

Shedding darkness. Reflecting on futures from a decolonial perspective.

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the critical inquiry that shapes the Darkness Reframed issue and, from a decolonial perspective, problematizes the possible assumptions attached to the category of darkness. Unpacking coloniality not only as a historical legacy but as a living force that continues to shape ways of thinking, the reflection points to the plurality of futures to be reframed in order to embrace a multilayered understanding of darkness(es). By questioning linear temporality and moving beyond the evolutionary logic of a past progressing towards a single, inevitable future, the article challenges the reduction of opposites through which past and future - as well as brightness and darkness - become framed within conceptual dualities. After engaging with the articles that constitute this issue, this contribution invites readers to rethink darkness through a continuous exercise of deframing to reframe hegemonic forms of knowledge. Understood as a spiral, this exercise involves different temporalities, diverse actors, and distinct stages in the formation of individual and collective reflection. It therefore moves beyond academic communities, positioning scholars as citizens and members of wider societies. In this way, the article contributes to imagining futures grounded in the (re)building of knowledge through interdisciplinary approaches shaped by a plurality of societal actors.

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CONTEXT

From a position rooted in social and cultural anthropology, where interculturality and migration studies intersect, this reflective essay builds on my work as a social researcher, combined with experience accompanying communities through diasporic processes. It is within this context that the article emerges as an invitation to keep rethinking darkness and possible futures from critical and multisituated perspectives.

KEYWORDS

decolonial; darkness; futures; temporality; linearity

INTRODUCTION

Everyday interactions rely on many different ways of communicating. Among all the codes that shape our social relationships, spoken and written language usually occupy a central place in creating meaning and shaping how we imagine the world. Without going into the complex debates around theories like Chomsky's "universal grammar" (1992), which sees language as an inborn structure, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Kay & Kempton, 1984), which suggests that language shapes how we think, we can see a clear fact: language has become the dominant channel of communication, and it can be used to serve different forms of power (Bourdieu, 1985). For example, calling people 'illegal' or 'undocumented' frames them in a way that can justify exclusion or control. Because of this, it is urgent that we critically examine everyday terms and expressions, so that both scholars and practitioners can reflect on how language gives shape to our daily interactions and to the futures we imagine.

This aim - to critically explore normative narratives and imaginaries, in particular in relation with futures thinking - is central for the Futures Reframed journal. In this first thematic issue, that critical, reflective outlook towards what is considered 'normal' became very clear. It invited us, readers and authors, to challenge ourselves and our societal frameworks, embracing an introspective analysis for a de/reconstruction of individual and collective imaginaries.

Specifically, this issue offered the chance to rethink *darkness*, a concept that may involve multiple meanings. The articles that nurture this number brought different perspectives, stories, and research associated with *the dark* and its implications with imagined futures. Some of the topics explored paths from the analysis of progress-oriented educational frameworks and the interlocks of anthropocentrism with climate change to the connections of trauma temporalities and affective experiences in contemporary societies. Alongside this, the study of light-dark dichotomies provided a ground to go beyond Eurocentric postulates and to revisit hope and hopelessness postulates in order to decolonize the futures. All of them helped to reimagine darkness, and while doing so, this reflective essay aims to support the exercise of 'defame to reframe' by encouraging a critical immersion into the uncertainty that may surround darkness.

A SPACE FOR DARKNESS IN FUTURES THINKING

As a multisensory entity, darkness merges feeling with cognitive appreciation, while simultaneously carrying relevant socio-historical meaning (Reichardt & Cohen, 1998). The call suggests that "there must be a space for darkness in futures thinking", and starting from this statement, and drawing on my background in the anthropology of the senses, diaspora studies, and work with marginalized communities I reflect on a few key aspects to explore.

To begin with, living in societies where crises, wars, and genocides are commonplace, people often feel pressured to chase happiness in the form of a sweetened dose of hope (Filho, 2011). In this sense, claiming a space for darkness challenges the tendency to rush forward, escaping or avoiding negative thinking (Han, 2024). Instead, both academics and practitioners working on the theme of futures are invited to reconsider how feelings of hopelessness or anxiety might contribute to individual and societal growth and maturity.

Secondly, recognizing that hope is triggered through its direct relationship with despair, we can understand both elements as lying on a shared continuum. Following this interconnected line of thought, in which ideas unfold through an immense web (Ramirez Goicoechea, 2013), the void underlying the reduction of "opposite" concepts begins to fade. Thus, a reformulated "space for darkness in futures thinking" emerges; a space where the possibilities of linking

positive thinking with hope, and negative postulates with despair are also questioned. Here, a tension of meanings takes shape, a dialectical relation (Brauer, 2019), in which the significance of these elements becomes more complex through their interdependence, leading us to ask: Should brightness and darkness occupy opposite sides?

