



## The politics of the unseen: speculative, pragmatic and nihilist hope in the anthropocene

David Chandler

**To cite this article:** David Chandler (2024) The politics of the unseen: speculative, pragmatic and nihilist hope in the anthropocene, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 25:1, 1-16, DOI: [10.1080/1600910X.2023.2235916](https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2235916)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2235916>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2155



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

# The politics of the unseen: speculative, pragmatic and nihilist hope in the anthropocene

David Chandler

School of Social Sciences, University of Westminster, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores hope as a dominant framing for critical social theory in the era of the Anthropocene. It suggests that with the dissolution of modernist assumptions of human exceptionalism, universal causality and temporal progress, critical social theory can be understood as having shifted fields. This shift is from the field of the seen – the field of appearances (i.e. the world of politics, of rational subjects, instrumental rationality and aspirations of progress) – to the field of the unseen (towards approaches which can be understood as working with or drawing upon a world which is beyond or below appearances). It will be argued that the Anthropocene is central to this shift from the centrality of questions of transparency and of politics to those of opacity and hope. This is in part because the Anthropocene is seen to have emerged behind the backs of political reason, unseen and unintended. If the Anthropocene as a condition is the product of taking a narrow reductive approach to the world, as framed in the modern ontology, then access to the unseen world becomes a necessity. The different forms of hope engaged with in this paper articulate distinct understandings of this ‘other world’ beyond appearances.

## KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; hope; pragmatism; speculative; nihilist; critique; ontology

## Introduction

In the Anthropocene, it appears that we live in a bifurcated world, with a small world of the ‘moderns’ and a much larger unseen and unacknowledged world beyond this. For example, the late Bruno Latour argued that the modern ontology was too restrictive, creating an artificial world separated from the world that exists in reality. The division was described by him as that between ‘the world I live in as a citizen of a developed country, and ... the world I live off, as a consumer of the same country’ (Latour 2021, 41). For contemporary critical social theorists, the modern ontology (of the human as self-determined subject separate from a world composed of other-determined objects) is a problematic abstraction, failing to capture the complexity of real life. This failure means that we do not take into full account the exploitation of the natural environment.

**CONTACT** David Chandler  [d.chandler@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:d.chandler@westminster.ac.uk)  University of Westminster, 32-38 Wells Street, London, W1T 3UW, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

For Latour, it is: ‘As if every wealthy state was coupled with a shadow state that never stopped haunting it, a sort of Doppelgänger that provides for it, on the one hand, but is devoured by it, on the other’ (Latour 2021, 41). This ‘shadow state’ thus very much resembles Valerie Plumwood’s ‘shadow places’, remaking the connections with unseen and disregarded capitalist ‘externalities’ (Plumwood 2008; Potter et al. 2022).

It is the ‘shadow places’, the ‘shadow state’, as ‘Doppelgänger’, that contemporary discourses of hope indicatively seek to build upon. This emphasis on place or location is important as the problematic is not essentially one of futurity but an attitude to the present rather than to the future (see, for example, Potter et al. 2022). Practices of hope thereby enable awareness of a ‘real’ but unrecognized world that is beyond the world that is there ‘for us’, beyond the world of immediate appearances. Thus, hope (for the purposes of this paper) is not defined merely in terms of possessing a positive approach to future outcomes. Hope is not merely a subjective attribute or positive mental state, but a discursive field of practices or activities designed to access, to connect with and to build upon what exists unrecognized or unseen in the present. This liminality, between the sphere of presence and absence is captured well by the German critical theorist Theodore Adorno in his assertion that the sphere of hope is ‘the no man’s land between the border posts of being and nothingness’ (Adorno[1996] 2007, 381). Thus, for Adorno, as considered later, hope points to the existence of attributes or possibilities contained in the world but not in ‘the world’ as grasped in dominant understandings.

Hope is grounded upon a reality that exists not on the transparent surface of appearances but in the yet unrecognized or unseen potentiality and thus beyond the world of liberal or Enlightenment ‘reason’. Hope is thereby the practice of living after the end of the ‘One World World’ (Law 2015) or ‘at the end of the world’ (Tsing 2015), i.e. after the recognition of the fundamental limits to a modernist idea of ‘world’, with its telos of progress and linear causation. In this journal, in 2015, John Law famously argued that breaking with the constraints of a modernist framing of ‘world’ opens up radical political, epistemological and ontological possibilities that cannot be seen if we still choose to stay in the ‘single container world’ of modernity (2015, 127). Hope focuses upon the potentialities of the world under the surface of its finalized appearances, after the exhaustion of the narrow and reductive ‘world’ as constituted in a modern ontology of universal laws, Newtonian fixities, and Cartesian divides of the ‘human’ as subject and ‘world’ as passive object.

This paper is set out as follows. First there is a brief engagement with hope as it was presented in modernity. This is important to emphasize the centrality of hope to both a modern or subject-centred framing of ethical and political practice as well as those that seek to move beyond or to decentre the human. Whereas, in modernity, the field of hope is specifically sectioned apart from ethical and political practice, today, it will be argued, it is central to it. Then the paper will heuristically sketch out three distinct approaches to hope in the Anthropocene. It does this in seeking to open up an analysis of the methodological approaches and political and ethical stakes at play in differing approaches which put hope to work in opposing ways. This is an important avenue of exploration if the assumption is correct that the field of critical theorization shifts from the field of the visible – from the field of appearances – to a concern with how we relate to the unseen, the unintended, the externalities, the connections, relations, the possibilities,

and potentialities, which are not so clearly visible. The three modes of hope which are highlighted – the speculative, the pragmatic, and the nihilist – are presented heuristically to draw out what is at stake in different approaches to the unseen. It goes without saying that the work of individual theorists may well be understood as operating across (or between) these paradigms or approaches.

