



Full Length Article

## Interstitial and Abyssal geographies

David Chandler<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jonathan Pugh<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Westminster, UK<sup>b</sup> Newcastle University, UK

### ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the contemporary crisis of faith in modern reasoning, work on islands and with island cultures has come to the fore in the development of alternative, non-Eurocentric, non-modern, ways of being and knowing. Much attention has surrounded a wide range of critical work associated with the 'ontological' or the 'relational' turn, highlighting interstitial, entangled, post- and more-than-human creative encounters of becoming. This paper examines the emergence of what we call 'abyssal thought', a related but distinctly different analytical approach drawing largely from critical Black studies. Central to abyssal approaches is the understanding of the world as ontologically inseparable from its violent forging through antiblackness. In putting coloniality at the heart of the modernist problematic, abyssal work turns to the Caribbean in particular as a gateway, door or 'punctum', a space of 'abyssal geographies', inviting a deconstruction or unmaking of the world. Exploring how, this paper draws out three key aspects of the abyssal analytic: (1) the abyssal 'subject' forged through the ontological violence of the making of the modern world, (2) the abyssal as a refusal of impositions of spatial and temporal fixities, and (3) the methodological approach of 'paraontology'. Thus, its key concerns are those of refusal, deconstruction and 'suspension' rather than of creative becoming. In distinction to relational ontologies of interstitial island work, the desire is not to save or to remake understandings of the human and the world but rather to negate them.

### 1. Introduction

The island is a prominent geographical form which has long been employed as a generative figure for thought (Glissant, 1997; Daou and Pérez-Ramos, 2016). Today, as critical debate increasingly seeks alternatives to modern reasoning's binary (human/nature, subject/object, mind/body) divides, the figure of the island has received renewed focus (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). In this paper, we draw out two tendencies, or heuristics, in contemporary work which employ islands to challenge modern reasoning in different ways: what we call 'interstitial' and 'abyssal' analytics.<sup>1</sup> Interstitial approaches employ islands as exemplars of understandings of boundary permeability and of relations of entangled becoming (Brigstocke, 2021; Hessler, 2018; Spahr, 2005). This work contributes to and draws from broader conceptual developments in actor network theory, new materialism and more-than-human geographies. Interstitial approaches invoke a *relational* ontology, where humans and non-humans world themselves through creative, co-constitutive encounters. Working in ways that highlight the centrality of the interstitial, we may develop new capacities, affordances and

sensitivities to others and the world around us; thereby enabling greater ecological awareness and facilitating new exploratory approaches in the face of climate catastrophe (Colebrook, 2021a, 2021b).

While the relational subject and interstitial islands as facilitating entangled becomings is the focus of this special issue, we wish to highlight the emergence of an analytically distinct abyssal 'grammar'<sup>2</sup> or approach, which can be heuristically drawn out from recent literatures associated with critical Black studies, Caribbean islands and the Middle Passage. Thus, whilst there have recently been important surveys of the field of Black Geography (notably Noxolo, 2022), we wish to broaden our scope by drawing out a distinctive analytical approach that today cuts across many other disciplines and fields of research. We think that Geographers will take a great deal of interest in this analytical development due to its original take on antiblackness and colonialism, and for how it specifically turns to geographies, notably those of the Caribbean, as profoundly generative and enabling for its development. Therefore, in order to draw out and elaborate what we call 'abyssal approaches' more effectively, throughout this paper, we introduce a range of key and clarifying terms.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [d.chandler@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:d.chandler@wmin.ac.uk) (D. Chandler).

<sup>1</sup> The two spatial figures 'abyss' and 'interstice' both cover a range of literal meanings in everyday language, with the key distinction being that 'abyss' signifies a gap of seemingly immeasurable or infinite depth while an 'interstice' indicates a space within particulate matter, connecting as well as separating.

<sup>2</sup> By 'grammar' we mean more than language or words, thereby pointing to the larger socio-historical framing that gives them meaning. Thus 'grammar' is the fleshing out of the paradigm or framing of the world, following Frank B. Wilderson's use in heuristically distinguishing three distinct 'grammars' or ontologies of violence (2010).

Central for abyssal approaches, as we learn from Caribbean writers from Césaire and Fanon onwards, is that the antiblack world is inseparable from the violence that forged the modernist ontology of human as subject and world as object.<sup>3</sup> Turning to the Caribbean, in particular, as a generative space for critique, abyssal approaches do not seek to re-tune to or salvage the world by developing more relationally sensitive ways of being and knowing. Instead, this work engages the Middle Passage and the Caribbean – from the hold of the slave ship, to creolisation and Caribbean cultural forms, such as carnival – for an abyssal geography which works relationality quite differently to the understandings offered via geography’s ‘relational turn’. Following Glissant’s radical delineation of Relation, relation is not understood as a form of productive creativity, with a telos of differentiation, but as a way of holding together, in suspension, opaque or indistinct, that which the cuts and separations of a modern ontology would rend apart (1997, pp. 134–5; see also da Silva, 2016). As we examine below, in abyssal work, there are no metaphysical assumptions of immanent or creative telos, which could enable affirmative imaginaries of salvage or redemption.

