



# Abyssal geography<sup>†</sup>

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Today, we are held to live in the Anthropocene, bringing to an end modern binary imaginaries, such as the separation between Human and Nature, and with them Western assumptions of progress, linear causality and human exceptionalism. Much Western critical theory, from new or vital materialism to post- and more-than-human thinking, unsurprisingly reflects this internal crisis of faith in Eurocentric or Enlightenment reasoning. At the same time, a radically different critique of modernity has gained prominence in recent years, emerging from critical Black studies, which places the Caribbean at the centre of the development of a new and distinct mode of critical thought. In attempting to grasp the ways in which Caribbean thought and practice have been seen to enable a distinctive alternative non-Eurocentric imaginary, this paper heuristically sets out a paradigmatic framing of 'abyssal geography'. We emphasize two key points. The first is that abyssal thought is not grounded in abstract and timeless philosophical assumptions but figuratively draws upon aspects of Caribbean practices of resistance and survival, for example, from the Middle Passage, Plantation, carnival, creolization, dance forms and speculative fiction. The second is that abyssal work engages the legacies of modernity and coloniality by explicitly seeking to question the lure of ontology: seeking to disrupt, suspend and to problematize the modern project of the human and the world.

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## Figuring 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: 38 – 9)

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 and the writers of Négritude 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*

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*Masks*, first published in 1952 (Fanon, 1986: 96). This paper is about a contemporary return to the Caribbean and the radical ‘abyssal’ call for the ending of the world, as a product of Western ‘reason’ which has brought about a new 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 counter intuitive 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 in the midst of catastrophic crisis. 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 emergency upon assumptions of linear, modern 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 instrumentalization of nature and (often unintentionally) caused the collapse of climate and environmental stability.

This paper sets out a distinctive approach to the crisis of modernity that reflects a radically different set of stakes. In this framing, which draws largely upon contemporary critical thought, especially in the field of Black studies, another understanding of the world—as abyss—emerges. What we call ‘abyssal thought’ and ‘abyssal work’ does not seek to establish alternative metaphysical or philosophical truths. It does not attribute an immanent telos to the world, nor does it attempt to correct the errors of modern reasonings of the human/nature, mind/body, subject/object divides. In the critical works we engage, particular modes of Caribbean thought and practice, of resistance and survival, are figured to enable an abyssal paradigm of critique. Central, is how abyssal work seeks to suspend and to question rather than to affirm the cuts and distinctions of the subject and the world.

We stress from the outset that this paper is about the shifting nature of contemporary critique and how a turn to the Caribbean has enabled a figurative assembling of an ‘abyssal geography’. The abyssal approach reads certain aspects of Caribbean thought and practices as important for a paradigmatically distinct understanding of the world and approach to critique. In drawing out the abyssal analytic, this paper is 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 engagement with the Caribbean and Caribbean thought has become enabling for the emergence of an approach which dramatically shifts the stakes of critical thought. The abyssal paradigm is one which, as we underscore throughout, works on the basis of very different conceptual assumptions to those underpinning the relational and ontological turns, which have dominated critical Anthropocene thinking to date. To reiterate, 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 & Chandler, 2021),<sup>1</sup> our concern is with how certain engagements with history, geography and culture become enabling for contemporary critical thought (see also Chandler & Pugh, 2022; Pugh, 2022; Pugh & Chandler, forthcoming).

By way of illustrative examples, the next four sections of the paper set out the key stakes of abyssal geography. First, we foreground how contemporary work draws upon

Caribbean writers, notably Glissant (1997; Spillers, 2003; Harney & Moten, 2021), to underline how the world as abyss emerged through modern and colonial world-making. We explore how the world as abyss is not the ‘underside’ to modernity and colonialism, something which could be separated out or cleaved off, but inextricable from these world-making projects. Second, we turn to how the figuring of particular modes of Caribbean practice—what we draw out as ‘abyssal socialites’—can be read as simultaneously indexing the violence of, suspending, and bringing into question this ontology of world-making. Again, the abyssal line of thought can be drawn from the work of leading Caribbean writers, notably Benítez-Rojo (2001). In the third section, we extend our consideration of abyssal sociality as a figurative critical positionality into a discussion of what we read as the ‘time of the hold’ (Sharpe, 2016; Gumbs, 2020). Finally, we conclude the paper by underscoring the key stakes of abyssal geography, drawing out distinctions between abyssal approaches and the currently dominant, relational, approaches which characterize critical thought today.

