



The stakes of abyssal geography. Response to commentaries on David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh's 'Abyssal geography'.

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We thank Kevin Grove, Adom Philogene Heron, and Tracey Skelton for their generous and extremely useful commentaries on the abyssal analytic. We also thank James D. Sidaway, Nuraziah Aziz, and Chih Yuan Woon for facilitating the dynamic flow of discussion and debate—beginning with a draft paper, then the RGS-IBG conference plenary and discussion with the panel and audience, now concluding with the published paper (Chandler & Pugh, 2023) together with three commentaries. This process has certainly enabled us to develop and clarify our analytical framework. Throughout the process, we think it is probably fair to say, Grove has been the most interested in the potential of the project, Skelton has been tentatively sceptical, and Philogene Heron the most doubtful regarding what an abyssal analytic may have to offer. The three commentaries thus provide a range of approaches which, we think, reflects well where Geography as a discipline is at today. Work that seeks to question the ethical and political assumptions behind what might be called the relational or new materialist shifts to a less anthropocentric or 'more-than-human' analytic is generating growing interest in the discipline (we come back to this point at the end of our response).

Before turning to the three commentaries and their significant points for discussion, we start by briefly re-emphasizing that the paper sets out to highlight the importance of an emergent 'abyssal' or non-relational paradigm of critique which we contrast to the 'relational' and 'ontological' assumptions which drive much critical work today. We discuss how rearticulating the world as abyss foregrounds the foundational violence of Indigenous dispossession, chattel slavery and the Middle Passage via the assembling of a figurative position without ontological security—a structural perspective of the abyssal ~~subject~~. The subject is placed under erasure to put its status under question and thus to distinguish it from other treatments, such as John Drabinski's relational ontology of an 'abyssal subject' amid agential 'rhizomic' processes of becoming (2019: 115). Crucially, as Grove saliently recognizes throughout his commentary, the assembling of the abyssal ~~subject~~ enables a registration of world-making violence, while being unobtainable on literal, ontological or ontic grounds. The abyssal ~~subject~~ may be a figurative assemblage, a 'poetical' provocation for thought, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022: 27, n 5) might put it, but this figuration is one that cannot be separated from the historical and economic realities of the Caribbean and the role of this space in

the structuring of the world of modernity, grasped ontologically as a 'One World World' of entities to be known and governed in a fixed grid of space and time (Law, 2015).

The central argument of our paper is that figuring the world as abyss is deeply generative, problematizing the cuts of entities, essences, and spatial and temporal fixity. To underscore the distinctiveness of the abyssal approach or method, we wish to delineate it as *para*-ontological, questioning claims of ontological grounds (see also Chandler, 2014). This means that abyssal work is not anti-ontological and negating, operating from an oppositional, affirmative ontological position; it does not seek to rescue or reinsert ontology, but is instead deconstructive, problematizing knowledge, ontology, world, representation, identity, on the basis of the structural positionality of a figurative **subject**. Central to this is how abyssal thought challenges assumptions enabling the world to cohere before the human as subject (see also Marriott, 2021; Karera, 2022). This is a mode of critique that, we believe, can be hugely enabling for 'abyssal geography' as an alternative political and ethical approach—a distinctive method which problematizes ontological claims enabling 'productivist' (i.e., productive of life and differentiation, see Culp, 2016: 10) salvific imaginaries of alternative world-making for survival in the Anthropocene. Grove (2023: 215) thus reads abyssal thought further, as expressing:

...what Claire Colebrook (2021) might call a world-destroying desire: a desire expressed through the categories of this and other worlds even as it strives and hopes for the destruction of all worlds. For what else can the response to the geocidal and genocidal violence of the modern world, what Farhana Sultana (2022) calls 'climate coloniality', be other than this—a refusal to sustain the world...

The world as abyss is not the 'world of many worlds'; a variety of worlds understood on literal terms, thereby accessible to currently dominant models of development studies and postcolonial studies, which positively facilitate the ethnographer to read and register being, thus enabling them to ethically intervene on behalf of the obtainable Other. To the contrary, in problematizing the violence of ontological world-making, abyssal work, through the figurative assemblage of the abyssal **subject** poses a significant challenge to those who seek to grasp and instrumentalize the world in this way.