The paper is organised in the following way. The next section sets up an understanding of the interstitial island and its importance in bringing to the fore relational interdependencies and entanglements, challenging the binary divides of modern ontology. Interstitial work is thus situated within the broader turn to relational ontology in critical geography and critical theory more generally (Pugh, 2016). The rest of the paper then draws out what is at stake in an alternative approach of abyssal work; its understanding of the Caribbean as not creative in the way of interstitial approaches, but rather as holding the potential of negation, of deconstruction of the modern ontology of world. We counterpose the generative power of the interstitial to the negative force of abyssal deconstruction through a sustained engagement with three texts read through the abyssal framing: Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1997); Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (2001); and John Edgar Wideman’s *The Island: Martinique* (2003). We use these three texts to provide openings to grasp the Caribbean in ways which do not seek to (re)build relations of subject and world in positive terms of entanglement, but rather to illustrate three key aspects of the abyssal analytic: (1) the abyssal ‘subject’, forged through the violence of a modern ontology/world, (2) the abyssal refusal of spatial and temporal framings of modernity, and (3) the methodological approach of refusal, deconstruction and suspension, that of ‘paraontology’.

## 2. Interstitial life

Interstitial work is largely affirmative and enabling, revealing new ways in which island relationalities can assist in remaking and rethinking what it means to be human in an entangled world. Thus, work on ‘interstitial islands’ is about opening up, sensing and attuning to interactions, where life exists interdependently. In this relational ontology, the materiality of the island (often productively opposed to continents) is understood to play an important generative role in challenging the reductive binaries of modern frameworks of reasoning (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). The possibilities and potentialities are said, in particular, to be amplified by “the shore as a liminal space between the solid and the liquid—the land and the sea—as a space of encounter”, “the conceptual potential of the contact zone ...” (Boon et al., 2018, p. 6; DeLoughrey and Flores, 2019). Thus, in interstitial island work, inter-relations are enabling for our learning, experimentation and individuation. In this way, as Daou and Pérez-Ramos (2016, p. 9) draw out, the island provokes a particular challenge to land-locked continental thinking:

The fundamental finitude of the island should not be understood as a secluding boundary condition that creates a dichotomy between itself and the constitutive other. Instead ... its framed specificity allows us to better understand the interactions between things and world ... and also to construct new forms of thought that help reveal the world and render it legible ... In this way, the island bolsters the ecological imaginary, [of an] entangled world.

Interstitial island work is affirming through an openness to the world. Via the abstract starting point of entanglement, at the level of ontology, of being, the human as subject and the world as object are placed in a dynamic relationship of becoming. The subject changes at the same time as its perception of, and relation to, the outside is transformed (Daou and Pérez-Ramos, 2016; Spahr, 2005). The ‘world’ – channelled through the island – comes into being through interaction, rather than pre-existing, being there to be ‘discovered’ (Farrier, 2020). This makes an interstitial or relational ontology very different to the modernist one, of distinct entities conceived as independent of, or existing prior to, relation. Latour gives the example of training the body to acquire greater sensitivity or affordances to be a ‘nose’ for wine tasting, ‘a dynamic definition of the body as “learning to be affected”’ (2004, p. 209). Interstitiality reworks our understanding of the human as subject, placing it within rather than outside or prior to relation, in a dynamic and open process of becoming.

Islands and their surrounding life have come to play a powerful role in the development of these relational lines of thought (see Pugh & Chandler, 2021). For example, Boon et al. (2018, p. 35) draw attention to “the conceptual potential of mud” around island shores: ‘At a fundamental level, mud is about encounter ... As a sticky substance, mud may not necessarily be interesting in and of itself; rather, it is interesting to the extent that it interacts with other things, both human and nonhuman ... Mud is a point of contact.’ (p. 37). Thus, they are drawn to such questions as: “What happens in this murky, interstitial space between the solid and the liquid? What might an attentiveness to mud—as both material substance and conceptual metaphor—enable? What might it mean to play with mud?” (p. 36). Encountering mud as a shifting materiality thereby enables new ways of thinking about the world as relational becoming. Similarly, for Julian Brigstocke (2021, p. 3), “thinking with the sandy substrate of Hong Kong” might enable us to unsettle “racialized extractive capitalism by unearthing unsettled, shifting grounds, working with the elemental swerve of matter to undermine material practices of consolidation and colonial closure.” The key point for Brigstocke is that sand, like mud, has dynamic materiality, and it is important to attune to how sand is formed and reformed, relationally entangled, with the human and more-than-human world. For Brigstocke, encountering sand on an island – how and why it is blasted, dug up, melted, and petrified into consolidated forms – is a way of attuning to the legacies of colonialism and the relational entanglements which make up island life. It is through our encounters – the inter-relation between sand, or mud, and us – that a pathway opens for us to attune to the world. In this sense, sand and mud, and island life more generally, become our ‘informants’ – so long as we are open to the inter-relational encounter and to being affected by it.

This interstitial work foregrounds the political potential of being sensitised to island relational entanglements (Drifters Project, 2019; Hawkins, 2018). Attuning to the shifting nature of island life enables us to open ourselves out to what emerges ‘in-between’ the reductive categories of modern frameworks of reasoning. Interstitial island work can thus be understood to be part of what has come to be known as the broader ‘relational turn’ in island studies (Pugh, 2016): it takes a relational approach to ontology, open to and generative of alternative ways of knowing and being. For a relational ontology, there is little conception of an ‘outside’ that is not enabling; fungible in some way for the posthuman as an embedded and relational subject. Thus, for those turning to the oceans surrounding islands, even engagements with the abyss grasp the unknown in ways that are framed in terms of enabling

<sup>3</sup> As David Marriott argues in his study of Fanon’s thought, ‘anti-blackness is the discourse through which ... being is articulated’ (2018, p. x; see also Keel, 2018).

relational entanglements. As illustrated in Melody Jue's (2020) *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, the focus is one of productive instrumentalization: the meaning of our more-than-human and nonhuman planetary kin for us. 'We' are always pushed to expand beyond our existing limits and constraints, mobilizing our non-human kin, such as the 'vampire squid', capable of enabling us to be at home even in the oceanic abyss. Jue (2020, p. 73) writes:

The abyss dramaticizes the ocean's condition of ephemerality, where inscription on paper or even stone tablets would eventually be eroded by seawater or encrusted with growth. Because the vampire squid lives in a milieu where not all our vocabulary or figurative language works smoothly, it pushes us to consider more ocean-specific conditions of mediation and a vocabulary that would be adequate to the abyssal environment.

