

The background of the cover is an abstract, radial pattern of fine lines. The lines radiate from a central point, creating a sense of depth and movement. The color palette is dominated by shades of purple, pink, and teal, with some darker, almost black, lines interspersed. The overall effect is reminiscent of a starburst or a deep-space exploration.

# **THE WORLD AS ABYSS**

The Caribbean and Critical  
Thought in the Anthropocene

**Jonathan Pugh  
and David Chandler**

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## Preface

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## CHAPTER I

# The World as Abyss

What can I do?

I must begin.

Begin what?

The only thing in the world that's worth beginning:

The End of the World, no less.

(Césaire 2013 [1956], 38–39)

In 1939 Martinican writer Aimé Césaire first published his book length poem variously translated as *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, *Return to My Native Land*, or *Journal of a Homecoming*, in which this epigraph appears. As the colonial powers were taking the world into an era of mass destruction, Césaire drew upon a Caribbean imaginary to counterpose to the apocalyptic violence of so-called Western ‘reason’ (Jones 2010, 162). Césaire’s call was later famously echoed by another radical Martinican activist and intellectual, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in 1952 (2021, 96). *The World as Abyss* is about a contemporary return to the Caribbean and the radical ‘abyssal’ call for the ending of the world, at a time in which Western ‘reason’

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similarly appears to have led the world into an epoch of devastation and destruction. This epoch is known as the Anthropocene, the fundamentally changed world of climate catastrophe and habitat and species extinction.

It might seem counterintuitive that an abyssal paradigm of critical thought should arise at just the moment that dominant approaches to the political sphere are concerned with saving the world amid multiple and ongoing chronic crises. For much contemporary thought, the ‘end of the world’ is understood in the literal terms of the impact of global climate change and the indirect impact of the climate crisis upon assumptions of modernist progress and human dominium. This ‘reality check’ has facilitated a fundamental rethinking of liberal social and scientific assumptions built upon strict categorical distinctions and separations. Much critical theory – we are thinking here of a range of new materialisms and more-than-human approaches – can be seen to index this internal crisis of faith in Eurocentric or Enlightenment reasoning. Contemporary critical thought, dominated by the relational and ontological turns, has questioned assumptions of the human/nature divide and foregrounded how modern reasoning has led to the instrumentalisation of nature and (often unintentionally) caused the collapse of climate and environmental stability.

This book is about a distinctive approach to the crisis of modernity that reflects a radically different set of stakes. In this framing, influenced by contemporary critical Black studies, another understanding of the world – as *abyss* – emerges. As we expand upon in what follows, rearticulating the world as abyss foregrounds the foundational violence of Indigenous dispossession, chattel slavery and the Middle Passage via the assembling of a figurative position without ontological security – the structural perspective of the abyssal *subject*.<sup>1</sup> This figurative positionality holds the radical

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<sup>1</sup> As we draw out in this book, what we call the abyssal *subject* is the figurative assembling of a critical positionality that cannot be reduced to a subject position in the world. The abyssal *subject* is a positionality from which it is possible to put in question the ontological assumptions that enable this world to be taken for granted as an

capacity to lift the veil off and to desediment<sup>2</sup> the world-making project of colonial violence which forged the ‘human’ and the ‘world’. Crucially, the assembling of the abyssal ~~subject~~ enables a registration of world-making violence, while being unobtainable on literal, ontological, or ontic grounds. Lacking being ‘in’ the world of a fixed grid of space and time, this perspective provides a generative political and ethical project, putting in question the cuts of entities, essences and spatial and temporal fixity. Thus, the distinctiveness of what we call ‘abyssal thought’ is that rather than correcting the errors of modern reasoning – seeking to secure more productive ontological grounds along the lines of the relational and ontological turns – abyssal thought refuses the lure of remaking the human and the world. As we delineate in detail, figuring the world as abyss develops a form of critique

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a priori given. In many places in this book we indicate this positionality through the conception of a barred ~~subject~~, existing under erasure. Erasure was used by Heidegger and later by Lacan and Derrida to indicate that the signifier – ‘subject’ – is not wholly suitable for the concept it represents. We also acknowledge Calvin Warren’s powerful use of erasure in his discussion of black ~~being~~ (2018). Thus, our framing of the abyssal ~~subject~~ has a very different emphasis from that of John Drabinski’s relational ontology of an ‘abyssal subject’ amid agential ‘rhizomic’ processes of becoming: ‘Rhizome, then, performs the conceptual labour of ontology. That is, rhizome describes the *being* of subjectivity...’ (2019, 115, italics in original).

<sup>2</sup> Desedimentation is a term often used by Derrida (for example, 1992), but we derive our approach in this book more directly from Nahum Chandler who writes (2014, 65–66): ‘I specifically propose this concept-metaphor here as otherwise than a procedure that might be primarily one of recovery or return. I think of it as a kind of resetting, a setting afoot or apace, a destabilization... Yet, there is in the question of desedimentation as it has acquired its coherence as a concern for me an ineluctable and intractable movement of force as a massive violence which remains, despite all manner of dissimulations, the very terms of the announcement of existence or being as a problem for thought.’

which problematises ontological fixity, rather than engaging in ‘productivist’ salvific imaginaries of world-making.<sup>3</sup>

We stress from the outset that this book is about the shifting nature and stakes of critique in the Anthropocene and how a turn to the Caribbean in particular has been very important for the figurative assembling of a critical structural positionality, from ‘the world as abyss’. In the critical works we engage, certain readings of Caribbean thought and modes of practice, of resistance and survival – the Middle Passage, Plantation, creolisation, marronage, carnival, jamettes, and Caribbean speculative fiction, as just some examples – facilitate the development of what we draw out as an abyssal analytic.

Of course, the distinctive and unique importance of the Caribbean to the formation of modern thought and the world as constituted through coloniality has long been stressed by many writers, such as C. L. R. James who wrote:

Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern. It is an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of the word, but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else. (James 1938, 305, italics in original)

Fanon himself was acutely aware of this, when, in the Preface of *Black Skin, White Masks*, he wrote: ‘As those of an Antillean, our observations and conclusions are valid only for’ the Antilles, arguing that ‘a study needs to be made to explain the differences between Antilleans and Africans’ (2021, xiv), and later that ‘black Americans are living a different drama’ from those in the Caribbean (ibid., 196). Édouard Glissant, one of the most influential

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term ‘productivist’ to indicate the underlying ontological assumptions of productive differentiation which often lies at the heart of immanent and relational theorising. The term, with its slightly negative and modernist implications, flags up questions of force and overdetermination implicit in these metaphysical assumptions of immanence. See also Andrew Culp’s use of this term (2016, 66–67).

Caribbean theorists for contemporary theorising, was equally keen to examine the specificities of Caribbean sensibility, particularly the psychic consequences of a lack of national or collective identity (Glissant 1989; see also Brathwaite 1975).<sup>4</sup>

We argue that contemporary readings of Caribbean modes of thought and practice have distinctively drawn upon tropes of displacement, dislocation, suspension and marronage. It is this articulation of a figurative positionality carved out against chattel slavery, plantation economies, coloniality and racial capitalism that has been central to current articulations of what we analytically draw out as the world as abyss. In this book we focus on three key ways: firstly, in that the Caribbean provides the geo-spatial ground for the figurative assembling of the ‘abyssal subject’; secondly, that the Caribbean provides a temporal register for narratives of modernist ‘progress’, given meaning (sedimented) by the repetition of relations of hierarchy and subordination and given material form in the global colour line; and, thirdly, that the region is today being regularly drawn upon to illustrate abyssal modes of practice, what we draw out as ‘abyssal sociality’, enabling the problematisation of modernist hierarchical divisions.

It should already be clear that this book is therefore not about the Caribbean in all its complexities – its various histories, societies and cultures, its multitude of writers, artists, and poets – but rather about how a particular way of engaging with the Caribbean and Caribbean thought has been enabling for the emergence of a distinct line of critical thought in contemporary debate. This is one which, as we underscore throughout, works very differently from the critical engagements provided by the relational and ontological

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<sup>4</sup> As J. Michael Dash notes in the Introduction to Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, central to his writings about the Caribbean and Martinique is the view of displacement from a modernist grid of the world with fixed entities: ‘Martinican man is dispossessed in time and space’ (Dash 1989, xxxii). Glissant himself described this displacement in terms of ‘an agitated existence, violently and irrevocably severed from the motherland of Africa and painfully, inevitably, and improbably cut off from the dreamland of France’ (Glissant 1989, 9).

turns that have dominated critical Anthropocene thinking to date. To reiterate, our concern here is with the particular readings of Caribbean modes of thought and practice in the contemporary emergence of an important ‘abyssal’ paradigm of thought.

### The Caribbean as Ground

Having established that this book is concerned with how a highly distinctive approach can be drawn from a contemporary shift in critical thought, we want to underscore how the abyssal framing is not a matter of events revealing some timeless problem of the abstract or reductionist nature of modern thought. Critiques of the modernist paradigm have often depended upon some contemporary event revealing the limits of modernist assumptions. For many theorists the turning point today is the shock of climate crisis, while for an earlier generation of critical theorists, associated with the Frankfurt School, the shock was the Holocaust and the devastating power of nuclear weaponry. For the abyssal analytic, the modern episteme is not understood as a product of abstract or ‘reductionist’ thinking which today needs to be ‘grounded’, ‘adjusted’ or ‘corrected’. The critique of modernity is not that it fails to understand complexity or contingency or relation; that it commits what is often called ‘epistemological violence’ (Rekret 2018, 101). Modernist understandings are not merely a problem of thought or of approach, but a problem ingrained within the materiality of the world. Modernist understandings are understood to be integral to the real material and ongoing reproduction of structural inequity, dispossession, coloniality and racial capitalism. For the work we engage with that enables us to delineate the abyssal analytic, the Caribbean is key to the modern conception of the human/non-human divide and its material reflection in the horrors of the Middle Passage, plantation economies and brutality of chattel slavery, and the ongoing economic and social inequities of the global colour line (Spillers 2003; da Silva 2007; Harney and Moten 2013; Sharpe 2016).

For abyssal work, this world of racial modernity has not ended; and, in fact, it is the ending of this world that is the key task. This task is thus often argued to begin with a recentring of the Caribbean region as the epicentre and ‘vortex’ (Philip 1989, 83) of the modern world-making project. This project of world-making can then begin to be radically rethought in terms of the world as abyss. The abyssal emphasis on materiality and upon the social historical grounding of the modern condition, is not merely a question of bringing social and economic concerns to the forefront. As we stress throughout this book, for abyssal work the question of the making of modernity is, fundamentally, an *ontological* question – the making not just of regimes of knowledge and of governing hierarchies, but also the world and its subject. It is this world which provides a stable or seemingly ‘natural’ ground, enabling specific regimes themselves to change while holding in place the world of being as a background certainty informing what might be known and how these entities, once known, might be governed most efficiently.

### Modernity’s Hold

Some theorists of the Anthropocene as our contemporary condition emphasise how the present is ‘haunted’ by the long-term consequences of previous actions, which caused permanent damage to the environment, meaning that the historical past is not something ‘away’ or ‘over’ (Morton 2013, 1; Ghosh 2016). Work within the abyssal paradigm shares an understanding that questions the temporal differentiation of linear time, but also extends the analytic of entanglement. Thus, ‘unpayable debt’ (da Silva 2022) in the present is not merely a question of historical relation to an ‘external’ environment but to the understanding of the disavowal at the heart of the construction of the human as subject. There is a ‘spectre’ haunting modernity, haunting the hubristic fiction of human exceptionalism (the subject capable of the cutting and the casting of the world into objects and subjects, into valued and non-valued). For the abyssal analytic, the problem is the aporia

that is the precondition for the framing of a human/nature divide. This aporia is the disavowal of those humans cast into ‘modernity’s hold’, denied the status of fully human, and displaced without ontological security (Ferdinand 2022, 175; Wilderson 2020, 333). Thus, in the abyssal framing, there can be no easy move beyond the human/nature divide, as in much Anthropocene critical theory, as if the (reformed and improved) human could just be returned to the world as it is currently understood to exist.

In an abyssal framing, when we talk of the ‘human’ we mean a modern human, a human understood as the subject of reason. The human as the rational individual, the liberal subject; the human that is the basis of universal understandings of abstract equality under the law and at the ballot box. For abyssal approaches, the human of modernist social and political theory could only exist on the basis of the denial of humanity to other ‘humans’. As Fanon (2021 [1952], 89) famously reflected, this distinction was carved out in the Caribbean through five hundred years of subjection, where the black(ened) (non)person was reduced to ‘an object in the midst of other objects’. This world-making project, with the Caribbean at its epicentre, which constructed the human based on the denial of humanity to others, is, for the abyssal approach we schematically draw out from contemporary developments, the real price of the human/nature divide. It is a price that is concealed and disavowed by those who wish to talk about the crisis of modernist thought and the condition of the Anthropocene in terms of problems in relating to the environment and in understanding our mutual dependencies on other forms of life. As Malcolm Ferdinand (2022) has recently argued, this understanding is that of ‘colonial ecology’, seeking to address environmental problems without acknowledging the underlying problem of the making of the modern ontology through the ongoing violence of slavery and colonialism.

### Critique and the Abyss

This book analytically focuses upon the shifting nature and stakes of critique in the Anthropocene, and it therefore seeks to explore

what is distinctive about the abyssal paradigm, emphasising how drawing upon the Caribbean for the figurative assembling of a critical positionality helps carve out a very different set of starting concerns and methodological assumptions. One key aspect is that this positionality is *figurative* rather than literal, that it draws upon readings of Caribbean modes of thought and practice, but it does so to illustrate a structural positionality rather than a particular fixed identity or set of subject-specific properties. The question of positionality has become increasingly central for contemporary critical thought since the idea of an autonomous subject, capable of standing apart from or above the world, has become discredited due to its association with coloniality and environmental destruction. It would therefore seem perhaps inevitable that critical theorists should be drawn to geographical regions and cultures around the world which seem to offer an alternative to traditional modern notions of the subject.

We see this appeal reflected, for example, in the ‘Indigenous turn’ in Western academia (Whyte 2017; Davis and Todd 2017; Chandler and Reid 2020) and in contemporary posthuman and more-than-human work, and critical Anthropocene thinking more generally. We think that this search for alternative modes of subjecthood and of subjectivation are important drivers in the development of contemporary abyssal thought. Within this search for an alternative conception of the human subject and alternative ethico-political grounds for critique, a wide range of concerns have arisen. For some theorists, there is a desire to avoid reliance on timeless, ontological and metaphysical abstractions and to ground critique in the real-world complexities where coloniality cannot be neatly separated from the world (Povinelli 2021; Zalloua 2021). For others, there is a move away from discourses of immanent salvation and repair which enrol more-than-human and Indigenous modes of being in instrumentalising ways (Karera 2019; Robinson 2020), available to ‘save the West from itself’ (Colebrook 2021, 528), whilst denying the continued centrality of ongoing colonialism as the real, fundamental ‘force of history’ (Povinelli 2021, 2). Such questions,

and the discussions they give rise to, are part of a broader anxiety today around notions of the ‘obtainable’ subject available for instrumentalisation by ethnography and critical theory (Bissell, Rose and Harrison 2021; Laruelle 1991; 2017; Culp 2021; Ruiz and Vourloumis 2021).

### Abyssal Geography

In attempting to grasp what it is about particular Caribbean modes of thought and practice that contemporary work finds important for a distinct alternative to both rationalist and relational frameworks, we heuristically set out a paradigm of ‘abyssal thought’ which operates at the level of ontology or, more precisely, the paraontological (Chandler 2014).<sup>5</sup> The problematisation of the world of modern ontology – of entities, located in fixed grids of time and space – foregrounds the radical distinctiveness of abyssal thought in that it explicitly escapes the affirmative grounds of ontology. Key for approaches which enable us to draw out the abyssal analytic, is that ‘the human’ and ‘the world’ are conceptually and materially inseparable from the violent histories of chattel slavery, coloniality and racial capitalism. For abyssal approaches, this world is not over, nor can some pre-existing or pure world, without the grounding violence of chattel slavery and coloniality, be salvaged or redeemed.

For abyssal thought, the world as abyss is the starting point rather than the world of modernity, of the human, of entities and

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to highlight here that our use of the abyssal as a conceptual paradigm is distinctive from that often found in decolonial work, which tends to take the abyss as an entity within the world; either as a productive resource for immanent processes of self-creativity – for example, An Yountae’s (2016) *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* – or, as a line of radical exclusion between the West from its others; for example, Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2007) *Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges*.

transcendental assumptions of space and time. In contradistinction to leading Western critical theorists of the Anthropocene – from Bruno Latour to Jane Bennett, Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway – who seek to affirm the world of modernity as a launching platform for the development of alternative forms of ontological world-making, abyssal modes of practice reject the lure of the world as a call for subordination. Central here is how relational ontologies operate through the logic of *available geographies*, tracking, sensing, or speculating upon spatial entanglements or extensions and becomings *in* the world. Instead, for abyssal work, as we learn from Denise Ferreira da Silva, the task of critique is the work of ‘negativation’ (da Silva 2022, 44) of refusal: the ongoing call for the unmaking or undoing of the world. As we draw out, the figurative world as abyss is a desedimenting ‘non-spatiality’, ‘the release of matter from form’ (ibid., 161), frequently viewed as analogous to matter held in *quantum suspension* and thus unavailable for delineation. Theorising from the abyss, as we analyse in this book, is desedimenting in that it is world-subtractive rather than productivist, in the sense of being world-additive (see also Colebrook 2021).

Perhaps a useful way of flagging up this distinction is to locate non-being at the heart of abyssal work in contradistinction to what could be called approaches of ‘productive entanglement’, which focus upon levelling or ‘flattening’ ontologies of being. Work that might appear most like an abyssal critique of modern ontology, for example, the work collected under the broader heading of the ‘oceanic turn’ (Steinberg and Peters 2015; DeLoughrey 2016) through a more specific focus upon ‘saturation’ (Jue and Ruiz 2021a), or the focus on atmospheres and ‘suspension’ (Choy and Zee 2015; Simmonds 2017), questions the ‘territorial bias’ in which identifiable and separable entities are often imagined to be entangled like a knotted vine (Jue and Ruiz 2021b, 3). These approaches of entanglement between matter and agency emphasise ambiguity, fluidity, indistinction and opacity, understanding entanglement as central to ontological analysis. These framings of ‘quantum’ entanglement (for example, Der Derian and Wendt

2022) share much with the abyssal approach at a descriptive level,<sup>6</sup> but the key difference is that these ‘relational’ approaches are all ‘productivist’, they are concerned with production: producing richer, more creative or more differentiated worlds.