Whereas Grove immerses himself in the literature we engage, Philogene Heron and Skelton declare they are not familiar with much of this scholarship. Indeed, the recent Black studies work we turn to, largely coming from North America, of Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Nahum D. Chandler, M. NourbeSe Philip, and others, is still largely absent from the fields of development studies and postcolonial geography and Geography more generally. It is of course impossible to give a single reason as to why this might be the case, but perhaps one reason is that Geography as a discipline is very much driven by hegemonic policy assumptions of salvage and mitigation, as expressed through the relational and ontological turns, rather than critical stances which seek to trouble and problematize these approaches. Thus, we do not think it is a lack of familiarity with this literature that establishes the gulf that Philogene Heron recognizes between his work and our paper, but the key stakes of the abyssal analytic itself. The crux of the problem which Philogene Heron (and to a lesser extent Skelton) has with the abyssal analytic—the distinctiveness of 'abyssal thought'—is that it does not seek to correct the errors of modern reasoning by appealing to the 'real' Caribbean. Both understand the Caribbean as literally available to the researcher who, through careful engagements, holds the position of facilitating ontological and ethical reflections or interventions—what Philogene Heron calls 'scholarly service'. Instead of seeking to secure these more productive ontological and ethical

grounds, the task of abyssal thought, through the figurative abyssal *subject*, as we illustrate through the examples in the paper, is to refuse the lure of remaking the human and the world—to challenge this ongoing extension of the foundational violence of modernist reasoning. For Philogene Heron (2023: 221) this is a problem:

As a thinker guided by an ethnographic sensibility (a practice founded on relationship-based dialogues between humans who inhabit interconnected worlds) I fear that the desire for a theory that shatters the racial capitalist world is being asserted at the expense of engaging with real Caribbean people.... Does abyssal sociality offer a useful frame for understanding these people's experiences and their sense of themselves as human beings? But prior to such considerations, perhaps there is a more central, motivating question to which we must first attend: who is our work intending to serve? ...As an archipelago de- and re-populated, de-forested, polluted, enclosed, and exploited by imperial and enduring colonial design—from genocide to servitude to service—we might ask if the Caribbean should be expected to give the gift of critique that shatters the modern world, at all.

Rather than engage with the key stakes of the paper and its positioning of abyssal and relational thought, Philogene Heron engages it on a different level of analysis. The gap which Philogene Heron opens-up rests upon his ethnographic appeal to what he calls the 'real', 'ordinary', and 'everyday' Caribbean; work enabled by what he calls his approach to an 'ethnography of relation': 'We might aspire for a scholarly praxis that gradually builds relationships to people and place, a praxis defined by care and radical solidarity, a sitting with difference and being in service of our interlocutors.'

It is clear that the abyssal analytic poses problems for what Philogene Heron underscores in his commentary as the importance of 'scholarly service' to the Caribbean. As we have stressed, a key aspect of abyssal approaches is that the critical positionality developed is *figurative* rather than literal. That is, abyssal work draws upon readings of Caribbean modes of thought and practice, but it does so to illustrate a *structural positionality* rather than a set of obtainable subject-specific properties available for ethical instrumentalization. This is a different approach to that of a researcher undertaking 'scholarly service', through an ethnography of relation, or capacity-building exercises of community-engagement. In bringing this distinction to the fore—between articulating different ways of 'productivist' being in the world, on the one hand, and the 'generative' questioning of claims of ontological grounding, on the other—we wish to further underscore how work in an abyssal paradigm is not constructing an alternative ontology of being, available as an exterior resource to be intervened in, to save or improve the world. The abyssal approach is one that seeks to question and to problematize, it does not set out an alternative programme or set of solutions. Whilst many of the tropes and terms employed in critical debates today, such as relational approaches to ethnography and positionality, vitalism, new materialism, posthumanism, Indigenous ontologies, and the more-than-human, might now be commonplace, they are still deeply *philosophical* statements about the nature of the world and being. In sharp distinction, the abyssal approach is *non-philosophical*, in that there are no statements about the nature of being because it is the preconditions for ontological statements which are precisely what is at stake in an abyssal approach.