Perhaps both entities, brightness and darkness, are intertwined within an ongoing evolutionary process that unfolds in a sort of spiral shape. Finally, if societies accept the association of those conceptions as hopelessness, disappointment or anxiety with darkness, something is being taken for granted. We automatically position our perspective within a specific cosmogony, which may operate as a double-edged sword. On one side, accepting the aforementioned terms as inherent to the imaginary of darkness leads us to rethink why they are connected to it - a necessary question that brings us closer to critically examining Global North cosmogonies. But on the other side, assuming that darkness is directly tied to these kinds of feelings may dramatically narrow the perspective, potentially overlooking the wide range of meanings that darkness could otherwise carry. However, it invites us to keep exploring what lies beyond shadows.

While *Darkness Reframed* in *Future Studies* raised fundamental questions about how we approach futures, an essential question comes up: were all the pieces of the puzzle included? And if so, considering it as a three-dimensional puzzle, how could social scientists decipher the whole picture from a single perspective? Perhaps this is not a question to be addressed only by social scientists, but by different societal actors working together to build from and towards a diversity of knowledge.

UNFOLDING THE SPIRAL: BRIDGING LIGHT AND DARKNESS

As this reflection unfolds analyzing what surrounds darkness, questions regarding the meanings of brightness should also emerge. If the aim of the editorial board of the *Futures Reframed* journal and the contributors to this first thematic issue, has been to reframe and re-signify darkness, the perspectives that assign brightness the realms of hopefulness and joy need to be challenged as well. This is not in order to reinforce a dualistic perspective that confronts brightness with darkness, but rather to identify the nodes that connect them, unveiling what takes place in the space between both elements.

Therefore, brightness versus darkness, hope versus despair, or happiness versus sadness are ultimately a matter of perception - biased, learned, inherited from a specific cosmogony, and definitely not monolithic truths. Yet, if these oppositions are understood today as normalized, they are only standards that must be reframed within an intercultural process of healing historical epistemological violence¹. Embracing other perspectives that allow us to reinterpret opposites not as mutually exclusive but as elements of the same whole, may lead us to explore the grey areas, uncovering connections through which we can explore the different pieces of the puzzle. This would offer a more integrated sense of feelings and experiences, in which time, space, and the elements that shape them create a complex and interconnected network.

According to this, when discussing the reframing of futures, temporality cannot be simplified into a linear path that runs from past to future while excluding other possibilities within a closed circuit with no return. The spiral process mentioned above, which integrates the entities of darkness and brightness, may serve as a model for plural temporalities that resist such linear reductions. As reflected in our clocks, time is not counted from daylight but from midnight (Midnite, 1999). Darkness marks both the beginning and the end of our journeys,

¹ Epistemological violence understood as the point where knowledge stops being a tool for understanding the world and starts being used to reshape it according to particular interests (Karahan, 2025).

serving as a metaphor for the cyclical temporalities in which we live while simultaneously challenging linear temporality.

The analogy of a spiral process that does not simply repeat but rather revisits events (Martins, 2021) may help us to analyze the liminal areas while relocating the significance of darkness and brightness, making them susceptible to contextual definition. In this way, the inherent opposition between darkness and brightness becomes disconnected through an anti-dichotomic stance, allowing our imaginary to contest the reductionism of opposites characteristic of eurocentric imaginaries (Restrepo & Rojas, 2010) and to question the epistemological toolbox from which we interact and construct societies.

Despite and yet building from the rich analysis of the articles that nurture this number, this reflective essay seeks to take one step backwards to inquire into a bigger spectrum of understanding regarding the meanings of darkness. All with the purpose of connecting the space for darkness(es) in reframed futures with forms of uncertainty that don't necessarily have to link with feelings of despair. Thus, emphasizing the relevance of continually questioning historical legacies and hegemonies shaped in everyday language.

In sum, and to be unpacked in the following lines: unlearning as a method to relearn; deframing as a tool to reframe; shedding darkness to clarify.

