

## CHAPTER 2

# The Abyssal Subject

### Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, the importance of the perspective of ‘the world as abyss’ has emerged against the backdrop of the search for an alternative to modernist political projects, increasingly seen as unable to fully address problems of coloniality, racial capitalism and environmental destruction (Noys 2012; Colebrook 2014). While much critical work in the opening decades of the 2000s was driven by the promise of more constructive and affirmative relational approaches (Latour 2004) and the turn to immanence, today there is a growing search for what may lie beyond the confines of the relational and ontological turns (Karera 2019; Povinelli 2021; Zalloua 2021; Pugh and Chandler 2022; Chipato and Chandler 2022a; 2022b). We explore how ‘abyssal’ work turns to the Caribbean, not to find a world-saving cosmology to correct the errors of modern reasoning but, to learn from those who have long been said to lack fixed grounds of ontological security. Thus, as we draw out in this chapter, Caribbean tropes of displacement have often been key to the figurative assembling of an abyssal subject and what we draw out as abyssal

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**How to cite this book chapter:**

Pugh, J. and Chandler, D. 2023. *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene*. Pp. 17–59. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72.b>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

sociality, problematising and putting in question the projects of modernity and colonialism.

An abyssal framing is enabled by reading specific Caribbean modes of practice as being free from assumptions of fixed and pre-set entities and the human as an individualised and pre-existing subject. The abyssal paradigm holds off the lure of the world as given to us empirically, as just 'there', pre-constituted by a modern ontology of fixed entities that are transparently available. The modern or Eurocentric framing assumes an objectivity, or autonomous production of thought, without constraints of context and finitude. This Eurocentric imaginary of certitude constrains politics to what exists, i.e., to a debate on the terms of the world as a fixed and reified product of colonial, ecocidal and genocidal destruction. The problematisation of the world imagined to be made in this way is anchored in a perspective that starts from the world as abyss. Thus, the shift to a deeper level of problematisation has often been most deeply informed by and explicated via work which draws upon figurations that assume a non-subject positionality. For us, a key thinker in this field is Fred Moten. Moten, in his extensive work in critical cultural theory, has famously drawn methodologically on the poststructuralist approach of Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant, going so far as publishing a philosophical trilogy under the general title, 'Consent Not To Be A Single Being', in a tribute to his influence. We think that Moten's work is important as an example of the way in which the work of Caribbean theorists can be seen to circulate through the academy in ways which provide a certain non- or ante-ontological character to work in contemporary critical Black studies.

This shift to concerns of ontology is defining for what we are describing as an 'abyssal' approach and for the figuration of an abyssal subject positionality. The starting position is not one of being in the world as an already defined or fixed entity but a position of displacement or of non-identity. The implication of this ontological inflection is that identity can never be pre-given, the problem is not the problematic construction of identities and the need for identities to be recognised or included in some way,

but the construction of identities per se. Although the figurative assembling of an abyssal subject draws upon Caribbean tropes, the abyssal subject is not another way of representing ‘Caribbean Man’ even in terms of Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s (1975) poetics of deconstruction. Thus, Moten argues that it is not ‘being’ but ‘nonbeing,’ ‘unsettlement’ or ‘displacement’ that is key. This ‘paraontological’ detachment of Blackness as a figurative positionality from Black persons (Moten 2013, 749) means that no-thingness or nonbeing:

...signals that which is most emphatically and lyrically marked in Édouard Glissant’s phrase ‘consent not to be a single being’ and indicated in Wilderson and Mackey’s gestures toward ‘fantasy in the hold,’ the radical unsettlement that is where and what we are. Unsettlement is the displacement of sovereignty by initiation, so that what’s at stake—here, in displacement—is a certain black incapacity to desire sovereignty and ontological relationality whether they are recast in the terms and forms of a Lévinasian ethics or an Arendtian politics, a Fanonian resistance or a Pattersonian test of honor. (Moten 2013, 750)

One way in which Moten (2016) articulates the importance of shifting perspective to the paraontological is in moving beyond the limits of discussing race in a liberal register of rights and challenging the arbitrary cut between Human and Thing. Sticking to the political level that limits discourse to ‘matters of fact,’ rather than engaging at a more ontological level of how ‘facts’ come into being, means that the question is limited to claiming rights based on inclusion in the ‘Human’ side of the cut and then necessarily reproducing and accepting hierarchical understandings of the division between Human and Thing. Or alternatively, dismissing rights based on redistributing agency across the ‘divide’ and giving agency to the ‘Thing’ (Moten 2016). Where actor network theorists, such as the late Bruno Latour (2004), would have argued that understandings of agency should be extended or redistributed to include ‘Things’ as possessing agential powers, Moten, thinks in terms of a different (we would say ‘abyssal’) paradigm.

Moten rejects the debate at the level of Humans and Things and the politics of inclusion and agency. Rather than a discourse of classifications of entities and (re)drawing of distinctions, Moten argues that thinking from a position of ‘no-thingness’ is enabling for an approach to critique which, we think, works very differently to that of the relational and ontological turns (2016, 11). This, for us, is a move of fundamental significance. Abyssal thought does not offer an alternative imaginary which seeks to rethink the human and the world, but is rather paraontological and non-worlding, refusing the separations constitutive of the human and the world. Theorising from the figurative world as abyss – from the non-being of the abyssal *subject* in abyssal sociality, as we do in this chapter – is ‘an enactment of *refusal* – a refusal to die, refusal to comply, refusal to give up and give in’ (da Silva 2022, 273). To underscore the distinctiveness of the abyssal approach, it is delineated as *non-* or *ante-* ontological (i.e. drawing out the desedimenting capacity of the indeterminacy of non-being), rather than anti-ontological and negating (i.e. from a position of oppositional ontological determinacy).