## Hope in modernity

In modernity, hope in a reality, unseen, underlying the appearances of the world, was a marginal pre-occupation. Hope operated outside the bounds of the world of politics and instrumental reason and was articulated in terms of the immanent power of life beyond the human realm of reason. It should be noted that these immanent powers were not generally seen as accessible to the modern subject. So, while two worlds existed – the world of modernity (of universal reason, the ontic, the actual, the world of Newtonian determinism and natural laws) and the world of immanent vital forces – there was understood to be a clear divide between them. This divide was articulated as that between the world of politics and law, of universal reason, and the world beyond, of natural and social and economic forces, that worked unseen behind the backs of reason or intention. Perhaps, two of the most famous examples of this framing, in terms of being classics of modernist thought, would be Adam Smith's 'hidden hand' of the market (Smith [1776] 2022) and Immanuel Kant's view of nature's 'secret plan' or 'providence' (Kant 1991).

This other world was veiled or curtained off from reason's access although it was understood to be a world that was the precondition for human betterment and improvement. Thus, for Kant, 'if we assume a plan of nature, we have grounds for greater hopes' (1991, 52) enabling thereby ethical and future-oriented actions regardless of the empirical experiences of disaster and defeat (see also Connolly 2011, 148). This inability to have experiential access to the world beyond human reason meant that questions of ontology were effectively ruled out of discussion. For both Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith, key thinkers and founders of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition, the world beyond human access was unproblematic. What did not appear transparently to us, and thereby was not available to our understanding and to our direction, was nevertheless working in ways that were amenable to human progress and potentially to future understanding and control. This assurance, this framing of hope – as a relation to potentiality which is present but not necessarily accessible to us – is at the heart of Albert Einstein's famous statement that 'God does not play dice'. Natural laws could not be at heart random or arbitrary even if they remained inaccessible to us. Human existence itself was considered proof that aspects of the world beyond our understanding were necessarily working 'behind our backs' for our collective benefit.

There could be no conclusive proof that nature had a 'secret plan' or that God did not 'play dice', only hope. Hope therefore ring-fenced the sphere of epistemology (the discussion of different perspectives upon the world) from that of ontology (the nature of being itself). As Quentin Meillassoux argues, this fundamental divide enabled the illusion that 'unreason' was located in human frailties while 'reason' was in the world and could be the goal of human knowledge, thus fixing the imaginary telos of progress (2008, 82). Hope plays a crucial role in the modern ontology marking out a sphere of the unknown and

the unseen but equally promising this sphere as one of futural potential, thereby setting out a temporal order, giving meaning to the present. Thus, Kant and Enlightenment theory secularize a Judeo-Christian imaginary with Man at the centre of a World amenable to his autonomous reason. Kant presented three questions to carve out the world of human reason: ‘1. What can I know?’ ‘2. What must I do?’ and ‘3. What may I hope?’ (2007, 635).

Hope is necessary as reason can never provide its own grounds in experience alone, thereby a ‘higher reason’ or ‘ideal of the greatest good’ is required (Kant 2007, 639). It was this ‘hope’ that was held to enable the modern sciences of reason. As Latour has convincingly argued (1993), the power of modernist forms of representation depended upon this fabrication of cuts and separations, the ‘purification’ of the Modern Constitution, distinguishing subject from object and reducing the world to an available ‘surface’. The approach of making the world transparent, through processes of abstraction, representation and homogenization was essential to modernist forms of knowledge and governance, separating a sphere of the known from the unknown, violently forcing the bifurcation of the world between the seen and the unseen, captured well in James C Scott’s classic analysis, *Seeing Like a State* (1998; see also Foucault [1966] 1989; Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1997; Latour 1993).

Hope as the sphere of the unseen – as a space beyond the ‘world’ of the moderns – was therefore already ontologically articulated at the very heart of Enlightenment reasoning. It is important to stress that hope was not just a faith in the providence and potentiality of the unseen but could also be understood as grounding the divide between the seen and the unseen, enabling the seen to ‘stand in’ or to represent the world as a totality. This is what Kant is arguing in his articulation of hope as the framing structure for human belonging in the world. So, hope is not framed in modernity as a temporal or futural beyond but a ‘beyond’ very much present in the here and now. For Kant’s transcendental idealism, this was clearly expressed in the inaccessible gap between appearance and reality, between the phenomena and the noumena. There was a ‘beyond’ to our knowledge of the world, one closed off to us, but nevertheless available as a secular source of hope that things could always be more perfectible; that this was never all that there was. It is this aspect of potentiality, a potentiality that remains hidden and unseen in the present, that gives modernist hope its secular, speculative and temporal character.