We appreciate the explorative and open tone of Skelton's commentary; she says 'I value the provocation Chandler and Pugh present—in person and in print. It has forced me to think harder and stimulated my critical thinking, especially about whiteness and Western scholarship' (Skelton, 2023: 226). 'I want to understand *abyssal geography* more which is why I persist in questioning it, but I wish to safeguard the Caribbean (history, people, places, struggles, survivals) at the same time' (Skelton, 2023: 225). In the interests of

clarification, rather than pick up upon Skelton's numerous positive comments, here we will engage what could be construed as her more critical points with regard to, firstly, the abyssal analytic's 'apparent erasure of the complexities, diversities, and multiplicities of the Caribbean in its very being' and, secondly, the need to 'safeguard the Caribbean' (Skelton, 2023: 225).

For abyssal work, as we say in the paper, the question of the making of modernity is, fundamentally, an *ontological* question—the making not just of regimes of knowledge and of governing hierarchies, but also the world and its subject. As our discussion of Benítez-Rojo's *Repeating Island* in the paper foregrounds, it is this world which provides a stable or seemingly 'natural' ground, enabling specific regimes themselves to change while holding in place the world of being as a background certainty informing what might be known and how these entities, once known, might be governed most efficiently. We analytically draw out this concern from the more contemporary authors we engage as well. Put another way, the abyssal critique of modernity is not that modernity fails to understand complexity or contingency or relation; that it commits what is often called 'epistemological violence' (Rekret 2018: 101). The critique of modernity is not constrained to the realm of epistemology, modernist understandings are not merely a problem of thought or of approach. Modernity is understood as a product of totalizing violence in the ontological construction of a world of individuated entities, laid out in a grid of space and time and available for appropriation and instrumentalization. It is this 'world' that needs to be ended before there can be any possibility of affirmative ethical or political projects. As long as this world is taken as given, as available 'for us', then projects of affirmation necessarily disavow or become complicit with regimes of genocide, dispossession and ecocide, seeking to ameliorate or salvage rather than to question and problematize structuring violence.

Thus, whilst Skelton encourages us to reflect upon our choice of the singular 'World' and 'Abyssal Geography' (which we employ in the published paper) rather than the plural terms 'worlds' and 'geographies' (used in the older draft), this distinction is fundamental. We therefore thank Skelton for drawing attention to this clarification. How ontological issues are enrolled in critical approaches is a central concern for our work (see also Pugh and Chandler, 2021). The distinctiveness of the abyssal approach that we outline focuses on the problem of modernity as an ontological project of world-making, not with reading, sensing, and productively registering the multitude of ways of being in the world. Abyssal work flags up two distinct levels on which critical work can be seen to take place. On one level, critique works affirmatively, unveiling what is hidden or goes unseen and repressed, focusing thereby on a disavowed reality—of diversities, complexities, or pluralities—challenging the universalist epistemological assumptions and the hierarchy of knowledge underpinning modernity and colonialism. On another level, that of abyssal work, critique works against affirmation, instead undertaking the task of deconstructing or disrupting assumptions that there is a 'truth' or a 'reality' to be unveiled, a reality that can be grasped outside the modern episteme. This assumption that another or alternative world is possible on the basis of knowing or acting differently is anathema to an abyssal approach that refuses to leave the world in place while adapting, reforming or improving upon the 'human'. The purpose of the focus on ontology is to shift questions and problematizations from the level of epistemology, how we think about the world, to that of the world itself, i.e., the ontology of cuts, separations, and assumptions that the world (or another world) is available to be known and instrumentalized.

As to Skelton's second point about 'safeguarding the Caribbean', for the work we engage that enables us to delineate the abyssal analytic, the Caribbean is clearly very important. It is that Caribbean space that is inseparable from the forging of the modern

conception of the human/non-human divide and its material underpinnings in the horrors of the Middle Passage, plantation economies and brutality of chattel slavery—the continued and ongoing economic and social inequities of the global colour line. While grounded in Caribbean ‘realities’, the abyssal analytic is a figurative one. The point of critical opening is that of the foundational grounds of modernity as ‘the world’ rather than an exploration of the ‘real’ or authentic Caribbean in all its complexities. It is a particular paradigm of critical thought that we are interested in exploring and drawing out. Skelton (2023: 225) poses the question ‘Is this a Eurocentric heuristic device that focuses on another collection of islands in the Anthropocene, that is the Caribbean?’ We agree that the Caribbean has long been appropriated in critical thought, however the abyssal paradigm makes no appropriative claims. As Grove effectively illustrates through his cross-references to scholars working in many different regions of the world, this is not a shift which is *literally about* the Caribbean but how the Caribbean is figured in, for and through a particular line of contemporary thought.