In this productivist framing, relations may reproduce hierarchies and oppressions, but they can always be empirically accessed by individuals, activists and policy-makers, thereby (a) articulating entanglement as literally operative in a distinct space and (b) in consequence, making it operable and instrumentalisable, creating new ethical duties – along the lines advocated by Karen Barad (2007) – where humans take responsibility for the choices and ‘cuts’ they make in worlding their worlds (for example, Zylinska 2021, 65). In bringing this distinction to the fore – between articulating different ways of ‘productivist’ being in the world and the ‘problematizing’ positionality of non-being, of lacking ontological grounding, in abyssal geography – this book is titled *The World as Abyss*. We do this to highlight that work in an abyssal paradigm is not constructing an alternative ontology of being, available as an exterior resource to be appropriated or intervened in, to save or improve the world, but necessitates the ending of that world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The labelling of approaches as ‘quantum’ can be misleading or ambiguous in that, for some theorists, quantum provides a new and more ‘real’ scientific approach to this world, understanding the underlying pre-conditions of possibility for the actual (the world of being). For other theorists, quantum provides an invitation to theorise what appears as the actual as a product of, ongoing, violent cuts and decisions.

<sup>7</sup> This fundamental distinction between ‘productivist’ work, affirming a ‘reality’ beneath modernist constructions of a human/world divide, and abyssal work, which seeks to foreground the ontological violence of world-making, can perhaps be illustrated by analogy with Derrida’s essay *Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’* (1992). Derrida makes the point that at stake is not the status of exclusion or inclusion within the authority of law but the regime of law itself. The necessary but disavowed grounding of law is non-law:

This moment of suspense, this *epokhe*, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of non-law. But it is also the

What we draw out as abyssal thought and work, approaches the stakes of critique in a radically distinctive way, developed from a fundamentally different understanding of the world as abyss.

The abyssal analytic raises the vantage point of positionality on a number of levels. On the one hand, it is important to emphasise that the contemporary attention to the Caribbean is largely a reflection of scholarship in North America. On the other hand,

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whole history of law. *This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence.* It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone. The supposed subject of this pure performative would no longer be before the law, or rather he would be before a law not yet determined, before the law as before a law not yet existing, a law yet to come, *encore devant et devant venir.* (1992, 36, italics in original)

The point that Derrida is making is that law and non-law come into being at the same time but all that appears is law. Non-law or non-being do not pre-exist the cut of the modern ontology. From within this world, of the cut: 'Every "subject" is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance' (Derrida 1992, 36). From within the world as constituted, it is difficult to challenge the arbitrary violence of the cut:

Here we are dealing with a double bind or a contradiction that can be schematized as follows. On the one hand, it appears easier to criticize the violence that founds since it cannot be justified by any preexisting legality and so appears savage. But on the other hand, and this reversal is the whole point of this reflection, it is more difficult, more illegitimate to criticize this same violence since one cannot summon it to appear before the institution of any preexisting law: it does not recognize existing law in the moment that it founds another. (Derrida 1992, 40)

Thus, the abyssal problematic is that of bringing to the surface the 'ontological violence' of the foundational violence of modernity, a violence that is both savage and arbitrary and at the same time seemingly cut apart or veiled from a modernist gaze. It is from the starting point of the world as abyss that a figurative assembling of an alternative structural positionality is possible.

abyssal work very much draws from the writings of Caribbean thinkers, such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo (2001) and Édouard Glissant (1997), and upon Caribbean tropes and imaginaries of displacement, suspension and marronage (Ferdinand 2022). For Benítez-Rojo (2001, 4, italics in original):

...the Caribbean flows outwards past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance, and its *ultima Thule* may be found on the outskirts of Bombay, near the low and murmuring shores of Gambia, in a Cantonese tavern of circa 1850, at a Balinese temple, in an old Bristol pub, in a commercial warehouse in Bordeaux at the time of Colbert, in a windmill beside Zuider Zee, at a cafe in a barrio of Manhattan, in the existential *saudade* of an old Portuguese lyric. But what is it that repeats? Tropisms, in series; movements in approximate direction.

Today, it is the importance of refusing the human and the world, which, for abyssal work, seems to make particular readings of Caribbean modes of practice and Caribbean writers generative. As we draw out from the work of Fred Moten, rather than seek admission into the realm of the human, abyssal work seeks to ‘sit with... rather than disavow’ ontological insecurity (2016, 16). The Caribbean, understood as the birthplace of the global colour line, of those said to possess ontological security and those said to lack it, is figured as particularly important for this line of critical thought.

Work drawing upon Caribbean history and culture has become prevalent more generally in contemporary critique, which increasingly mobilises aspects of this region as a potential entry point for challenging modern and colonial reasoning (Gordon 2008, 108; Ruiz and Vourloumis 2021; Ferdinand 2022). As Deborah A. Thomas (2022, 1) reflects in her essay *What the Caribbean Teaches Us*, ‘insights from the Caribbean create portals’ which are understood to help reshape the broader pathways of critical thought. Recent years have witnessed a substantial interest from academics working outside the Caribbean – for example, Kathryn Yusoff (2018), Elizabeth Povinelli (2021) and Gayatri Spivak (2021) – underlining that the Caribbean has become what

Katherine McKittrick calls ‘an analytical and methodological gift’ (quoted in Keohane and Smith 2022). As Kerry-Jane Wallart notes, leading thinkers, such as Dionne Brand (2011), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Carole Boyce Davies (2013) have presented ‘the Caribbean as a matrix for globalisation, for diasporic cultures around the globe, for creolization under any form and latitude’ (2019, 87). She argues that over the last thirty years the framing of the Caribbean has radically changed via a ‘critique of the colonial representations of the Caribbean islands as “small” spaces, as fragmented and disconnected spaces, as provincial, as forlorn, as archaic, as reduced to the size of a sugar plantation where nothing prevailed but the violence of greed’ (2019, 87). Today, increasingly, the Caribbean is viewed as anticipatory, as central to and at the heart of contemporary meaning-making, as ‘a very modern space indeed’ (ibid.).

Aware that the Caribbean has long been enrolled in the development of wider critical thought (Palmié 2006; Sheller 2003; Boyce Davies 2013), in exploring and developing an abyssal analytic, in no way are we claiming to speak for the region or its peoples, neither do we present an empirical or ethnographic study. Instead, we are drawing out a distinctive *abyssal analytic*, which, we believe, reflects an important current juncture in critical thought. As in our last book, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (Pugh and Chandler 2021),<sup>8</sup> we are interested in how certain engagements with histories, geographies and cultures become enabling for contemporary critical thought.

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<sup>8</sup> Our open access project and publications on *Anthropocene Islands* examine how the figures of the island, islander and ‘islandness’ are generative for thinking through relational entanglement as a key problematic of the Anthropocene (see <https://www.anthropoceneislands.online/page-3.html>). In a similar vein, our abyssal project draws out how Caribbean modes of thought and practice have become read generatively for the development of abyssal approaches. Both projects are interested in how geography and modes of being are engaged in the development of contemporary critical thought.

## The Book

The body of this short book is organised into four chapters. The second chapter introduces what is at stake in figuring the world as abyss through the Caribbean, drawing out from contemporary works which engage Caribbean thought and practices the figuration of an ‘abyssal subject’, ‘abyssal sociality’, and ‘abyssal geography’. Chapter 3 highlights how the abyssal is read to be grounded in the force of history in the Caribbean as the epicentre of the construction of the modern world. It reads contemporary critique as facilitating an understanding of ‘abyssal temporality’, of the Caribbean as modernity’s ‘hold’. The concluding chapter (Chapter 4) turns to how abyssal thought works with a radically distinctive relation to politics and to epistemology; what Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2014) calls a ‘paraontological’ approach, that consistently delegitimises the claims of colonial and modern world-making. We draw out how an abyssal framing can be understood as opening a line of critical thought which moves to not only trouble, but works towards the ending of, both the human and the world. Throughout the book, we explore why and how abyssal thought, as a radically distinctive mode of critique, might be appealing for critical thought today.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Abyssal Subject

### Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, the importance of the perspective of ‘the world as abyss’ has emerged against the backdrop of the search for an alternative to modernist political projects, increasingly seen as unable to fully address problems of coloniality, racial capitalism and environmental destruction (Noys 2012; Colebrook 2014). While much critical work in the opening decades of the 2000s was driven by the promise of more constructive and affirmative relational approaches (Latour 2004) and the turn to immanence, today there is a growing search for what may lie beyond the confines of the relational and ontological turns (Karera 2019; Povinelli 2021; Zalloua 2021; Pugh and Chandler 2022; Chipato and Chandler 2022a; 2022b). We explore how ‘abyssal’ work turns to the Caribbean, not to find a world-saving cosmology to correct the errors of modern reasoning but, to learn from those who have long been said to lack fixed grounds of ontological security. Thus, as we draw out in this chapter, Caribbean tropes of displacement have often been key to the figurative assembling of an abyssal subject and what we draw out as abyssal

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sociality, problematising and putting in question the projects of modernity and colonialism.

An abyssal framing is enabled by reading specific Caribbean modes of practice as being free from assumptions of fixed and pre-set entities and the human as an individualised and pre-existing subject. The abyssal paradigm holds off the lure of the world as given to us empirically, as just 'there', pre-constituted by a modern ontology of fixed entities that are transparently available. The modern or Eurocentric framing assumes an objectivity, or autonomous production of thought, without constraints of context and finitude. This Eurocentric imaginary of certitude constrains politics to what exists, i.e., to a debate on the terms of the world as a fixed and reified product of colonial, ecocidal and genocidal destruction. The problematisation of the world imagined to be made in this way is anchored in a perspective that starts from the world as abyss. Thus, the shift to a deeper level of problematisation has often been most deeply informed by and explicated via work which draws upon figurations that assume a non-subject positionality. For us, a key thinker in this field is Fred Moten. Moten, in his extensive work in critical cultural theory, has famously drawn methodologically on the poststructuralist approach of Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant, going so far as publishing a philosophical trilogy under the general title, 'Consent Not To Be A Single Being', in a tribute to his influence. We think that Moten's work is important as an example of the way in which the work of Caribbean theorists can be seen to circulate through the academy in ways which provide a certain non- or ante-ontological character to work in contemporary critical Black studies.

This shift to concerns of ontology is defining for what we are describing as an 'abyssal' approach and for the figuration of an abyssal subject positionality. The starting position is not one of being in the world as an already defined or fixed entity but a position of displacement or of non-identity. The implication of this ontological inflection is that identity can never be pre-given, the problem is not the problematic construction of identities and the need for identities to be recognised or included in some way,

but the construction of identities per se. Although the figurative assembling of an abyssal subject draws upon Caribbean tropes, the abyssal subject is not another way of representing ‘Caribbean Man’ even in terms of Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s (1975) poetics of deconstruction. Thus, Moten argues that it is not ‘being’ but ‘nonbeing,’ ‘unsettlement’ or ‘displacement’ that is key. This ‘paraontological’ detachment of Blackness as a figurative positionality from Black persons (Moten 2013, 749) means that no-thingness or nonbeing:

...signals that which is most emphatically and lyrically marked in Édouard Glissant’s phrase ‘consent not to be a single being’ and indicated in Wilderson and Mackey’s gestures toward ‘fantasy in the hold,’ the radical unsettlement that is where and what we are. Unsettlement is the displacement of sovereignty by initiation, so that what’s at stake—here, in displacement—is a certain black incapacity to desire sovereignty and ontological relationality whether they are recast in the terms and forms of a Lévinasian ethics or an Arendtian politics, a Fanonian resistance or a Pattersonian test of honor. (Moten 2013, 750)

One way in which Moten (2016) articulates the importance of shifting perspective to the paraontological is in moving beyond the limits of discussing race in a liberal register of rights and challenging the arbitrary cut between Human and Thing. Sticking to the political level that limits discourse to ‘matters of fact,’ rather than engaging at a more ontological level of how ‘facts’ come into being, means that the question is limited to claiming rights based on inclusion in the ‘Human’ side of the cut and then necessarily reproducing and accepting hierarchical understandings of the division between Human and Thing. Or alternatively, dismissing rights based on redistributing agency across the ‘divide’ and giving agency to the ‘Thing’ (Moten 2016). Where actor network theorists, such as the late Bruno Latour (2004), would have argued that understandings of agency should be extended or redistributed to include ‘Things’ as possessing agential powers, Moten, thinks in terms of a different (we would say ‘abyssal’) paradigm.

Moten rejects the debate at the level of Humans and Things and the politics of inclusion and agency. Rather than a discourse of classifications of entities and (re)drawing of distinctions, Moten argues that thinking from a position of ‘no-thingness’ is enabling for an approach to critique which, we think, works very differently to that of the relational and ontological turns (2016, 11). This, for us, is a move of fundamental significance. Abyssal thought does not offer an alternative imaginary which seeks to rethink the human and the world, but is rather paraontological and non-worlding, refusing the separations constitutive of the human and the world. Theorising from the figurative world as abyss – from the non-being of the abyssal *subject* in abyssal sociality, as we do in this chapter – is ‘an enactment of *refusal* – a refusal to die, refusal to comply, refusal to give up and give in’ (da Silva 2022, 273). To underscore the distinctiveness of the abyssal approach, it is delineated as *non-* or *ante-* ontological (i.e. drawing out the desedimenting capacity of the indeterminacy of non-being), rather than anti-ontological and negating (i.e. from a position of oppositional ontological determinacy).

This chapter draws out the characteristics of what we call the abyssal *subject* and abyssal sociality. First, we foreground how contemporary work develops particular readings of Caribbean writers, notably Glissant (1997), to underline how the formation of the abyssal *subject* in the world as abyss is understood to emerge inseparably from modern and colonial world-making. We explore how the abyssal *subject* is not grasped as the ‘underside’ to modernity and colonialism, something which could be separated out or cleaved off, but as inextricable from these world-making projects. Second, we turn to how particular modes of Caribbean practice, delineated here as abyssal sociality, are understood to simultaneously index, trouble, and to desediment this ontology of world-making. We examine how this highly distinctive approach to critique draws from the work of Caribbean writers such as Benítez-Rojo (2001). Throughout, we explore how the ‘force of Caribbean history’ is mobilised in work which contributes to the development of the abyssal analytic, ending the chapter by relating this to the appeal of abyssal approaches for contemporary critical thought.

## The World as Abyss Forged through the Middle Passage

Central for an abyssal perspective is the understanding that the world as abyss cannot be separated from the modernist making of both the human and the world. We draw upon a range of work to emphasise how a particular abyssal approach brings to the fore the foundational violence at the heart of both the world as material being and as given to finite thought. In this process of world-making, the world as perceived by thought is inseparable from the violent renting of the Middle Passage, the hold of the slave ship, and the new world of plantation logistics. For Harney and Moten (2013, 93–94):

Modernity is sutured by this hold. This movement of things, unformed objects, deformed subjects, nothing yet and already. This movement of nothing is... the annunciation of modernity itself, and not just the annunciation of modernity itself but the insurgent prophecy that all of modernity will have at its heart, in its hold, this movement of things, this interdicted, outlawed social life of nothing... [B]orders grope their way toward the movement of things, bang on containers, kick at hostels, harass camps, shout after fugitives, seeking all the time to harass this movement of things... But this fails to happen, borders fail to cohere, because the movement of things will not cohere... the absence of coherence, but not of things, in the moving presence of absolutely nothing.

We glean much from Harney and Moten (2013; 2021) for our understanding of the world as abyss, particularly from the way in which they do not seek to redeem the ontological lack of humans made objects – slaves reduced to ‘nothing’ under modern and colonial world-making. Rather than refigure ontology in the productivist mode of the relational and ontological turns, they think from the ‘absence of coherence’, from ‘no-thingness’ as important for the development of a paraontological approach or method, opening up a distinctive line of critique.

It is a key contention of this book that an abyssal framing draws a distinctive line of thought from the work of some of the most well-known and influential Caribbean writers of the last few decades. Notable here is Édouard Glissant who famously begins his *Poetics of Relation* with the ‘Open Boat’, the Middle Passage, and the figuration of a positionality of the subject of the three abysses – the slave ship, the depths of the sea, and the forgetting of origins in Africa. Thus, firstly, ‘the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss’ (1997, 6). Second, ‘the entire sea, gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green’ (ibid., 6). Finally, the third abyss ‘projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except – more and more threadbare – in the blue savannas of memory and imagination’ (ibid., 7). Crucial for us about the contemporary work we draw upon for the abyssal analytic is the lack of ontological security of the subject of these three abysses – becoming the ‘no-thing’ Harney and Moten speak of – lacking a perspective from which to see the world in its own image (Spillers 2003, 215).

This subject of the abyss, is not understood as pre-existing modernity as a timeless abstraction but emerges through the process of colonial and modern world-making. Here, the slave trade is figured as performing a crucial role. In fact, Glissant argued that ‘one of the best kept secrets of creolization’ (1989, 14) was the fundamental difference between a people transplanted by exile of dispersion, who continue to survive as a people elsewhere, and the transfer of a people via the slave trade, ‘where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities’ (1989, 14). For Glissant, it was the forced transfer of the slave trade that constituted a population forced ‘to question in several ways any attempt at universal generalization’ (1989, 14), forced to ‘desecrate’, to view critically, ‘the old order of things’ but unable to be ‘remade in the Other’s image’, forced to enter a ‘constantly shifting and variable process of creolization’ (1989, 15). Thus, we

learn from the work of Hortense Spillers (2003, 214–215, italics in original):

Those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the oceanic... [having an]... undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captives, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Because, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say they were culturally ‘unmade’... We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*, that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure.

Rather than provide us with a productivist alternative understanding of being, of ontology, to that posited by modern world-making, the figurative *subject* of the abyss is held in ‘non-differentiation’ (see also Ibrahim 2021, 15). There can be no going back after ‘The Door of No Return’ to what are, by necessity, ‘irretrievable selves’ (Brand 2011, 224; Gumbs 2018). This is ‘the absence of Black subjectivity (and homeland, and political sovereignty) that can never be fully realized’ (Culp 2021, 11). Thrown into a world in which it is never possible to be ‘at home’ (Fanon 2021, 102), lacking ‘ontological resistance’ (ibid., 90), the abyssal *subject* is unable to ontologically project itself upon the world.

It is precisely here, under an abyssal framing, that the violent imposition of colonialism’s cuts and distinctions – what could be called the *abyssal cut* – becomes the imposition of the ‘historical forms of limit’ that is colonial world-making (Chandler 2010). This ‘historical form of limit’ is precisely that of the ‘global colour line’ that then becomes the materialised form in which this bifurcation of the world is put into question. Key for abyssal work is how the abyssal cut ontologically constitutes the binary divides of the ‘global colour line’: on the one hand of ‘human subjects’ understood as self-constituting, and on the other, of ‘objects’

understood as determined by others, put to work on plantations (da Silva 2007). Grounded in the Caribbean, it is this force of enclosure, of stratification, of colonial world-making, which the abyssal approach understands as working at ‘the level of existence... understood as ontological’ (Chandler 2010). As Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2010) saliently remarks: ‘The Negro question, if there is such, is not first of all or only a question about the Negro... it is first a fundamental and general question about the dominant conceptions of humanity.’ The abyssal line of thought we draw out in this book foregrounds how the ‘ontological terror’ (Warren 2018) of colonial world-making comes to appear as ‘natural’ and ‘invisible’. Abyssal thought does not reveal ‘another reality’ beneath or other to this world but exposes this world as the product of the ongoing work of colonial violence.