For Jue (2020, p. 73) ocean forms of interstitial mediation offer "a speculative environment constructing a 'molluscane point of view' [which enables us] to imagine how an intelligent aquatic organism would develop different concepts to orient itself to its world than those familiar to the dry landscapes of human thought." Thus, oceanic encounters, crossings and imaginaries, like the work on islands discussed above, are seen to enable us to speculatively expand our minds; to experiment further into the world beyond modernist constraints. There may be vast distances (physically or psychologically) to navigate – significant 'in-between' or 'interstitial' spaces to attune to – but, as the above examples of island mud, sand, and abyssal oceanic life illustrate, importantly they are always to be made available for us; for human growth, individuation and learning. In the rest of the paper, we turn to a different way of disrupting modern frameworks; a mode of abyssal work that while sharing the critique of modern reasoning refuses the lure of relational ontology, the lure of the post- or more-than-human, i.e. the promise of salvage for both the human and the world.

### 3. The abyssal subject

In the interstitial or relational modes of engagement, island work is important in order to change human acts and understandings, enabling humans and the world, as a human home or 'dwelling', to continue in the face of the challenges of catastrophic climate change (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 195). The abyssal approach, on the contrary, understands the modern episteme not as a correctable error but as inextricable from the violent forging of the modern world itself (Césaire, 1972, p. 42; Robinson, 1983).<sup>4</sup> This 'world' presupposes antiblackness as the disavowed ground for its hierarchical binaries of humans and nonhumans, for its fungible objects and masterful subjects, for its transcendental subject and fixed natural laws and grids of time and space (Marriott, 2018; da Silva, 2021; Harney & Moten, 2021; Moten, 2018). This 'world' needs to be properly accounted for before there can be any possibility of moves to redemption or salvage. It is in clarifying these stakes, that the Caribbean often comes into focus for abyssal work, as a potential gateway, door or punctum (Avery, 1997, p. 108) enabling the questioning of much that is taken for granted in critical thought (Chandler, 2014, p. 13; Philip, 1989, p. 83; Ruiz & Vourloumis, 2021, p. 132).

In the contemporary turn to Caribbean writing, perhaps most engaged with is Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997; see, for example, King, 2019; King et al., 2020; Colebrook, 2019; Keeling, 2019; Ruiz & Vourloumis, 2021; Quashie, 2021; Povinelli, 2021; Spivak, 2021; Harney & Moten, 2021). Few books establish the violence of the making of the world of modernity as powerfully as Glissant's, which famously

begins by moving through the three abysses of the Middle Passage: the slave ship hold, the depths of the sea, and the gradual loss of African origins on the Caribbean plantation. 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" (ibid., p. 6). Second, "the entire sea, gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (ibid., p. 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 or imagination" (ibid., p. 7). Key for contemporary abyssal work is that the subject of these three abysses is dissolved, lacking a perspective from which to see the world in its own image (Harney & Moten, 2013; Spillers, 2003, p. 215). There is no going back after 'The Door of No Return' to "irretrievable selves" (Brand, 2001, p. 224; Gumbs, 2018).

What could be called the 'abyssal cut' then violently constitutes the binary divides of the 'colour line', of subjects understood as self-constituting, and of objects understood as other-determined and available to be put to use through the creation of plantation societies (da Silva, 2007). Thus, colonial violence produces the unrooted abyssal subject – grasped not in the rhizomic terms of being open to the world of relation (Moten, 2013, p. 749; 2018, p. 204), but as non-subject, never distinct from nor able to project itself upon the world – a subject in what Moten (2017, p. 67) calls "eternally alien immanence". The abyssal subject, lacking in 'ontological resistance' (Fanon, 1986, p. 110), necessarily exists through what we call 'abyssal sociality', holding together what would be cut and made distinct under modern and colonial reasoning, 'giving-on-and-with' (Glissant, 1997, p. 142), through maintaining differences in *suspension* (1997, p. 95). Thus the abyssal subject exists in 'the hold', in suspension, outside or against the cuts and distinctions of an antiblack world. When Harney and Moten (2013, p. 94) say, "And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world", they are not talking about a production of a world, but rather its suspension, what "Édouard Glissant calls *l'improvisible* is continually improvised. And the trick, of course, is this refusal of border under the constraint of border's constant imposition" (Moten, 2017, p. 227; see also 2003, p. 99).

Thus, the world as abyss is the world as Glissant's *chaos-monde*, a world without the violence of cuts and distinctions, opacity without "individuation-in-relation" (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 126). It is therefore also anti-ontological, outside the violence of ontological world-making. In this way, abyssal work, the underside of modernity, relentlessly moves against the modernist distinctions of the (antiblack) world, and is driven by the desire not for production but 'the purpose of ... suspension' (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 158). Abyssal thought seeks to defer the cuts or decisions which ground the modern ontology and which enrol the Caribbean as part of this process of cutting (Ruiz & Vourloumis, 2021). For abyssal thought, the Caribbean is at the centre of this struggle, to exist outside of and despite the cuts that constitute the modern world of entities and relations. Abyssal thought seeks to resist, to slow, to disrupt and to deconstruct this process.