### **The world as abyss forged through the Middle Passage**

The importance of the perspective of abyssal geography emerges against the backdrop of the exhaustion of the mass political projects of the last century. The evacuation of the political sphere has had effects that have stretched well beyond the narrow confines of institutional politics, including the conceptual rejection of the modernist subject, the human, and the search for an alternative perspective in immanent understandings affirming the powers and excess of life and relation (Noys, 2012; Colebrook, 2014; 2021). 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; Chandler & Pugh, 2022; Chipato & Chandler, 2022). We explore how, in this contemporary conjuncture, ‘abyssal’ work figuratively turns to the Caribbean not to find a world-saving ontology, to help the West correct the errors of modern reasoning, but to learn from those who have long been said to lack ‘being’ and ontological security.

We forefront a framework of ‘abyssal geography’, as a figurative assemblage drawn from specific Caribbean modes of practice which can be read as lacking assumptions of fixed and pre-set entities and the human as an individualized pre-existing subject. This shift from affirming the lure of the world, accepting the system we live in, to questioning some of the most deeply held assumptions about the nature of ‘things’ is not unique to abyssal thought per se. For example, perhaps the leading contemporary theorist of the Anthropocene, the late Bruno Latour, captured this well in his distinction between ‘matters of fact’ and ‘matters of concern’ (Latour, 2004). Latour made the point that what goes for politics and critique tends to operate at the surface level of ‘matters of fact’ rather than at a more ontological level of how ‘facts’ come into being. This shift to another level, to matters of ontology (and paraontology) is at the heart of the abyssal problematic that we set out here.

The abyssal paradigm problematizes or holds off the lure of the world, as constituted by a modern ontology of fixed entities transparently available. This is vital to grasp because the lure of the world—as it appears transparently before us in a modern ontology—constrains politics to what exists, to a debate on the terms of the world as a product of colonial, ecocidal and genocidal destruction. This refusal of the world is

anchored in a perspective that starts from the world as abyss. This shift to a deeper level of problematization has often been most informed by and explicated in the field of critical Black studies. A highly influential figure for our thinking in this area has been Fred Moten. One of the ways in which Moten articulates the importance of shifting perspective to the level of (para)ontology is in his argument for the need to go beyond the discourse of rights. He does this in working through the limits of discussing race in a liberal register of rights and the distinction between Human and Thing.

Sticking to the political level that limits discourse to ‘matters of fact’ means that the question is limited to claiming rights on the basis of inclusion in the category ‘Human’ and thus reproducing hierarchical understandings or redistributing rights on the basis of giving agency to the ‘Thing’ (Moten, 2016). Where Latour would argue that understandings of agency should be extended or redistributed to include ‘things’ as possessing agential powers, Moten, thinks in terms of (what we describe here as) an abyssal paradigm. Moten refuses 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 cuts and distinctions, Moten argues that thinking from a position of ‘no-thingness’ as a social and aesthetic practice, as poetics, is more productive (Moten, 2016: 11). Abyssal thought does not offer an alternative imaginary which seeks to rethink the human and the world but is rather a (para)ontological approach, problematizing the ontological claims of the human and the world.

Central for a framing of abyssal geography is that the world as abyss cannot be separated from the making of the human and the world. 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: 93–4):

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) for our understanding of abyssal geography in 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—but rather refuse the terms of debate. Rather than refigure ontology, they think from the ‘absence of coherence’ of what we term the abyssal subject,<sup>2</sup> of ‘no-thingness’ as a generative mode of practice. This section of the paper draws out how certain aspects of Caribbean history and culture are figured in such contemporary debates to mark the condition of this ontological lack and enable an understanding of the world as abyss.

An abyssal framing draws heavily upon the work of some of the most well-known and influential Caribbean writers of the last few decades. Notable here is Glissant—prevalent in the work of Harney and Moten—who famously begins his *Poetics of Relation* with the ‘Open Boat’, the Middle Passage, and 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’ (Glissant, 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’ (Glissant, 1997: 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’ (Glissant, 1997: 7).