The starting point for an abyssal analytic is thus the abyssal cut between being and Blackness as non-being, in the sense of lacking ontological existence, addressed directly in Fred Moten’s very important (2008) intervention, ‘The Case of Blackness’. Fanon’s claim that ‘ontology’, the antiblack world of a modern ontology, ‘does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.’ (Fanon 2021, 90) is central here. As Moten responds:

This passage [Fanon’s argument], and the ontological (absence of) drama it represents, leads us to a set of fundamental questions. How do we think the possibility and the law of outlawed, impossible things? And if, as Frantz Fanon suggests, the black cannot be an other for another black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life? (Moten 2008, 178)

The figurative positionality of Blackness lacks ontological substance, lacks being ‘in’ the world, experiencing existence through the eyes of an other. For Moten, this opening of a gap between the ‘fact’ of being human and the lived experience of lacking independent existence is key (2008, 180): ‘one that plays itself out not

by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and beings' (2008, 180). The figurative positionality of Blackness enables problematisation but is not productive within the world of a modern ontology:

What is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experienced of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of para-ontology whose compartment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events. (Moten 2008, 187)

An abyssal framing is thus not formulated upon an abstract metaphysics but derived from a figuration of the world as experienced through the prism of differentiated ontological standing, often drawing upon particular readings of Caribbean modes of resistance and survival.

Drawn from different parts of Africa, forced in the hold of the slave ship, slaves shared little in the way of common identities, languages, and dialects, so had to continually improvise for collective survival. Abyssal life thereby harbours the sociality of what Glissant calls *chaos-monde*, involving 'all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us... totality's reflection and agent in motion' (Glissant 1997, 94). As we have stressed, contemporary abyssal approaches read Glissant in a particular way. For example, da Silva (2022, 283, italics in original) states: 'I prefer to read in Glissant's more expansive approach a *refusal* that seeks to release [the world] to undeterminability, and not only this or that "linguistic" or "cultural" group.' An abyssal approach thereby works 'indeterminability' very differently to relational discourses of openness and encounter. In ontologies of becoming, a 'subject' or 'being' is always and already in the process of emergence, of actualisation, grasped in terms of a subject *open to the world*. We further see this in how, for example, creolisation often gets reduced to notions of hybridity and intersectionality, where the subject is the product of the comings together of ongoing relational entanglements (for a critique see Glissant 1989, 140–141 and Harney

and Moten 2021, 126). In direct contrast, the figurative *subject* of the abyss, of the hold of the slave ship, is *prized open by the world* – held in what Moten (2017, 67) calls ‘eternally alien immanence’.

Thus, we see the assembling of an abyssal figure unable to ontologically project itself upon the world, inhabiting an *abyssal geography*; an ‘untimely version of time’ (Ibrahim 2021, 29). This *subject* is ‘less’ than the subject of modernity, in the sense that it lacks ontological security. It is also at the same time ‘more’, precisely because of this lack of fixity, thereby possessing an awareness that the world as presently constituted is one of necessary and gratuitous violence. For the contemporary work which enables us to draw out the abyssal line of thought, staying with the indeterminacy of the abyssal *subject*, with the reverberations of elements stripped of form, is not then a flight from reality, but a piercing of the veil of reality, through thinking *from* the world as abyss. It is through grounding critique in the abyssal geography of the hold, Middle Passage, and the brutalities of chattel slavery, that abyssal work theorises from ‘behind’ the veil of modern and colonial world-making; beyond the assumptions that the world, as given, is ‘naturally’ there, rather than is a social and material product of the abyssal cut. As M. NourbeSe Philip (2008) says, reflecting upon her poem *Zong!* about slave traders working in Caribbean waters who drowned slaves to claim the insurance:

The descendants of that experience appear creatures of the word, apparently brought into *ontological* [our emphasis] being by fiat and by law. The law it was that said we were. Or were not. The fundamental resistance to this, whether or not it was being manifested in the many, many instances of insurrection, was the belief and knowledge that we – the creatures of fiat and law – always knew we existed *outside* [italics in original] the law – that law – and that our be-ing was prior in time to fiat, law and word... So many of us continue to live... Unable to not-tell the story that must be told. (Philip 2008, 206–207)

Let us then emphasise, as Philip says in this quote, that for the contemporary abyssal paradigm the Middle Passage and chattel slavery of the plantation form part of a process of the forging of the

world of modernity, *ontologically*. We say ‘ontologically’ to clarify that the birth of coloniality and racial capitalism are not just historical events that took place ‘in’ the world that we are now living in and therefore can be understood now as ‘events’, hundreds of years in the past. Understood as integral to the world-making process – integral to the world that we experience now – the foundational violence of the carving of subjects from objects, valued humans from non-valued non-humans, self-governing beings from non-beings, remains as much part of the ‘world’ today as it was then. The difference is that this world – with its incisions and divides – is now considered as natural and the foundational violence disavowed. The abyssal approach desediments the givenness of the ‘world’ as differentiated across segmented space-time and, in so doing, brings the foundational violence, essential to this world’s making, to the surface.

### Abyssal Sociality

Work which grounds an abyssal analytic tends to start with the Middle Passage and the hold of the slave ship as the violent birthplaces of modernity and the world as abyss. It is here that the figurative assembling of the subject of the abyss is often placed. As we have discussed, this line of thought is often developed from particular readings of Caribbean writers, of which Glissant is probably most well known. However, for us, another key Caribbean interlocutor is Antonio Benítez-Rojo and his text *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (2001). Benítez-Rojo sees the Caribbean as figuratively birthing the ‘global colour line’: the bifurcation between those constituted as full subjects and those held to lack these capacities and require tutelage. For Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean is seen as the fulcrum of modernity, as a world-making and world-denying project, as the site of the production of both Black(ended) and White(ened) subjects, which ‘was hammered into shape’ by Christopher Columbus:

...something like a medieval vacuum cleaner. The flow of Nature in the island was interrupted by the suction of an iron mouth,

taken thence through a transatlantic tube to be deposited and redistributed in Spain... A machine of the same model (think of a forge with its sparkling clangor and combustion), with an extra bolt here and a bellows there, was installed in Puerto Rico, in Jamaica, in Cuba... (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 5–6)

The repeating island, that gives the book its title, is a metaphor for the forcing violence that produces the world from the ‘between’ that is not in between, increasingly making the division of the world, between coloniser and colonised, between human and non-human, between reason and irrationalism, between aid provider and aid receiver. Key for drawing out the abyssal analytic from Benítez-Rojo’s text is how the stakes here are *ontological*; as this process repeats and expands, the world that is produced appears to exist ‘naturally’, and the process of violence and cutting becomes invisible. In an analysis comparable to Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism under capitalism (Marx 1983 [1867], 76–87), the effects of this process, the entities thrown off, appear to have a substance and existence – a being, a presence – of their own. The global colour line, the racialisation of the world, ontologically, imbricated within the very being of the world, appears to be natural with differences pre-existing the encounter. Benítez-Rojo’s *Repeating Island* denaturalises this world, deconstructing what is considered to be naturally ‘there’ and would otherwise be obscured precisely by the success of the process itself.<sup>1</sup>

Benítez-Rojo’s work allows us to draw out some of the key characteristics of abyssal work and an understanding of the world as abyss. There is a focus on the ‘between’ of the Caribbean, but this is not a relational approach, such as creolisation understood as hybrid entanglements, but rather its ontological inversion; the entities are products of encounter rather than existing prior to it. In other words, the Caribbean is not understood as a place of

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<sup>1</sup> This point is also well made by Derrida in his use of Freud’s assertion that: ‘Repressions that have failed will of course have more claim on our interest than those that may have been successful: for the latter will for the most part escape our examination’ (1978, 247).

‘encounter’ between different pre-formed cultures, as if socio-, economic- and political- divides pre-existed it. Instead, the Caribbean is framed as a site where ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ themselves are violently forged.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Benítez-Rojo attempts:

...to establish that the Caribbean is an important historico-economic sea and, further, a cultural meta-archipelago without centre and without limits, a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 9)

This framing enables us to rethink the world as abyss as one in which *the temporal and spatial framing is put in question itself*, rather than just the understanding of the entities produced by coloniality as an ongoing process of reproducing a bifurcated world. This work of ‘desedimentation’ is done through putting the Caribbean at the epicentre of the construction of modernity, historio-socio-economically and, more importantly, ontologically. To follow Benítez-Rojo, on the one hand, we have the process of cuts of world-making – he uses the concept of ‘Plantation’ as a machinic approach to biurfication (2001, 37–39; see also Brathwaite 1975; McKittrick 2013) – and, on the other, in response to this there is resistance, the attempt to disrupt and to defer the making of the ‘One World World’ (Law 2015).<sup>3</sup> This too is read by Benítez-Rojo as being centred on the Caribbean. These are the abyssal modes of practice of survival and of resistance; an aesthetics where differences are held together through an alternative

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<sup>2</sup> As Nahum Chandler argues, this line of (abyssal) thought can be dated back to W. E. B. Du Bois who conceived of modern slavery as ‘standing at the inception – neither inside or outside – of modern imperial colonialism, of a supposed European world economy, of capitalism as a system, of modernity as a global horizon’ (2013, 113 n. 15).

<sup>3</sup> We use John Law’s expression of the ‘One World World’ (2015) to describe the fixed grid of space-time of the modern ontology.

sense of the universal which emerges against differentiation, where differences are held together in play, often, as we shortly discuss, in *carnaval* (2001, 29). In carnival, as in the hold of the slave ship, discussed by Spillers and Harney and Moten above, an analytic of desedimenting suspension is invoked that is quite distinct from the differentiating and expansive, productivist powers of relational imaginaries (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 29).

*The Repeating Island* focuses upon the Caribbean as the fulcrum of the process of world-making. This process is one of extended and extreme violence: the process of Indigenous genocide, chattel slavery and colonial domination. For Benítez-Rojo then, this process is at its most intensive, its most forced, in the Caribbean as the site of the production of racial capitalism, the Plantation as a system and the racialising ontology of the subject, the object, the human, and the nonhuman:

...in what we call the plantation society, or simply the Plantation. For example, the series that has as its subject the slave, pertaining to: demand, purchase, work, depreciation, flight, *palenque* (runaway settlement), revolt, repression, replacement. This gives an idea of the rapid dynamic and the intense measure of exploitation intrinsic to the plantation machine. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 42)

The Plantation as a machine of racialisation, as world-producing, as a machine of binary division, becomes most visible, most forced, at its Caribbean epicentre. It is this set of continuities that enables abyssal thought to hold together what would be rendered apart – the slave and the citizen, the colonial metropole and the colonised, the human and the non-human – disrupting the entities of the present. Benítez-Rojo provides an insightful socio-historical analysis of the forging of modernity, one that gives figurative content to an abyssal understanding of what it means to live ‘in the wake’ of chattel slavery and the Middle Passage (Sharpe 2016):

If we bear in mind that the Plantation was a proliferating regularity in the Caribbean sphere, it becomes difficult to sustain the idea that the region’s social structures cannot be grouped under a single

typology. It is true that the Plantation's model differs from one island to another, and that sugar's hegemony begins in Barbados, passes to Saint-Domingue, and ends in Cuba, spreading itself out in time and space over three centuries. But it is precisely these differences that confer upon the Plantation its ability to survive and keep transforming itself, whether facing the challenge of slavery's abolition, or the arrival of independence, or the adoption of a socialist mode of production. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 74)

The Caribbean is figured as the site of the coercive forcing of the racialised and gendered world of a modernist ontology<sup>4</sup> – the Plantation, or racial capitalism – as well as the location of new and politically and geographically particular modes of resistance and flight from this, in 'the community of maroons, the *palenque*', the 'antiplantation', the community not so much of the 'free' but of those suspended in difference (2001, 249). Like the work of Spillers, da Silva, and Harney and Moten discussed above, these are not positioned as 'between' or at the 'intersection' of different geographies, but as modes of practice that desediment and problematise the decision or cut.

Benítez-Rojo closes his book with the chapter 'Carnival' which we read as a striking example for the development of an abyssal analytic. Benítez-Rojo distinguishes his intention from the treatments by Mikhail Bakhtin and Umberto Eco who both see carnival (in the same way as slave-owners' dances and holidays) as a partial letting go with the purpose of reaffirming the old or traditional order of power (2001, 306). In Benítez-Rojo's figuration, in carnival, the world is imagined through holding off, deferring the cut, holding differentiations together in ways that are strange, paradoxical, even frightening. Carnival is not an opposition to a modernist ontology nor an inversion of its values and hierarchies; for Benítez-Rojo, it points to something operating on another ontological level, which is precisely its interest for

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<sup>4</sup> We highlight the important linkages with gender below, in a discussion of the work of Philip (2017), see also Bey's *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (2020).

us, a rejection of the modernist process of biurfication – of world-making – itself:

Culturally speaking, the complexity of the Caribbean carnival cannot be reduced to binary concepts. It is one thing and the other at the same time... since it serves the purpose of unifying through its performance that which cannot be unified... In this sense, and only partially in the Bakhtinian sense, we can say that Caribbeanness functions in a carnivalesque manner. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 307)

Benítez-Rojo stresses that what he sees in carnival and in its rejection of binaries is an expression of what ‘was *already there*’ (ibid., 22, italics in original): what he simply calls ‘Caribbeanness’ (ibid., 307). Whilst he says that the repeating island is a ‘meta-archipelago’ (ibid., 24) expanding outwards into the world, not confined to the cartographically defined Caribbean (a point we pick up later for understanding the world as abyss), he understands that its characteristics are exemplified and amplified in the practices of this region – from carnival to Caribbean literature and poetry, to practices of marronage, and the walk and gait of Caribbean peoples. In all these cases, and more, Benítez-Rojo (ibid., 18) marks the attributes of the ‘interruptive action of the Caribbean machine’; which, as he delineates the stakes, works differently from the assemblage ‘machines’ that characterise the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). For Benítez-Rojo (2001, 18), the Caribbean is ‘a metamachine of differences whose poetic mechanism cannot be diagrammed in conventional dimensions... rhythms cut through by other rhythms, which are cut by still other rhythms... takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a centre no longer’ (ibid., 18).

Benítez-Rojo’s wager is that Caribbean practices, such as carnival, when performed in a ‘certain kind of way’ (ibid., 19), become an expansive, saturated space of displacing rhythms, deferring the ability to obtain a subject existing in obtainable relations. Carnival exemplifies this, where, as Benítez-Rojo clarifies:

I’m talking about the very complex phenomenon usually called improvisation... Someone might ask, for example, what the use is

of walking ‘in a certain kind of way.’ In fact, there’s not much use in it; not even dancing ‘in a certain kind of way’ is of much use if the scale of values that we use corresponds only with a technological machine coupled to an industrial machine coupled to a commercial machine. A jazz improvisation (jazz being a kind of music that dwells within the Caribbean orbit), which achieves a decentering of the canon by which a piece has been interpreted previously, is hardly useful either. The improvisation can be taped by a record company, but the product is a recording, not the improvisation, which is linked indissolubly with a space and time that cannot be reproduced... The deception lies in giving out that ‘listening’ is the only sense touched by improvisation. In fact, improvisation, if it has reached a level that I’ve been calling ‘a certain kind of way,’ has penetrated all the percipient spaces of those present, and it is precisely this shifting ‘totality’ that leads them to perceive the impossible unity, the absent locus, the center that has taken off and yet is still there... (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 19–20)

What we learn from Benítez-Rojo is how improvisation, when framed in terms of a specific kind of Caribbean practice, is enrolled to repudiate modernity’s binary delineations of subject/object, mind/body, human/nature divides. He figures this specific mode of improvisation as a shifting ‘totality’ (ibid., 20) which, ‘travelling toward the infinite,’ saturates, displaces, and dissolves the modernist divide that ‘separates the onlooker’ and ‘participant’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 16). Abyssal approaches reconfigure this space, through what Moten (2017, 1) calls the ontological insecurity of an in-between which is ‘not in between.’ In abyssal work, the ‘not in between’ is not spliced up and reductively packaged by the delineations of the colonial gaze. Rather it is an irreducible, displacing space, whose arrhythmia desediments notions of obtainable origins, opposites and relation (see also da Silva 2016; Bradley and da Silva 2021). Framed as the between which is not in between, Caribbean practices such as carnival and jazz enable an analytically distinct abyssal line of thought:

Let’s suppose that we beat upon a drum with a single blow and set its skin to vibrating. Let’s suppose that this sound stretches until it forms something like a salami. Well, here comes the

interruptive action of the Caribbean machine; it starts slicing pieces of sound in an unforeseen, improbable, and finally impossible way... takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a center no longer... A moment will be reached in which it will no longer be clear whether the salami of sound is cut by the rhythms or these are cut by the salami or it is cut in its slices or these are cut by slices of rhythm. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 18)

The notion of an obtainable subject existing in knowable sets of relations is undone in this abyssal sociality. Abyssal approaches dissolve individuation as it is articulated along the lines of both liberal modes of reasoning and of productivist entanglement between ‘individuation-in-relation’ (Harney and Moten 2021, 126). Moreover, as outlined earlier, abyssal sociality is not strictly oppositional or negating (anti-ontological) either. Rather, it is negative (ante- and non- ontological) and de-worlding. Thus, in thinking ‘Caribbeanness’ as ‘carnavalesque’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 307), for Benítez-Rojo, ‘every repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step toward nothingness’ (ibid., 3). We can think abyssal socialites in terms of how they ‘open up a complex and unstable kind of existing that points to the void, to the lack of something, to repetitive and rhythmic insufficiency which, finally, is the most visible determinism to be drawn in the Caribbean’ (ibid., 28). We wish to underscore how, for abyssal approaches, this figuration of an abyssal positionality is understood as desedimenting, so that ‘no-thingness manifests itself as a kind of practice [of] differentiation without separation [citing da Silva 2016], which is necessarily social and aesthetic’ (Moten 2016, 11).

This attention to differentiation without separability – to abyssal sociality as a field of desedimentation, rather than of fixed and distinct entities (da Silva 2016, 64–65) – enables us to draw out the radical import of figuring the world abyssally. There are no entities-in-relation because there are no fixed and individuated entities, either pre-existing or produced: there is no product. In fact, abyssal sociality is non-productive and non-creative in terms of adding new and proliferating entities to the world. It works at

a fundamentally different level altogether: in terms of a figurative critical positionality, enabling for a paraontological mode of critique. It is in this way that abyssal approaches work to problematise the project of modern world-making. Not by putting forward a modified yet still delineable sense of ‘the Other’, ‘Being’, or the ‘subject’. But rather by foregrounding abyssal socialites, such as carnival which are read in a ‘certain kind of way’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 19), figured as dissolving distinctions, revealing the violence of the colonial gaze in its desire for certitude over and against the play of finitude and contingency.