This chapter draws out the characteristics of what we call the abyssal *subject* and abyssal sociality. First, we foreground how contemporary work develops particular readings of Caribbean writers, notably Glissant (1997), to underline how the formation of the abyssal *subject* in the world as abyss is understood to emerge inseparably from modern and colonial world-making. We explore how the abyssal *subject* is not grasped as the ‘underside’ to modernity and colonialism, something which could be separated out or cleaved off, but as inextricable from these world-making projects. Second, we turn to how particular modes of Caribbean practice, delineated here as abyssal sociality, are understood to simultaneously index, trouble, and to desediment this ontology of world-making. We examine how this highly distinctive approach to critique draws from the work of Caribbean writers such as Benítez-Rojo (2001). Throughout, we explore how the ‘force of Caribbean history’ is mobilised in work which contributes to the development of the abyssal analytic, ending the chapter by relating this to the appeal of abyssal approaches for contemporary critical thought.

## The World as Abyss Forged through the Middle Passage

Central for an abyssal perspective is the understanding that the world as abyss cannot be separated from the modernist making of both the human and the world. We draw upon a range of work to emphasise how a particular abyssal approach brings to the fore the foundational violence at the heart of both the world as material being and as given to finite thought. In this process of world-making, the world as perceived by thought is inseparable from the violent renting of the Middle Passage, the hold of the slave ship, and the new world of plantation logistics. For Harney and Moten (2013, 93–94):

Modernity is sutured by this hold. This movement of things, unformed objects, deformed subjects, nothing yet and already. This movement of nothing is... the annunciation of modernity itself, and not just the annunciation of modernity itself but the insurgent prophecy that all of modernity will have at its heart, in its hold, this movement of things, this interdicted, outlawed social life of nothing... [B]orders grope their way toward the movement of things, bang on containers, kick at hostels, harass camps, shout after fugitives, seeking all the time to harass this movement of things... But this fails to happen, borders fail to cohere, because the movement of things will not cohere... the absence of coherence, but not of things, in the moving presence of absolutely nothing.

We glean much from Harney and Moten (2013; 2021) for our understanding of the world as abyss, particularly from the way in which they do not seek to redeem the ontological lack of humans made objects – slaves reduced to ‘nothing’ under modern and colonial world-making. Rather than refigure ontology in the productivist mode of the relational and ontological turns, they think from the ‘absence of coherence’, from ‘no-thingness’ as important for the development of a paraontological approach or method, opening up a distinctive line of critique.

It is a key contention of this book that an abyssal framing draws a distinctive line of thought from the work of some of the most well-known and influential Caribbean writers of the last few decades. Notable here is Édouard Glissant who famously begins his *Poetics of Relation* with the ‘Open Boat’, the Middle Passage, and the figuration of a positionality of the subject of the three abysses – the slave ship, the depths of the sea, and the forgetting of origins in Africa. Thus, firstly, ‘the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss’ (1997, 6). Second, ‘the entire sea, gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green’ (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). Crucial for us about the contemporary work we draw upon for the abyssal analytic is the lack of ontological security of the subject of these three abysses – becoming the ‘no-thing’ Harney and Moten speak of – lacking a perspective from which to see the world in its own image (Spillers 2003, 215).

This subject of the abyss, is not understood as pre-existing modernity as a timeless abstraction but emerges through the process of colonial and modern world-making. Here, the slave trade is figured as performing a crucial role. In fact, Glissant argued that ‘one of the best kept secrets of creolization’ (1989, 14) was the fundamental difference between a people transplanted by exile of dispersion, who continue to survive as a people elsewhere, and the transfer of a people via the slave trade, ‘where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities’ (1989, 14). For Glissant, it was the forced transfer of the slave trade that constituted a population forced ‘to question in several ways any attempt at universal generalization’ (1989, 14), forced to ‘desecrate’, to view critically, ‘the old order of things’ but unable to be ‘remade in the Other’s image’, forced to enter a ‘constantly shifting and variable process of creolization’ (1989, 15). Thus, we

learn from the work of Hortense Spillers (2003, 214–215, italics in original):

Those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the oceanic... [having an]... undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captives, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Because, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say they were culturally ‘unmade’... We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*, that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure.

Rather than provide us with a productivist alternative understanding of being, of ontology, to that posited by modern world-making, the figurative *subject* of the abyss is held in ‘non-differentiation’ (see also Ibrahim 2021, 15). There can be no going back after ‘The Door of No Return’ to what are, by necessity, ‘irretrievable selves’ (Brand 2011, 224; Gumbs 2018). This is ‘the absence of Black subjectivity (and homeland, and political sovereignty) that can never be fully realized’ (Culp 2021, 11). Thrown into a world in which it is never possible to be ‘at home’ (Fanon 2021, 102), lacking ‘ontological resistance’ (ibid., 90), the abyssal *subject* is unable to ontologically project itself upon the world.

It is precisely here, under an abyssal framing, that the violent imposition of colonialism’s cuts and distinctions – what could be called the *abyssal cut* – becomes the imposition of the ‘historical forms of limit’ that is colonial world-making (Chandler 2010). This ‘historical form of limit’ is precisely that of the ‘global colour line’ that then becomes the materialised form in which this bifurcation of the world is put into question. Key for abyssal work is how the abyssal cut ontologically constitutes the binary divides of the ‘global colour line’: on the one hand of ‘human subjects’ understood as self-constituting, and on the other, of ‘objects’

understood as determined by others, put to work on plantations (da Silva 2007). Grounded in the Caribbean, it is this force of enclosure, of stratification, of colonial world-making, which the abyssal approach understands as working at ‘the level of existence... understood as ontological’ (Chandler 2010). As Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2010) saliently remarks: ‘The Negro question, if there is such, is not first of all or only a question about the Negro... it is first a fundamental and general question about the dominant conceptions of humanity.’ The abyssal line of thought we draw out in this book foregrounds how the ‘ontological terror’ (Warren 2018) of colonial world-making comes to appear as ‘natural’ and ‘invisible’. Abyssal thought does not reveal ‘another reality’ beneath or other to this world but exposes this world as the product of the ongoing work of colonial violence.

