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Commentary

## Relational or abyssal?☆

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Steinberg's excellent AAG *Political Geography* plenary paper – 'Blue Planet, Black Lives: Matter, Memory, and the Temporalities of Political Geography' – is a powerful illustration of how ocean scholars increasingly foreground a relationally entangled world of wet and more-than-wet ontologies (Peters & Steinberg, 2019; Steinberg & Peters, 2015). It is within the parameters of a broader 'relational turn', of relational ontologies, that Steinberg sets up the stakes: exploring "how the ontological challenges posed by the ocean's materiality and the porous boundaries of marine ecologies and economies aligns with scholarship emanating from Black and Caribbean thought to rethink the linear histories and unitary identities that underpin modernist narratives". Here, on the one hand, Steinberg encourages relational engagement with "the water's depths, its phenomenological affordances, its absorptive liquidity, its sonic resonances, its blinding darkness, its incessant mobilities (both periodic and chaotic), its lifegiving, and life-taking, molecular structure." On the other, he acknowledges the limits of everything dissolving, maintaining the importance of a political project and subject with directed goals.

"In the end, the best solution might be a dialogue between the one strategy – telling the stories of objects in place in order to unearth a space and the social relations and histories that underpin it – and the other – thinking through liquid matter to destabilise the very notion of bounded space and linear time as tools (and representations) of social power. At the metaphorical mid-way point in the Floating Harbour, we can orchestrate a meeting between Black Lives Matter and World Oceans Day, between the M Shed exhibit and the Arnolfini, between the contested, linear history and geography of the Edward Colston statue and the elided, non-linear history and geography of Frank Bowling's paintings. From this meeting point, the ocean's 'historical poetry' can be put to work to reveal hidden histories and suggest new geographies."

Thus, we have the delineation and tension between two schematic modes of engaging oceans and race. In my intervention, I want to acknowledge the growing pressure of a third schematic, yet to be

analytically draw from the literature: an 'abyssal' rather than 'relational' approach.

Like much contemporary scholarship, Steinberg is (re)turning to Caribbean writers in particular to grapple with questions of race and the material world; notably Derek "Walcott (from Saint Lucia), Édouard Glissant (from Martinique), Kamau Brathwaite (from Barbados), and Antonio Benítez-Rojo (from Cuba)." Steinberg says, in their work, "The ocean is not where history goes to die." ..... But what if, from the perspective of the surging abyssal critique I am interested in analytically drawing out here, this is precisely what these Caribbean writers did say? What if history did dissolve in the abyss of the Middle Passage, and what if the cultures which emerged reveal the fantasy, often dangerous, of both modern frameworks and tropes which open out into sensing, tracking and tracing their relational entanglements and becomings? What if, like many of the contemporary authors I discuss below, we took Glissant (1997: 190) at his word when he insists on "irreducible singularity" and "opacity", and where would this leave political geographers and others interested in 'thought of the Other'? (Glissant, 1997: 154).

Glissant's (1997) *Poetics of Relation* famously opens by moving through three abysses of the Middle Passage: forcing together in the slave ship hold, the depths of the sea, and the gradual forgetting of African origins on the Caribbean plantation. 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:6). Second, "the entire sea, gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (ibid:6). Finally, the third abyss "projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except – more and more threadbare – in the blue savannas of memory and imagination" (ibid:7). For Glissant then, in this sense, history does die in the abyss: the subject of these three abysses is dissolved and no longer sees the world in its own image. There is no going back after 'The Door of No Return' to "irretrievable selves" (Brand, 2011: 224). What could be called the 'abyssal cut' then violently constitutes the entities of the 'colour line' as if they are natural through the creation of unnatural

☆ This commentary is a response to Steinberg's AAG *Political Geography* plenary paper – 'Blue Planet, Black Lives: Matter, Memory, and the Temporalities of Political Geography'.

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plantation societies. The lack of rootedness of this subject, produced through colonial violence, is what could be called the unrooted, uprooted ‘abyssal subject’, prized open by the world – what Fred Moten (2017: 67) calls “eternally alien immanence”. For Glissant, shorn of a world produced in its own image, the abyssal subject can therefore only meet otherness with opacity, as unknowable, rather than the colonial subject who projects upon and assimilates the other for its own purposes. The figure of mute Friday who existentially remains “unlocked” by the White European gaze in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (Spivak, 1990: 16). Crucially, therefore, for many contemporary authors – like Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2014), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2021), M NourbeSe Philip (1989), Sarah Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter (2017), R.A. Judy (2020), Marquis Bey (2020), Denise da Silva (2016), Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis (2021), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020), and others – it is precisely the artificiality of colonial framings which enables resistance to open-up the question of ontology itself.