### 4. Abyssal spatialities and temporalities

So far, we have introduced abyssal thought as a distinctive grammar or paradigm, which emphasises that we cannot separate out (antiblack) modern ontology from the violence of world-making. In this section we wish to illustrate the importance of historical and temporal groundings

<sup>4</sup> As we were going through the final revisions, Elizabeth Povinelli's (2021) *From Gaia to Ground* was published, making a similar point about the distinction between framings which start from timeless ontological assumptions and those which start from the grounding historical violence which forges the modernist world.

to abyssal work.<sup>5</sup> We do this through a text which, for our reading, is exemplary in its grounding of the abyssal through the Caribbean: Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (2001). Benítez-Rojo's provocation is to see the Caribbean birthing the 'global colour line': the biurification between what we understand as the developed West of modernity and the post-colonial world. The Caribbean as the fulcrum of modernity as a world-making and world-denying project, the site of the production of both Black (ended) and White (ened) subjects, 'was hammered into shape' by Christopher Columbus:

... something like a medieval vacuum cleaner. The flow of Nature in the island was interrupted by the suction of an iron mouth, taken thence through a transatlantic tube to be deposited and redistributed in Spain ... A machine of the same model (think of a forge with its sparkling clangor and combustion), with an extra bolt here and a bellows there, was installed in Puerto Rico, in Jamaica, in Cuba ... (2001, pp. 5–6)

The repeating island, that gives the book its title, is a metaphor for the forcing violence that produces the world from the 'between' that is not in between, increasingly making the division of the world, between colonizer and colonized, between human and non-human, between reason and irrationalism, between aid provider and aid receiver. As this process repeats and expands the world that is produced appears to exist 'naturally' and the process of violence and cutting becomes invisible. In an analysis comparable to Marx's critique of commodity fetishism under capitalism (Marx, 1983, pp. 76–87), the effects of this process, the entities thrown off, appear to have a substance and existence – a being, a presence – of their own. The global colour line, the racialization of the world, ontologically, imbricated within the very being of the world, appears to be natural. Benítez-Rojo's *Repeating Island* is one way of denaturalizing this world, of deconstructing what is considered to be naturally 'there' and would otherwise be obscured precisely by the success of the process itself.<sup>6</sup>

There is a focus on the 'between' of the Caribbean, but this is not an interstitial approach, but rather its ontological inversion: the Caribbean is not understood as a place of 'encounter' between different cultures, as if socio-, economic- and political-divides pre-existed it. Rather than a space of encounter within a timeless interstitial (relational) ontology, the Caribbean is framed as a site where 'being' and 'non-being' themselves are violently forged.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Benítez-Rojo attempts:

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

This abyssal analytic is thereby one of disruption and deconstruction, articulated via centring the Caribbean as central to the construction of modernity, historio-socio-economically as well as, importantly, ontologically. To follow Benítez-Rojo, on the one hand we have the process of

<sup>5</sup> Thus abyssal thought can be easily distinguished from other recent attempts to bring 'the negative' to the fore in critical geography (for example, Rose et al., 2021). For abyssal work, grounded in the violent ontological construction of the world, the negative comes *after*, not first (Rose et al., 2021, p. 288), as an historically contingent response to the ontological 'terror' of the making of the antiblack world (Warren, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> This point is made by Derrida (2001), p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> As Nahum Dimitri Chandler argues, this line of (abyssal) thought dates back to W. E. B. Du Bois, who conceived of modern slavery as 'standing at the inception – neither inside or outside – of modern imperial colonialism, of a supposed European world economy, of capitalism as a system, of modernity as a global horizon' (2013, p. 113, n. 15).

cuts of world-making – he uses the concept of plantation as a machinic approach to biurification (2001, pp. 37–39) – and in response to this there is resistance, the attempt to disrupt and to defer the making of the antiblack world. This too is read by Benítez-Rojo as being centred on the Caribbean. This is the abyssal culture of survival and of resistance; a culture where differences are held together through an alternative sense of the universal which emerges against differentiation, where differences are held together in play, often in *carnaval* (2001, p. 29). In the hold, in play, in carnival, an analytic of suspension is invoked that is quite distinct from the differentiating and expansive, productive powers of interstitial imaginaries (2001, p. 29).

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

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

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

If we bear in mind that the Plantation was a proliferating regularity in the Caribbean sphere, it becomes difficult to sustain the idea that the region's social structures cannot be grouped under a single typology. It is true that the Plantation's model differs from one island to another, and that sugar's hegemony begins in Barbados, passes to Saint-Dominique, and ends in Cuba, spreading itself out in time and space over three centuries. But it is precisely these differences that confer upon the Plantation its ability to survive and keep transforming itself, whether facing the challenge of slavery's abolition, or the arrival of independence, or the adoption of a socialist mode of production. (Benítez-Rojo, 2001, p. 74, p. 74)

If the Caribbean is the site of the coercive forcing of the racialized and gendered world of a modernist ontology<sup>8</sup> – the Plantation, or racial capitalism – then in resistance to this, in flight from this, is 'the community of maroons, the *palenque*', the 'antiplantation', the community not so much of the 'free' but those suspended in difference (2001, p. 249). Not 'between' but seeking to suspend the decision or cut. Benítez-Rojo closes his book with 'Carnival' and, for us, this chapter is particularly useful for highlighting an abyssal approach. He importantly distinguishes his intention from the treatments by Mikhail Bakhtin and Umberto Eco who both see carnival (in the same way as slave-owners' dances and holidays) as a partial letting go with the purpose of reaffirming the old or traditional order of power (2001, p. 306). For Benítez-Rojo, in carnival, the world is imagined abyssally through holding off, deferring the cut, holding differentiations together in ways that are strange, paradoxical, even frightening. Carnival is not an opposition to a modernist ontology nor an inversion of its values and hierarchies, for

<sup>8</sup> For a study which highlights the important linkages, see Bey's *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (2020).