The starting point for an abyssal analytic is thus the abyssal cut between being and Blackness as non-being, in the sense of lacking ontological existence, addressed directly in Fred Moten’s very important (2008) intervention, ‘The Case of Blackness’. Fanon’s claim that ‘ontology’, the antiblack world of a modern ontology, ‘does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.’ (Fanon 2021, 90) is central here. As Moten responds:

This passage [Fanon’s argument], and the ontological (absence of) drama it represents, leads us to a set of fundamental questions. How do we think the possibility and the law of outlawed, impossible things? And if, as Frantz Fanon suggests, the black cannot be an other for another black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life? (Moten 2008, 178)

The figurative positionality of Blackness lacks ontological substance, lacks being ‘in’ the world, experiencing existence through the eyes of an other. For Moten, this opening of a gap between the ‘fact’ of being human and the lived experience of lacking independent existence is key (2008, 180): ‘one that plays itself out not

by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and beings' (2008, 180). The figurative positionality of Blackness enables problematisation but is not productive within the world of a modern ontology:

What is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experienced of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of para-ontology whose compartment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events. (Moten 2008, 187)

An abyssal framing is thus not formulated upon an abstract metaphysics but derived from a figuration of the world as experienced through the prism of differentiated ontological standing, often drawing upon particular readings of Caribbean modes of resistance and survival.

Drawn from different parts of Africa, forced in the hold of the slave ship, slaves shared little in the way of common identities, languages, and dialects, so had to continually improvise for collective survival. Abyssal life thereby harbours the sociality of what Glissant calls *chaos-monde*, involving 'all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us... totality's reflection and agent in motion' (Glissant 1997, 94). As we have stressed, contemporary abyssal approaches read Glissant in a particular way. For example, da Silva (2022, 283, italics in original) states: 'I prefer to read in Glissant's more expansive approach a *refusal* that seeks to release [the world] to undeterminability, and not only this or that "linguistic" or "cultural" group.' An abyssal approach thereby works 'indeterminability' very differently to relational discourses of openness and encounter. In ontologies of becoming, a 'subject' or 'being' is always and already in the process of emergence, of actualisation, grasped in terms of a subject *open to the world*. We further see this in how, for example, creolisation often gets reduced to notions of hybridity and intersectionality, where the subject is the product of the comings together of ongoing relational entanglements (for a critique see Glissant 1989, 140–141 and Harney

and Moten 2021, 126). In direct contrast, the figurative *subject* of the abyss, of the hold of the slave ship, is *prized open by the world* – held in what Moten (2017, 67) calls ‘eternally alien immanence’.

Thus, we see the assembling of an abyssal figure unable to ontologically project itself upon the world, inhabiting an *abyssal geography*; an ‘untimely version of time’ (Ibrahim 2021, 29). This *subject* is ‘less’ than the subject of modernity, in the sense that it lacks ontological security. It is also at the same time ‘more’, precisely because of this lack of fixity, thereby possessing an awareness that the world as presently constituted is one of necessary and gratuitous violence. For the contemporary work which enables us to draw out the abyssal line of thought, staying with the indeterminacy of the abyssal *subject*, with the reverberations of elements stripped of form, is not then a flight from reality, but a piercing of the veil of reality, through thinking *from* the world as abyss. It is through grounding critique in the abyssal geography of the hold, Middle Passage, and the brutalities of chattel slavery, that abyssal work theorises from ‘behind’ the veil of modern and colonial world-making; beyond the assumptions that the world, as given, is ‘naturally’ there, rather than is a social and material product of the abyssal cut. As M. NourbeSe Philip (2008) says, reflecting upon her poem *Zong!* about slave traders working in Caribbean waters who drowned slaves to claim the insurance:

The descendants of that experience appear creatures of the word, apparently brought into *ontological* [our emphasis] being by fiat and by law. The law it was that said we were. Or were not. The fundamental resistance to this, whether or not it was being manifested in the many, many instances of insurrection, was the belief and knowledge that we – the creatures of fiat and law – always knew we existed *outside* [italics in original] the law – that law – and that our be-ing was prior in time to fiat, law and word... So many of us continue to live... Unable to not-tell the story that must be told. (Philip 2008, 206–207)

Let us then emphasise, as Philip says in this quote, that for the contemporary abyssal paradigm the Middle Passage and chattel slavery of the plantation form part of a process of the forging of the

world of modernity, *ontologically*. We say ‘ontologically’ to clarify that the birth of coloniality and racial capitalism are not just historical events that took place ‘in’ the world that we are now living in and therefore can be understood now as ‘events’, hundreds of years in the past. Understood as integral to the world-making process – integral to the world that we experience now – the foundational violence of the carving of subjects from objects, valued humans from non-valued non-humans, self-governing beings from non-beings, remains as much part of the ‘world’ today as it was then. The difference is that this world – with its incisions and divides – is now considered as natural and the foundational violence disavowed. The abyssal approach desediments the givenness of the ‘world’ as differentiated across segmented space-time and, in so doing, brings the foundational violence, essential to this world’s making, to the surface.

