail in the coffin of the idea that our inner lives are essentially private to us. I was startled to learn, quite late, that Freud’s concerns about dream interpretation was a professional cover for his more scandalous interest in dream telepathy—or the transference of information via dreams.[7]

Carl Jung took it even further, stressing the irreducible collectiveness of the unconscious—painting a complicated picture of an ecosystem of mental life that accommodates (and is already constituted by) strange fellows. By diffractively rereading the ancient practice of alchemy (an example of why the “old” is still valid, and how the future can ontologically reconvene the past) as the journey of the soul in transformation, Jung drew entangling lines between “human minds” and base metals.

Because there’s a whole lot of back history about the transcorporeal mind (or the inescapable entanglement between minds and bodies—not just “the” human body), there have been many experiments exploring ESP (or extra-sensory perceptual) abilities like clairvoyance, precognition and telepathy, the implications of which would mean that something far more radical than modernity (and its commitments to closure) can tolerate is afoot.

But I do not need to write to you about men who stare at goats, or the ability to know

beforehand (queering temporality) to suggest that we are part of a flow of becoming—and our “inner lives,” supposedly immured from the weather, is the direct effect of the weather. From the simple ways we communicate, as if gesturing out into the world, to the “simple” ways we are able to anticipate the direction someone is going with his words, and complete the sentences, we are beginning to rethink thinking, feeling, knowing, and communicating as the cascading performance of many others, reaching us in waves and heading on to wherever.

Thoughts don’t come from “within”; neither do they come from “without.” They emerge “between.” It’s the same with feelings. I like to think that the gentle dipping of a leaf under the weight of a dewdrop can set off a series of events that flow through us as (what we call) “depression”; and, that the molten formation of a rock, through the intra-activity of weather and technology and story, is experienced “joy” in a specific moment. I like to imagine that when a seed falls into the earth, it experiences grief, and its grief is met by the loamy femininity of the soil, and that is how trees sprout out with joy. Perhaps those moments of unspeakable silence, when depths churn and sides groan, when words escape you, when a pill or a diagnosis doesn’t add up to much, when all you want to do is squeeze yourself into the tiniest place in the universe, it is because you—for all intents and purposes—are co-performing the disintegration of imaginal cells within a cocoon, and knowing the pain of becoming a moth.

Perhaps this is the next frontier: not outer space or inner space, but the spaces between. No more jumping to conclusions—no more leaping from already- formed “heres” to “theres” while avoiding the performance of the middle! The world is not composed of things, but flowing, half-uttered sayings, never congealing into an independent wholeness long enough to be considered separate, and always part of a traffic of intra-bodies.

Finally, heading into the dark is always a matter of collectives. In Yoruba shamanism, even if you were sent alone to the forest to retrieve something, there is still an irreducible collective implied in the effort. In the way a particular measurement can produce light as a particle to the exclusion of its complementary identity as wave, individuals are the productions of political-scientific-religious- economic measurements. What those measurements cut out are one’s ancestors, tailing them in bacteria, dust, and memory. In this sense, we are all possessed; we are legion.

But while modernity fixes the frames, adjusts the lenses, and notices only the isolated person, many indigenous practices of healing draw in other bodies in the community as part of person-making. As such, healing in African indigenous systems is interactional (or intra-actional!), whereas Western paradigms,[8] as Nwoye notes in his study of African grief work, tend to place emphasis

on the role of the “totalitarian,” or “sovereign,” or “self-sufficient” ego of the bereaved individual in resolving grief... which has given rise to researchers’ present tendency to medicalize the phenomenon of mourning, promoting the assumption that resolving grief can be achieved only in the clinic or through therapy.[9]

Therapy in these indigenous settings is not a fix as much as it is an immersion. It is a staying-with, a going-down-together. It happens in slow time, in soft yielding places where the logic of darkness is allowed to play out. There is no cure, no shortcut, and no detour. Just the long dusty road traveled with others. It might even be said that grief travels you, touches you, shakes you, beats you up, and scratches you. Because it is her own being, especially a force one must not look at with one’s naked eyes, it is best to respect the spontaneity of grief and pain. The community’s efforts are usually a

negotiation and struggle with the provisionality of the dark side of psychic life. Of course, chronic negativity can be taxing on any community, and there is the possibility that even with communal support, a person may not find his or her way back. Nevertheless, the usual premise is that everyone must go through these moments—that people are born and die more generously and more frequently than a beginning and an end might presuppose.