Benítez-Rojo, it points to something much more radical, which is precisely its interest for us in this paper, a refusal of the antiblack process of world-making itself:

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

Having given this extended illustration of the spatial and temporal specificity of abyssal work, we can now be clearer about the difference between abyssal thought, on the one hand, and relational and interstitial ontologies on the other. As we discussed above, the grammar of relational ontologies, the interstitial, is constituted by a timeless ontology which already presupposes the world of being or of presence. In contrast, abyssal work is explicitly grounded in the violent history of modern ontological worldmaking; seeking to hold in suspension, to blur, or make indistinct, against linear spatio-temporalities and fixed grids of space and time. Here, abyssal work does not destabilize modernity's closures or distinctions between entities by invoking an alternative, positive, relational ontology of spatio-temporal becoming, more open to the world. To the contrary, there is no such 'positive' alternative in abyssal thought. Rather, the stakes are framed negatively, in terms of a radical negation and refusal, of deconstructing or desedimenting the processes through which certain differences/cuts are seen to be meaningful or natural (Moten, 2017, p. 312, n. 1). For the abyssal approach, this undermining takes the form of ontological deconstruction of the world given meaning by the 'global colour line' (Chandler, 2013; Du Bois, 1903) - a line understood as undergirding the modernist binaries, including those of culture and nature, subject and object, human and animal. Thus, while both interstitial and abyssal work critique modern ontology, at the heart of the distinction, we suggest, is an approach that articulates a different grammar to that of relational approaches. An 'abyssal' grammar works to deconstruct a modern ontology rather than to add to it or to improve it.

Abyssal thought is not abstract or timeless but works through distinct spatialities and temporalities through which the antiblack world is (re) produced. Firstly, spatially, in abyssal work, as we have just seen, the Caribbean is not marginal or liminal between Africa and America and Canada, but the disavowed axis or fulcrum of the (un)making of the world (Chandler, 2014; Glissant, 1997; Philip, 1989). Abyssal geographies of the Caribbean work to clarify antiblackness as the production of the world, where blackness is the disavowed or excessive outside of the world of entities as objects for the human as subject. Thought from and with the Caribbean enables an abyssal approach, viewing the world othered through a modernist imaginary, without the world of entities and laws. What was submerged, disavowed and degraded by world-making modernist ontology, comes back into awareness in the world as abyss, where being and non-being co-exist in what could be understood as analogous to quantum entanglement (Harney & Moten, 2021). This attention to the ongoing process of making and remaking the antiblack world of modernity means that geographies of the abyss do not operate in a linear temporality (Ruiz & Vourloumis, 2021). Thus, the analogies with quantum physics are not ontological assertions of relational entanglement (as in Smith, 2016) but concern the historical and social mechanisms through which the world is cut into being and non-being or subject and object. Abyssal thought works to reveal the violence and artificiality of these distinctions and instead holds them in suspension.

As we analysed above, 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 antiblackness.

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: antiblackness is co-constitutive with this ontology of the transcendental subject and world as object. For abyssal thought, there is little at stake in any abstract or merely formal temporal distinctions cutting the present from the past. The point is to highlight the centrality of coloniality to the ontology of the modern world.

From this perspective, there can be no moving on from or beyond modernity 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 refusal 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 antiblackness. The implications for critical Western thought are that there can be no recuperation of the world of modernity from its colonial past. Abyssal approaches to the violences and exclusions that constitute the modern ontology of being are increasingly giving visibility to hauntological presences that refuse the cut of the present from the past. Thus Indigenous genocide, chattel slavery and the plantation mode of thought, generated via and through the Caribbean, could be understood to operate in ways akin to Marx's proletariat, as the spectre haunting not merely Europe, but the world of Western modernity itself.

## 5. Paraontology

The force of abyssal thought is generated via a holding together with the disavowed, the unaccounted, those banned from the world of being and the world of the subject.<sup>9</sup> As we have analysed, the refusal of antiblackness, the refusal 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 negation. Unlike the understanding of the interstitial, the abyssal is deconstructive, disruptive of sedimented notions of subject/object or human/nature. Here, the thought of the abyssal works with a distinct method that can be characterised as 'paraontological'. 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, p. 17, p. 17)

A paraontological approach is explicitly adopted by authors including Harney and Moten (2021) and Chandler (2013). What Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter also refer to as, 'paraontological life' (2017, p. 47),<sup>10</sup> is central for the abyssal work and analytic we are drawing out in this paper. 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 potential site for the undoing of these ontological cuts and imaginaries (see Chandler, 2013, 2014). Abyssal life is constituted by the violence of colonial exclusion so has a double existence of being brought into being but knowing or experiencing this being in the world as unsettling and lacking ontological security (Fanon, 2001, p. 41; see also; Jones, 2012). Abyssal or paraontological life, confronted by unknowability and forced

<sup>9</sup> In this respect the Caribbean could be understood as Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) in reverse: as the process of dissolving the antiblack world of modernity rather than of its construction.