The lack of ontological security of the ~~subject~~ of these abysses is crucial for the contemporary work we draw upon for the development of an abyssal analytic. As we learn from the work of Hortense Spillers (2003: 214–15, emphasis 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 productive alternative to the subject as posited by modern world-making, the ~~subject~~ of the abyss is figured as lacking an ontological grounding; ‘suspended’ in ‘non-differentiation’ (see also Ibrahim, 2021: 15), with no possibility of going back to ‘irretrievable selves’ after passing through ‘The Door of No Return’ (Brand, 2002: 224). 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 ‘at home’, the abyssal ~~subject~~ is unable to ontologically project itself upon the world. Far from producing an alternative way of being for critical theory to put to work, the violent unmaking of the ~~subject~~ of the abyss produces a lack of ‘ontological resistance’ (Fanon, 1986: 110).

It is precisely here 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 that of the ‘global colour line’, that then becomes the materialized 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, sutured and put to work on plantations (da Silva, 2016). Grounded in the Caribbean, it is the force of history which matters and becomes important for rethinking the world as abyss; the force of colonial world-making, working at ‘the level of existence ... understood as ontological’ (Chandler, 2010). As Nahum Chandler (2010) 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 paper 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 the world as the ongoing work of colonial violence and artifice.

An abyssal framing is not an abstract metaphysics but enabled by particular readings of Caribbean modes of resistance and survival. Drawn from different parts of Africa, forced in the hold of the slave ship, slaves are presented as sharing little in the way of common identities, languages and dialects and forced to improvise; fusion on the move. 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). Key here for distinguishing abyssal thought, is how it works very differently from relational ontologies. In relational ontologies of becoming, a ‘subject’ or ‘being’ is always and already in the process of emergence, of actualization, grasped in terms of a rhizomic subject, *open to the world*. We see this in how, for example, creolization 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 – 1). In direct contrast, the **subject** of the abyss, of the hold of the slave ship, is *prized open by the world*—suspended in what Moten (2017: 67) calls ‘eternally alien immanence’.

As we draw out, the figurative abyssal **subject** of contemporary theoretical work is unable to ontologically project itself upon the world; inhabiting an abyssal geography and an ‘untimely version of time’ (Ibrahim, 2021: 29). This figurative **subject** is enabling for the abyssal analytic because it is ‘less’ than the subject of modernity, in the sense that it lacks ontological security. At the same time, for the generative purchase of an abyssal framing, it is also ‘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 and one that can never be its home. For the work which enables us to draw out the abyssal line of thought, staying with the hold and the Middle Passage as an abyssal geography is not then a flight from reality, but a piercing of the veil of reality, through thinking *from* the world as abyss (Philip, 2008; Gumbs, 2020). It is through grounding critique in abyssal geography that abyssal work theorizes from ‘behind’ the veil of modern and colonial world-making, beyond the assumptions of the world, as given, as ‘naturally’ there for us, rather than a contingent 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 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* the law – that law – and that our being 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: 206–7, emphasis in original).

To put it clearly, as we read Philip as stating here, for ‘abyssal work’, 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, humans from non-humans, self-governing beings from other-determined (non-)beings remains as much part of the ‘world’ today as it was then. The

difference is that this world—with its cuts and divides—is now considered as natural and the foundational violence disavowed. The abyssal approach deconstructs the givenness of the ‘world’ as differentiated across segmented spacetime and, in so doing, brings the foundational violence essential to this world’s making to the surface.

### Abyssal sociality

Work which enables us to ground an abyssal analytic starts with the Middle Passage and the hold of the slave ship as the birthplace of modernity and the world as abyss. It is here that the figurative subject of the abyss emerges for abyssal thought. As we have discussed, although this line of thought is present in much contemporary work (for example, Spillers, 2003; Harney & Moten, 2013; Philip, 2008; Gumbs, 2020; see also Pugh & Chandler, forthcoming), it draws heavily upon the work of earlier Caribbean writers, of which Glissant is probably most renowned. However, for us, another key Caribbean interlocutor is Antonio Benítez-Rojo and his text *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Benítez-Rojo, 2001).

Benítez-Rojo sees the Caribbean as birthing the ‘global colour line’ through what he calls its ‘Plantation’ society (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 9). A ‘powerful machine of machines’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 8), ‘with its gears, its wheels and its mills’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 9), this was a world-making and world-denying machine for the production of both Black(ened) and White(ned) subjects. For Benítez-Rojo, this ‘repeating island’ expanded outwards, becoming a ‘cultural meta-archipelago without centre and without limits’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001); the fulcrum of modernity, bifurcating the world between colonizer and colonized, human and non-human, developed and not developed, reason and irrationalism.