DEFRAMING THE DARKNESS

This invitation to unlearn not only offers a methodology for incorporating social research but also calls us to envision a cosmos where the social and the natural arenas mutually reinforce one another (Murillo Sencial, 2005). By critically rethinking darkness, we embrace the exercise of deframing darkness within a socionatural framework. It is not about "facing realities" but about "merging with" them, since we do not simply confront societal puzzles, we are part of them. To engage with and to decipher these interconnected realities while reframing futures, the role of dominant postulates in shaping the meanings that frame our imaginaries shall be questioned.

Looking into western cosmogony, darkness is commonly linked to mystery, representing the unknown which remains uncertain because it lies beyond sight. As a sight-centered cosmogony (Ochoa Gautier, 2003), the other senses such as hearing or touch become secondary, according to a sensory hegemony (García Martínez, 2025) where the power of sight defines perception. Thus, if we cannot see in the darkness, threatening events may lurk, making us vulnerable in contexts where sight as the "principal sense" is deprived, automatically associating darkness with the distrust.

The meaning attached to the expression "at first sight," which alludes to a first impression and, following a literal reading, reduces this primary impression to sight, is problematized by María Lugones's revision of the verb *tantear*². More specifically, she uses it as a method to recognize terrains still unexplored by our imagination. As she explains, "I use the Spanish word *tantear* both in the sense of exploring someone's inclination about a particular issue and in the sense of '*tantear* [in the darkness]', putting one's hands in front of oneself as one is walking in the dark, tactilely feeling one's way" (Lugones 2003, p. 1). It is when we are *tanteando* the darkness that we can surrender to our feelings to begin dismantling the concepts that precondition our perception. In this way, we can start to position those feelings within a context and ask ourselves: Why should we feel fear in the darkness? Why does

²"Tantear" could be translated as "to sound out," and it is significant how "sound" and thus listening as a sense is invoked when the verb reflects the aim to find out something, exploring what is not visible.

obscurity represent mystery? And how much does western cosmogony influence that association?

As pointed out above, the reductionism that makes distrust stem from darkness relies on the opposing power represented by the safety embodied in brightness. This concept, often linked to celestial and angelic imaginaries, reveals how catholic precepts shaped imaginaries where whiteness and light materialize god, while hell dwells in darkness (Sennett, 1994; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991; Benz, 1977). In this same vein, catholicism and the widely unmasked and debunked racist pseudoscientific theories of biological hierarchy, contributed to the dehumanization of blackness by framing black bodies as spaces of oppression (Mbembe, 2017; Fanon, 2008), thereby morally enabling western powers to colonize the Global South.

The epistemological violence that fuels racist postulates and forges theoretical oppression is already being contested, and it is our responsibility to nurture those *ethnic epistemologies* (Ladson-Billings, 2000), bringing them to the center of academic debates. Cynthia B. Dillard's *Endarkened Epistemology* exemplifies the urgent need to disrupt eurocentric sciences rooted in the binary logic of the Enlightenment era, aiming to "learn to (re)member the things we've learned to forget" (Dillard, 2012, p. 4). This sort of *decolonial attitude* (Pillow, 2019), must permeate the foundations of social sciences and society at large - not only to acknowledge black cosmogonies within academia but also to directly "talk black" to power (hooks, 1988).

RE-POSITIONING FUTURES

The role futures play in western society is often framed in terms of progress, expectation, ambition, and goals to be achieved (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This conception would not be possible without understanding futures as a metaphor for reachable realities, and it is difficult to avoid this definition unless we step away from a linear reading of temporalities that, from past experiences, follow narrow paths toward the future. From the perspective of decolonial chronopolitics, the reclamation of southern epistemologies through relational, cyclical, and plural temporalities (Shahjahan, 2025, p. 2) envisions a spiral flow of events, allowing experiences to be positioned within a more complex and enriched fabric, woven with diverse textures and sensed as a communitarian tapestry. In this sense, Mills, in his work *White Time*, points to the colonial appropriation of temporalities through what he calls "chronological colonizations" (Mills, 2014, p. 31), whereby temporality was standardized under the management of white settlers, while simultaneously whitening "the historical chronometer" by resetting it to zero, thus erasing histories prior to their arrival.

Despite the difficulties of moving away from an understanding of temporalities shaped by the cognitive colonization of our minds, temporalities are contextual rather than static entities, and they can only be understood by analyzing the cosmogonies that define them. In some cosmogonies, time is essentially composed of events and experiences, leaving no room for the projection of time, which makes clear that the future, as a projection of forthcoming events, is not a universal category. This means that the western generalized notion of "building the future" through ambition or the commonly invoked idea of "goals" is a contextually situated construction rooted in capitalism and deployed in the form of dominant timelines.