### Abyssal Sociality

Work which grounds an abyssal analytic tends to start with the Middle Passage and the hold of the slave ship as the violent birthplaces of modernity and the world as abyss. It is here that the figurative assembling of the subject of the abyss is often placed. As we have discussed, this line of thought is often developed from particular readings of Caribbean writers, of which Glissant is probably most well known. However, for us, another key Caribbean interlocutor is Antonio Benítez-Rojo and his text *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (2001). Benítez-Rojo sees the Caribbean as figuratively birthing the ‘global colour line’: the bifurcation between those constituted as full subjects and those held to lack these capacities and require tutelage. For Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean is seen as the fulcrum of modernity, as a world-making and world-denying project, as the site of the production of both Black(ended) and White(ened) subjects, which ‘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... (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 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 coloniser and colonised, between human and non-human, between reason and irrationalism, between aid provider and aid receiver. Key for drawing out the abyssal analytic from Benítez-Rojo’s text is how the stakes here are *ontological*; 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 [1867], 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 racialisation of the world, ontologically, imbricated within the very being of the world, appears to be natural with differences pre-existing the encounter. Benítez-Rojo’s *Repeating Island* denaturalises this world, deconstructing what is considered to be naturally ‘there’ and would otherwise be obscured precisely by the success of the process itself.<sup>1</sup>

Benítez-Rojo’s work allows us to draw out some of the key characteristics of abyssal work and an understanding of the world as abyss. There is a focus on the ‘between’ of the Caribbean, but this is not a relational approach, such as creolisation understood as hybrid entanglements, but rather its ontological inversion; the entities are products of encounter rather than existing prior to it. In other words, the Caribbean is not understood as a place of

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<sup>1</sup> This point is also well made by Derrida in his use of Freud’s assertion that: ‘Repressions that have failed will of course have more claim on our interest than those that may have been successful: for the latter will for the most part escape our examination’ (1978, 247).

‘encounter’ between different pre-formed cultures, as if socio-, economic- and political- divides pre-existed it. Instead, the Caribbean is framed as a site where ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ themselves are violently forged.<sup>2</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. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 9)

This framing enables us to rethink the world as abyss as one in which *the temporal and spatial framing is put in question itself*, rather than just the understanding of the entities produced by coloniality as an ongoing process of reproducing a bifurcated world. This work of ‘desedimentation’ is done through putting the Caribbean at the epicentre of the construction of modernity, historio-socio-economically and, more importantly, ontologically. To follow Benítez-Rojo, on the one hand, we have the process of cuts of world-making – he uses the concept of ‘Plantation’ as a machinic approach to biurfication (2001, 37–39; see also Brathwaite 1975; McKittrick 2013) – and, on the other, in response to this there is resistance, the attempt to disrupt and to defer the making of the ‘One World World’ (Law 2015).<sup>3</sup> This too is read by Benítez-Rojo as being centred on the Caribbean. These are the abyssal modes of practice of survival and of resistance; an aesthetics where differences are held together through an alternative

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<sup>2</sup> As Nahum Chandler argues, this line of (abyssal) thought can be dated back to W. E. B. Du Bois who conceived of modern slavery as ‘standing at the inception – neither inside or outside – of modern imperial colonialism, of a supposed European world economy, of capitalism as a system, of modernity as a global horizon’ (2013, 113 n. 15).

<sup>3</sup> We use John Law’s expression of the ‘One World World’ (2015) to describe the fixed grid of space-time of the modern ontology.

sense of the universal which emerges against differentiation, where differences are held together in play, often, as we shortly discuss, in *carnaval* (2001, 29). In carnival, as in the hold of the slave ship, discussed by Spillers and Harney and Moten above, an analytic of desedimenting suspension is invoked that is quite distinct from the differentiating and expansive, productivist powers of relational imaginaries (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 29).

*The Repeating Island* focuses upon the Caribbean as the fulcrum of the 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 the site of the production of racial capitalism, the Plantation as a system and the racialising ontology of the subject, the object, the human, and 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. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 42)

The Plantation as a machine of racialisation, as world-producing, as a machine of binary division, becomes most visible, most forced, 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, one that gives figurative content to an abyssal 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-Domingue, 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, 74)

The Caribbean is figured as the site of the coercive forcing of the racialised and gendered world of a modernist ontology<sup>4</sup> – the Plantation, or racial capitalism – as well as the location of new and politically and geographically particular modes of resistance and flight from this, in ‘the community of maroons, the *palenque*’, the ‘antiplantation’, the community not so much of the ‘free’ but of those suspended in difference (2001, 249). Like the work of Spillers, da Silva, and Harney and Moten discussed above, these are not positioned as ‘between’ or at the ‘intersection’ of different geographies, but as modes of practice that desediment and problematise the decision or cut.

Benítez-Rojo closes his book with the chapter ‘Carnival’ which we read as a striking example for the development of an abyssal analytic. Benítez-Rojo 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, 306). In Benítez-Rojo’s figuration, in carnival, the world is imagined 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 Benítez-Rojo, it points to something operating on another ontological level, which is precisely its interest for

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<sup>4</sup> We highlight the important linkages with gender below, in a discussion of the work of Philip (2017), see also Bey’s *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (2020).

us, a rejection of the modernist process of biurfication – 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 Bakhtinian sense, we can say that Caribbeanness functions in a carnivalesque manner. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 307)

Benítez-Rojo stresses that what he sees in carnival and in its rejection of binaries is an expression of what ‘was *already there*’ (ibid., 22, italics in original): what he simply calls ‘Caribbeanness’ (ibid., 307). Whilst he says that the repeating island is a ‘meta-archipelago’ (ibid., 24) expanding outwards into the world, not confined to the cartographically defined Caribbean (a point we pick up later for understanding the world as abyss), he understands that its characteristics are exemplified and amplified in the practices of this region – from carnival to Caribbean literature and poetry, to practices of marronage, and the walk and gait of Caribbean peoples. In all these cases, and more, Benítez-Rojo (ibid., 18) marks the attributes of the ‘interruptive action of the Caribbean machine’; which, as he delineates the stakes, works differently from the assemblage ‘machines’ that characterise the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). For Benítez-Rojo (2001, 18), the Caribbean is ‘a metamachine of differences whose poetic mechanism cannot be diagrammed in conventional dimensions... rhythms cut through by other rhythms, which are cut by still other rhythms... takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a centre no longer’ (ibid., 18).