What makes the *Repeating Island* enabling for an abyssal approach is in how the stakes here are ontological; as this process repeats and expands, the world that is produced appears to exist ‘naturally’, as the process of violence and cutting becomes invisible. Benítez-Rojo’s work denaturalizes this world, deconstructing what is considered to be naturally ‘there’ and would otherwise be obscured precisely by the success of the process itself. Central is how the Caribbean is framed as a site where ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ are violently forged.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, we have the abyssal cut and the process of Plantation society’s machinic cuts and distinctions of ontological world-making (see also McKittrick, 2013). On the other, in response, there is resistance, the attempt to disrupt and to defer the making of the ‘One World World’ (Law, 2015). What we draw out as ‘abyssal socialites’ of survival and of resistance, Benítez-Rojo sees as prevalent across the Caribbean. A particular aesthetics where differences are held together through an alternative sense of the universal which emerges against differentiation, abyssal socialites simultaneously mark the violence of, suspend and problematize the cuts and distinctions of colonial ontological world-making.

Whilst Benítez-Rojo says that the repeating island is a ‘meta-archipelago’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 24) expanding outwards into the world, not confined to the cartographically defined Caribbean, he understands that its characteristics are exemplified or amplified in the practices of this region; from Caribbean literature and poetry to practices of marronage, and the walk and gait of Caribbean peoples. He closes his book with the chapter ‘Carnival’ which, for our reading, is enabling for the drawing out of the abyssal analytic, where he says:

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 (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 307).

Benítez-Rojo (2001: 18) says that carnival can be figuratively read as registering the 'interruptive action of the Caribbean machine'; a 'machine', which, as he delineates the stakes, works differently from the 'assemblage machines' that characterize the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1986). For Benítez-Rojo (2001: 18), the Caribbean is rather '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 ... tak[ing] 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' (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 18). Benítez-Rojo's wager is that Caribbean practices, such as carnival, read as performed in a 'certain kind of way' (Benítez-Rojo, 2001, 19), become an expansive, saturated space of displacing rhythms, suspending the cuts and delineations of the colonial gaze. Carnival exemplifies this point, 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 interrupted 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).

We draw upon Benítez-Rojo for the figuration of an abyssal analytic, particularly how improvisation is enrolled to problematize understandings of Caribbean practices based upon modernity's binary delineations of subject/object, mind/body, human/nature divides. Benítez-Rojo views improvisation as a shifting 'totality' which saturates, displaces and desediments the modernist divide that 'separates the onlooker' and 'participant' (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 16). Abyssal approaches reconfigure this space, through what Moten (2017) calls the expansive generosity 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 cuts and distinctions 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 & da Silva, 2021). Framed as the 'between' which is 'not-in-between', in abyssal work, Caribbean practices such as carnival and jazz become figured in ways that enable an abyssal line of thought:

Let's suppose that we beat upon a drum with a single blow and set its skin 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 obtainable relations is undone in what we draw out here as the figurative critical positionality of abyssal sociality, denaturalizing the veil of the colonial gaze (see also Sharpe, 2016; Terreffe, 2016). For Benítez-Rojo, in carnival, ‘every repetition is a practice that necessarily enables a difference and step toward nothingness’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 3). What we draw out from this for the development of our understanding of abyssal socialities is that 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’ (Benítez-Rojo, 2001: 28). It is important to underscore for the clarification of an abyssal approach that the figurative abyssal subject is not understood as productive, but rather that ‘no-thingness manifests itself as a kind of practice [of] differentiation without separation [citing da Silva, 2016]’ (Moten, 2016: 11). Abyssal work desediments, de-worlds and is subtractive, rather than productive or generative, of ontological clarifications.

For Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016), this attention to ‘Difference Without Separability’ gets to the heart of the problematic of modern frameworks of reasoning: refusing modernity by suspending its three ontological pillars 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 (da Silva, 2016: 65, emphasis in original).