“Mental ill-at-ease-ness” is debilitating, and there are of course times when a pill could work wonders. What is of course important to note is that nothing comes without its world. Pills and talk therapy might help in recovery, but they shut out other ways of listening to the others around us, other ways of giving darkness its day in the sun. And just like in Hope’s case, when the burden of recovery is placed on reductionistic approaches, those tools can turn around to hold us in their grip.

Someone once told me that civilization is the shared obliviousness to the fact that we haven’t gotten rid of wild things, and that they dwell “within” us—somewhere beneath the threshold of normalcy. This wildness, this darkness, is not an “other.” We are continually sourced, recreated, and reconfigured here.

Only under the regime of Light—the Apollonian politics of permanence—would death and darkness be treated as enemies. Perhaps this is why it is extremely difficult for moderns not to think that the world is here for us, for our own enjoyment, our own movements and definitions and terms. But the world is not “designed,” put in place, or created for our well-being—at least not in the absolute sense that there is a universal harmony awaiting our awakening. The world dips in and out, retreats and proceeds, produces and eats up its own genius a mere gasp later.

Suffering needs a new onto-epistemology—not one that rules it out for eventual fixing, but one that recognizes its entanglement with well-being. Grieving must be part of the lives for happiness to become meaningful.

There aren’t enough places to grieve around, since every place is adhering to the imperatives of development, but I do pray that your world will have “soft places to yield”—where the generativity of grief can be met with in its troubling presence, where darkness can be known as a menstrual wound, and failure, a portal to wild worlds beyond our ken.

It often takes Lali to remind me that you have to move and have your own way in the world. To tell you the truth, I cannot bear to see you in pain. Just the memory of your tears brings water to my own eyes, not to mention actually watching you cry. And yet, if I embrace you too long, then I lose you. I must learn the slow process of letting go, of allowing you the privilege of sorrow without seeking to console you to numbness.

Perhaps this is why I have written this particularly long letter, taking a break from my hunt for hushes ... to invite you to consider that your discomfort is a holy ally, a redeeming interruption. Where you are most confused, exhausted, distressed, and compromised is where the wild things grow. Where crazy colors, beguiling angels’ trumpets, decadent air ferns, and wise old spruces sprout with festive abandon. Where the thrumming of frogs, the discourse of cricket limbs, the ambivalence of a nightly mist, and the audience of a delighted moon contrive an unheard score. It’s where your primal self, where the unthought, calls to you softly—reminding you that you are not to be easily resolved, reminding you that you are larger than you could ever imagine.

You will encounter troubles of your own. You will be “traveled” by things words cannot encircle. Find the others who can hold space with you. Then, when in the alchemical dynamics of things, the sun emerges again, don’t walk off rudely into his arms. Turn toward the smoldering darkness whence you came, and thank her for shaping you, for scaring you, for wounding you, and defeating you, and shaking you, because in her womb you were thoroughly purged, and made fresh for new glimpses of wonder. And as you walk farther into the domineering light, the dark will bless you with a gift to remind you that you are not as contained or as limited as you think, that there is more to you than what meets the educated eye, that whatever you do, the whole universe does the same along with you—imitating you with a childish keenness, and that you are never, ever alone.

That’s why shadows were invented.

[1] Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction.”

[2] Ibid.

[3] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

[4] C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 345.

[5] Barad, ““Diffracting Diffraction.”

[6] Stanton Marlan and David H. Rosen, *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 16.

[7] Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind* (New York: Bantam, 2007).

[8] Alethea, I thought to mention that it is very easy to fall into the trap of seeking to naturalize African and indigenous practices as some kind of default ontology we should all adopt, while denaturalizing the West as “old” and needing transformation. But none is truer than the other. Even modernity is not some backward notion we must leave behind in order to the new ahead of us. I wouldn’t want to create some kind of “successor regime” dynamic here. Each performs the world differently, but are themselves subject to revision. For instance, African cosmologies in their current iteration think of the dead as disembodied spirits in ancestral realms, which shares a humanistic distinction with

Judeo-Christian thought. I think more in terms of dust and nonhumans around us. Our souls are locked up in the ordinary things that condition us. While I am enabled to think that way, agential realism becomes a strategy for me to revisit and return to the so-called "old."

[9] Nwoye, "Memory Healing Processes," 147.