

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~~ 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

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. 83–93. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72.d>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

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.¹

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;

¹ 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)²

² 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).³ 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

³ 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.