Benítez-Rojo’s wager is that Caribbean practices, such as carnival, when performed in a ‘certain kind of way’ (ibid., 19), become an expansive, saturated space of displacing rhythms, deferring the ability to obtain a subject existing in obtainable relations. Carnival exemplifies this, where, as Benítez-Rojo clarifies:

I’m talking about the very complex phenomenon usually called improvisation... Someone might ask, for example, what the use is

of walking ‘in a certain kind of way.’ In fact, there’s not much use in it; not even dancing ‘in a certain kind of way’ is of much use if the scale of values that we use corresponds only with a technological machine coupled to an industrial machine coupled to a commercial machine. A jazz improvisation (jazz being a kind of music that dwells within the Caribbean orbit), which achieves a decentering of the canon by which a piece has been interpreted previously, is hardly useful either. The improvisation can be taped by a record company, but the product is a recording, not the improvisation, which is linked indissolubly with a space and time that cannot be reproduced... The deception lies in giving out that ‘listening’ is the only sense touched by improvisation. In fact, improvisation, if it has reached a level that I’ve been calling ‘a certain kind of way,’ has penetrated all the percipient spaces of those present, and it is precisely this shifting ‘totality’ that leads them to perceive the impossible unity, the absent locus, the center that has taken off and yet is still there... (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 19–20)

What we learn from Benítez-Rojo is how improvisation, when framed in terms of a specific kind of Caribbean practice, is enrolled to repudiate modernity’s binary delineations of subject/object, mind/body, human/nature divides. He figures this specific mode of improvisation as a shifting ‘totality’ (ibid., 20) which, ‘travelling toward the infinite,’ saturates, displaces, and dissolves the modernist divide that ‘separates the onlooker’ and ‘participant’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 16). Abyssal approaches reconfigure this space, through what Moten (2017, 1) calls the ontological insecurity of an in-between which is ‘not in between.’ In abyssal work, the ‘not in between’ is not spliced up and reductively packaged by the delineations of the colonial gaze. Rather it is an irreducible, displacing space, whose arrhythmia desediments notions of obtainable origins, opposites and relation (see also da Silva 2016; Bradley and da Silva 2021). Framed as the between which is not in between, Caribbean practices such as carnival and jazz enable an analytically distinct abyssal line of thought:

Let’s suppose that we beat upon a drum with a single blow and set its skin to vibrating. Let’s suppose that this sound stretches until it forms something like a salami. Well, here comes the

interruptive action of the Caribbean machine; it starts slicing pieces of sound in an unforeseen, improbable, and finally impossible way... takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a center no longer... A moment will be reached in which it will no longer be clear whether the salami of sound is cut by the rhythms or these are cut by the salami or it is cut in its slices or these are cut by slices of rhythm. (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 18)

The notion of an obtainable subject existing in knowable sets of relations is undone in this abyssal sociality. Abyssal approaches dissolve individuation as it is articulated along the lines of both liberal modes of reasoning and of productivist entanglement between ‘individuation-in-relation’ (Harney and Moten 2021, 126). Moreover, as outlined earlier, abyssal sociality is not strictly oppositional or negating (anti-ontological) either. Rather, it is negative (ante- and non- ontological) and de-worlding. Thus, in thinking ‘Caribbeanness’ as ‘carnavalesque’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 307), for Benítez-Rojo, ‘every repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step toward nothingness’ (ibid., 3). We can think abyssal socialites in terms of how they ‘open up a complex and unstable kind of existing that points to the void, to the lack of something, to repetitive and rhythmic insufficiency which, finally, is the most visible determinism to be drawn in the Caribbean’ (ibid., 28). We wish to underscore how, for abyssal approaches, this figuration of an abyssal positionality is understood as desedimenting, so that ‘no-thingness manifests itself as a kind of practice [of] differentiation without separation [citing da Silva 2016], which is necessarily social and aesthetic’ (Moten 2016, 11).

This attention to differentiation without separability – to abyssal sociality as a field of desedimentation, rather than of fixed and distinct entities (da Silva 2016, 64–65) – enables us to draw out the radical import of figuring the world abyssally. There are no entities-in-relation because there are no fixed and individuated entities, either pre-existing or produced: there is no product. In fact, abyssal sociality is non-productive and non-creative in terms of adding new and proliferating entities to the world. It works at

a fundamentally different level altogether: in terms of a figurative critical positionality, enabling for a paraontological mode of critique. It is in this way that abyssal approaches work to problematise the project of modern world-making. Not by putting forward a modified yet still delineable sense of ‘the Other’, ‘Being’, or the ‘subject’. But rather by foregrounding abyssal socialites, such as carnival which are read in a ‘certain kind of way’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 19), figured as dissolving distinctions, revealing the violence of the colonial gaze in its desire for certitude over and against the play of finitude and contingency.