## Hope in the anthropocene

The Anthropocene brings this ontological framing of hope in modernity to a close. There can be no assumption that life has an immanent drive that is ‘providential’ to humanity or that Enlightenment understandings of progress can be seen to be working in line with the deeper needs of the planetary Earth. One of the key aspects of the Anthropocene is that the divide between the transparent world, understood to be available to instrumental reason, and the unseen or unknowable is no longer so straightforward. For Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith, the borders of the inside and outside were clear in the divide between appearance and essence or between the sphere of state regulation and market freedoms. In the Anthropocene, understood as a new era in which humankind has fundamentally impacted the Earth systems of environmental and climatic stabilization, the divide between the known and the unknown has been problematized. With this

problematization, modernist imaginaries of progress and universal causality have been thrown into question and aspects of uncertainty and unpredictability have come to the fore. This is in part because the Anthropocene is seen to have emerged behind the backs of political reason, unseen and unintended (Chakrabarty 2021). Timothy Morton (2013) refers to this as the age of Hyperobjects, entities that we cannot grasp as we are entangled with them rather than observing them from afar.

Today, the view of progress as the building up of a universal store of knowledge of a fixed or determined world of causality no longer appears possible. There is no 'pure' world of nature external to the human sphere of direction and control. The end of this division was already pre-empted in understandings of globalization as ushering a new world of risk and uncertainty. In this world, governments were no longer initiating policy, acting in a fixed world amenable to instrumental understandings, but were governing 'recursively', responding to the unseen and unintended consequences of previous policy interventions (see, for example, Giddens 1999; Beck 1992). The unseen gradually seeped into the world of governance and policymaking, forcing a new sphere of thought and practice onto the policy agenda. The difference with modernist assumptions of the unseen was that in this 'second modernity' or 'runaway' world of 'global risk society' the unseen was understood to have potentially catastrophic effects.

The passive or optimistic approach to unseen forces and interactive effects, as articulated in modernity, is today likely to be understood as an ideologically charged discourse of denial in the face of catastrophic climate change (Chandler 2019). Modern hope was reliant upon on a linear telos of progress and an underlying assumption of harmony between the world of modernist reason and the world 'unseen' and inaccessible to us but upon which we are dependent. Hope as constructed within modernity today stands accused not just of climate change denial but also of brushing under the carpet all the deaths and dispossessions that were considered necessary for modernity to progress (Colebrook 2020; Povinelli 2021). Discourses of hope in progress and of underlying harmony (despite the disastrousness of appearances) are seen to be dangerously ideological: they legitimize history from the perspective of the victors not the losers.

As Elizabeth Povinelli notes, it is important 'to remember the function of the horizon and frontier in liberalism as a mechanism of disavowal' (2021, 38): 'The horizon is liberalism's governmental imaginary, its means of bracketing all forms of violence as merely unintended, accidental, and unfortunate consequences of liberal democratic unfolding' (2021, 41). It should be highlighted here that the ideological nature of modern hope, inseparable from the liberal telos of progress, is brought to the fore, not only in relation to environmental and species destruction but also the disavowal of modernity's imbrication within chattel slavery, Indigenous dispossession, colonialism, and racial capitalism. Hope, in liberal promises of freedom, emancipation and social equality, is increasingly condemned for its structural reproduction of these conditions.

As Rinaldo Walcott argues, in *The Long Emancipation* (2021): 'all of our present conceptions of freedom, understood within that linear progressive narrative, actually prohibit Black subjects' access to that very same linear modernist freedom' (2021, 3). Hope is thus enrolled in processes of tutelage, apprenticeship, and subordination, legitimising existing hierarchies, inequalities, and exclusions, while dominant liberal universalist understandings are reinforced rather than challenged (see also Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2022). As Jovan Scott Lewis explores, even in postcolonial framings of

colonial debt and reparation, hierarchies and dependencies are reproduced and affirmed (2020, 150–54; see also Robinson 2020, 226 on ‘benevolent violence’). In the Anthropocene, hope can no longer be dependent upon linear temporalities of progress or providential certainties of a ‘happy ending’.

As stated above, in the Anthropocene we realize that the unseen or unacknowledged reality of the world exceeds the grasp of modernist, Eurocentric and anthropocentric forms of ‘reason’ and that therefore we need a different way of accessing or knowing the world. We need to ‘see’ or ‘sense’ beyond the limits of the modern ontology; beyond what is sometimes understood as the confines of Kantian ‘correlationism’ (Meillassoux 2008) where all we have are the phenomena of appearances, the world as always already given to thought. Thus, the crisis of modernity reopens metaphysical questions of the human and the world previously bracketed off from ethical and political discourse. For this reason, the return of hope and discourses of the unseen to the centre of ethical and political concern offers an important field for analysis of contemporary social and political theorising. While hope helps to bridge or to move beyond the binary assumptions of the human/nature or subject/object divide, there appears to be little consensus on how hope is put to work after modernity. This paper therefore seeks to set out an initial heuristic framework for the analysis of contemporary forms of hope. The following sections of this paper briefly outline three potential ways of engaging this unseen ‘beyond’, the first puts the emphasis on access via the speculative imagination, the second stresses the importance of grounded practice and experimentation, the third reverses the problematic, seeing the ‘world’ from the figurative positionality of the unseen, from behind the ‘veil’ of modernity.