Following the analysis of the undifferentiated *subject* of the hold, or figured through carnival, it is possible to draw a clear distinction between abyssal and relational approaches in so far as they relate to questions of transcendence and empirical existence. A relational ontology – such as actor network theory, materialist semiotics or theories of multi-species entanglement – works at the level of the world as it appears, as given to us – and is developed through a temporality of growth and attunement to ‘beings-in-relation’ (as if the shifting interstices between relations or between subjects and objects could be documented, engaged, or instrumentally or ethically put to work). By contrast, the improvisational capacities of an abyssal sociality, such as carnival, is saturated and lost in, deepening and expanding, the *irreducibility* of confluences; such that ‘a new chaotic flight of signifiers will occur, and so on ad infinitum’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 12). It is in this way that we can start to draw out how abyssal approaches refuse the human *and* the world. Abyssal work does not approach the stakes of critique by posing or framing an alternative reality but sees the task as that of lifting the veil covering the grounding violence and disavowal of finitude essential to the ongoing reproduction of colonial and modern world-making.

It is the key contention of this book that certain contemporary readings of Caribbean thought and practices have been important for the emergence of an abyssal paradigm, generative for a distinctive framing of geography, understanding the world as abyss. Thus, we read an abyssal approach to be at the heart of Moten’s

reading (2017) of C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins*. Rather than frame *The Black Jacobins* in terms of how it documents the tragedy of the Haitian Revolution, Moten draws out 'something more than failure, more than some static or unproductive contradiction... something that remains to be discovered in black radicalism' (ibid., 7). On the one hand, Moten reflects upon Toussaint and the Enlightenment and, on the other, the confidence which rebellious slaves placed in Toussaint's Lieutenant, Dessalines, and the darkness of the ditch they jumped into to avoid fire from a fortress. In his reflections, Moten (ibid., 2) foregrounds something between Enlightenment and darkness which he says is not in-between:

Toussaint, all hooked up and bound to the French, trapped in no-man's-land between liberty (abstract-subjective-telic-white) and independence (national-objective-present-black: the position Dessalines seemingly naturally slips into) hips us, by way of James, to the need for something not in between these formations. For James, the desire is for something not in between darkness and enlightenment, something not in between Dessalines and Toussaint. And we've got to think what it means not just for Dessalines to take the men into his confidence *but to talk to them*. We've got to think the form of that talk as well as its content, in untutored and broken dialect, unretouched, addressed to his followers and not to the French, sounded and not written and rewritten, seemingly unmediated by the graphic, and finally, concerned not with liberty but with independence. (Moten 2017, 7, italics in original)

Moten highlights the paraontological, the mode of existence which is not *in-between* (Moten 2017, 9). Paraontological life, the Caribbean which Moten reads James as pointing us towards, is a challenge to entanglement's focus upon separability. The paraontological is not different strands of relation coming together, from Africa and Europe, for example, forming a new mode of obtainable 'being' in revolt against regulation. Instead, like Glissant's (1997) figure on the 'Black Beach' at the end of the *Poetics of Relation*, where creolisation reaches the apex of opacity (see Pugh and

Chandler 2021), abyssal approaches assemble a figurative subject (unavailable to the ontological and ontic realms) who is not simply the product of the yoking together of origins and opposites, but rather de-worlds any such notions of delineable space and time. Thus, abyssal sociality is in this sense ‘non-local’ (as we explore further below), making leaps, in creolisation, in carnival, refusing notions of availability *in* the world of obtainable delineation. As Moten (2021) says of the influential work he is doing with Harney, ‘what we are doing is an ongoing extension of a kind of pidgin, or of creolisation in the way Glissant uses that term... a taking revenge on the English language...’ This abyssal mode, as in Benítez-Rojo above, is improvisational – at the point of confluence (if we can indeed now employ such a reductive term, still hinting towards separability) that ‘guarantees the ongoing presence and the irrecoverable possibility of what gets coded as conditions and foundations’ (ibid., 10). Such that the ‘not-in-between’ is: ‘There and not there, not hybrid, not in between marks the presence and loss of Africa. Blackness and black radicalism are not in between but neither one nor the other’ (ibid., 10).

Abyssal work foregrounds a *radical desedimentation* in which: ‘Everything here depends upon some kind of not-in-between suspension and propulsion, a certain arrhythmia, the breakdown of the too-smooth historical trajectory of European domination’ (ibid., 10):

Jumping in the ditch, revolutionary tactic and dance, lingering in the space between the notes, descending into the depths of the music. James seems to assert that Toussaint might have acted had he jumped, like Dessalines, into the ditch of *Vodun* ritual and revolutionary movement, slipping into the darkness, into the musical breaks of the history he was making and by which he was enveloped, into those nodes of time, where it leaps forward, new rhythm and all. But that leap forward depends upon that sounding. And again, this is not the in between. (Moten 2017, 9)

Abyssal thought is enabled by thinking with abyssal socialities where, in work such as Moten’s, a particular Caribbean aesthetic

comes to the fore, acting like a kind of experimental metaphysical wit,<sup>5</sup> de-worlding relation. In abyssal work, particular readings of Caribbean creolisation enable a distinctive aesthetic where a 'phrasal disruption of the sentence is crucial... in excess of the

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<sup>5</sup> Metaphysical wit is a particular style of poetry, exemplified by John Donne and William Shakespeare, involving the extreme juxtaposition of similes and metaphors. As discussed elsewhere (see Pugh 2012), it works radically differently from analytical modes of philosophy which seek to develop more precise concepts and frameworks that delineate what it means to be human in the world. Working in the opposite direction, metaphysical wit, through juxtaposing unlikely similes and metaphors (for example, Donne's putting 'love' in unlikely relation to a 'flea'), unmoors the sedimented purchase and power of inherited concepts and words but without a clear sense of reconstruction and repair. For Derrida (Derrida 1974, 1), commenting upon the centrality of metaphor to what he calls the 'white mythology' of European philosophy, 'metaphor has always been defined as the trope of resemblance; not simply between signifier and signified, but between two signs, the one designating the other... which carries a pre-supposition of continuity' (ibid., 13). As Ralph Waldo Emerson (2000, 27) said of Shakespeare, metaphysical wit achieves the sensation of dissolving the veil of worldly delineations through how the poet 'tosses' words and concepts around like a 'bauble from hand to hand'. Thus, what Shakespeare called his 'art' in *The Tempest* engages the bewitching veil which Prospero's language casts upon Caliban and the world. As the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott said (1974, 4) of Shakespeare, it is therefore unsurprising that Shakespeare gave the closest figure to the Caribbean in his work, Caliban, the most powerful metaphysical wit, the most extreme or 'vulgar' juxtapositions of metaphors and similes. In doing so, for Walcott, Shakespeare creolised language as much as any other writer. By the end of the play, along Fanonian lines, having revealed the illusion of the veil of (Prospero's) European thought, Caliban simply walks away in resignation, signalling that his Blackness is 'structured by delusion' and that 'the reproduction of whiteness [is] at the heart of black suture' (Marriott 2021, 142; see also Harney and Moten (2021, 156) for what they call the 'calypsonian allure' of metaphysical wit).

sentence because it breaks up meaning's conditions of production' (ibid., 3). Thus, Moten's reading of James foregrounds how the world as abyss is neither properly 'inside' nor 'outside' the delineations of colonial world-making:

Titles like *The Invading Socialist Society* or *The Future in the Present* offer a glimpse of something powerful in James's phrasing: he puts forward for us a notion of an internal incursion that can be seen in relation to an interior force of exteriorization, moving toward a possibility coded as outside, an actuality inside. Inside and outside are, then, not only positions but forces... To insist, along with James, on this kind of fullness, on this Caribbeanness [foregrounds the] not in between. (Moten 2017, 12–13)

We see the radical import of an abyssal approach as coming into sharp relief in John Edgar Wideman's (2003) novel *The Island: Martinique*. Wideman explores how, in 1946, Martinicans voted to incorporate Martinique into metropolitan France rather than claim independence. This has been suggested to be a problem, the result being that 'The Martinican is in effect neither French nor West Indian, but a disembodied hybrid being unsure of its roots' (2003, 96). In the novel, Wideman's author as protagonist thinks otherwise:

Is the only choice for Martinique either/or – French or West Indian. Why remain trapped within a racialized paradigm of essentialist oppositions – black or white, European or African. Must 'hybrids' be 'disembodied' and 'unsure.' Doesn't creolization embody the certainty of uncertainty and improvise rootedness with spontaneous performance. (Wideman 2003, 97)

Undergirding this example is the understanding that the world of choice is premised upon a modernist ontology of subject and world. That is a world imagined to be constituted through binary divides, a world of separate entities, a world in which the human as subject then makes choices and decisions as to what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Abyssal work desediments this world of separations that enable the constitution of the human

as knowing/choosing subject. Understanding the world as abyss, the critique is of the violence that enables the process of making entities and of valuing in the first place. Abyssal thought locates the problem of choice in terms of what da Silva (2022, 49) calls modernity and colonialism's organising framework of 'necessity', which follows from adherence to the ontological pillars of Enlightenment thinking (namely, separability, determinacy and sequentiality); derived:

...from the metaphysical assumption that what can be comprehended shares in the same form (formality) or purpose (finality) as that which does the comprehending... what is not questioned is the presumption of unity – presented scientifically or historically – and the corresponding unifying concept or principle that captures it. (da Silva 2022, 179)

Wideman highlights this in the writing of the slave-trader Père Labat, disgusted at his role in the degrading trade and at France's dependence upon it. It is important that this dependence is ontological in the sense of the construction of France as civilised and as civiliser, the construction of a fictional imaginary, dependent on the 'fecklessness and ignorance of his [Labat's] brethren' who 'know nothing of Martinique' yet use this fantasy projection to conceal the reality of 'pagan France [which] festers in its own putrid juices' (2003, 106). Slavery and colonialism enabled Enlightenment imaginaries, imaginaries still being repeated, still constituting subjects and non-subjects five hundred years later, still enabling 'choices' and 'necessity' under the guise of humanitarian intervention (2003, 106; see also Pallister-Wilkins 2021).

Wideman suggests an alternative that we read as an abyssal approach. In the world as abyss, there is no possibility of seeing oneself in terms of a separated identity: 'Creole languages, according to prevailing linguistic theories, begin as pidgins – ephemeral, primitive, oral media of exchange created by people who don't understand one another's languages' (2003, 45). Drawn from different parts of Africa, those denied subjecthood shared little in the way of common identities, or modes of communication, so had to

improvise. This is fusion on the move, a universal that does not produce hierarchies or exclusions, which lacks identity and distinctions, that Glissant understands in terms of *opacity* (Harney and Moten 2013; Glissant 1997). Thus, it is creolisation's forgetting of relation, opposites and origins,<sup>6</sup> which is 'the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence' (Glissant 1997, 191; see also Walcott 1974), working against 'forced convertibility, forced translation, forced access' (Harney and Moten 2021, 114). Abyssal sociality holds off the world of modernity's ontological clarifications and the world of the subject reduced to choices and decisions 'in' this world.

### Abyssal Readings of the Caribbean

Abyssal readings of the Caribbean assemble a figurative positionality of critique that both problematises modernity's narrative of progress – for its disavowal of genocide, chattel slavery and expropriation – and provides a figure of political and historical practices that is read to exist in apposition or adjacently to the political as given. This figure is both less and more than the modernist subject of civil society. The *subject* is less in the sense of lacking a fixed identity and ontological security but, precisely because of this lack, is more than a modernist subject, in having the unasked for 'privilege' of 'double consciousness', an awareness that the world as presently constituted can never be considered a home. For the development of our argument in this book, we think it is important to emphasise the abyssal nature of Du Bois' (1903) conception of 'double consciousness', which we read not as a doubling of the consciousness of the rational subject from two distinct positionalities, such as 'African' and 'American', but rather that of a figurative assembling of a non-historical subject, neither 'African' nor 'American', without a stable identity. For Du Bois, it was this distancing or separation that enabled the 'veil' of ontology

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<sup>6</sup> We are indebted to our conversations with Fred Moten which enabled us to draw out this critical point.

to be pierced because this subject experienced life ‘behind the veil’, outside the framings of modernist binaries of subject/object, human/non-human (Du Bois 1903; Chandler 2022, 89).<sup>7</sup> This gives the abyssal paradigm, forged largely by authors in contemporary Black studies, an historical grounding, often turning to Caribbean modes of practice.

This is a figured positionality that not by choice has the potential to see out from behind the ‘veil’ of mystification that naturalises the products of the modernist imaginary. In doing so, in abyssal work, the understanding of this history rearticulates not just an alternative historical narrative but, more importantly, uses this rearticulation to desediment, to deconstruct and to hold off, the products of this process. The birth of modernity is transformed from being a positive history of ‘progress’, presupposing the metaphysical truths of a world available to universal ‘reason’, to being a narrative of colonial fiction carving out a ‘world’ through an ongoing orgy of violence, both instrumental and gratuitous.

For abyssal thought, as we learn from Caribbean writers such as Césaire (2013 [1956]) and Fanon (2021 [1952]) onwards, the ‘One World World’ of modernist metaphysics is inseparable from the violence that forged the modernist ontology of ‘human as subject’ and ‘world as object’. It is this understanding that figures the Caribbean as the focal point of the making of modernity that has been at the heart of the Black radical tradition from the work of W. E. B. Du Bois onwards. As Nahum Chandler notes, for Du Bois, this

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<sup>7</sup> We are aware that there are many ways of reading Du Bois’ articulation of ‘double consciousness’; we think that the abyssal framing is an important counter-position to the ‘additive’ approach of seeing ‘double consciousness’ as a literal doubling of subject positions, i.e., being ‘both (American) and (African)’. This view of holding multiple perspectives is common in traditional Du Bois scholarship. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his introduction to ‘The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois’ Oxford University Press series (Gates 2007, xv), states ‘just two is too cautious... Dr. Du Bois... Keep counting.’ The intimation being that the more subject positions that are available the better or the more scientific our understanding is.

line was understood as ‘tendentiously global’ in its bearing from its inception, ‘and thus not in any manner the underside or alternative side of the entirety of modern historicity, in its material, as well as ideological, being’ (Chandler 2022, xix). For the abyssal approach, it is vital that the making of this world, understood in terms of the economic and social processes that have unfolded since the fifteenth century, is inseparable from the ontological claims (made in philosophical, political, legal and scientific discourse) which are co-constitutive of this process.

Both the material structures and the ideational claims legitimising and reproducing them can be thereby understood to have emerged with the processual unfolding of the global colour line (Chandler 2022, 148). Thus, for the abyssal line of thought, the critique of modernity is not a largely socio-economic one of recompense for stolen lives and stolen labour (see for example, the work of Cedric Robinson 2000; and Eric Williams 2022 [1944]; 2012 [1942]), nor is it largely a moral indictment of the savageness and cruelty of capitalism and primitive accumulation by dispossession. At stake is the philosophical and political power of renarrativising modernity from the abyss, turning ideological self-understandings inside out and, more importantly, putting into question the modern imaginaries of separation and distinction across a fixed grid of time and space. As Paul Gilroy described it, constructing modernity figuratively, ‘from the slave’s point of view’, offers a rich ‘unique perspective on many of the key intellectual and political issues’ in understanding modernity (1993, 55), delegitimising its foundational assumptions. We would like to emphasise that at stake in contemporary approaches of the abyssal is the subject-centred imaginary of space and time as a fixed grid, as a segmented container holding entities in their relational becoming. The figure of the abyssal subject is thus fundamental to contemporary thought, not because of empirical continuities that can be traced through particular modes of practice apparent in the Caribbean, but because this figure has the capacity to disrupt, to desediment, the divisions assumed to be a natural ground for modernist thought.

For our understanding, a key example has been M. NourbeSe Philip's (2017) essay and play '*Dis Place – The Space Between*'. Philip's focus is the black female body, specifically the '*space that lies between the legs of the female and the effect of this space on the outer space – “place”*' (ibid., 242, italics in original). Philip begins by foregrounding the patriarchal violence at the heart of the colonial project,<sup>8</sup> for Philip, '*dis place*' is not only the 'fulcrum of the New World plantation' (ibid., 244), it is simultaneously always a 'subversive' space (ibid., 242). Philip powerfully signals this with reference to the 'Jamette... A loose woman... whose habitat is the street... A woman possessing both the space between her legs and the space around her, knowing her place. On the streets of Port of Spain.' (ibid., 244):

We could be starting our genealogy with Nanny of the Maroons... Women warriors taking their inner space into the outer space of battle and war, where men violate the inner space of women. Rum shop, cockfight, steel pan yard, street corner – only jamettes hanging about these places... Is what they doing in these places? Only servicing men? Signifying another reality? About the balance of the inner and outer space? (Philip 2017, 244)

For McKittrick (2000), the jamettes in Philip's essay and play signal the 'between-ness of black women's identities' (2000, 226), where 'gender positionality is rewritten and contested, the speaking

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<sup>8</sup> Philip argues (2017, 242, italics in original):

In patriarchal societies (the only societies we have known), the female body always presents a subversive threat. By far *the* most efficient management tool of women is the possibility of the uninvited and forceful invasion of the space between the legs – rape. Which is a constant. A threat to *the* space – the inner space between the legs. Even if never carried out, this threat continually and persistently inflects how the female reads the external language of place, or public place – the outer space. One woman raped is sufficient to vocalize and reify the threat of the outer space, and the need to protect this inner space means that the female always reads the outer space from a dichotomous position – safe/unsafe, prohibited/unprohibited.

body is unsilenced through the invention of S/Place' (2000, 228); 'space and place are stretched and (un)predictable. This process of historicisation and reinvention breaks the silence... invokes the unsilencing of black femininity – without dismissing histories of worldlessness and struggle' (2000, 229). What we learn from Philip and McKittrick is the importance not merely of deconstructing the Black female body, *but of the veil of being itself*. The figure of the abyssal subject enables moves of deconstruction, of desedimenting, or 'negativating' (da Silva 2022, 44) assumptions of entities with fixed locations and separations across time and space. As Philip says:

Does the inner space exist whole in any language? Other than 'threat' and 'fear'? What is the language of the inner space? Beyond the boundaries of control and fear. Is its language silence?... The outer space c(o)untouring and shaping the inner space; its language of silencing exerting pressure of threat and fear causing the inner space to collapse upon itself like a black (w)hole absorbing everything around it. (Philip 2017, 265)

This does not trouble the female body constructed through patriarchal, colonial space and time to reveal some more 'authentic' body behind it. Rather, it shows that the notion of obtainable 'being' rests on no firmer ground than modern and colonial world-making itself. Thus, for Philip: 'We peeling back layers of silencing and finding what "dis place" is really about. Silence. A different text lying there, a spirit world, an imaginative universe' (ibid., 267).