This understanding of ‘difference without separability’ is important for an abyssal framing because it allows us to clarify abyssal sociality—as desedimenting the cuts and distinctions of modern time, space, and ontological world-making—bringing ontological assumptions into question. This abyssal framing of an undifferentiating mode of sociality, as displacing the ontological pillars of modernity, can be drawn out of much contemporary work which figuratively turns to Caribbean practices; from recent engagements with marronage (Harney & Moten, 2021), to the Black female body and jamenttes (Philip, 2017), to creolization (Wideman, 2003), and contemporary art practices (Ruiz & Vourloumis, 2021) (see Pugh & Chandler, forthcoming, for further discussion). As Bradley and da Silva (2021) say:

When the categorial force of blackness is confronted with the total violence that its historical trajectory cannot but recall, it cannot but refract and fracture the *transparent shoal* (the threshold of transparency) that protects the Subject’s onto-epistemology across his scientific and aesthetic moments. 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*.

Clarifying abyssal sociality as this undifferentiating field, refusing the ontological pillars of modernity, enables us to draw out the radical import of figuring the world abyssally. In the world as abyss, there are no entities-in-relation because there are no 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 deconstruction, denaturalizing the colonial gaze. It is in this way that abyssal approaches work to problematize the project of modern ontological world-making. Not by putting forward a modified yet still delineable sense of ‘the Other’, ‘Being’, or the ‘subject’ (that is, not by way of positing an alternative ontology to modern reasoning). But rather by foregrounding what we frame as abyssal socialities, which in abyssal thought are enrolled to suspend cuts and distinctions, revealing the violence of colonial world-making as artifice.

Bearing in mind the figurative importance of the undifferentiated ~~subject~~ of the hold, as emphasized by Spillers, and discussed above, it is worth underscoring the clear conceptual, ethical and epistemological distinctions at stake in the contrasting of abyssal and relational ontological approaches. A relational ontology—such as actor-network theory, materialist semiotics or theories of multi-species entanglement—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 are saturated and lost, in deepening and expanding the *irreducibility* of confluences; such that ‘a 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 rather by desedimenting<sup>4</sup> the cuts and delineations of colonial and modern ontological world-making.

### Hold time

In this section of the paper, we draw out abyssal time as the ‘time of the hold’, which desediments the cuts and distinctions of modernity’s fixed grids of space and time and temporality of linear progress. Christina Sharpe is, for us, a key thinker in this area, experimenting with articulating hold time in a number of ways, most notably in her book *In The Wake* (Sharpe, 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’ (Sharpe, 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’ (Sharpe, 2016: 4). The rupture of the modern ontology, of linear temporality, is the ground of ‘a past that is not past’ (Sharpe, 2016: 13). Drawing upon Philip’s (2008) *Zong!*, Sharpe (in an interview with Selamawit Terrefe) makes the point

that at stake is really the understanding that the hold is Black supply that makes the system run; the materiality of the world is one that 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 racialization of the global colour line is ontologically inseparable from the materiality of the world itself. This is articulated via her concepts which attempt to figuratively 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' (Ruiz & Vourloumis, 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, the approach should 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' (Sharpe, 2016: 14).

For Sharpe, like others noted above, figurations of Caribbean modes of life and thought can be particularly inspiring for this line of thinking, particularly:

...forms of Black expressive culture (like the works of poets and poet-novelists M. NourbeSe 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).

Sharpe (in Gumbs and Sharpe, 2022) reads 'residence time' as a central preoccupation of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' (2020) *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 much of the work of the more-than-human or post-human turns. As we think 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, a rather different level of entanglement, one that could be described, as we highlighted above, as operating at the figurative level rather than the level of ontology 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: 12, 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 (2020: 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’, 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’. Rather, Gumbs’ *Undrowned* is an immersion into ‘residence time’, where:

At the bottom, who you were and what you were became a whale and please come back to me with all your scars and patterns. I will seek you at the bottom of myself and breathe you up out of my crown. I will remember you and breathe your stolen breath. It is not small what happened to tear us apart. It is not over either. At the bottom: greed. But my love is textured, massive, scarred. My love is breathing, writing, path. My love is made from who you are. My love, I hear you in my gut. And so I stay and so I leave and you return (Gumbs, 2020: 119).