Following the analysis of the undifferentiated subject of the hold, or figured through carnival, it is possible to draw a clear distinction between abyssal and relational approaches in so far as they relate to questions of transcendence and empirical existence. A relational ontology – such as actor network theory, materialist semiotics or theories of multi-species entanglement – works at the level of the world as it appears, as given to us – and is developed through a temporality of growth and attunement to ‘beings-in-relation’ (as if the shifting interstices between relations or between subjects and objects could be documented, engaged, or instrumentally or ethically put to work). By contrast, the improvisational capacities of an abyssal sociality, such as carnival, is saturated and lost in, deepening and expanding, the *irreducibility* of confluences; such that ‘a new chaotic flight of signifiers will occur, and so on ad infinitum’ (Benítez-Rojo 2001, 12). It is in this way that we can start to draw out how abyssal approaches refuse the human *and* the world. Abyssal work does not approach the stakes of critique by posing or framing an alternative reality but sees the task as that of lifting the veil covering the grounding violence and disavowal of finitude essential to the ongoing reproduction of colonial and modern world-making.

It is the key contention of this book that certain contemporary readings of Caribbean thought and practices have been important for the emergence of an abyssal paradigm, generative for a distinctive framing of geography, understanding the world as abyss. Thus, we read an abyssal approach to be at the heart of Moten’s

reading (2017) of C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins*. Rather than frame *The Black Jacobins* in terms of how it documents the tragedy of the Haitian Revolution, Moten draws out 'something more than failure, more than some static or unproductive contradiction... something that remains to be discovered in black radicalism' (ibid., 7). On the one hand, Moten reflects upon Toussaint and the Enlightenment and, on the other, the confidence which rebellious slaves placed in Toussaint's Lieutenant, Dessalines, and the darkness of the ditch they jumped into to avoid fire from a fortress. In his reflections, Moten (ibid., 2) foregrounds something between Enlightenment and darkness which he says is not in-between:

Toussaint, all hooked up and bound to the French, trapped in no-man's-land between liberty (abstract-subjective-telic-white) and independence (national-objective-present-black: the position Dessalines seemingly naturally slips into) hips us, by way of James, to the need for something not in between these formations. For James, the desire is for something not in between darkness and enlightenment, something not in between Dessalines and Toussaint. And we've got to think what it means not just for Dessalines to take the men into his confidence *but to talk to them*. We've got to think the form of that talk as well as its content, in untutored and broken dialect, unretouched, addressed to his followers and not to the French, sounded and not written and rewritten, seemingly unmediated by the graphic, and finally, concerned not with liberty but with independence. (Moten 2017, 7, italics in original)

Moten highlights the paraontological, the mode of existence which is not *in-between* (Moten 2017, 9). Paraontological life, the Caribbean which Moten reads James as pointing us towards, is a challenge to entanglement's focus upon separability. The paraontological is not different strands of relation coming together, from Africa and Europe, for example, forming a new mode of obtainable 'being' in revolt against regulation. Instead, like Glissant's (1997) figure on the 'Black Beach' at the end of the *Poetics of Relation*, where creolisation reaches the apex of opacity (see Pugh and

Chandler 2021), abyssal approaches assemble a figurative subject (unavailable to the ontological and ontic realms) who is not simply the product of the yoking together of origins and opposites, but rather de-worlds any such notions of delineable space and time. Thus, abyssal sociality is in this sense ‘non-local’ (as we explore further below), making leaps, in creolisation, in carnival, refusing notions of availability *in* the world of obtainable delineation. As Moten (2021) says of the influential work he is doing with Harney, ‘what we are doing is an ongoing extension of a kind of pidgin, or of creolisation in the way Glissant uses that term... a taking revenge on the English language...’ This abyssal mode, as in Benítez-Rojo above, is improvisational – at the point of confluence (if we can indeed now employ such a reductive term, still hinting towards separability) that ‘guarantees the ongoing presence and the irrecoverable possibility of what gets coded as conditions and foundations’ (ibid., 10). Such that the ‘not-in-between’ is: ‘There and not there, not hybrid, not in between marks the presence and loss of Africa. Blackness and black radicalism are not in between but neither one nor the other’ (ibid., 10).

Abyssal work foregrounds a *radical desedimentation* in which: ‘Everything here depends upon some kind of not-in-between suspension and propulsion, a certain arrhythmia, the breakdown of the too-smooth historical trajectory of European domination’ (ibid., 10):

Jumping in the ditch, revolutionary tactic and dance, lingering in the space between the notes, descending into the depths of the music. James seems to assert that Toussaint might have acted had he jumped, like Dessalines, into the ditch of *Vodun* ritual and revolutionary movement, slipping into the darkness, into the musical breaks of the history he was making and by which he was enveloped, into those nodes of time, where it leaps forward, new rhythm and all. But that leap forward depends upon that sounding. And again, this is not the in between. (Moten 2017, 9)

Abyssal thought is enabled by thinking with abyssal socialities where, in work such as Moten’s, a particular Caribbean aesthetic

comes to the fore, acting like a kind of experimental metaphysical wit,<sup>5</sup> de-worlding relation. In abyssal work, particular readings of Caribbean creolisation enable a distinctive aesthetic where a 'phrasal disruption of the sentence is crucial... in excess of the