### Speculative hope: seeing the unseen

Continuing the speculative trajectory of theorists like Eric Fromm (1968) and Ernst Bloch (1986) associated with the Frankfurt School, contemporary approaches of speculative, transcendental hope focus upon moving beyond the world of human exceptionalism and the human/nature divide to develop ‘greener’ and more ‘ecological’ sensibilities (Bennett 2010, xiv; 10). For speculative thinkers, we can do this by working on our own powers of becoming affected, our experiential being in the world, cultivating openness to alterity. As Jane Bennett states: ‘The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it’ through techniques of ‘training oneself’ (2010, 14). Good examples of advocates of speculative hope in international relations are William Connolly (2011; 2013) and Jairus Grove (2019). Grove, in rejecting the ‘crypto-providence’ of Kant (2019, 234), asserts that hope lies in understandings of complexity and creativity that Connolly argues are ‘nonprovidential’ (2019, 239). Hope for Grove and for Connolly (as for Bennett) is a speculative practice oriented towards the virtual world beyond that of actualized appearance.

Thus, ‘Connolly’s political theorist as seer ... attempts to peer into the future, but the seer looks for incipient possibilities, not catastrophic certainties’ (Grove 2019, 264). Drawing on Deleuze, Connolly argues for a pre-emptive generosity and openness to the inaccessible beyond, imagining ‘a seer dwelling within a nest of partly formed potentialities jostling against and upon each other during a forking moment, with no potentiality settled enough to be foreseen with certainty’ (Connolly 2011, 158). Rather than

focusing on saving the world as it exists in appearance, speculative political theory, ‘the politics of becoming’, works within the ontology of hope, one that is affirmative and ‘restores belief in the world’ (Grove 2019, 270) and ‘suggests an enhanced attentiveness to materiality and the chaos of becoming’ (Grove 2019, 269). As Connolly suggests, ‘A seer by definition lives at the edge of power and events’ (2011, 159) living not at the centre of a modernist imaginary, but ‘dwelling sensitively’ (2011, 165), on the edge, with incipient hope in the beyond.

Speculative hope, seeking to free thought from the confines of the linear temporality of modernity, inculcates a practice of openness to the other, to the unseen and to the inaccessible beyond, aware of the subject’s mutual imbrication within ‘the world of becoming’. Existing within modernity but focused on modernity’s unseen, speculative hope seeks to work upon the liminal realm between being and non-being or the actual and the virtual, enabling alternative potentialities to emerge. The speculative imaginary is one of the subject staring into the unknown abyss but without fear, instead with an approach of openness and welcome, affirming the world beyond rationalist appropriation. Increasingly, what is valued is otherness in-itself, as the unknown or unexpected provide opportunities for rethinking and reworking expectations. As Grove states, the end of the world ‘is the end of something but never *the end*’ (2019, 280 italics in original). It is the lack of certainty that is the source of hope rather than expectations of Kantian providentiality. As Grove concludes his book *Savage Ecology*: ‘I am experimenting with the role of seer in order to push further into the metaphysical fallout of cosmic fragility’ (2019, 280).

The subject-centred and idealist perspective of speculative hope is an important aspect of contemporary ethical and political work that seeks to counter the negative effects of histories of oppression and exclusion. The power and appeal of speculative approaches can be seen in the work of several Black feminist projects of affirmation, for example, in the work of Michelle Wright, Jayna Brown and Alexis Pauline Gumbs discussed here. Speculative approaches to hope can be clearly seen at work within Afrofuturist approaches which focus upon the transcendental subject’s inner powers of thinking beyond linear time and space. The ‘politics of becoming’ and ‘unscripted encounter’ are vital to the project of escaping the ‘linear progress narrative’ with its ‘Middle Passage epistemology’ of continuity, identity, and struggle against oppression, with ontological assumptions of fixed origins, laws of cause and effect and collective representations (Wright 2015, 26). Instead, Afrofuturist approaches turn to non-linear models of spacetime, focusing upon the present; what Michelle Wright calls the ‘epiphenomenal time’ of the ‘encounter’, where the individual intersects in the now with a multitude of possible futures (2015, 31). Wright argues that epiphenomenal time restores agency to the subject:

Agency here is not tied to concrete outcomes (born of concrete goals) but to the choice to notice and wonder at differences that the linear progress narrative struggles to wholly interpellate on its own ... interpellation begins with the self, it is not a reactive action but one of ‘choice’. (Wright 2015, 117)

Wright’s *Physics of Blackness* has been influential for the Black Quantum Futurism collective, which draws on quantum understandings along with African cosmologies to train and develop capacities for reaching into the unknowable beyond through the extension



of access in the present (Phillips 2015); ‘decolonizing the mind’ so that the past, present and future become not separate entities but overlapping dimensions (VerCetty 2020, 140). The speculative beyond provides the fundamental break required from what some see as ‘time-warped trauma’, ‘the stuckness’ in the horrors of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery (Womack 2016, 59).

For many Afrofuturists, the positionality of the ‘seer’, in modernity but staring into the beyond, is an unrequested gift of societal exclusion. Jayna Brown writes:

I argue that being categorised as inhuman, or not quite human, is a privileged position from which to undo the assumptions not only of race thinking but of the other systems of domination ... and instead marvel at the potential modes of existing as biological entities such exclusion opens up. (2021, 112)

For Brown, this turn to the speculative outside of the ontology of being is necessarily ‘a jump into the unknowable ... not the unknown’ (2021, 6–7). ‘[B]ecause black people have been excluded from the category human, we have a particular epistemic and ontological mobility ... we develop marvelous [*sic*] modes of being in and perceiving the universe’ (2021, 7). She ends *Black Utopias* on a similar note to Grove, with an analysis of Alex Garland’s film *Annihilation*, where the sole black woman, trapped in the mysterious Area X, accepts the abyss, becoming a flowering bush, fulfilling ‘a radical longing to merge with the cosmos’ and to ‘join the awesome, the unexpected, *already present* in the world’ (2021, 178 italics added).