Philip's engagement with the jamette points us towards a para-ontological shift in understanding a space that is not accessible 'in' the world, by way of ontological clarification, but which is nevertheless 'of' the world.<sup>9</sup> Rather than an obtainable space of

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<sup>9</sup> We use the construction 'of' but not 'in' to highlight the distinction to the usual use of 'in' (as in physically in) but not 'of' (as in not sharing the same values) the world. Whereas the latter distinction – 'in but not of the world' – highlights a subjective or perspectival

opposition or negation (achieved through positing an alternative identity), we understand Philip's reading of the jamette along the lines of a non- or ante-ontological position – an 'imaginative universe' (ibid.) – where everything exists, actually, possibly, and virtually. As da Silva (2022, 291) clarifies:

...the particle *in-* remains in the field of knowledge and presumes that it has or can obtain what is needed for a definition, explanation, or interpretation to arise. The particle *non-*, in contrast, opens up a whole range of unknowable im/possibilities and virtualities as well as actualities; it is not in the order of the form (concept, category, definition) but in the register of matter as *pars* (the plenitude of existence), namely *corpus infinitum*.

'Corpus infinitum' is a powerful term for abyssal work. Reading it more conservatively, along the lines of Barad, as da Silva says, would point us towards 'a statement regarding the reality of something', namely, 'the im/possibility of stating that there is a *what* there' (ibid.). Thus, for Barad, the focus would be upon the oppressions and ethics of world-making cuts and delineations. This is whilst, for an abyssal approach, *corpus infinitum* refers to how the project of colonialism was 'activating' for an 'undetermination' (ibid.) (*ante-ontological*), which is important for the assembling of a figurative *subject* who refuses 'the fixities created by modern thinking and the context it has designed and justifies' (ibid., 293).

As we have been exploring in this chapter, an abyssal analytic is different from relational ontologies, or post- and more-than-human approaches, which, in their focus upon empirical

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difference, the difference we highlight here – 'of' but not 'in' the world highlights an ontological one. We also note that da Silva uses the construction 'of a being *of the world*' drawing upon Glissant's understanding of opacity (along the lines of Chapter 1 in this book, rather than in terms of rhizomic becoming) and Karen Barad's articulation of ontological indeterminacy, describing phenomena as being 'not in the world, but *of the world*' (da Silva 2022, 293, n.27, italics in original).

relations and interaction on the surface of appearances, necessarily disavow the socio-historical centrality of coloniality in the forging of the modern episteme, suggesting that we can correct or adjust the errors of abstract or reductionist modern and colonial reasoning and move on. For the abyssal analytic, abyssal socialities that problematise the 'givenness' of entities 'in' the world, emerge inseparably from modern and colonial world-making. Thus, in problematising the veil of colonial, patriarchal, hierarchical, space and time, Philip turns to:

A race! – of women mashing the ground – dancing and wining their all, any and everything and is Carnival time again and the jamettes coming back and pulling all those middle-class and upper-class women onto the streets; the only war now is between the Carnival bands and is so the women coming, flowing down the streets with the skimp and scant of their costumes, carrying their staffs – their *lingas* and they wining and wining round and round *displace* – African and Indian alike – *tout bagai* wining and wining – *yoni* round and round the *linga* of their Carnival staffs and they dancing through the streets – *oh, for a race of women!* – shaking their booty, doin their thing, their very own thing, jazzin it up, winin up and down the streets, parading their sexuality for two days – taking back the streets making them their own, as they spreading their joying up and down the streets of Port of Spain... It is the only time of the year that women – old, young, thin, fat, women women – can exhibit their sexuality without undue censure or fear under the benign gaze of OUR ROYAL WILL AND PLEASURE. (Philip 2017, 271, italics in original)

We see this reading of carnival as a figuring of a different kind of logic which possesses the 'inherent potentiality' (ibid., 267) to register how the 'reality' of being itself – produced through colonial, patriarchal, hierarchical, space and time – is based upon nothing more, nor less, than the violent reproduction of the global colour line. For the abyssal analytic, even as ontological insecurity is inescapably at the heart of world as abyss, this is not something

that can be wished away; an abyssal framing seeks to ‘claim, rather than disavow’ ontological insecurity (Moten 2016, 16). The figure of the subject of the abyss – of the Middle Passage, the hold of the slave ship, plantation slavery, creolisation, carnival, the jamaette, and of certain readings of key Caribbean texts, explored so far – is a product of displacement, of ontological insecurity. Thus, the task of abyssal work is not the construction of an elusive Caribbean identity, revolutionary subject, or project, but the ongoing *practice* of paraontological critique.

### **The Attraction of the Abyss for Contemporary Critique**

...what kinds of questions become unavoidable when we begin  
within the force of history rather than with a claim about ontology?  
(Povinelli 2021, 2)

Rather than reforming or improving the world of modernity and putting ideas of progress and futurity ‘back on track’, abyssal thought rejects the lure of ‘the world’ as constructed through a modernist imaginary. Any subject position that is ‘in’ the world necessarily becomes subordinated to discourses of salvage and survival. For relational, new materialist and more-than-human critiques of modernist thought, there is another ‘more real’ ontological reality, one that comes into consciousness because of a crisis, such as the Holocaust, climate change, or, more recently, the Coronavirus pandemic (for example, Bratton 2021; Latour 2021). This is nicely captured in the title of Benjamin Bratton’s book, *The Revenge of the Real* (2021). The Coronavirus crisis is seen to bring to the surface relationships and dependencies that were otherwise obscured by the abstractions of the modernist episteme with its imaginaries of autonomous subjects and universal forms of scientific reasoning. The bringing to the fore of these relational interdependencies is then held to enable a shift in thinking, returning humanity to the ‘real’ world where account can be taken of environmental costs for sustainable futures.

In contrast the key to abyssal thinking is a structured positionality that punctures the veil of modernist thinking, but not in ways that bring humanity back ‘Down to Earth’ to ‘reality’ as Bruno Latour argued (2018). Abyssal thought does not seek to substitute a ‘real’ ontology of entanglement for the reductionist imaginary of modernist distinctions. The abyssal call for ‘ending’ the world is a refusal and disruption, or a process of demonstrating the violence and arbitrariness of the incisions of the modernist imaginary, rather than any seeking to return to a richer world of inter-relation and co-dependency. The abyssal project seeks to end this ‘world’ and to problematise its ontological assumptions of ‘world’ and ‘subject’. One example, of what might be seen as an abyssal approach, is the powerful contraposition of a slave positionality and that of those granted rights of ‘civil society’ as articulated by Fredrick Douglass, in his 4<sup>th</sup> of July oration at Rochester in 1852:

What, to the American slave, is your 4<sup>th</sup> of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages... (cited in Du Bois 1998 [1935], 14)

Abyssal thought sees modernity as a charade, a world which is necessarily forced to disavow the violence and destructiveness of its founding and ongoing reproduction. From within modernity this charade cannot be seen for what it is, its violence and destructiveness is apparent but veiled, leaving only a self-understanding of modernity as progress; as wars, deaths and destruction are seen as unfortunate costs to be paid on the path to development and peace. This ‘veil’ inverts the logic at play, naturalising or reifying

the appearances of the world as inevitable ‘side-effects’ or ‘unintended consequences’. For abyssal thought, what is at stake is the task of refusal and deconstruction of this world as it appears. It is for this reason that W. E. B. Du Bois’ short story ‘The Comet’ (1920a) presents the supposed near total extinction of humanity as a moment of liberation for an individual considered to be less than fully ‘human’. In the story, a Black worker is forced down into a New York building’s vaults to undertake work ‘too dangerous for more valuable men’. When he emerges a comet has passed close to the Earth seemingly emitting deadly gasses which have killed everyone on the surface. Coming to terms with life after the ending of the world, the man falls in love with a white woman who has also survived; a relationship that would have been impossible otherwise. Swept up in their emotions the ending of the world appears as positive:

“Death, the leveler!” he muttered.

“And the revealer,” she whispered gently...

The ending of the world is a moment of emancipation not just from the psychological and material ‘shackles’ of racial division but also is ‘revealing’ of the unseen human potential that is routinely disavowed. The sad ending of the story is that the destruction is only localised to New York and the normality of racial domination is quickly restored, the man threatened with lynching after being spotted with the white woman.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, work in the abyssal framing could be seen as sharing some conceptual aspirations with critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School (Jeffries 2016; Buck-Morss 1977). Perhaps this approach is exemplified most clearly in Walter Benjamin’s final essay, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in which he argued that ‘There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin 2015, 248). He famously took Klee’s painting ‘Angelus Novus’, pictured as the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage

Abyssal thought works differently from approaches which seek to understand reality in other more ‘truthful’ or ‘scientific’ ways, in the line of Enlightenment thought from Kant onwards, affirming what exists. Instead, abyssal thought seeks to problematise assumptions that reason is capable of adequately grasping reality. As we have stressed, one of the most important analytical attractions of abyssal work is its paraontological focus. This places abyssal work in clear distinction to much contemporary critical work, because the relational and ontological turns necessarily suborn us to affirming the empirical appearances of the world as given. The rejection of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and its replacement with creative practices and the tracing of networked effects leaves little space for any possibility of critiquing the world that exists. At the same time, the search for alternative modes of access to the reality of the world, has been increasingly problematised for the instrumentalising and appropriation of non-Western knowledges, cosmologies, and cultural practices. It is becoming clear that attempting to ‘save’ or ‘salvage’ the world (just as much as attempts to imagine living on ‘in the ruins’ after the end of the world) can only maintain the imaginaries of both human and world, enabling new (if scaled back) practices of ‘productivism’ and a ‘palliative politics’ of acceptance and submission (Machado de Oliveira 2021). Not so with abyssal work.

Throughout the history of modernity, attempts to imagine the world otherwise have tended to divide between those that privilege the workings of nature or ‘life’ and those that privilege the inner workings of ‘history’. In modernity, dominated by Enlightenment conceptions of reason, it was the inner workings of ‘history’, in line with an anthropocentric reasoning, that allegedly guaranteed that there would be ‘progress’ despite the ‘bumps in the road’ of coloniality, genocide and now ecocidal global warming. As faith

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upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it... irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 2015, 249)

in modernity's promise wanes, ontological visions seek to replace the telos of anthropocentric 'history' with that of 'nature' or life itself; allegedly given an immanent meaning or purpose as a set of differentiating negatropic relational understandings enabling the world, imagined as 'posthuman', to have another chance at sustainability and recuperation.

The choice of two dominant ontological framings of the transcendental human subject of 'history' and the immanent interactive working of 'life' can appear to be that of Scylla and Charybdis. To be suborned by the demands of 'history' would be to subordinate intellectual and ethical freedom to the pragmatic needs of revolutionary class struggle, to the vanguard party or to a scientific and technical elite. To be suborned to the demands of nature, to 'what the planet is telling us' (Burke et al. 2016), or to nature's unappointed interpreters and guardians, would be equally authoritarian. It is little wonder that there is a demand for ethical, political alternatives which promise an escape from being suborned to the world as requiring saving at the cost of disavowal of the lives already sacrificed to its maintenance (Colebrook 2020).

Prior to contemporary approaches of the abyssal, critical theorists struggled with how to move beyond the 'veil' of empirical appearance, beyond the assumptions that the world as given was naturally there 'for us', rather than a social and material product and therefore possibly otherwise. A good example might be the theorists of the Frankfurt School, exemplified in the struggle of Adorno to ground his negative dialectics in the subject giving itself over to the object to break the hold of ideology over its own subjectivity (Adorno 2007; Buck-Morss 1977, 85). As Adorno argued, to break from the automatically socially produced '*consensus omnium*' (italics in original), 'to give the object its due... the subject would have to resist... and to free itself as a subject' (2007, 170–1).<sup>11</sup> As Adorno stated, seeing through the

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<sup>11</sup> However, it was difficult to find a way out of the structuring of the social world that barred this resistance:

The delusion that the transcendental subject is the Archimedian fixed point from which the world can be lifted out if its hinges – this

mystifications of a modernist ontology of being, the reification or naturalisation of products of contingent socio-historical processes, was not merely a matter of reasoning or subjective understanding; 'reification is an epiphenomenon... the trouble is with the conditions... not primarily with the people and with the way conditions appear to people' (2007, 190).

Adorno made the point that breaking from the subject position of a being 'in' the world is not straightforward, this was because our being in the world appears to be natural to us. So natural that, for example, uniting as a collective human race to fight climate change seems to be non-negotiable. To use this example then, belief in a collective emergency would raise questions about any relative lack of engagement in environmental activism (Bell and Bevan 2021; Taylor 1993). Assumptions of a natural consensus would shape a response to this by addressing problems of presentation and access to these movements. This framing, that assumes a shared set of interests and investments, in saving 'the world', carries a high moral charge, naturalising the assertions of a 'One World World' (Law 2015). The questioning of this assumption is not easy from within this 'world'. However, a break from this '*consensus omnium*' is considerably easier (and some would argue essential) if one's everyday lived experience undermines this assumption of a worldly positionality.

The abyssal framing does not rely on a subject capable of unmaking itself through its own volition (a sort of super transcendental subject). Neither does it rely on tropes of victimhood and vulnerability, often associated with a diminished subjectivity, and alleged to be potentially able to escape or exceed capitalist capture, where weakness 'magically' becomes a source of power (Noys 2012, 17). Rather, the abyssal subject is 'of' but not 'in' the world (see footnote 9 above). Abyssal critique operates without a subject essentialised as having futural properties or capabilities but also lacks any

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delusion, purely in itself, is indeed hard to overcome altogether by subjective analysis. For contained in this delusion, and not to be extracted from the forms of cogitative mediation, is the truth that society comes before the individual consciousness and before all its experience. (Adorno 2007, 181)

alternative transcendental power. Critique is based precisely upon a figurative abyssal positionality that lacks an ontological standing beyond the violence of the abyssal cut that grounds modernity. It is this special property of the abyssal figure, without grounds or identity, that paradoxically grounds and gives immense historical and ethical force to abyssal critique. Because this critique is without ground, without telos or goals, it is necessarily in non-relation to the world of being (of fixed entities and essences).

Elizabeth Povinelli (2021), an author we learn much from, argues that critique should be located within ‘the force of history’. She writes: ‘To begin with an ontological claim purges Western thought of its colonial history, namely, the historical conditions that give rise to such thought’s modern methodological and epistemological maneuvers’ (2021, 16). However, while the target of her critique, the narrow empiricism and the abstract, timeless, metaphysical assumptions of new materialist and relational ontology, is an important one, the alternative she offers is perhaps less clear. What does it mean for critique to be located within ‘the force of history’? The question of how it might be possible to develop a situated positionality of critique in our period of a crisis of modernist politics is one that we feel is not easy to resolve.

In many ways, similar questions of historical consciousness and of ontology were at the heart of disagreements between members and associates of the Frankfurt School in the wake of the collapse of communist and socialist opposition to war and fascism in the 1930s and 1940s (this point is also inferred in the work of Paul Gilroy, for example, 1993, 55). Some, like György Lukács and (at times under the influence of Brecht) Walter Benjamin, grounded critique on a modernist ontology, putting faith in a metaphysical understanding of history as progress, expressed by the proletariat as the revolutionary class (Buck-Morss 1977). For others, such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, critique had to be grounded independently of any ontology of a transcendental subject or process (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). However, the problem with grounding critique independently of any subject of history is that the ‘force of history’ easily becomes just as abstract and timeless as metaphysical approaches. How do we square this circle?

It is our understanding that figuring the world abyssally – engaging aspects of the historical experience of the Caribbean as a forcing ground for modernity, materially and ideationally – is one way of figuring a positionality of critique from ‘within the force of history’. This moves us beyond the choices of essentialising an historical subject as an expression of an immanent telos, or a timeless and ahistorical metaphysical alternative without a subject of political possibility. It does this through the assembling of a structural position of a (barred) *subject* excluded from the world of modernity and thus lacking in ontological security or ground from which to place itself in relation to others politically. This is a subject which is ‘of’ the world and excluded from being ‘in’ the world, materially and ideationally. A liminal subject.<sup>12</sup> We suggest that this *subject* appears to meet the requirements of the contemporary moment in providing a groundless-ground for thoroughgoing critique and for the rejection of the lure of ‘the world’.

The abyssal *subject* and abyssal sociality enable a grounding of critique that is missing in philosophical approaches that could be construed to pursue similar ‘world-ending’ aspirations. Of these, perhaps the thinker most closely associated with the desire to reject the ontological ‘decisions’ of modernist thought is François Laruelle. Abyssal approaches, we argue, only appear to align with the non-philosophy of Laruelle (2017), influential in Western critical

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<sup>12</sup> Glissant (1997, 7) writes that the Caribbean person figuratively ‘lies inside and outside of the abyss’. On the one hand, ‘inside’ the abyss, through how: ‘Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies’ (1977, 8). On the other hand, they simultaneously live ‘outside’ the abyss, living through the ongoing violence of the modern and colonial project, its carving out of the human and the world. For Glissant, the choice should be obvious: ‘We take sides in this game of the world’ (ibid., 8), where the ‘experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of change’ (ibid., 8). As with the ‘abyssal’ work we engage throughout, this statement completely inverts the stakes of a metaphysics of liberation.

thought and increasingly discussed in relation to contemporary Black studies (Culp 2021; Smith 2016; Barber 2016; Dubilet 2021). For Laruelle (1991, 4), the Real, or what he sometimes calls the One, radically marks what is excluded from the world and cannot be obtained in the world of ontological clarifications; it is ‘without opposite: even light, which tries to turn it into its opposite, fails in the face of the rigor of its secret’. Thus, the Real is an irreducibly opacity, what Laruelle (1991, 1) calls ‘the black universe’.

As Alex Dubilet argues (2021), the weakness of Laruelle’s approach is that it is not grounded *enough* in the world; that is, in the real historical forces which enable a positionality of radical critique. As Dubilet says, in not paying attention to the grounding forces of history, Laruelle gives too much ‘autonomy to radical immanence’ (ibid., 66) which has ‘a certain independence from the world’ (ibid., 66). Dubilet continues:

...pace Laruelle, [there is a need] to render immanence neither as autonomous nor as heteronomous, but to see it as carrying a force of the antinomian or even the antenomial: that is, a force that precedes while refusing the imposition of the nomos of the world. In this way, it eschews the names and normativity of the world while also avoiding becoming a reactive, derivative force against the asserted primacy of nomos, an assertion whose persistent lie it repudiates. It is, as an index of the real in rebellion against the world, what puts the nomos in unending suspension... It indexes nameless, dispossessed life in common that anamorphically exhibits the world to be, in Moten’s words, ‘the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life.’ (Dubilet 2021, 67)

For Dubilet, it is in paying attention to the force of history, the historical (re)making of the world, that we get to the ‘immanent abyssal ground’ (ibid., 71). We therefore think that Benítez-Rojo’s (2001) argument (see Chapters 1 and 2), that the ‘repeating island’ expands outwards into the world beyond the cartographically defined Caribbean, is important for rethinking the world as abyss. States like South Carolina were founded in the mid-to-late

1600s by planters and slave owners from Barbados who wanted more land for cattle (Allison 2013). Managed by slaves who they brought from Barbados to South Carolina, perhaps making these slaves the first ‘cowboys’ (Allison 2013), the cattle provided meat to Caribbean islands with scarce land resources that had already been given over to monoculture, such as sugar production.