In this regard, Mbiti's (1969) studies on Kikamba and Giryuku conceptions of temporality offer a glimpse into how the hegemonic idea of the future is simply one construction among many others (Abakare, 2023). As Mbiti explains, their understanding of time is dependent on experience: only when an event occurs can it be conceptualized. Within this temporal framework, the present is shaped by both the *Sasa* and the *Zamani*.

“Zamani contains events actualized and experienced in the Sasa. This shows that time goes backwards, from the Sasa (now-period) to the Zamani (realm of the past). The Zamani becomes the final storehouse of all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 23).

According to Mbiti, the future is like a shadow that is not depicted until it arrives in the present, at which point it flows into the *Zamani*. Time moves backward in a cyclical manner, enriched by experiences lived in the *Sasa*, so we are not the ones who move forward into time. From this perspective, temporality must be experienced to be real, directly clashing again with the capitalist imaginaries in which the idea of time is constructed as a commodity.

Unfolding from this example, this special issue offers excellent work on the conversation between present and future imaginaries of darkness but still shows some marked tendency to linear temporality. As scholars and practitioners influenced by western structures and schools of thought, it's challenging for us to think time beyond linearity and fully embrace the spiral path that condenses past and future in present life experiences. An exercise that invites us to keep *tanteando* our paths.

However, the main point of this reflection is not to fully analyze the complexities of temporalities beyond standardized postulates, but rather to bring them to the center to question again to what extent our social interaction derives from universal cognitive structures or sociopolitically assimilated systems. In this regard, given the complexity of unveiling the structural and dialectical *entanglement* (Mbembe, 2001), which makes it difficult to trace how far the colonization of thought continues to permeate, it is worth reflecting on futures from the political time of affective life (Cooppan, 2019). From this standpoint the significance of the instants, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties that construct human feeling is highlighted from a non-linearity conception of social life. Moving away from the colonial grid of progress.

TANTEANDO (TO) THE SHADOWS

This argument shows that the fact that we cannot see in the dark does not mean we are unable to feel it, just as the impossibility of preventing futures does not imply that we must fear events. From this perspective emerges the invitation to tantear (to) the shadows, pointing to multisituated futures that we already may experience in the present. This allows us to disconnect from expectation while simultaneously unpacking the uncertainty that accompanies us here and now. As I write this text, as you read these words, acknowledging that the process of encoding and decoding unfolds in the gerund, continuously reconfiguring pathways.

The works of imagination require the firm intention to venture into open waters, to move away from the shores that draw us back to the familiar terrain of our cognitive comfort zone. In doing so, by blurring horizons we are compelled to feel the present, to activate our senses from critical standpoints, to reflect on our own way of thinking, and thus to rethink our cosmogonies. This process, whether carried out in research or while simply walking the streets, may help us to continually question the certainties upon which our imaginaries rest and which constitute the basic characteristic of culture as a non-static entity (Velasco Maíllo & Díaz de Rada, 1996).

Tanteando (to) the shadows as social scientists challenge our methodological and epistemological toolkit and places us in the position of interrogating our own capacities to apply those tools. At the same time, it shows how valid they can be in helping us decipher

social conventions interwoven within structural and institutional tapestries, layered through historical heritage. Accordingly, this introspective exercise represents a call for a decolonial way of thinking, which involves not inter-disciplinary but trans-disciplinary approaches, in the sense of going beyond “disciplinary decadence” (Gordon, 2006). In this regard, it's not just about academia inviting other actors into the exercise of building knowledge in what would be an inter-disciplinary process, but rather from a truly immersive transdisciplinary exchange, academia has the responsibility to take a step back to feel also "invited", to be one more actor as part of this act of (re)building knowledge - a clear strength of Futures Reframed's approach.

Thus, immersing ourselves in darkness by deepening its meanings and implications allows us to reconceptualize the hegemonies that have historically circumscribed it, framing every form of darkness as the counterpart to privileged whiteness. From this perspective, Futures Reframed raises challenging and necessary questions. Seeking a new calibration of frames may be a matter of perspective, and questioning western cosmogony becomes a crucial step. However, merely acknowledging that every form of knowledge is positioned is not enough when the aim is to unveil the intricacies of the mentioned three-dimensional societal puzzles. Therefore, the challenge becomes not only to question but to truly unsettle the axis, shaking the entrenched structures towards an epistemology of the social sciences forged in authentic diversity of knowledge.

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