Here, recent years have seen the dramatic rise of what David Chandler and myself are coming to understand as ‘abyssal thought’, a ‘doubled understanding’ of blackness: generative both in the violent construction of the modern ‘world’ and its facilitation of openings for its ‘deconstruction’. As Benítez-Rojo (2001) illustrates, on the one hand we have the cuts of modern and colonial world-making, but, simultaneously, there is resistance, the attempt to *hold open*, to suspend, disrupt and to defer colonial world-making (illustrated in how much contemporary work is (re)turning to creolisation, Calypso, Jazz, Afro-futurism, Dub, and Carnival, for examples).

“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)

This is a good example of the world as “*chaos-monde*”, as Glissant (1997: 94) would say, a world without entities held-in-relation, suspending and working against the reductive grasping hand of ontology (whether constituted by modern reasoning, more-than-human relational tropes, or otherwise). The insistence upon “irreducible singularity” (Glissant, 1997: 190), gathering and embracing “totality finally sufficient to itself” (Glissant, 1997:27). Similarly, for Denise da Silva (2016: 65), *On Difference Without Separability*, radical critique needs to work to hold everything in suspension, without cuts and distinctions.

“when the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existents, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existent.”

In such works, and many others besides today, we can draw out the difference between Glissant’s (1997: 154) European tradition of ‘thought of the Other’ – opening outwards towards the Other through care for relational entanglements – with the more radical, abyssal ‘other of Thought’, where the subject is ‘prized open’ from the outside by infinite Relation.

“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” (Glissant, 1997: 155).

For me, this points the way towards an abyssal positionality, exposing the modern world as (violent) fantasy by holding open the world of Relation. Here, an increasing number of authors are turning to “para-ontology” (Bey, 2020: 17; N.D. Chandler, 2014; Cervenak & Carter, 2017; Moten and Harney, 2021), where “the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology ... [but] ... dissolution”, which “breaks

up and desediments” categorisation, holding that “categorisation is a mechanism of ontology” (Bey, 2020: 17). In these recent developments, the philosophical tradition of deconstruction has also been important. Yet, the substantiating focus upon blackness, as material and generative force, emerging through the abysses of the Middle Passage, means that whilst they overlap these approaches cannot be straightforwardly aligned with Derrida. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida (2011) engages Robinson Crusoe, on a Caribbean island, to slowly draw out and deconstruct the sovereign subject. But when authors interested in blackness as a generative force, like Harney and Moten (2021: 80), turn to the Caribbean they engage cultural forms, such as Carnival, which are “teaming, an inappropriate swarm having a funky inappropriate time, dispersed as a series of infinite series of breaks in an infinite passion.” Here, as Harney and Moten (2013: 47) further clarify, “blackness” is not confined to “black people”, even as they are “(under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it”. Neither is creolisation confined to a trackable relational ontology, or ‘hybrid’ relations, traceable from the ‘outside’, as often portrayed in the literature. Rather, the focus is upon *relentlessly deconstructing and suspending forces*, of Carnival, of Dub, of maroon communities, of creolisation, working from the ‘inside’ – “Blackness is unwatchable because there’s no way to watch it that ain’t in it, no way to watch it from the outside” (Harney & Moten, 2021:53).

Thus, what I am characterising here as ‘abyssal work’ is (re)turning to the Caribbean in a significant way, as this powerful “vortex” (Philip, 1989: 83) – from Gumbs’ (2020) *Dub* to Philip & Boateng’s (2008) *Zong! and Wynter’s (2012) Maskerade*. An “explosive” (Glissant, 1997: 33), highly generative, geo-ontological space which not only enables us to clarify the world as abyss, but to more sharply delineate the stakes of critique – on the one hand, opening out to how everything is co-constituted through traceable inter-relational becomings (Glissant’s ‘thought of the Other’), on the other, to practices and analytics which refuse being held-in-relation, remaining opaque, suspending the cuts and distinctions of ontological world-making (the ‘other of Thought’). My sense is that analytically drawing out this third distinction, beyond the two approaches of modern and relational thinking which Steinberg so effectively engages, will become increasingly important for Geographers. As the pressure to decolonialise institutions, universities and practices grows, tensions will no doubt increasingly emerge between ‘thought of the Other’ and the ‘other of Thought’ – that is, between those which claim to decentre the human as subject, sensing and tracking inter-relational entanglements, and communities or analytics which adopt a less affirmative or para-ontological approach, refusing both modern rationalist assumptions and relational ontological imaginaries.

## Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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