Alexis Pauline Gumbs provides another example of speculative hope in her book *Undrowned* (2020). Along the lines discussed above, this is a book of speculative affirmation of Black life imagined as being open to the world rather than attempting to know or to instrumentalize it: ‘What it would take to tune in with our environment enough to be in flow with the Earth, instead of in struggle against’ (2020, 121). Black life is futural in the condition of the Anthropocene, the life of survival through technics of love and openness, of immersion rather than separation (2020, 137). Speculative hope thus can be seen as part of a critical tradition that consciously breaks from the linear and providential understanding of hope in Kantian modernity. However, the break from Kantianism can be questioned to the extent that there is still a reliance on the transcendental subject breaking with the modern ontology or freeing thought in order to be open to the present but unseen potentiality existing in the world beyond modernist approaches of appropriation and instrumentalization. The affirmative power of speculative approaches is particularly important for ethical and political projects which seek to move beyond stories of loss and negation.

### **Pragmatic hope: worlding worlds otherwise**

Pragmatic hope is less about changing modes of thought and more about our embodied and embedded modes of practice. For pragmatic hope the worlds we live in are not so much a problem of practices of thinking but of our material being as world-making agential beings entangled with others. Pragmatic hope lacks the abstract framings of speculative hope, where there is the world of the known and the unknowable, of the actual and the virtual, of modern ontology and the unseen abyssal ‘beyond’ but is rather about specific contexts and relations. Indigenous theorist Deborah Bird Rose (2011) argues

that ‘worlds’ are practices, or modes of entangled being. How we world the world has consequences; our being in the world can contribute to collective flourishing or collective disaster. As we are aware, in the Anthropocene, the modern mode of being in the world is reproducing cycles of death and destruction rather than enabling processes of growth and differentiation. While Indigenous peoples are held to cultivate their environments in mutual life-giving ways, the moderns have instigated feedback loops of ‘death-work’, wiping out ecological diversity and threatening mass species extinction. Rather than affirming the unknowable possibilities of the present beyond the reductionist world of ontology, pragmatic hope suggests an attentiveness to the links, relations, and connections, in the here and now but beyond the reach of human cognition. Often this requires attentiveness to the knowledge and understanding of patterns and correlations, enrolling the aid of ‘companion species’ (Haraway 2003) of nonhumans, to access and amplify the power of life as a self-organising, autopoietic or sympoietic system (see Chandler 2018).

I would argue that pragmatic hope is to modern hope what neoliberalism is to liberalism. In that, while liberalism was seen to assume that markets and democracy worked naturally, neoliberal thought focused on how markets and democracies required institutional frameworks and safeguards; they needed to be governed ‘for’ rather than left alone (see, for example, Hayek 1960; also Foucault 2008). While for Kant, the power of life or nature was unknowable but necessarily assumed to be providential, for pragmatic hope the relational forces of life need to be channelled in ways that amplify their negentropic powers. This distinction mirrors that between free-market liberalism, where the ‘hidden hand’ of the market was understood to deliver the best possible outcomes and neoliberal or neo-institutionalist approaches which sought to indirectly shape market systems (Hayek 1960; North 1990). Neoliberal approaches differed in their awareness that markets’ immanent, relational, power was not ‘naturally’ self-organized for providential outcomes but could also result in catastrophic collapse or system change. Markets needed to be governed for rather than directed or left to *laissez-faire* (Foucault 2008, 131). For pragmatic hope then, the question is how to indirectly see or sense the operations of these vital forces whose operation is beyond human powers of direct access and understanding. Thus, pragmatic hope moves beyond an ontology of the seen in an imaginary which is often conceived as ‘after modernity’, after the naïve or hubristic assumptions of the naturalness of ‘nature’ or of markets. Perhaps the archetypal figure of pragmatic hope is Bruno Latour, with his assertion that *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). For Latour, we have always worked pragmatically although we told ourselves fictions that we were discovering some objective or universal laws of cause and effect.

Pragmatic hope seeks to amplify and to tap into the powers of relational interaction, the powers of life and of markets, indirectly, not through top-down processes of control and direction, but through the ‘bottom-up’ tracing of effects. As already intimated above, in the work of Bird Rose, there is a close relation to Indigenous understandings of multiperspectivism, which also engage with the search for patterns and correlations, described as *Cannibal Metaphysics* by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) and as ‘material semiotics’ by Eduardo Kohn (2013). The search for patterns and correlations, to access the world beyond the reductionist imaginary and linear causality of modern ontology, involves tracing the feedback loops and sensing processes of emergence. Giving ‘what is’ its due enables an attention to Big Data and other forms of data gathering and

sensing for correlations in more-than-human assemblages. A good recent example of pragmatic hope would be Benjamin Bratton's *Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-pandemic World* (2021) which seeks to develop new forms of planetary governance based upon a positive biopolitics of sensing and an understanding of humans as material, biological and epidemiological agents rather than as rational actors.