<sup>10</sup> This foregrounding of a 'paraontological' approach distinguishes our understanding of 'abyssal geographies' from that of An Yountae (2018).

to improvise and to invent on the move, is captured well in R. A. Judy's recent magisterial study *Sentient Flesh* (2020).

Whereas (above) we gave Latour as a good example of an interstitial approach, the desire to inculcate capacities/affordances to respond to relational entanglements; the abyssal approach differs in that it 'unsettles being' rather than affirming alternative ways of knowing and engaging. Abyssal thought is deconstructive; affirmative relational approaches of the interstitial are constructive. Latour's 'nose', the wine sommelier, builds his own individual capacities and affordances through his 'encounters' and 'entanglements', whereas Haitian Juba dancers, or the players in a jazz ensemble, discussed by Judy, or creolisation as opacity by Glissant (1997), lose their individuality and give themselves over to the rhythm where everything is held in suspension against cuts and distinctions. While Latour's sommelier exists in a temporality of progress and growth, of becoming through refinement, attunement and 'learning to be affected', abyssal or paraontological life is lost in, deepens, or expands the moment itself: this is the logic of intensity rather than of extension. There is no 'in between' because there are no entities, no entities either pre-existing or produced: there is no 'product' for an abyssal approach, in fact, abyssal practices are 'non-productive' or 'non-creative' in these ways.

To further illustrate the paraontological approach or method, we will now turn to a novel rather than philosophical thought. The novel is John Edgar Wideman's *The Island: Martinique*. The work is provocative, and one in which it is clear that slavery is not something consigned to the past or merely useful as a metaphor, but a very real part of the island's 'living heritage' (2003, p. xxvi). As noted above, the presence of the past in the present is central to abyssal thought, but explanations are often shrouded in philosophical abstraction. Not so here:

Slaves and tourists. The guided tour and slavery. After pointing out a few odd parallels, wouldn't it be silly, maybe even perverse, to push the similarities very far. Aren't slaves and tourists at opposite poles of the scale of privilege and freedom. As markers defining such a scale, however, both demonstrate how the initial, uncorrected error of racism permeates an entire social system and distorts its values from top to bottom. (2003, p. 94)

It seems counter intuitive to say the least to connect slavery and tourism, both processes that work through the island as a place of otherness and separation. One experience is of violence and coercion on a genocidal scale, resulting in a permanent break from family, culture and origins, the other a chosen and desirable temporary break, subject to mass commercialisation, enabling a rejuvenation and positive return to ordinary life. The connection is a social system permeated by racism. Reading this paragraph alone is not enough to make the point Wideman works towards. Yes, there is racism and inequality, but this, in itself, does not necessarily justify comparing coerced slavery with commercial package holidays, even if the destination point is the same, geographically.

In our reading, Wideman's point is not merely that there is a continued or ongoing history of racial differentiation with inequalities reproduced both under coercion and under the 'freedom' of capitalist commerce. His point is ontological, that racism cannot be separated out or differentiated from the system of world-making itself: that racialized subjects are the products of this process. The 'colour line' is not something pre-existing but is continually produced through social processes that generate subjects/objects in the world, subjectifying some while thing-ifying others. Slavery and tourism both produce racialized subjects. Race is not something that is just there, pre-existing social processes. Just as slavery produced subjects as property owning sovereigns capable of self-determination and objects understood as less-than-human and as incapable of autonomy, so with package tourism and the guided tour:

When the tourist arrives on the island the native must disappear. (And vice versa, as Fanon understood.) ... The tourist expects to

enjoy the island unencumbered by those who've been displaced, replaced. What's the tour if not a golden opportunity to go native. The native population is superfluous, insubstantial as shadows cast by tourists going about the business of play ... Darkness also sought, since the darkness of the other (or freedom from self) is what draws the tourist to the island. The tourist's desire to be other, to play native. (2003, p. 89)

The island is itself a product of a process of displacement, of a need for the drudgery of 'normality' to be meaningful, via the tourist's projection of themselves as a subject rather than a cog in the machine of commodity production. The island experience assuages the commodity life of the wage labourer through the fantasy of being a subject in relation to a world of otherness, available to them as enabling:

The guided tour, itself a commodity, commodifies [the tourists who] sign on for the happy tropics and enter an assembly line, streamlined, efficient, and after their allotted days in the sun, roll out tanned and exhausted, ready, maybe grateful, for a return to the sanity of work. (2003, p. 88)

The guided tour produces the subject positions of Black and White just as chattel slavery did before. The novel can be read as a work of abyssal geography to suggest that little has changed beyond the mechanisms of the production of racialized subjects via the geographic form of the island. So what is it about the Caribbean in particular that enables the deconstruction of this binary?

Problem is that on island outposts of empire such as Martinique the inevitable sex between Europeans and Africans reveals very quickly the impermanence, permeability, mutability, and unreliability of skin colour as a marker of race. To solve this problem the settler drapes everybody in a mandatory second skin: *black* or *white*. Though invisible, this covering effectively overrides appearance. Not to acknowledge it risks severe punishment – isolation, exile, torture, fines, death, prison, ostracism – within the colonial order. What you might see when you look at a person (or yourself) is replaced by what you must see. The colonial solution goes further, ascribes value to this imaginary either/or. (2003, pp. 55–56)

The island both constructs and enables the deconstruction of this binary. The Caribbean is thereby generative or productive, but not in the framing of a relational ontology of interstitiality (from Darwin onwards, of non-linear differentiation and adaptation in more-than-human sympoietic and autopoietic growth and development). In an abyssal approach, developed here by employing a paraontological method, the Caribbean and its abyssal geographies are productive in a very different way. The Caribbean is a punctum that fractures, or opens a way, into unravelling or deconstructing the process of cuts and distinctions that constitutes a world where Black and White become pre-given entities in a world of Being, organised hierarchically around the human as universal subject.