The Caribbean thus provides an historical grounding which enables the figurative assembling of an abyssal *subject*. This is illustrated in R. A. Judy’s (2020) *Sentient Flesh*, where he discusses the ‘Buzzard Lope’ dance, undertaken by slaves, variously in the Carolinas, Virginia, and the Georgia Sea Islands. The earliest ethnological record of Buzzard Lope, or ‘shout’, is found in the Gullah-speakers of the Georgia Sea Islands. Participants move around a circle ‘shuffling and stomping their feet, clapping and pattin’ (Judy 2020, 219). ‘At the centre of the shout ring, a solo dancer mimics the movements of a buzzard loping around an object in the center of the circle, usually a handkerchief, representing carrion’ (Judy 2020, 219). Centrally, for Judy (2020, 318, italics in original), this is an act of ‘*para-semiosis*’, where the pattin’ movement against the flesh of the dancers engenders a flight from the body as the property of slavery (see also, Bennett 2020). For Judy:

...flesh *represents* nothing but *signifies* everything, including an unassimilated semiosis, not fully digested into the anthropology of ‘Man’, which can only imagine the world as constituted in the process of production, whether called that or called providence, or nature, over which Man is destined to acquire mastery. (Judy 2020, 250)

Thus, the dance serves to ‘energize a de-fetishizing de-commoditizing semiosis of the flesh. The flesh is not beaten... and contorted in dance to sacrifice for the gods, or even the ancestors, who are always present. Rather, it is worked in semiotic contestation’ (Judy 2020, 245). We read an abyssal approach as developing a figurative positionality which desediments the plot lines of ‘the capitalist sociopolitical economy within which it is circumscribed, articulating

a radical sociality' (Judy 2020, 249).<sup>13</sup> For abyssal work the world of relations, at both the level of the ontic and ontological, is the problem, rather than holding the capacity to offer solutions. Whereas an influential relational ontology, such as Donna Haraway's (2006; 2016), exists in a temporality of becoming through refinement and attunement to literal relations in the world (see also Ramírez-D'Oleo 2023), the Buzzard Lope dancers are lost in, deepen, or expand the possibility for paraontological critique on the basis of a critical positionality which can be read as being 'of' but not 'in' the world. Abyssal work 'does not privilege relations' (da Silva 2022, 155), but rather, in what we draw out as R. A. Judy's abyssal reading of the Buzzard Lope, the flesh and the body are figuratively held in what da Silva (2016) frames as a kind of quantum suspension.

## Conclusion

This chapter has set out the abyssal analytic as a rethinking of the world as abyss, harbouring an abyssal subject and abyssal socialities with the capacity to problematise the human and the world, but without suggesting an alternative, obtainable world beyond. It has done this through engaging contemporary critical work which draws upon specific readings of Caribbean thought and

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<sup>13</sup> As Judy (2020, 243, italics in original) says, all the 'formal resemblance of the Buzzard Lope to the Opete performed in Dutch Guiana and the "John Canoe" in Cuba strongly suggests a common formation originating in the sacrifice rituals of the vulture determined by the *télos* of the cosmology of the Ashanti, Dahomey, and Fanti peoples. Nevertheless, by circumstantial necessity, its performance in the Georgia Sea Islands, Virginia, and the Carolinas uproots the form from its fundamental purpose without effacing the common formal elementals... Formal innovation becomes determinate, indeed becomes the purpose of the performance, in which the Buzzard Lope, along with its patten', energizes a semiosis of the flesh that not only de-commoditizes it, but makes manifest the conventionality of the process that fetishizes the commodity of something of objective value.'

modes of practice, survival, displacement and resistance, to produce a quite distinct critique of modernity. As we have seen, the abyssal framing shares aspects of mainstream contemporary critical thought in its rejection of the modern subject and the abstract and reductionist assumptions of the modern episteme. However, there are three points that we wish to highlight in conclusion to this chapter, which will be further developed in the next chapter. First, is the figuring of an abyssal positionally, as a vantage point for critique, one that enables a certain 'double consciousness' or the under 'privilege' of a second sight (Du Bois 1903; Chandler 2014). Second, is the understanding that the world and its bifurcation, in terms of the global colour line, is inextricable from the modernist imaginary, and that this world is not over but ongoing. Third, the appreciation that rethinking the world as abyss does not seek to imagine or constitute a distinct or separate space, under or other to modernity, but rather seeks to disrupt or desediment this world's underlying assumptions.



## CHAPTER 3

# Hold Time

### Introduction

The previous chapters have drawn out how abyssal thought is neither based upon metaphysical and timeless assumptions nor subordinated to the world as given, fixed in a universal grid of time and space. Spatially and temporally, abyssal work problematises the world as a product of violent cuts and divisions, thus the Caribbean tends not to be in a flat space as a marginal area, between Africa and America, but ontologically viewed as the disavowed axis or fulcrum of the (un)making of the world (Philip 1989; Chandler 2014; Glissant 1997). In a similar vein, readings of particular modes of abyssal sociality, located within the Caribbean, often work to clarify the production of the world as a process of ongoing violence and racialisation. Thought derived from particular imaginaries of the Caribbean provides us with the reading of an abyssal line in contemporary critical thought, viewing the world other than through a modernist imaginary, without the world of entities and laws. For abyssal thought, particular Caribbean modes of practice are read as holding the fixed grids of space

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and time of modernity in suspension and desedimenting them, enabling a different understanding of temporality to emerge.

As we draw out in this chapter, this can be grasped as a ‘non-temporality’ – *suspended time, a time of refusal*. The abyssal time of the hold does not offer an alternative historical narrative, but rather a grounded critique of historical narrativisation itself, a problematisation of the reductionist and deterministic framings of time in historical terms. We undertake this analysis in four sections, which enable further clarification of the abyssal analytic delineated in this book. The first emphasises that the problem for an abyssal framing is not the interpretation of the Caribbean within a linear temporality, but rather the construction of linear time through the material and ontological violence of chattel slavery and racial capitalism. The second section develops the abyssal approach through exploring how the figure of the abyssal subject suspends modern world-making’s fixed grids of time and space. The third section turns to ‘the temporality of the hold’, where abyssal socialities hold the violent production of the materiality of the world. The conclusion emphasises the importance of ‘hold time’ and stresses the contemporary appeal of abyssal work.

### The Making of Linear Temporality

Colonial temporalities of progress have a linear conception of time, for Kant and the Enlightenment, understood as a construction of the transcendental subject, and later, for Hegel, as a literal and objective developmental movement through time and space. For the abyssal framing we articulate here, centring upon the Caribbean, this conception of time, and attempts to decouple from it, come into sharp relief. Kerry-Jane Wallart’s (2019) insightful commentary on Trinidadian theorist Dionne Brand’s (2011) *A Map to the Door of No Return* highlights how the Middle Passage and the African diaspora act as a temporal hold, delinked from a Western cannon, in fact, ‘the aim is to de-link any discursivity’ (2019, 82). In an abyssal framing, modernity and, with it, linear temporality, is figured as emerging through the Middle Passage and the Plantation as a form of organising and disciplining. There could be no

linear time without ‘the slave ship’ invention and manufacture of the Negro, those ‘confined to the night of the hold and refused the world’ (Ferdinand 2022, 245). According to Ferdinand:

Through these same routes, the slave ship created the illusions that the First Peoples were absent from the Americas, produced Africa’s ignorance, and established Europe’s solipsism. From colonization, trafficking, and slavery to contemporary forms of racism, passing through exhibitions of human zoos and imperial expansions, modernity has developed itself in the streets, in the political arenas, as well as in the universities and the museums, on the basis of relentless contempt for racialized men and women... (Ferdinand 2022, 245)

While clock time, or ways of understanding time as continuous, existed prior to the modern age, understanding time as spatial and differentiated in a linear way was a product of the colonial making of the world (Nanni 2012). This necessitated and enabled difference to be articulated in terms of temporal stages of development rather than in the terminology of Christian and non-Christian. Race, as the demarcation of a biologically distinct population, is thereby a modern invention, strongly associated with the Middle Passage and the Caribbean, as the epicentre of modernity (Ibrahim 2021) and with the secular approach to the world itself (see Wynter 1995; 2003). As Terence Keel argues, linear time, with its typologies of racial distinction, was not originally based on Darwinian evolution but on an understanding of a telos in nature that unfolded according to a predetermined design (2018, 160 n.103). This ‘secular creationism’ enabled racialised understandings to act as a ‘secular form of theology’ (2018, 13).

The racialised understanding of linear time was cohered through the violence of coloniality and racial capitalism, with the assumption of a universal hierarchy of species fixity and inherent order ‘through a predetermined hierarchy of stages, with Europeans at the top of the evolutionary chain’ (Keel 2018, 124). In this framework:

...each race was thought to develop according to its own pace, with the so-called savage races depicting how the ‘white race’s

ancestors lived in prehistoric times.’ Modern ‘primitives’ became, in effect, stand-ins for the missing link between animals and humans sought by evolutionists. (Keel 2018, 124)

Linear time, the time of modernist ‘progress’ or of ‘development’ cannot be disentangled from discourses of the human in which Black and Indigenous peoples are inevitably assumed to be expendable and to be marked for extinction. The linear time of modernist ontology places the Middle Passage, chattel slavery and Indigenous dispossession in the past, as unfortunate episodes in the positive imaginary of the futural progress of Man. But, for abyssal thought, time understood as a linear telos of progress, essential for the construction of the Kantian transcendental subject, is inextricable from its grounding in (ongoing) colonial violence. Abyssal time is therefore ‘hold time’, as we learn from Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* (2016). Thus, the time of chattel slavery, of the Middle Passage, of the carving out of the world of modernity, is not over: racialising violence is co-constitutive with this ontology of the transcendental subject and world as object. In the world as abyss, there can be no moving on from or beyond modernity, its temporal and spatial fixities, as if it were merely a matter of mistaken ideas or understandings. The problem is not the separation of the human from the world and the inability to recognise our entangled encounters of becoming; we cannot just return the human to the world if we recognise that this world itself is an ontological construct of violence, division, and exclusion.

For an abyssal framing, the modern world-making project, which had the Caribbean at the centre, is an ongoing one. The distinctive attributes of the figurative abyssal subject that lacks full legitimacy and standing might be understood via the socio-historical reproduction of uneven relations of development, both internally to economies across the world, and as structured via changing global relations of capitalist production and trade. Du Bois’ historical study of the failure of reconstruction in the United States and the reproduction of racial inequalities is a seminal work in this area (1998 [1935]), while a more contemporary analysis of the failure of post-emancipation claims of full citizenship and

inclusion can be found in Saidiya Hartman's work (1997). However, we are keen to stress that the abyssal paradigm, as we read it, is not based upon a critique of liberal understandings of equality and inclusion, but how these processes of historical relational inequity result in alternative modes of practice. We emphasise that these are drawn out figuratively, as abyssal socialities, rather than as obtainable or available to ontological partitions. It is in foregrounding particular Caribbean modes of practice that the region becomes centred in and important for abyssal work concerned with the 'time of the hold'. Here, the dissolution of fixed grids of space and time, and hierarchical, patriarchal, and, linear pathways of 'progress', comes into view.

### The Subject Suspended in the Abyss

We see this attention to hold time as 'suspended in time' (Philip 2021, 124) in one of the most powerful poems about racial bifurcation in the making of the modern world – Philip's (2008) *Zong!: As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*. About slave traders who drowned slaves to claim the insurance, the poem tells the story of how colonial world-making produces what we read as an abyssal subject '[w]ithout a history, name, or culture. In life but without life. Without life in life – with a story that cannot but must be told' (2008, 196). Philip is driven by these central questions:

What did, in fact, happen on the *Zong*? Can we, some two hundred years later, ever really know? Should we? These are the questions I confront. Although presented with the 'complete' text of the case, the reader does not ever know it, since the complete story does not exist. It never did. All that remains are the legal texts and documents of those who were themselves intimately connected to, and involved in, a system that permitted the murder of the Africans on board the *Zong*. (Philip 2008, 196)

Thus, writing the poems of *Zong!* in the colonial language of English, Philip (ibid., 195) says '[w]ithin the boundaries established by the words and their meanings there are silences; within each

silence is the poem.' She presses the point about the silence of the drowned slaves, 'once you're underwater there is no retrieval... The gravestone or tombstone marks the spot of interment, whether of ashes or the body. What marks the spot of subaquatic death?' (ibid., 201). Thus, the plottings and chartings of fixed grids of colonial space are desedimented by the unlocatable opacity of the figurative subject of the abyss, where, as we have drawn out earlier in this book, inhabiting an abyssal geography therefore means to inhabit zones of non-spatiality as well. We regard Philip's work as giving an important stress to this entanglement, whereby the figurative abyssal subject, and the coming about of the abyssal geography they inhabit, is not the 'underside' of colonial world-making but intrinsic to it. What makes it possible to draw an abyssal line of thought from *Zong!* is that it does not seek to re-ascribe or prescribe an alternative language, sense of ontological security or spatiality, onto the drowned subjects of the abyss. Rather than posing an ontology which could be recuperated, what is foregrounded is the loss of narrative and the dissolving of space. The poems are not 'a recombinant narrative', but, as Philip insists, 'a recombinant antinarrative. The story that can't ever be told' (ibid., 204).

We can think of *Zong!* as a poetics of the world as abyss. Thus, as Philip says, '*Zong!* is 'hautological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present. And only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it's not told – literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space' (ibid., 201). Here, the legacy of the Middle Passage, chattel slavery and the Plantation is one of fragmentation, suspension and loss of a single sense of identity.

This sense of loss of ontological security is captured well in Saidiya Hartman's autobiographical work *Lose Your Mother* (2007), where she makes a number of visits to Ghana and the slave forts along the coast. In her book, the sense of suspension is palpable, where it is not possible to recover a past, to discover kin, only to meet strangers (2007, 7). As Hartman states, the past is not over (2007, 18), but it is not temporally marked because death was just a 'by-product' of the workings of the trade, 'collateral damage', rather than an intention or goal (2007, 31). While the past is

inaccessible the future also appears to be closed off as dreams of racial equality and postcolonial independence have failed to deliver (2007, 39–41; 172). Suspension means that ‘The slave is always the stranger who resides in one place and belongs to another. The slave is always the one missing from home’ (2007, 87). For Hartman ‘there can be no going back’, loss is ontological: ‘Loss remakes you’ (2007, 100). Realising this means affirming the ‘time of the hold’, of suspension: ‘Those disbelieving in the promise and refusing to make the pledge have no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one’s existence’ (2007, 100).<sup>1</sup>

We stress that the radical import of abyssal thought has significant consequences for the broader stakes of critique. For once the reified category of race is problematised, an abyssal approach suggests that all other cuts and distinctions are also put at risk; as powerfully analysed in Chandler’s reading of Du Bois, which:

...tracks a rift that opens within any philosophical premise on the question of essence... This condition or difficulty of thought... points toward... a general question of the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, abyssal work is characterised by what Benítez-Rojo (2021, 23) calls a ‘contrapunctual discourse’, which we also understand as distinguishing Harney and Moten’s (2019) reading of Caribbean marronage. For Harney and Moten, colonial world-making operates according to the logistics of the ‘straight line’ (2021, 19), through surveillance strategies of rigid hierarchies, fixed grids of space and time. Their understanding of marronage does not however offer us an alternative, available, understanding of ‘being’, space and time, to that of colonial reasoning (as in the work of Roberts 2015 and Ferdinand 2022). Rather, it foregrounds how those reduced to non-being, gathering in marronage, ‘improvise’ a ‘kink’ (ibid., 19) in colonial spatialities and temporalities. ‘And what is a collection of kinks, or a collective of kinks, if not a dread, or a jam?’ (ibid., 19). In Harney and Moten’s (2021) reading, staying *with* the ontological lack and opacity of non-being in marronage – with this ‘unwatchable place we make when we watch with one another, having refused to watch one another’ (ibid., 20) – is a kind of ‘non-temporality’ and ‘non-spatiality’, functioning as a ‘block’ that unblocks (ibid., 19–20), holding off the surveillance logistics of colonial world-making.

of the ground of being: first, of something like a ‘Negro,’ but then, also, of something like a ‘human,’ and all the borders that seem to appear under that heading (of the ‘animal,’ for example, or of sexual difference, or even of ‘gender’), and perhaps beyond... (Chandler 2014, 52)

This is precisely what we read to be at stake in the time of the hold: the world itself. We learn from scholars like Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021) that the time of the hold is not productive of alternative spatial and temporal relations, but a time of non-temporality and non-spatiality. An undifferentiating expanse, ‘*corpus infinitum*’ (Bradley and da Silva 2021), which in dissolving colonialism’s defined temporal and spatial pathways ‘exceeds whatever can be apprehended as form, as object or data’ (da Silva 2021, 5). The time of the hold is not a threat to the world because it adds new relations and entities to the world, but precisely because it is *subtractive*, de-worlding the ontological pillars of modern world-making.

The non-temporality and non-spatiality of hold time is registered effectively in da Silva’s (2016) article ‘Difference Without Separability’ as a kind of elementary quantum entanglement; rejecting the linear distinctions of modernity’s three ontological pillars, which produced its temporal and spatial imaginaries, of separability, determinacy and sequentiality:

Without *separability*, knowing and thinking can no longer be reduced to *determinacy* in the Cartesian distinction of mind/body (in which the latter has the power of determination) or the Kantian formal reduction of knowing to a kind of efficient causality. Without *separability*, *sequentiality* (Hegel’s onto-epistemological pillar) can no longer account for the many ways in which humans exist in the world, because self-determination has a very limited region (spacetime) for its operation. When nonlocality guides our imaging of the universe, difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable *estrangement*, but the expression of an elementary *entanglement*. That is, when the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain

condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant. (2016, 65, italics in original)

This understanding of ‘difference without separability’ (also referred to in Chapter 2) is enabling for an abyssal framing because it allows us to think about ‘hold time’ as both registering the world-founding violence of, and dissolving, modernity’s fixed grids of space and time and linear telos of progress. Abyssal work does not do this by channelling an alternative ethics or duty of care founded upon the revelation of a new or alternative grounding for obtainable entities-in-relation. Rather, it is through the ‘groundless ground’ of the figurative abyssal ~~subject~~ in abyssal sociality, that abyssal work deconstructs and holds off the ontological foundations of the world. As Bradley and da Silva (2021) say:

The total exposure of blackness both enables and extinguishes the force of the modern ethical program, insofar as the disruptive capacity of blackness is a quest(ion) toward the end of the world. Blackness is a threat to sense, a radical questioning of what comes to be brought under the (terms of the) ‘common.’ If the ordered world secures meaning because it is supposed to be knowable, and only by Man, if that world is all the common can comprehend, then blackness (re)turns existence to the expanse: in the wreckage of spacetime, *corpus infinitum*.

