

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

How to cite this book chapter:

Pugh, J. and Chandler, D. 2023. *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene*. Pp. 61–81. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72.c>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

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).¹

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

¹ 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' novel² *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

² 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.³ 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

³ 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.