At the more radical end of approaches that work through pragmatic hope, some radical Indigenous and critical feminist theorists argue that Eurocentric versions of pragmatic tracing and feedback are problematic in that they seek to generalize a certain set of techniques as if there were some timeless understandings or methods available to access the unseen world beyond modernist appropriation. These, Eurocentric, approaches to hope, according to Povinelli, seek to make hope 'compatible with liberal and illiberal capitalism'. Thus, relational understandings, often appropriated from Indigenous communities, are then instrumentalized as liberal powers 'want to continue to have what they have', 'What they want is for Indigenous people to save the world' (2021, 126; see also Chandler and Reid 2019). Povinelli seeks to challenge the sometimes abstract and timeless ontological understandings of both speculative and pragmatic approaches to hope. Instead of starting from claims to ontology, she locates hope in the pluralized grounded practices of resistance to the forces of colonial modernity and racial capitalism. In so doing, she articulates a different spatial and temporal framing of pragmatic hope, one that is horizontal rather than vertical, critical rather than affirmative.

In Povinelli's articulation of pragmatic hope – a hope grounded in the material practices of entanglement – there is a critical shift in positionality away from hegemonic Eurocentric framings. She makes the point that hope is not about 'survivance' in the wake of a coming environmental catastrophe, instead she highlights what she calls 'the ongoing nature of the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism and its epistemological and ontological presuppositions and unfoldings' (2021, 132). Pragmatic hope is no longer about changing course, in order to recognize and respond pragmatically to connectivities and entanglements, as it is for Bratton (2021) and Latour (2021), but rather about mobilising 'spatial and affective discourses in order to transform actual harms into horizontal hopes' (Povinelli 2021, 132). It is about slowing and challenging the ongoing sacrificing of worlds called for in order to salvage the world of liberal modernity. Povinelli is careful to articulate the necessity of grounded practices which can't be universalized or instrumentalized by others.

This attention to multiplicities and the grounding in Marilyn Strathern's anthropology of *Partial Connections* (2004) has also been an important influence upon approaches to pragmatic hope as presented in the material and embodied practices highlighted by Donna Haraway's concept of 'staying with the trouble' (2016) and Anna Tsing's articulation of the practices of hope as making 'life in the ruins' (2015). Haraway powerfully talks of the need for 'response-ability', 'becoming-with, not becoming' (2016, 12) as: 'Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding' (2016, 13). In doing so, 'I – we – have to unlearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars' (2016, 13). For Haraway, then, the human is decentred as the possessor of powers of direction or control, instead pragmatically 'becoming-with' in processes of mutuality.

Anna Tsing's work provides possibly some of the best examples of pragmatic hope as practices of engagement, care, and openness. Practices that put relational context and

shared precarity at the centre and can neither be understood as directive or instrumentalising nor generalized into new forms of governance or regulation:

I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs. I argue that only an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition allows us to notice this – the situation of the world. As long as authoritative analysis requires assumptions of growth, experts don't see the heterogeneity of space and time, even when it is obvious to ordinary participants and observers ... To appreciate the patchy unpredictability associated with our current condition, we need to reopen our imaginations. (Tsing 2015, 4–5)

The attention to the world as 'a mosaic of open-ended assemblages' affirms a life of contingency and precarity, as always open to generative engagements but without guarantees. Pragmatic hope is an ongoing process of situational awareness and responsivity, a process which depends heavily on our embodied and experiential becoming with others. Pragmatism is very much oriented around embodied practices, while speculative approaches to hope are focused upon the freeing of the mind. Also, it is important to note, that both speculative and pragmatic approaches are tightly linked to processes of affirmation rather than to critique.

### **Nihilist hope: theorising from the abyss**

The third framing, that of nihilist hope, differs distinctly from speculative and pragmatic approaches in its categorical rejection of an ethical or political approach of affirmation. In fact, it is precisely the difficulties of escaping the lure of the world and the desire to affirm potentialities contained within it, that drives nihilist framings of hope. Nihilist approaches could be seen as existing in a field of conceptual work having both a Eurocentric and a more critical contemporary framing, in this case the more radical expressions would be those associated with critical Black studies, particularly the work of Afropessimism. Earlier versions, associated with Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno of the Frankfurt School, find hope in the radical negation of the world of unending violence, where both carrying on in the world but also giving up in despair are impossible.

It might, at first glance, appear that nihilism and hope are incompatible concepts, however this is far from the case. It is the force of critique of what exists that creates the possibility of another world to come after. As Benjamin argued in his final essay, the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin 2015, 248). He famously took Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus', pictured as the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it ... irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 2015, 249)

Benjamin inverts the understanding of progress, articulating it as a litany of acts of barbarism. Nihilism and hope thus come together from a positionality that lacks a stake in

the world as conceived in modernist terms. As Adorno states, in a world of ontological loss, after the collapse of faith in modernist meaning-making binaries and separations, both nihilism and hope need to be reconceived. In fact, the only hopeful position is that of nihilism, the hope of negation rather than the abstract desire for nothingness. Drawing upon Beckett, he argues:

... the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet. As long as the world is as it is, all pictures of reconciliation, peace, and quiet resemble the picture of death. The slightest difference between nothingness and coming to rest would be the haven of hope, the no man's land between the border posts of being and nothingness ... The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honours itself by defending what is damned as nihilism. (Adorno[1996] 2007, 381)

For Adorno, the dark side of modernist 'reason' is the world as concentration camp. 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself ... The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism' (Adorno[1996] 2007, 365). From the perspective of nihilist hope, the critical approaches of pragmatic hope that insist on 'staying with the trouble' and 'making life in the ruins' are still problematic and affirm the world that exists through 'their more and more faded positivities'. As Claire Colebrook notes, pragmatic approaches to hope, even the more radical ones described above, as articulated by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, also have 'a practical and therapeutic function, enabling us to continue to be who we are' (2020, 185); an 'ongoing managerial exercise in anthropodicy: what we have been in the past may have been destructive, but future non-being is unthinkable' (2020, 186).