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<sup>5</sup> Metaphysical wit is a particular style of poetry, exemplified by John Donne and William Shakespeare, involving the extreme juxtaposition of similes and metaphors. As discussed elsewhere (see Pugh 2012), it works radically differently from analytical modes of philosophy which seek to develop more precise concepts and frameworks that delineate what it means to be human in the world. Working in the opposite direction, metaphysical wit, through juxtaposing unlikely similes and metaphors (for example, Donne's putting 'love' in unlikely relation to a 'flea'), unmoors the sedimented purchase and power of inherited concepts and words but without a clear sense of reconstruction and repair. For Derrida (Derrida 1974, 1), commenting upon the centrality of metaphor to what he calls the 'white mythology' of European philosophy, 'metaphor has always been defined as the trope of resemblance; not simply between signifier and signified, but between two signs, the one designating the other... which carries a pre-supposition of continuity' (ibid., 13). As Ralph Waldo Emerson (2000, 27) said of Shakespeare, metaphysical wit achieves the sensation of dissolving the veil of worldly delineations through how the poet 'tosses' words and concepts around like a 'bauble from hand to hand'. Thus, what Shakespeare called his 'art' in *The Tempest* engages the bewitching veil which Prospero's language casts upon Caliban and the world. As the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott said (1974, 4) of Shakespeare, it is therefore unsurprising that Shakespeare gave the closest figure to the Caribbean in his work, Caliban, the most powerful metaphysical wit, the most extreme or 'vulgar' juxtapositions of metaphors and similes. In doing so, for Walcott, Shakespeare creolised language as much as any other writer. By the end of the play, along Fanonian lines, having revealed the illusion of the veil of (Prospero's) European thought, Caliban simply walks away in resignation, signalling that his Blackness is 'structured by delusion' and that 'the reproduction of whiteness [is] at the heart of black suture' (Marriott 2021, 142; see also Harney and Moten (2021, 156) for what they call the 'calypsonian allure' of metaphysical wit).

sentence because it breaks up meaning's conditions of production' (ibid., 3). Thus, Moten's reading of James foregrounds how the world as abyss is neither properly 'inside' nor 'outside' the delineations of colonial world-making:

Titles like *The Invading Socialist Society* or *The Future in the Present* offer a glimpse of something powerful in James's phrasing: he puts forward for us a notion of an internal incursion that can be seen in relation to an interior force of exteriorization, moving toward a possibility coded as outside, an actuality inside. Inside and outside are, then, not only positions but forces... To insist, along with James, on this kind of fullness, on this Caribbeanness [foregrounds the] not in between. (Moten 2017, 12–13)

We see the radical import of an abyssal approach as coming into sharp relief in John Edgar Wideman's (2003) novel *The Island: Martinique*. Wideman explores how, 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, 96). In the novel, Wideman's author as 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. (Wideman 2003, 97)

Undergirding this example 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 desediments this world of separations that enable the constitution of the human

as knowing/choosing subject. Understanding the world as abyss, the critique is of the violence that enables the process of making entities and of valuing in the first place. Abyssal thought locates the problem of choice in terms of what da Silva (2022, 49) calls modernity and colonialism's organising framework of 'necessity', which follows from adherence to the ontological pillars of Enlightenment thinking (namely, separability, determinacy and sequentiality); derived:

...from the metaphysical assumption that what can be comprehended shares in the same form (formality) or purpose (finality) as that which does the comprehending... what is not questioned is the presumption of unity – presented scientifically or historically – and the corresponding unifying concept or principle that captures it. (da Silva 2022, 179)

Wideman 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 that this dependence is ontological in the sense of the construction of France as civilised and as civiliser, the construction of a fictional 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, 106). Slavery and colonialism enabled Enlightenment imaginaries, imaginaries still being repeated, still constituting subjects and non-subjects five hundred years later, still enabling 'choices' and 'necessity' under the guise of humanitarian intervention (2003, 106; see also Pallister-Wilkins 2021).

Wideman suggests an alternative that we read as an abyssal approach. 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, 45). Drawn from different parts of Africa, those denied subjecthood shared little in the way of common identities, or modes of communication, so had to

improvise. This is fusion on the move, a universal that does not produce hierarchies or exclusions, which lacks identity and distinctions, that Glissant understands in terms of *opacity* (Harney and Moten 2013; Glissant 1997). Thus, it is creolisation's forgetting of relation, opposites and origins,<sup>6</sup> which is 'the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence' (Glissant 1997, 191; see also Walcott 1974), working against 'forced convertibility, forced translation, forced access' (Harney and Moten 2021, 114). Abyssal sociality holds off the world of modernity's ontological clarifications and the world of the subject reduced to choices and decisions 'in' this world.

### Abyssal Readings of the Caribbean

Abyssal readings of the Caribbean assemble a figurative positionality of critique that both problematises modernity's narrative of progress – for its disavowal of genocide, chattel slavery and expropriation – and provides a figure of political and historical practices that is read to exist in apposition or adjacently to the political as given. This figure is both less and more than the modernist subject of civil society. The *subject* is less in the sense of lacking a fixed identity and ontological security but, precisely because of this lack, is more than a modernist subject, in having the unasked for 'privilege' of 'double consciousness', an awareness that the world as presently constituted can never be considered a home. For the development of our argument in this book, we think it is important to emphasise the abyssal nature of Du Bois' (1903) conception of 'double consciousness', which we read not as a doubling of the consciousness of the rational subject from two distinct positionalities, such as 'African' and 'American', but rather that of a figurative assembling of a non-historical subject, neither 'African' nor 'American', without a stable identity. For Du Bois, it was this distancing or separation that enabled the 'veil' of ontology

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<sup>6</sup> We are indebted to our conversations with Fred Moten which enabled us to draw out this critical point.

to be pierced because this subject experienced life ‘behind the veil’, outside the framings of modernist binaries of subject/object, human/non-human (Du Bois 1903; Chandler 2022, 89).<sup>7</sup> This gives the abyssal paradigm, forged largely by authors in contemporary Black studies, an historical grounding, often turning to Caribbean modes of practice.