The world of representation, of the bifurcation of human and inhuman, of colonial world-making which splits the world into zones of being and non-being is registered materially, whether in Gumbs, or a whale. They share this ‘context’. Breathing with whales, for Gumbs, is not so much about attuning to the more-than-human to expose the fallacies of modernity’s rigid pathways and fixed grids of time and space, as it is about taking in and absorbing this ongoing violence as inextricable from the production of this world. For Sharpe, Gumbs’ work illustrates ‘residence time’: ‘what I was trying to think through with residence time, about how those falls of people, and those falls of whales were each becoming part of that *underwater ecosystem* that is with us still. With us to this very day, with us long past our living and our possible, even probable, extinction’ (Gumbs & Sharpe, 2022, emphasis in original). In one part of the book Gumbs (2020: 33) refers to the Clymene dolphin as having ‘quantum skin’. We read *Undrowned* as foregrounding an abyssal mode of practice which holds the ontological cuts and distinctions of colonial world-making in what da Silva (2016) frames as quantum suspension:

And who are you really, transatlantic Clymene? And what did you birth at the end of the world in the tempest of slavery of 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).

The hold time of the Clymene dolphin’s ‘quantum skin’—‘accompanied’ by 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 & da Silva, 2021, our emphasis). By contrast, much critical Anthropocene thinking today desires more illumination to be shed upon the world and its inhabitants, as objects for speculation, saving or liberation. The line of abyssal thought we draw out from saturated ‘hold time’ is different; reflective more of David Marriott’s reading of black poetic knowledge (Marriott, 2018: 316) 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’. Irrevocably marked by the metaphysical violence of the project of modernity, in an abyssal reading, the ‘quantum skin’ of the Clymene dolphin becomes a figure of paraontological deconstruction; not of ontological world-making.

### Conclusion: the stakes of abyssal critique

In this paper we have heuristically developed a framework of ‘abyssal geography’ articulated in contraposition to the currently dominant relational approaches. The abyssal approach both problematizes modernity’s narrative of progress—as one of genocide, chattel slavery and expropriation—and provides a figurative subject of political and historical practices that exists in apposition or adjacently to the political as given. This is a figure that is both less and more than the modernist subject of civil society. This subject is less in the sense of lacking a fixed identity and ontological security, but more than a modernist subject precisely because of this lack of fixity, possessing the capacity for ‘double consciousness’, an awareness that the world as presently constituted can never be its home. This is a ~~subject~~ subject that not by choice has the potential to problematize the ‘veil’ of mystification that naturalizes the products of the modernist imaginary. In doing so, in abyssal work, the understanding of this history rearticulates not just the historical narrative but, more importantly, uses this rearticulation to desediment, to deconstruct and to put into question, the products of this process. Modernity is no longer grasped as a positive epoch of ‘progress’, presupposing the metaphysical truths of a world available to universal ‘reason’, but as a product of colonial fantasies of mastery, carving out a ‘world’ through an ongoing violence, both instrumental and gratuitous.

In conclusion, the Caribbean figured as abyss enables the transformation in approach in three key ways: (1) it provides the ground for the figure of the abyssal ~~subject~~ subject with no ground; (2) the Caribbean provides the programmatic geographic imaginary for the carving of being as the epochal marker of modernist ‘progress’, given meaning (sedimented) by the repetition of relations of hierarchy and subordination, naturalized ontologically in terms of the global colour line; and, (3) provides ongoing abyssal modes of practice, of ‘making a way out of no way’, that at the same time provide enabling framings and understandings capable of problematizing modernist hierarchies of cuts and divisions. This paper has thus drawn out how abyssal geography presents a distinctive mode of contemporary critique, developed from figuring the world as abyss.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Our open access project and publications on Anthropocene Islands examines how the figure of the island, islander and 'islandness' are generative for thinking through 'relational entanglement' as a key problematic in the Anthropocene (see <https://www.anthropoceneislands.online/page-3.html>). In a similar vein, our abyssal project draws out how particular Caribbean modes of practice have become productive for thinking abyssal geography. Both projects are interested in how particular geographical forms and modes of being are engaged in the production of contemporary critical thought.
- 2 The abyssal ~~subject~~ is a barred subject (under erasure), as 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~~ (Warren, 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' caught in the midst of agential 'rhizomic' processes of becoming: 'Rhizome, then, performs the conceptual labour of ontology. That is rhizome describes the *being* of subjectivity ...' (Drabinski, 2019: 115).
- 3 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' (Chandler, 2014: 113 n. 15).
- 4 Desedimentation is a term we take from Nahum Chandler who writes (Chandler, 2014: 65 – 6): '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'.

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