*The Island: Martinique* is a good way into discussing an abyssal anti- or para-ontology as it is not presented as a study of embodied being or becoming, because the author is himself a tourist, alienated and unsure of his positionality. The novel thereby provides a fictional distancing or (as Frank Wilderson would argue, 2020, p. 14) a meta analysis not just of alienated being in the world, but of the process or systems of worlding that produce or generate a world in which life is impossible if it is not to become abyssal. Through a paraontological approach, it repeatedly demonstrates how the world of the subject, a world of being, a world of choice, is held up against the ontological production of the world which is not seen but, 'though invisible', overrides 'the world' of appearances. On every occasion where choice comes into the picture it is already problematic. It is already an acceptance of a modernist ontology of Being and of the subject and world. Thinking and working with the Caribbean, as with many other contemporary writers, noted above as working with an abyssal mode, is seen to problematise this abstract and oppressive

framing.

There are two moments in particular in the novel which stand out. The first concerns the reduction of choices to superficialities, once the passive standpoint of the individual pre-existing and separate from the world is assumed: 'We can choose blue, green, white or yellow toilet paper, but we're not asked whether we're willing to destroy the rain forest to pay for a choice of colours.' (2003, p. 96) Secondly, in a discussion of the choices of modernist politics of nationalism and of self-determination, which also presuppose separate pre-existing entities. In 1946, Martinicans voted to incorporate Martinique into metropolitan France rather than claim independence. This has been suggested to be a problem, the result being that 'The Martinican is in effect neither French nor West Indian, but a disembodied hybrid being unsure of its roots.' (2003, p. 96) Wideman's author protagonist thinks otherwise:

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

Undergirding both of these examples is the understanding that the world of choice is premised upon a modernist ontology of subject and world. That is a world imagined to be constituted through binary divides, a world of separate entities, a world in which the human as subject then makes choices and decisions as to what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Abyssal work deconstructs this world of cuts and separations that enable the constitution of the human as knowing/choosing subject. Understanding the world as abyss; the critique is of the racism that enables the process of making entities and of valuing in the first place. Abyssal thought, adopting a paraontological method, locates the problem of racialization as part of the process of world-making or world-imagining; not merely as a problematic approach to thinking about or acting within this world.

Just as, for Marx, the 'freedom' of the worker to contract with the capitalist in the labour market is premised upon prior relations of dispossession and social inequality (Marx, 1983, p. 172), the imagination of the Caribbean is similarly based upon a fiction of equality. For the tourist, the island is a world of escape, a world of affirmation, based upon the concealed labour of the native. The irony is that the tourist imagination, that constitutes the tourist as the freedom loving native vis-à-vis the reality of the hum drum life of the salariat, is one that is produced through the imaginary of the island. However, as Wideman astutely comments, the island as site of production can also be the site of deconstruction. Tourists can never be allowed to really become native, to put reality in the place of projected fantasy. It would not do to uncover the myth that there is no original freedom and that the fantasy of the human as subject can only be carved from the disavowal of native life and freedom. This is the disruption or deconstruction worked by abyssal thought.

Abyssal thought is therefore dangerous. As Wideman writes, it is: 'Not healthy to venture too far into the heart's darkness. *Beware, beware, the Gulf of Benin/Few come out, many go in.*' (2003, p. 90) Abyssal thought is dangerous because it exposes the grounding assumptions that fuel the imaginary that produces a world of being and subjects. The abyss is the world in which the violence of constructing and imposing a modernist ontology of distinctions and separations is visible, the world of catastrophe or disaster that is the precondition of modernity (see Bey, 2020, p. 53). As much as the Caribbean is the site of the production or generation of this world, it is also possible to think of the region as an opening, doorway or 'punctum' into a world in dissolution. This is not an act of speculation, of abstraction or of imagination. The modernist ontology is the imaginary, fuelled by the processes of power, that can turn islands into factories of racial distinction and the production of a world based on this reproductive violence of the global colour line. Yet, the Caribbean disrupts, the tourist itinerary as an example threatens to

disrupt, to deconstruct. Why? Because: 'Complete reversibility, complete exchange would be fatal. Fatal darkness from which there is no return.' (2003, p. 91).

The world and its subject is undone by abyssal thought. The project of world-making itself is called into question. Abyssal thought and paraontological work is thus essentially productive or generative, but differently to interstitial or relational understandings. Abyssal geographies, exemplified by the Caribbean in contemporary abyssal work, demonstrate the construction of the 'world' or the 'globe' to be a project of an ongoing process of destruction; a process which is genocidal and ecocidal in its cuts and distinctions. In this framing, it is the world itself which is a projection, a fantasy. The racialization or ontologisation of the world is not merely an instrumental, or even an accidental, by-product of power – it is part of the constitution of the meaning of power itself. This aspect of deconstruction, of abyssal thought, is perhaps least grasped by mainstream critical approaches. It is therefore here that we think abyssal work, and the abyssal analytic we are drawing out in this paper, is particularly distinctive.