Nihilist hope seeks to move beyond the affirmative approaches which seek to find hope in forces already in existence, and therefore potentially accessible through work on freeing the mind or upon embodied affordances and relations. There is no desire to affirm the world as it exists. It is not just the modernist construction of the 'human' but the ontology of 'world' itself that is problematized in the nihilist grounding in the injustice and constitutive violence of modernity. As Calvin Warren states: 'blackness is outside ontology' understood as grounded in 'an antiblack metaphysics' (2018, 42–3). Where nihilist hope differs from speculative and pragmatic approaches to hope is in locating a positionality *outside* the world as grasped in modernist constructions of the human as subject. The starting point is a positionality understood as 'within the veil' (Du Bois 1920), external to the 'world' understood as a world made and sustained by the violence of ontological terror. Nihilist hope depends upon the inverting or negating of the modernist framing of the unseen, theorising *from* rather than *towards* the 'abyss' (see Pugh and Chandler 2023). This positionality is that of the 'other' aware of its 'otherness', often expressed in W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness' (1903). As Paul Gilroy states, for critical Black studies, Du Bois leads the way in theorising modernity via a 'sustained and uncompromising interrogation of the concept of progress from the standpoint of the slave' (1993, 113).

One of the most powerful expositions of nihilist hope is Du Bois' short story 'The Comet' (1920). In the story, a Black worker is forced down into a New York building's vaults to undertake work 'too dangerous for more valuable men'. When he emerges a

comet has passed close to the Earth seemingly emitting deadly gasses which have killed everyone on the surface. Coming to terms with life after the ending of the world, the man falls in love with a white woman who has also survived; a relationship that would have been impossible otherwise. Swept up in their emotions the ending of the world appears as positive:

‘Yes,’ she said slowly; ‘and how foolish our human distinctions seem—now ...’

‘Yes—I was not—human, yesterday,’ he said ...

‘Death, the leveler!’ he muttered.

‘And the revealer,’ she whispered gently, ... (Du Bois 1920, 147–148)

The ending of the world is a moment of emancipation not just from the psychological and material ‘shackles’ of racial division but also is ‘revealing’ of the unseen human potential that is routinely disavowed. The sad ending of the story is that the destruction is only localized to New York and the normality of racial domination is quickly restored, the man threatened with lynching after being spotted with the white woman. For nihilist hope, the unseen world ‘behind the veil’, requires as its precondition the ending of the world of modernity. Advocates of nihilist hope are thereby drawn to the world-ending stance of theorists working in critical Black studies, particularly articulating their work in alignment with Afropessimism. As Claire Colebrook states:

This is what I take Afro-pessimism’s conception of social death to be, an awareness not so much that one does not have a world or belong in the world, but that the world demands one’s non-being. Currently this form of existence is utterly tragic, constantly resulting tracing the wake of black lives not mattering. Even so, Afro-pessimism also offers a positive sense of the end of the world, where non-being and worldlessness provoke thought to move beyond the world. (2020, 197)

Nihilist hope does not provide a speculative imaginary that presumptively welcomes the unseen ‘beyond’, nor does it provide an affirmation of forces and effects that exist in potentiality ‘here and now’. Nihilist hope is the hope of negation, facilitating the practical tasks of deconstruction, of paraontological unravelling (on the concept of paraontology see Chandler 2014). The world, as imagined by modernity, remains a barrier to both thought and embodied relationality, thus the task for nihilist hope remains that of negation rather than affirmation.

## Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the contemporary politics of the unseen. It has analysed how questions of hope, intimately tied to metaphysical questions of the human and the relationship between the human and the world, have been rearticulated today. Hope in modernity had been fundamental to the closure (or bracketing) of questions of ontology, questions of the ‘unseen’ beyond modernist reason. However, the Anthropocene understood as a register of the crisis for modernist thought, including the critical tradition (which appears to be at an impasse), has reopened questions of the ethical, political and ontological stakes of differing conceptualizations of hope. This shift, in placing hope at the forefront of contemporary concerns, has highlighted conceptualizations that share

little with the hope of modernity, with its confidence in a ‘happy ending’ no matter how many setbacks are experienced. The different conceptualizations of hope in the Anthropocene necessarily conceive themselves to be less ‘human-centred’, problematising modernist ontological assumptions and seeking to operate beyond the constraints of the human/nature divide.

Our contemporary moment appears to have recast the unseen as vital to the construction of political and ethical possibilities. This shift in focus places hope at the centre of ethical and political concerns precisely because contemporary questions seem to evade the certainties of modernist assumptions. As a way into opening up the contemporary exploration of hope, this paper has heuristically outlined and given examples of work illustrating three key paradigms or approaches. These approaches are schematic for the purposes of clarification, rather than for labelling or categorising certain thinkers or theorists. Speculative hope, with its reliance on a ‘seer’ capable of welcoming emergent forces with presumptive generosity and non-anthropocentric care, refusing to suborn communities to the world as it exists. Pragmatic hope, operating with the assumption that modernity is over and affirmative of non-anthropocentric world-making practices, engaging in emergent multiplicities in ways that seek to inculcate differentiation rather than to direct and control. And, finally, nihilist hope, refusing the lure of affirming forces existing within this world and instead engaging in the work of paraontological disruption and deconstruction, placing hope in world-ending negation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*David Chandler* is Professor of International Relations, University of Westminster. He edits the open access journal *Anthropocenes: Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*. His recent books include *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (2023); *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (2021); *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (2019); and *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (2018).