This particular ‘abyssal’ way of figuring the Caribbean is what is of interest to us analytically in the paper. The paper is about how abyssal approaches draw upon the Caribbean differently to relational or more-than-human approaches. The abyssal analytic also engages its material very differently from the ways that varieties of modernist thought would do. The ‘reality’ of the Caribbean, no matter how plural or complex it may be (like all ‘realities’ always are) is not really what is at stake here. An abyssal figuration draws upon economic, political, literary, cultural aspects, not to tell a ‘literal’ truth, but an ontological one, about the disavowal of foundational violence. By this we mean that the abyssal approach is concerned with questioning or problematizing the ontological structuring by which the world appears to the human as individuated subject rather than taking this world ‘literally’ in the form it is given. In our paper, we emphasize the importance of the Caribbean as the space through which this process of cutting ‘Man’ or the human from the world, this process of ontological ‘purification’ (Wynter, 1975c: 1), takes place and where resistance necessarily raises the ontological questions of being rather than merely those of equality and inclusion.

The question of whether abyssal approaches are appropriative of the Caribbean is a relevant one, only if the above methodological points are misconstrued. With regard to our duties as academics and the sort of service we should be normatively committed to, in this work, we are simply interested in understanding a current analytical shift towards a non-relational, para-ontological approach, and the figurative assembling of a critical positionality which helps carve out a very different set of starting concerns and methodological assumptions from the relational and ontological turns (see also Pugh and Chandler, *forthcoming*). Developed by Nahum Chandler (2014), paraontology is a method or approach which is gaining increasing traction in wider critical debates (see, for example, Cervenak & Carter, 2017; Harney & Moten, 2021; da Silva, 2022). As Marquis Bey states:

...a notion of a paraontology... functions as a critical concept that breaks up and desediments. By way of this, it permits the rewriting of narratives and the very conditions of understanding the present as such. Importantly, the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology. Paraontology is not a search for new categories, as if categorization is a neutral process. It is not; categorization is a mechanism of ontology, an apparatus of circumscription. What the paraontological suggests is a dissolution (Bey, 2020: 17).

We understand abyssal work as a paraontological approach which understands the structural positionality of the figurative abyssal as desedimenting modern ontological

world-making; putting in question assumptions of 'being' and the fixities of modern spatial and temporal imaginaries.

Looking forwards, we feel, a productive avenue, as Grove suggests, is to consider the abyssal analytic in relation to the recent range of debates about 'negative geographies' and geographies of the 'void' (Bissell *et al.*, 2021; Kingsbury & Secor, 2021; Dekeyser *et al.*, 2022)—and the growing concerns with how the discipline of Geography, at a more general level, has too often been unreflective about the stakes of subordination to discourses of salvation and productivist world-making (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021; Oliver & Dekeyser, 2022). In *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*, Mitch Rose, David Bissell and Paul Harrison (2021: 2–3) reflect well this growing scrutiny in Geography when they say that 'the relational thinking that has come to characterize cultural geography does not sufficiently consider the question of limits: the limits of capacities, powers, and relations ...relational ontologies leave little space to admit finitude and the problems that the nonrelational poses' (emphasis in original). Currently, these developments in Geography tend to focus upon drawing attention to the limitations of the relational and ontological turns within the context of broader philosophical debate, or through a piece of ethnographic or empirical research. Our abyssal work seeks to add two further concerns: (1) We foreground the importance of analytically drawing out how the forces of history (here, the Caribbean) are understood to ground and enable any critical turn to the negative; (2) We underscore the importance of rejecting approaches which only appear to turn away from re-making the human and the world, but then do so through the side door. For us, as we have said, abyssal work is uncompromisingly deconstructive rather than productive, which has not always been the case with these recent developments. It is this interest in refusing the lure of 'the world' that is driving the abyssal approach and forcing the stakes involved to be clarified.

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