The colour line, ontologies of race, of being and non-being, are at the heart of the metrics, the forms of thought, rather than a product of them. Wideman's novel highlights this in the writing of the slave-trader Père Labat, disgusted at his role in the degrading trade and at France's dependence upon it. It is important to heed that this dependence is ontological in the sense of the construction of France as civilized and as civilizer, the construction of a fantasy imaginary, dependent on the 'fecklessness and ignorance of his [Labat's] brethren' who 'know nothing of Martinique', yet use this fantasy projection to conceal the reality of 'pagan France [which] festers in its own putrid juices' (2003, p. 106).<sup>11</sup> Slavery and colonialism enabled Enlightenment imaginaries, imaginaries still being repeated, still constituting subjects and non-subjects five hundred years later, for example, under the guise of humanitarian intervention (2003, p. 106; see also Pallister-Wilkins, 2021).

Wideman's novel suggests an alternative or abyssal mode of being in this world – a world of opacity, where otherness is not distinct from the self but a field within which one is thrown. In the world as abyss, there is no possibility of seeing oneself in terms of a separated identity: 'Creole languages, according to prevailing linguistic theories, begin as pidgins – ephemeral, primitive, oral media of exchange created by people who don't understand one another's languages.' (2003, p. 45). Drawn from different parts of Africa, forced in the hold of the slave ship, people shared little in the way of common identities, languages and dialects, so had to improvise. It is this fusion on the move, a universal that does not produce hierarchies or exclusions, that lacks identity and distinctions, that Glissant understands in terms of *opacity* (Glissant, 1997; Harney & Moten, 2013): 'Creolisation insists on the moment, the fresh start each moment offers. Since the past is always present anyway, creolisation foregrounds the immediacy, urgency, and drama of daily exchanges with other people. Such encounters constitute the unfolding narrative of life.' (Wideman, 2003, p. 49) Creolisation is an improvised response of the abyssal subject, as is carnival, discussed earlier, responding to and holding together without the cuts of modern and colonial world-making. Abyssal life harbours a sociality of *chaos-monde*, of Relation, involving "all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us ... totality's reflection and agent in motion" (Glissant, 1997, p. 94).

To be clear then, this force of opacity, works otherwise to ontologies of distinct entities in relation to each other within grids of time and space; instead, grasping difference but without separability, as Denise Ferreira da Silva argues (2021). A form of sociality and engagement Harney and Moten (2021, p. 117) call the "boogie-woogie rumble" and Glissant (1997, p. 154) works as an analytical divide between 'thought

<sup>11</sup> Of course, there is a long tradition of critical work from the Caribbean making the ontological point of Europe's imagined self-image being constructed through this colonial imaginary, including, for example, Césaire, (1972); Fanon (2001).

of the Other' (beginning with the subject or entity, in relations, i. e., an interstitial ontology), and 'the other of Thought' (an abyssal or para-ontological framing), where Glissant says: 'To suspend the suspense we have recourse to this imaginary construct of totality, by means of which we transmute for ourselves this mad state of the world into a chaos that we are able to contemplate. An imaginary rekindled by the other of Thought.' (p. 155) For us, this analytical distinction opens the way towards an abyssal appositionality where 'opacity' works against or rather outside of frames of colonial capture (Glissant, 1997, p. 189), and the reproducibility of 'form'. As Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis write: 'Blurring and fading are aesthetic strategies as much as they are political accomplishments.' (2021, p. 55) Thus, abyssal approaches, working through a paraontological method, are very different from understandings of being and reality that focus upon being-in-relation or entities-in-relation, as if relations were simply awaiting 'us'; to better attune to and sense, for our individuation, learning and growth.

## 6. Conclusion

We began this paper by highlighting how, in much contemporary debate, islands have emerged as key figures, engaged in different ways for the critique of modern reasoning (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). Here we have drawn out 'abyssal' approaches as an alternative framing to that of 'interstitial' work with islands. For interstitial approaches, islands are sites of affirmation, available for us to learn from and experiment with, by sensing and attuning to relational entanglements. Thus, interstitial island work is contextual and inter-relational, and works with relational ontologies which are open and productively individuating, adding to 'our' entangled world. By contrast, the abyssal approach is a negating one, deconstructing cuts and separations that are part and parcel of the making of the (anti)black world. This pushes to the fore the Caribbean in particular – both imbricated within the world-making process, (re)producing the modernist ontology of being, and as holding the potential force of disruption. For abyssal and paraontological work, as we have detailed, the Caribbean is an exemplary 'abyssal geography' for reconfiguring the stakes in this way, for developing abyssal thought, and for radically re-working the spatialities and temporalities of critique.

For us, the keys to understanding the importance of abyssal approaches are two-fold. Firstly, they are grounded on the real and ongoing historical, social and political construction of the world as available to the human as subject, rather than starting from the timeless understandings of the 'ontological' turn, seeking to locate new 'truths' in a relational and entangled order. Secondly, they do not suborn critical thought to the saving of the world or the reworking of the human (Colebrook, 2021b). For abyssal approaches, as for Fanon and Césaire, 'the world' itself is the problem. It is no coincidence that Fanon, Césaire and Glissant drew their conclusions from the Caribbean, emblematic of the grounding violence of colonial modernity, and that the region's influence is central to contemporary approaches of the abyssal. Thus, we conclude that the distinction between the interstitial and the abyssal is of substantial importance for island studies and human geography more generally: interstitial approaches seek to develop an alternative way of understanding the world, replacing modern reasoning with relational ways of knowing and being, productively attuning to relational entanglements, offering a positive solution to the Western crisis of faith in modernity. Abyssal approaches, working through what we call 'abyssal geographies' and 'abyssal socialities', notably from the Caribbean, offer no such positive alternative. The abyssal project is thereby a critical and negating one, always incomplete, in that it seeks to deconstruct and to disrupt the ongoing process of world-making.

## Declaration of competing interest

No Conflict of Interest.

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