This ‘abyssal’ approach of drawing upon the force of history for the figurative production of an abyssal ~~subject~~ that avoids the traps both of transcendental abstraction and of narrow empiricism, affirming the world as it appears, is, for us, illustrated clearly in Denise Ferreira da Silva’s monograph *Unpayable Debt* (2022). The violence and destructiveness of the world that is in full view, apparent but veiled as natural or necessary, da Silva reads in the terminology of the ‘unpayable debt’ that structures the bifurcated world of the global colour line and reifies the reproduction of unequal outcomes. We think that da Silva’s work is an important demonstration of the mobility and critical purchase of the figure

which we analyse in this book in terms of the abyssal subject. We justify this observation in reference to da Silva's powerful use of Octavia Butler's 'time travel' novel<sup>2</sup> *Kindred* (2018, first published in 1979), in which the protagonist, Dana, experiences herself as composed both in mid-1970s Los Angeles and in a slaveholder's estate in early 1800s Maryland. We think that this is an important illustration of an abyssal approach which, as we have stressed throughout, is a figurative reading, rather than somehow determined by the material itself, whether this material is understood as historical, experiential, or fictional. This becomes clear when we consider the structuring of *Unpayable Debt* in relation to other readings of Butler's *Kindred*, such as Michelle Wright's.

Wright (2015) critically engages with *Kindred*, in her work, on the grounds that the novel reproduces a linear temporality. In Wright's reading, the key protagonist, Dana, understands herself via a linear logic, tracing herself back into the past via a direct line of descent from an act of rape by the slave owner. Thereby becoming complicit in reproducing discourses of victimhood and inferiority: '...the whole concept of culpability exists only through the Middle Passage epistemology because of the origin it chooses as well as the cause-and-effect logic that drives its motion forward' (Wright 2015, 85). In distinction, da Silva (2022) suggests that Dana is *suspended* in time, rather than a linear or determined product of history. Suspension is key to the abyssal problematic, from the perspective of the abyssal subject there can be no assumption of a background of linear temporality. From behind the veil, from the abyss, it becomes clear that linear temporality, with its presuppositions of pre-existing entities, of human subjects and the world as object, can only exist for those 'in' the world, not merely 'of' it.

As da Silva explains, her figurative assemblage of 'the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*' (2022, 26–28) works as a

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<sup>2</sup> We put quotes around time travel as, for da Silva, and as we explore in more detail later in this chapter, these zones of experience are so intimately and immediately connected that it would make more sense to argue: 'Dana never moves at all' (2022, 300).

‘poetical tool, that is, a reading device, which has been designed to take apart that which is a condition of possibility for the text, discourse and the liberal (white European cisheteropatriachal male) position of domination’ (2022, 27, n. 5). The starting positionality of the abyssal ~~subject~~ is crucial in order to emphasise that the problem does not lie with a liberal ontology of exclusion or discrimination, in which subjecthood and world are the unquestioned framing of the discussion. As da Silva states, this figure, ‘the body of the captive person figuratively does not refer to the excluded (which gives coherence to) or the constitutive outside (which delimits the borders) of the Subject’ (2022, 79). The act of violence is not taking place ‘in’ the world, but in the making of the world:

Owner and slave do not enter the scene as equals with attributes that are the negation of the other’s similar attributes... When positioned against each other, as persons (humans) we find that the Slave’s predicate is no-liberty and the Owner’s is liberty... Met with juridical force (as title/state) and physical force (as property/slave owner), the Slave has no ethical position, no stand before the figure of Humanity. (da Silva 2022, 80)

We understand da Silva’s figurative device as one that seeks to reveal the totalising violence which is the ontological ground for the ‘condition of possibility’ for domination. The figurative device unmakes the disciplinary domains through which it is legitimised, ‘the symbolic and juridical and the ethical and economic’ (2022, 36). It is through this figurative tool of ‘negativation’ that da Silva articulates her project, which is:

Explicitly presented as a disruption of the infrastructure of post-Enlightenment thinking (the principle of identity, the thesis of necessity, as well as the onto-epistemological descriptors and pillars these constitute), its principal capacity is to expose... describe, and unsettle this arrangement, and to articulate an invitation to an image of existence that is not supported by force of necessity or the mechanisms of symbolic and total violence it sustains. (da Silva 2022, 36–37)

We suggest that as the abyssal approach becomes more central in contemporary critical thought, the figurative assembling of such a structured positionality becomes more mobile, grounding a ~~subject~~ that is 'of' but not 'in' the world. It is this figuration which is so important to the distinction Moten stresses, between an abyssal ~~subject~~ positionality and the experience of being necessarily 'in' the world:

The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks (thereby placing certain formulations regarding non/relationality and non/communicability on a different footing and under a certain pressure) but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being. (Moten 2013, 749–50)

### The Temporality of the Hold

Christina Sharpe articulates 'hold time' in a number of important ways in her influential book *In the Wake* (2016). The wake is the aftermath of slavery and the Plantation: the afterlife of the abyss opened up by modern and colonial world-making, 'the ongoing disaster of the ruptures of chattel slavery' (2016, 5). It is this disaster that provides the structure, the veil, of Black life: 'the larger antiblack world that structured all of our lives' (2016, 4). The rupture of the modern ontology, of linear temporality, is the ground of 'a past that is not past' (2016, 13). Drawing upon *Zong!* in an interview with Selamawit Terrefe, Sharpe makes the point that the materiality of the world is parasitical on Black life itself.

CS: ...in thinking about the Zong I've also been trying to work some with the science of wakes. If something or someone is thrown or jumped overboard or if someone drowns and their body is not recovered that body won't last long in the water. And you will most likely not recover the bones. A colleague who teaches fluid dynamics told me about residence time, which is the amount of time that the nutrients exist in the water. So I've been thinking about residence time, those Africans thrown, jumped

overboard who, as their bodies broke down into various components, like sodium from their blood, are with us still in residence time. I've been trying to think through those things in terms of how we understand the conditions and duration of Black suffering. ST: It's not only duration, though, it seems as though it's the sustenance—

CS: Precisely!

ST: Of the world as we know it. Not just on the ontological or psychic level, but at the—

CS and ST: Material

ST: Yes, which could also be the reason why there's such an unconscious resistance to dealing with the ethics of Black suffering. (Terrefe 2016)

Thus, Sharpe is arguing that the materiality of the world holds Black life and Black death within its very being. The ongoing racialisation of the global colour line is ontologically inseparable from the materiality of the world itself. This is articulated via her concepts which attempt to capture this ongoingness: 'the wake, the ship, the hold and the weather' (Sharpe 2016, 16). As Ruiz and Vourloumis argue, deploying Sharpe's concept of 'wake work' (2021, 131): 'Being in the wake is at once a history and an ongoing presence of violence, death, and dispossession.' Thus, wake work is a practical question, 'What does it mean to *inhabit* that Fanonian "zone of non-Being"?' (Sharpe 2016, 20). For Sharpe, as for da Silva and Bradley above, the approach would be that 'rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*... of ontological negation', and how 'literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival' (2016, 14).

When authors, such as Sharpe, think with 'hold time', it is often the Caribbean that is drawn upon. Thus, Sharpe writes that *In the Wake* is inspired by:

...forms of Black expressive culture (like the works of poets and poet-novelists M. NorbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, and Kamau Brathwaite) that do not seek to explain or resolve the question

of this exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity. (Sharpe 2016, 14)

To illustrate her point Sharpe (2016, 34) makes a particular reading of Brathwaite's poem 'Dream Haiti', about contemporary Haitian refugees at sea: 'The sea was like slake gray of what was left of my body and the white waves... I remember'. For Sharpe (2016, 57), quoting Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2010, 708), Brathwaite's material registration is a powerful depiction of a 'collapse of the space and time separating the contemporary interdiction of Haitian refugees at sea and the long history of patrolling African bodies in the Middle Passage'. The past is not over, as in the linear temporalities of modernity, but is constitutive of the Caribbean present. Centrally, for the drawing out of an abyssal approach, space and time are for Sharpe held in a kind of quantum suspension *as* the Black bodies of the Haitian refugees (which therefore can be generatively read alongside the analytical import of da Silva's (2022) *Unpayable Debt*).

In Sharpe's residence time, the very materiality of Black bodies enables an understanding of what we are drawing out as the abyssal ~~subject~~. Not obtainable in the world of ontological partitions, this figurative ~~subject~~ holds the ontological pillars of colonialism – based upon fixed grids of space and time, of separability, determinacy and sequentiality – in suspension. Thus, as Sharpe draws out, in *Dream Haiti* 'a Coast Guard cutter becomes, in Brathwaite's hands, a Coast guard gutter – not a rescue or a medical ship but a carrier of coffins, a coffle, and so on. As the meaning of words fall apart, we encounter again and again the difficulty of sticking the signification' (Sharpe 2016, 77). For Sharpe (2016, 76), in this way, Brathwaite's poem does not posit an alternative ontology of world-making, but rather becomes a 'testament to the fact that objects can and do resist' modern understandings of time, where Blackness becomes 'the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line – is a

strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity' (Moten 2003, 1; quoted in Sharpe 2016, 76). As da Silva (2022, 155) says, 'towards the dissolution of the racial dialectic, of its terms, and of the *world* it reproduces'.

As Michelle Wright highlights, in *Physics of Blackness*, it is problematic to seek to give 'Blackness' a positive content, either biological, social or historical: 'Blackness was not a scientific discovery' (2015, 2). Blackness is not something that can be directly traced back to the Middle Passage 'through an unbroken chain of ancestors' with uniform experiences (2015, 10). 'Hold time' does not seek to imagine a chain of continuity across linear time, but is rather what Sharpe calls 'residence time':

The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'everything is now. It is all now'. (Sharpe 2016, 41)

As da Silva (2022, 299–300) similarly draws out for Dana in *Kindred*:

The DNA codes from both the white and the black branches of her family defined the elementa that entered her body, from when she was being gestated, throughout her mother's pregnancy, and later gathered from the food, air, and water she consumed as well as calor, that invisible red glow happening to and between things all the time. Dana did not have to go anywhere, 1830s Maryland remains in/as the capital was expended in the creation of everything that entered into the building of her house and its acquisition, the money she and her partner paid or inherited, earned, and borrowed to buy it... Everything, in each and every elementum that entered the composition of her context, mid-1970s Los Angeles, could have been part of the composition of the context of early 1800s Maryland. There is a point in the cosmos from which early 1800s Maryland and mid-1970s Los Angeles occur

in the same instant, where one can see both as immediately connected. From there, there is no such thing as distance between her home and Rufus's farm. Dana never moves at all.

This powerfully underscores how 'hold time' requires an expansive attention to the world's materiality, beyond that of people alone – from houses to DNA, air, food, and water, 'in each and every elementum' (ibid.). Something which is a particular preoccupation of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' (2020) acclaimed text *Undrowned*.

*Undrowned* engages the materiality and production of the world in a way which highlights interconnection and interdependencies with other nonhuman kin but, in our reading at least, her tone and emphasis is very different from that of the more-than-human or posthuman turns. As becomes clear in the extended quote below, what is at stake is not producing richer, more creative or differentiated worlds but rather a spatial and temporal holding together (see also Gumbs and Sharpe 2022), a distinctly different level of entanglement, one that could be described as operating at the ontological level rather than the level of individual entities interacting:

What is the scale of breathing?... Is the scale of breathing within one species? All animals participate in this exchange of release for continued life... And if the scale of breathing is collective, beyond species and sentience, so is the impact of drowning. The massive drowning yet unfinished where the distance of the ocean meant that people could become property, that life could be for sale. I am talking about the middle passage and everyone who drowned and everyone who continued breathing. But I am troubling the distinction between the two. I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. *It made a context. The context of undrowning.* Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do

every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism.  
(Gumbs 2020, 1–2, our emphasis)

Whilst attention to the more-than-human might be taken into the realms of a relational ontology of extension (because in *Undrowned* Gumbs seeks to learn from whales and other sea creatures), it is the underscoring of this ‘context’ which we think matters for the stakes of abyssal work. For Gumbs (ibid., 7), ‘what is at stake for me in this apprenticeship [to whales and other sea creatures] is a transformed relationship to my own breathing, the salt-water within me, the depth of my grief, and the leagues of my love’. As in the case of Sharpe’s work on ‘residence time’, or Gumbs’ other works, such as *M Archive* (2018), inhabiting the abyss does not offer us a prescriptive ontology, relational or otherwise: as Gumbs (2020, 2) says, ‘I don’t know what that will look like’. In one part of the book, Gumbs (2020, 33) refers to the Clymene dolphin as having ‘quantum skin’. This conceptualisation of quantum or ‘quantum suspension’ is, as we read it, a speculative way into imaginings of ‘difference without separability’ (da Silva 2016), suggesting a problematisation of an ontology of separate entities in grids of segmented time and space. Thus, what we understand as an abyssal speculative imaginary, in Gumbs’ work, enables the suspension of ‘laws of thought’ freeing up possibilities to think beyond the barriers of ‘separability’, ‘sequentiality’, and ‘the law of non-contradiction’ (da Silva 2022, 158–9):

And who are you really, transatlantic Clymene? And what did you birth at the end of the world in the tempest of slavery off the side of the boat, what is your magic of spinning and cape, your consistent unheard of revolution of genes. Your journey accompanied and cloaked.

What did you find at the edge of yourself? Oh. Yes. Now I see it.

The sky. (Gumbs 2020, 34)

Much critical Anthropocene thinking today desires more illumination to be shed upon the world and its inhabitants, as objects for saving or liberation. As we noted in the opening chapter, in a

relational ontology, tropes of saturation, quantum entanglement and suspension are understood in such a way that they become enabling for a human ethics or duty of care; one which foregrounds human responsibility for the choices and divisions made in the world (Barad 2007). In an abyssal reading, the time of the hold – the ‘context’ which Gumbs shares with the ‘quantum skin’ of Clymene dolphin – instead becomes a force of paraontological problematisation.<sup>3</sup> The hold time of the Clymene dolphin’s ‘quantum skin’ – ‘accompanied’ by the violence of the colonial gaze, whilst simultaneously ‘cloaked’ from it (Gumbs 2020, 34) – marks a ‘gestural difference that is *irreducible*, both to the serial violence of the racial regime of representation and to the so-called “politics” that clamors for recognition within it’ (Bradley and da Silva 2021, our emphasis). To theorise from within the world as abyss is not to think from a position of obtainable being, but rather, as we read Gumbs doing, to invert the stakes of analysis and critique. It is to think from a figuratively assembled **subject** positionality which materially both registers the violence of, and puts into question, modernity’s ontological pillars of separability, determinacy and sequentiality, its fixed grids of space and time.

We stress the importance of the figurative abyssal **subject** as a ground for the refusal of and deconstruction and delegitimation

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<sup>3</sup> This could also be drawn out from what Glissant calls ‘the other of Thought’, which moves in ‘the other direction [from world-making, in an abyssal reading], which is not one, distances itself entirely from the thought of conquest; it is an experimental meditation (a follow-through) of the process of relation, at work in reality, among the elements (whether primary or not) that weave its combinations’ (Glissant 1997, 137). The ‘other of Thought’ is not a relational ontology in the abyssal analytic because the other is never transparent or available. To clarify the distinction, what Glissant (1997, 155) calls ‘thought of the Other’ is appropriative, ‘presupposed by dominant populations, but with an utterly sovereign power, or proposed until it hurts’. By contrast, ‘the other of Thought’ registers what in this chapter we draw out as ‘hold time’, suspension in a field of differences which are not amenable to hierarchical distinctions.

of the world as grasped in a modern ontology of separation and ‘transparency’. In their book *Formless Formation*, Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis (2021, 54) invoke the collaborative work of *Moved by Motion*, ‘an ensemble of fluctuating members, created by and including artists such as filmmaker Wu Tsang, boychild, Asmara Maroof, Josh Johnson... DJs, musicians, dancers, artists, poets, writers’. In one performance, *Sudden Rise*, Tsang reads a poem written by boychild and Fred Moten:

As Tsang incantates the poem, boychild and Johnson dance to the reading as well as to Maroof’s electronic sounds and Patrick Belaga’s cello. Without a script and in an improvised manner, the music responds to the interlaced projected images and movements of the dancers. The dancers’ bodies are captured by images in real time on huge screens behind them, enabling an eerie doubling of their dance; a choreography composed of countless falls from a raised platform and mirrored in different temporal registers. (Ruiz and Vourloumis 2021, 55)

For Ruiz and Vourloumis, the violence of the projected images on the screen is problematised through a blurring counterinsurgency, ‘opaque ... an aesthetic strategy of collaboration’ (2021, 57). For Ruiz and Vourloumis, the performance is deeply inspired through a particular reading of Glissant, generating ‘a shared unknowability that breaks through the dialectical limits of opacity and transparency’ (ibid., 55). As we also draw out from the poetry of Fahima Ife (2022), which she terms *Maroon Choreography*, an abyssal approach draws out this ‘sense of being-and-not-being-composed, of... disembodied lapses, outside any sense of bodily identities’ (2022, ix).

Abyssal sociality provides a distinct structural positionality understood as ‘behind the veil’, appositional to the ‘world’ made and sustained by the violence of ontological terror (Warren 2018). This structural positionality enables critical work shaped by experiences and writings from the Caribbean, in particular, to impact upon a range of conceptual work in the field of Black studies and

beyond, including the work of refusal often articulated in alignment with Afro-pessimism. As Claire Colebrook states:

This is what I take Afro-pessimism's conception of social death to be, an awareness not so much that one does not have a world or belong in the world, but that the world demands one's non-being. Currently this form of existence is utterly tragic, constantly resulting tracing the wake of black lives not mattering. Even so, Afro-pessimism also offers a positive sense of the end of the world, where non-being and worldlessness provoke thought to move beyond the world. (Colebrook 2020, 197)

While we do not think that the abyssal analytic can be reduced to critical Black studies, let alone to Afro-pessimism, abyssal work shares similarities with the latter in that it does not provide an imaginary of a 'beyond'. Nor does it provide affirmation, the imaginary of a 'past' or an 'outside' that can be drawn upon. The opening that abyssal work provides – which we think can be drawn out from contemporary critical developments, from da Silva and Gumbs, to Ruiz and Vourloumis, and Ife – is that the refusing of the world will enable other modes of existence. These have no 'positive' ontological content, but rather enable processes of deconstruction, reflecting what David Marriott (2018, 316) says about Black poetic knowledge as 'the incarnation of an ungraspable demand that must remain oblivious even to the demand to reveal itself as a particular experience or as the innermost working of a new universal'. Abyssal work is not about documenting or making an ethical choice between 'good' or 'bad' relations but is rather about 'the infinite refractions of violence at the level of being and existence within the world' (Douglass and Wilderson 2013, 119).