## References

- Adorno, T. [1966] 2007. *Negative dialectics*. New York: Continuum.
- Adorno, T., and M. Horkheimer. [1944] 1997. *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Benjamin, W. 2015. *Illuminations*. London: Vintage.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bird Rose, D. 2011. *Wild dog dreaming: Love and extinction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Bloch, E. 1986. *The principle of hope, volume one*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bratton, B. 2021. *The revenge of the real: Politics for a post-pandemic world*. London: Verso Books.
- Brown, J. 2021. *Black utopias: Speculative life and the music of other worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2021. *The climate of history in a planetary age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Chandler, D. 2018. *Ontopolitics in the anthropocene: An introduction to mapping, sensing and hacking*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chandler, D. 2019. The death of hope? Affirmation in the anthropocene. *Globalizations* 16, no. 5: 695–706. doi:10.1080/14747731.2018.1534466
- Chandler, D., and J. Reid. 2019. *Becoming indigenous: Governing imaginaries in the anthropocene*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Chandler, N.D. 2014. *X: The problem of the Negro as a problem for thought*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Colebrook, C. 2020. What would you do (and who would you kill) In order to save the world? Dialectical resilience. In *Resilience in the anthropocene: Governance and politics at the end of the world*, eds. D. Chandler, K. Grove, and S. Wakefield, 179–99. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Connolly, W.E. 2011. *A world of becoming*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Connolly, W.E. 2013. *The fragility of things: Self-organizing processes, neoliberal fantasies, and democratic activism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1903. *The souls of black folk*. Seattle: Amazon Classics.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1920. *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil*. Seattle: Amazon Classics.
- Foucault, M. [1966] 1989. *The order of things*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 2008. *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the collège de France, 1978-1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Fromm, E. 1968. *The revolution of hope: Toward a humanized technology*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Giddens, A. 1999. *Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives*. London: Profile Books.
- Gilroy, P. 1993. *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Grove, J. 2019. *Savage ecology: War and geopolitics at the end of the world*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gumbs, A.P. 2020. *Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Haraway, D. 2003. *The companion species manifesto – dogs, people & significant otherness: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hayek, F.A. 1960. *The constitution of liberty*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kant, I. 1991. Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose. In *Political writings*, ed. I. Kant, 41–53. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 2007. *Critique of pure reason*. London: Penguin.
- Kohn, E. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. 2021. *After lockdown: A metamorphosis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Law, J. 2015. What's wrong with a one-world world? *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 1: 126–39. doi:10.1080/1600910X.2015.1020066
- Lewis, J.S. 2020. *Scammer's yard: The crime of black repair in Jamaica*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lindroth, M., and H. Sinevaara-Niskanen. 2022. *The colonial politics of hope: Critical junctures of indigenous-state relations*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Meillassoux, Q. 2008. *After finitude: An essay on the necessity of contingency*. London: Continuum.
- Morton, T. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- North, D.C. 1990. *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, R, ed. 2015. *Black quantum futurism: Theory and practice, volume one*. Philadelphia, PA: AfroFuturist Affair/House of Future Sciences Books.
- Plumwood, V. 2008. Shadow places and the politics of dwelling. *Australian Humanities Review* 44: 139–50.



- Potter, E., F. Miller, E. Lövbrand, D. Houston, J. McLean, E. O’Gorman, C. Evers, and G. Ziervogel. 2022. A manifesto for shadow places: Re-imagining and co-producing connections for justice in an era of climate change. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 1: 272–92. doi:10.1177/2514848620977022
- Povinelli, E. 2021. *Between Gaia and ground: Four axioms of existence and the ancestral catastrophe of late liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pugh, J., and D. Chandler. 2023. *The world as abyss: The Caribbean and critical thought in the anthropocene*. London: University of Westminster Press.
- Robinson, D. 2020. *Hungry listening: Resonant theory for indigenous sound studies*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Scott, J.C. 1998. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, A. [1776] 2022. *Wealth of nations, books I-III*. Ottawa, Canada: East India Publishing Company.
- Strathern, M. 2004. *Partial connections*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tsing, A.L. 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- VerCetty, Q. 2020. Building the X variable: Artivism with afrofuturism. In *Space-time collapse II: Community futurisms*, ed. R. Phillips, 133–51. Philadelphia, PA: AfroFuturist Affair/House of Future Sciences Books.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. 2014. *Cannibal metaphysics*. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.
- Walcott, R. 2021. *The long emancipation: Moving toward black freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Warren, C. 2018. *Ontological terror: Blackness, nihilism and emancipation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Womack, Y. 2016. Thoughts on navigating the time warp of horrors and riding the DNA strands of resilience. In *Space-Time collapse I: From the Congo to the carolinas*, ed. R. Phillips, 55–64. Philadelphia, PA: AfroFuturist Affair/House of Future Sciences Books.
- Wright, M.E. 2015. *Physics of blackness: Beyond the middle passage epistemology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.