## Conclusion

As we have analysed in this chapter, in abyssal thought, the 'time of the hold' is understood as having the capacity for dissolving linear temporality. It is in the Caribbean that much contemporary work

finds a **subject** which enables the lifting of the 'veil' of modernity and colonialism, marking the violence of, but also delegitimising and refusing the assumptions of a transparent and available 'world'. Even as abyssal thought desediments the container view of space and time, it is not possible to think from outside the container of the present and the demands of contemporary critical thought which increasingly seems to require that the stakes now be oriented toward thinking the world as abyss. For abyssal thought, the figurative assembling of the abyssal **subject** focuses upon the totalising violence of the Middle Passage, highlighting the understanding of the veiling of the world as a socio-historical product of modern and colonial world-making. Thus, by lifting this veil, staying with the time of the hold, abyssal work seeks to both mark the ongoing violence of, and desediment, colonial world-making. Indeed, as we explore in the final chapter, abyssal work is an invitation encouraging and generating opportunities to push further – from problematising, to working towards ending both the human and the world.



## CHAPTER 4

# The End of the World

### Introduction

This book has charted an abyssal analytic in contemporary critique which brings the world into question. At the heart of this is a figurative subject that is not, a subject that is liminal in being ‘of’ this world but not ‘in’ the world. This structured positionality does not enable seeing from within the world to a veiled ‘beyond’, but rather seeing out from ‘behind’ or from the other side of the veil: theorising from the abyss. As we have made clear, this is not about revealing another reality, a reality beyond or other to modernity, but experiencing modern reality as the ongoing work of violence and artifice. Theorising from the abyss, from the figurative perspective of originatory violence, from the structural perspective of the slave, from the excluded position of Blackness as non-being, questions the categories of understanding through which modernity and racial capitalism has ‘worlded’ the world. The distinction between this positionality and that of actors ‘in’ the world, is that there is no subject-ness enabling a positive or affirmative account of being or imagined as able to ground alternatives based upon

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actions or agencies that appear to the world as it is seen within a modern ontology.

### The Stakes of the Abyssal

In starting to draw this book to a close, we think that another way of grasping this position without subject-ness, and therefore without an ontology of being, might be via Derrida's critique of Foucault's critique of madness (1978, 36–76). According to Foucault, the modernist episteme, the regime of reason, is carved out in distinction to unreason, to madness (just as the regime of 'the human' is carved out in distinction to the inhuman other). To challenge this process of material and social construction, Foucault refused to diagnose madness from the standpoint or perspective of reason, instead choosing to articulate madness's self-understanding. This perspective gives subject-ness to those excluded or dehumanised under modernity's gaze, seeking to shift the discursive framing from a negative set of descriptive understandings to positive and agential ones. Resistance to modernity is thus strategically carried out by reclaiming subject-ness by emphasising a different mode of being human and therefore redefining and extending the meaning of humanness, of reason and of subjecthood. This is a perspective which assumes being *in the world*, which necessarily is affirmative, thereby expanding this world, extending processes of inclusion and subjectivation. Derrida argued that instead of 'madness made into an object and exiled as the other of a language and a historical meaning which have been confused with logos itself... Foucault wanted madness to be the *subject* of his book in every sense of the word' (1978, 39). Foucault sought to escape the trap of modernist discourse, of its hierarchical and essentialising binary cuts involving violence both epistemic and material, but he was still trapped in a modern ontology. What is at stake in taking a structural position or standpoint *in the world* is that critique is based upon an alternative understanding of an entity, thus Foucault sought to understand madness 'before being captured by knowledge', before being apprehended or assimilated within the dominant normative

order (1978, 40). Thereby, Foucault sought to dispute an understanding and challenge sets of violent, hierarchical forms of othering, based on a different understanding, one that gives subjectivity and agency to the excluded and othered entity.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of method is how to engage critically with the world without repeating the violence of the modern ontology, without reproducing hierarchical forms of reasoning. For Derrida, this meant deconstructing the 'prerequisite methodological or philosophical considerations' that ground the modernist world (1978, 45), specifically the divisions and separations that enable ontology. In the example of madness therefore it could wrongly be assumed that 'it would be necessary to exhume the virgin and unitary ground upon which the decisive act linking and separating madness and reason obscurely took root' (1978, 46). However:

The attempt to write the history of the decision, division, difference runs the risk of construing the division as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation. (Derrida 1978, 48)

While Foucault sought to deconstruct the divisions and hierarchies imposed upon the world, the world itself is presupposed as 'an original presence'. For Derrida, as for an abyssal approach to thought and practices (as developed heuristically through this book), there was no assumption of a world that could be the basis of ethical judgements and alternative or concealed 'truths'. There was no hidden 'reality' beneath the surface of modern world-making. Derrida's critique of Foucault thus enables us to highlight, from another perspective, what is at stake in abyssal approaches. It is not a matter of restoration of some 'original presence' or status, nor is it a matter of redefining entities and reappraising relations;

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, there are clear parallels with Moten's (2016) discussion of the shift in his own work from (a Foucauldian) thinking of the agential capacities of the Thing in apposition to the Human, to the (more Derridean) paraontological power of no-thingness.

merely rearticulating aspects previously seen positively as, in fact, negative. For example, recasting war victories as war crimes or colonial narratives as ones of genocide and dispossession, or environmental ‘solutions’ as paving the way for worse disasters. Although this may well be part of the analysis, crucially, abyssal thought does more than merely place a negative sign where previously there were positive ones.

The paradigm of abyssal work points towards the end of the world understood as a world of entities and relations somehow separate or independent of the abyssal cut. The figurative assembling of an abyssal positionality enables ‘the world as abyss’ to be apparent because it appraises the world as a modern construct from the structural positionality of the abyss, being ‘of’ the world but not ‘in’ the world. For the abyssal approach, theorising from the Caribbean as abyss, the world of modernity is constructed through cuts and divisions rather than pre-existing them. Blackened or racialised subjects no more pre-exist the ruptures of modern slavery and racial capitalism than objects as distinct entities with fixed essences pre-exist these same processes and the sciences which co-constitute them.

Thinkers from within critical Black studies, often emphasise how things appear the opposite to or very different from a perspective behind the veil. For example, for those denied subjecthood, what might seem like madness or as irrational to those ‘in’ the world can be seen as resistance or at the very least an act that is reasonable in context (Jurelle Bruce 2021, 171). As La Marr Jurelle Bruce argues, reasoning from behind the veil is not a product of some essentialised subject creating alternative forms of knowledge of fixed entities that thereby stands or works parallel to that of a hegemonic perspective. It is, in fact, knowledge of how to survive in a liminal condition:

I want to emphasise that this black reason is not an essentialist dogma emerging spontaneously from the epidermis of a *biologized blackness*. Rather, it is a critical intelligence emerging from an *existential blackness* as it confronts the atrocious violence of antiblackness. (Jurelle Bruce 2021, 191, italics in original)

The point is not that racialised subjects thereby have an alternative ontology of the world, an alternative set of truths, but rather that exclusion from the world necessarily enables a questioning of the boundaries that constitute that world: the boundaries of inside/outside, subject/object, human/non-human. The veil, the boundary between the world (of the subject) and the non-world or without world of the *subject* is figurative, but real nonetheless. As Du Bois writes, about 'the Veil': 'Surely it is a thought-thing, tenuous, intangible; yet just as surely it is true and terrible and not in our little day may you and I lift it.' (1920b, 136). As we have explored in the previous chapters, while the subject necessarily sees the world from within the veil, producing the world as available for thought and instrumentalising practice, the figurative abyssal *subject* is read as not enabled to perceive or experience the world in these terms nor themselves as a subject 'at home' in the world in these ways. In an abyssal framing, there is no ground other than the ongoing paraontological critique of the violent artifice of colonial and modern world-making. Abyssal work holds off the desire to reinvest in being in the world.

Nahum Dimitri Chandler's development of a paraontological approach is paradigmatic in enabling the Caribbean to be seen at the heart of the abyssal problematic. Chandler (2022) highlights how Du Bois was the first social theorist to articulate the Caribbean as central to the construction of modernity via the 'mutually agonistic constitution of all that is Europe and all that is Africa' and the construction of a Black *subject* that is historical (in its creation) but also existential (*ibid.*, 102) in not having a ground apart from that of violent coercion. Thus, two worlds are seen to be brought into existence through the emergence of modernity: the world as perceived by the subject where the world (being) appears before it as natural; and the non-world 'behind the veil' where the division between being and non-being is seen to be a product of violence and artifice. In one world, modernity enables a framework of civilisation, science and reason, in the other, the world of modernity is put into question (the world as abyss). The abyssal *subject* (as we explored in Chapter 2) is thereby a problem for the world and puts to question the assumption of the human as a subject within it. However, unlike other forms

of critical thought operating within and against modernity as a paradigm for thought, Chandler enables the clarification that the abyssal **subject** opens up the problem of the being of the world itself, rather than just the problem of the human as subject within the world (as explored in Chapter 3).

In Chandler's reading, Du Bois takes the historical process of the violence involved in the construction of the human as subject as a way into posing broader questions of modernity's ontological assumptions, as he states:

I have begun to remark our own, my own, engagement of that problematization under the heading of a *paraontology* – a critical practice that attends to that within discourse, or forms of existence in general, practices that would operate *as if* there were indeed such a matter as present being, available for knowledge that would produce ontology... (Chandler 2022, 224, italics in original)

Chandler's (2014) text *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* illustrates his paraontological approach through the example of perhaps the most famous Caribbean slave in history, Olaudah Equinano, and his self-reflective story, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equinano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789 (Equinano 2005). Chandler (2014, 160) draws out how Olaudah Equinano, 'a slave, comes to recognize that it is his relation to property that organises his relationship to humans, both to himself and to others', and that this relationship is built upon nothing more than abstract relations. As Chandler (2014, 161) examines, Equinano's self-narrative powerfully illustrates this through a series of ironies arranged around one central irony – if 'Equinano, as property, acquires property (albeit small), he can transform his relationship to humans, including himself'. But it is how Equinano emerges as an abyssal **subject** that opens up the problem of being itself, not just the problem of the human as subject, which is where the radical import of a paraontological approach is to be found.

What Chandler demonstrates through Equinano's life story is that there is no absolute or singular gesture *of or for* being. Through the many ironies of Equinano's life, Chandler shows us that there is no principle of being that maintains its pertinence; and that it is in tracking the figure of the *unsovereign* that we may 'open the way to the most fundamental account of the dynamis at the heart of the possibility of the subject in general' (Chandler 2014, 163). Equinano's life story, 'always strategic and historical, situated, in the last instance' (Chandler 2014, 167), serves to bring out this 'opening, a paradoxical structure' (Chandler 2014, 164), based on a basis that is not one, which thereby enables the theorist to put in question, to desediment, any transcendental illusions of 'being'.

We stress that the refusal of the world, the rejection of the exclusion that is constitutive for those included and accounted for within the world of being, neither adds new entities to the world nor recoups the imaginary of the human: it is a force of desedimentation. As Marquis Bey states:

...a notion of a paraontology... functions as a critical concept that breaks up and desediments. By way of this, it permits the rewriting of narratives and the very conditions of understanding the present as such. Importantly, the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology. Paraontology is not a search for new categories, as if categorization is a neutral process. It is not; categorization is a mechanism of ontology, an apparatus of circumscription. What the paraontological suggests is a dissolution. (Bey 2020, 17)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We think a paraontological approach addresses Colebrook's (2021, 527) call: 'Is there something like para-theory that could exit or disrupt the game but not with the sort of post-theory literalism and piety that continues to give theory its ammunition? The only theory that can meet this challenge is not one that aims to grasp matter or life all the more intimately, and not one that wants to queer what we already have, and not one that picks up on the projects of sexual difference or metaphysics and tries to find their depth or exit, but one that seeks to end the world.'

A paraontological approach is explicitly adopted by Harney and Moten (2021) following the line of thought of Chandler (2014), and by Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter in their framing of ‘paraontological life’ (2017, 47).<sup>3</sup> Abyssal or paraontological life is both the fungible material through or from which the modern subject and modern ontology is constituted or carved out, but also the site for desedimenting these ontological imaginaries (see Chandler 2010). In a paraontological approach, what was submerged, disavowed and degraded by world-making, comes back into awareness in the world reconfigured as abyss by radically dissolving ‘being’ and the fixities of modern spatial and temporal imaginaries.

### The Stakes of Critique

In an abyssal framing, the figuration of the abyssal ~~subject~~ thus holds the potential to problematise the ontological imaginary of colonialism and modernity, of the *abyssal cut*, the suturing of the abyssal ~~subject~~ through the global colour line. It does this from the inside, from the recognition of the cut as one that makes the abyssal ~~subject~~ paradoxical or ungraspable from a dominant outlook: an object that is self-reflective. Our point, taken to conclusion, is that a paraontological approach is one of ongoing work not only of problematisation, but opening up the possibilities for further questioning the conditions of possibility for modern ontologies of fixed time and space and the violence enabling the machinery of world-making. It is perhaps easy for the reader to see

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<sup>3</sup> It is the focus upon the implications of an abyssal analytic for contemporary critical thought (for example, the approach of paraontology) which most clearly distinguishes our project from other work articulating an understanding of the abyss as itself an object of thought, albeit in different and distinct ways; such as, An Yountae’s (2016) *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* and Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2007) *Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges*.

that the world of modernity and colonialism is constituted along the binary lines of subjects and objects, humans and those not valued as humans. It is also, probably for many readers, straightforward to understand that this world was forged in the Caribbean; that ‘explosive’ region (Glissant 1997, 33) which gave birth to the global colour line, where the *Repeating Island* (Benítez-Rojo 2001) expanded outwards consuming more flesh and more territory. However, once the category of *being itself* is problematised – as, for example, in Chandler’s paraontological approach – all cuts and distinctions, all ‘being’, all temporal and spatial pathways, are put at risk. This, we believe, is precisely what is at stake in abyssal work: the existence of the world itself.

Abyssal approaches can be understood in terms of what Claire Colebrook (2021, 524) calls ‘world-destructive theory’, working differently from the relational ontologies that influence much critical theory today, which she describes as ‘world-sustaining’. From actor network theory to assemblage theory, new materialism, more-than-human ontologies and rhizomic subjects, the influence of relational ontologies in contemporary critique has up until recently often meant that humans and non-humans are widely understood as developing capacities, affordances and sensitivities to others and the world around them through their dynamic relations of becoming. Offering what is usually framed as a positive alternative to modern reasoning (its human/nature, mind/body, subject/object divides), relational ontologies work with modified assumptions of an available world of humans and more-than-human relational entanglements. Whilst they can highlight how specific entanglements can and do close down human and non-human possibilities, relational ontologies necessarily work ‘in’ the world and have been increasingly critiqued in the literature for this affirmative or ‘world-sustaining’ approach (Karera 2019; Leong 2016; Chandler and Pugh 2020).

Today, these relational approaches increasingly appear to amount to little more than modifications of a longer European tradition which assumes the ‘notion of a subject whose world is their own, defined by their own possibilities’ (Colebrook 2021,

524; Douglass and Wilderson 2013). Colebrook (2021, 524–525) usefully clarifies this distinction:

World-sustaining theory grants each discourse its own space of possibility, allowing for a post-metaphysical domain of reflection, dissent, conversation and a convergence towards an ever-receding ideal of legitimation. World-destructive theory acknowledges that this conception of language as world-disclosive is possible only in certain worlds: worlds that have been blessed with the geo-political ease of cosmopolitanism and personal self-definition. What happens when one's very being and world is imposed rather than assumed? What if, within the geo-politics of worlds one's very being were deemed to be worldless? What if what is assumed to be the horizon of world-formation does not include, recognize or humanize one's own kind? In such a case the only way in which one might exist is to end the world or refuse recognition.

As we have explored in this book, an abyssal framing and understanding of the world as abyss does not develop alternative metaphysical assumptions of an immanent or creative telos, a relational ontology that would enable affirmative imaginaries of saving and salvaging. To the contrary, they are concerned with the *limits* of imaginaries of relation, with a figurative abyssal ~~subject~~ and socialities that disavow the human and the world. Abyssal work is the 'abolition of the metaphysics of liberation' (Culp 2021, 124) through 'the tactical deployment of history as contingent' (Culp 2021, 128); neither adding new entities to the world nor recouping the imaginary of 'the human'. It is paraontological rather than ontological, non-relational rather than relational, problematising rather than producing. Thus, abyssal thought has an ambiguous relation to political struggle, which generally locates challenges in an affirmative grammar of improving and reforming injustices in the world. For abyssal work, these necessarily reproduce the injustices of the world, whilst the abyssal problematic operates 'behind the backs' of those seeking to improve their lives.

The abyssal problematic works to meet a contemporary conceptual demand for a critical positionality that remains untainted by the seeming collapse of political possibilities. We suggest that

contemporary framings of abyssal thought can be seen as potentially ameliorating the problems of relying upon either purely metaphysical assumptions (for example, that deconstruction can hold open a permanent space of possibility), or purely empirical experiences of oppression and exclusion (with the danger of essentialising assumptions of the meaning and capacities provided by 'Blackness' (Dekeyser 2022)). Throughout this book, we have stressed that while much contemporary abyssal work draws upon particular modes of Caribbean practice and understanding, we are not arguing that abyssal work necessarily relies upon the Caribbean or *is* Caribbean in some way. Our argument has been that reading the Caribbean in abyssal ways has been particularly important for the figurative assembling of the abyssal *subject* existing in the world as abyss.

Abyssal thought therefore engages the stakes of critique without necessarily being forced into acceptance of the world as presented in the current state of political inertia and apparent exhaustion of political projects. It similarly has an ambiguous relation towards reason and rationality, despite not engaging in mysticism or metaphysics. There is no assumption that reason and reality coincide, rather, in the abyssal problematic, it is the lack of identity which necessitates the grounding violence at the heart of the figuration of the abyssal *subject* which opens up the problematisation, putting in question both the human and world. If we understand relational, posthuman and new materialist approaches as coming to prominence in the wake of disillusionment with a modernist and rationalist political ontology, then we could describe the abyssal as seeking to move otherwise and to problematise this 'relational' or 'ontological' turn, providing a different register of understanding. Thus, in this book, we have drawn out the emergence of an analytically distinct field, which we locate in response to the current challenges, demands and constraints placed upon the possibility of critique.



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# THE WORLD AS ABYSS

This book is about a distinctive ‘abyssal’ approach to the crisis of modernity. In this framing, influenced by contemporary critical Black studies, another understanding of the world of modernity is foregrounded – a world violently forged through the projects of Indigenous dispossession, chattel slavery, and colonial world-making. Modern and colonial world-making violently forged the ‘human’ by dividing those with ontological security from those without, and by carving out the ‘world’ in a fixed grid of space and time, delineating a linear temporality of ‘progress’ and ‘development’. The distinctiveness of abyssal thought is that it inverts the stakes of critique and brings indeterminacy into the heart of ontological assumptions of a world of entities, essences, and universal determination. This is an approach that does not focus upon tropes of rescue and salvation but upon the generative power of negation. In doing so, this book highlights how Caribbean experiences and writings have been drawn upon to provide an important and distinct perspective for critical thought.

**Jonathan Pugh** is Professor of Island Studies, Newcastle University, UK. He leads the ‘Anthropocene Islands’ initiative ([www.anthropoceneislands.online](http://www.anthropoceneislands.online)).

**David Chandler** is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, UK.

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