This is a figured positionality that not by choice has the potential to see out from behind the ‘veil’ of mystification that naturalises the products of the modernist imaginary. In doing so, in abyssal work, the understanding of this history rearticulates not just an alternative historical narrative but, more importantly, uses this rearticulation to desediment, to deconstruct and to hold off, the products of this process. The birth of modernity is transformed from being a positive history of ‘progress’, presupposing the metaphysical truths of a world available to universal ‘reason’, to being a narrative of colonial fiction carving out a ‘world’ through an ongoing orgy of violence, both instrumental and gratuitous.

For abyssal thought, as we learn from Caribbean writers such as Césaire (2013 [1956]) and Fanon (2021 [1952]) onwards, the ‘One World World’ of modernist metaphysics is inseparable from the violence that forged the modernist ontology of ‘human as subject’ and ‘world as object’. It is this understanding that figures the Caribbean as the focal point of the making of modernity that has been at the heart of the Black radical tradition from the work of W. E. B. Du Bois onwards. As Nahum Chandler notes, for Du Bois, this

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<sup>7</sup> We are aware that there are many ways of reading Du Bois’ articulation of ‘double consciousness’; we think that the abyssal framing is an important counter-position to the ‘additive’ approach of seeing ‘double consciousness’ as a literal doubling of subject positions, i.e., being ‘both (American) and (African)’. This view of holding multiple perspectives is common in traditional Du Bois scholarship. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his introduction to ‘The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois’ Oxford University Press series (Gates 2007, xv), states ‘just two is too cautious... Dr. Du Bois... Keep counting.’ The intimation being that the more subject positions that are available the better or the more scientific our understanding is.

line was understood as ‘tendentiously global’ in its bearing from its inception, ‘and thus not in any manner the underside or alternative side of the entirety of modern historicity, in its material, as well as ideological, being’ (Chandler 2022, xix). For the abyssal approach, it is vital that the making of this world, understood in terms of the economic and social processes that have unfolded since the fifteenth century, is inseparable from the ontological claims (made in philosophical, political, legal and scientific discourse) which are co-constitutive of this process.

Both the material structures and the ideational claims legitimising and reproducing them can be thereby understood to have emerged with the processual unfolding of the global colour line (Chandler 2022, 148). Thus, for the abyssal line of thought, the critique of modernity is not a largely socio-economic one of recompense for stolen lives and stolen labour (see for example, the work of Cedric Robinson 2000; and Eric Williams 2022 [1944]; 2012 [1942]), nor is it largely a moral indictment of the savagery and cruelty of capitalism and primitive accumulation by dispossession. At stake is the philosophical and political power of renarrativising modernity from the abyss, turning ideological self-understandings inside out and, more importantly, putting into question the modern imaginaries of separation and distinction across a fixed grid of time and space. As Paul Gilroy described it, constructing modernity figuratively, ‘from the slave’s point of view’, offers a rich ‘unique perspective on many of the key intellectual and political issues’ in understanding modernity (1993, 55), delegitimising its foundational assumptions. We would like to emphasise that at stake in contemporary approaches of the abyssal is the subject-centred imaginary of space and time as a fixed grid, as a segmented container holding entities in their relational becoming. The figure of the abyssal subject is thus fundamental to contemporary thought, not because of empirical continuities that can be traced through particular modes of practice apparent in the Caribbean, but because this figure has the capacity to disrupt, to desediment, the divisions assumed to be a natural ground for modernist thought.

For our understanding, a key example has been M. NourbeSe Philip's (2017) essay and play '*Dis Place – The Space Between*'. Philip's focus is the black female body, specifically the '*space that lies between the legs of the female and the effect of this space on the outer space – “place”*' (ibid., 242, italics in original). Philip begins by foregrounding the patriarchal violence at the heart of the colonial project,<sup>8</sup> for Philip, '*dis place*' is not only the 'fulcrum of the New World plantation' (ibid., 244), it is simultaneously always a 'subversive' space (ibid., 242). Philip powerfully signals this with reference to the 'Jamette... A loose woman... whose habitat is the street... A woman possessing both the space between her legs and the space around her, knowing her place. On the streets of Port of Spain.' (ibid., 244):

We could be starting our genealogy with Nanny of the Maroons... Women warriors taking their inner space into the outer space of battle and war, where men violate the inner space of women. Rum shop, cockfight, steel pan yard, street corner – only jamettes hanging about these places... Is what they doing in these places? Only servicing men? Signifying another reality? About the balance of the inner and outer space? (Philip 2017, 244)

For McKittrick (2000), the jamettes in Philip's essay and play signal the 'between-ness of black women's identities' (2000, 226), where 'gender positionality is rewritten and contested, the speaking

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<sup>8</sup> Philip argues (2017, 242, italics in original):

In patriarchal societies (the only societies we have known), the female body always presents a subversive threat. By far *the* most efficient management tool of women is the possibility of the uninvited and forceful invasion of the space between the legs – rape. Which is a constant. A threat to *the* space – the inner space between the legs. Even if never carried out, this threat continually and persistently inflects how the female reads the external language of place, or public place – the outer space. One woman raped is sufficient to vocalize and reify the threat of the outer space, and the need to protect this inner space means that the female always reads the outer space from a dichotomous position – safe/unsafe, prohibited/unprohibited.

body is unsilenced through the invention of S/Place' (2000, 228); 'space and place are stretched and (un)predictable. This process of historicisation and reinvention breaks the silence... invokes the unsilencing of black femininity – without dismissing histories of worldlessness and struggle' (2000, 229). What we learn from Philip and McKittrick is the importance not merely of deconstructing the Black female body, *but of the veil of being itself*. The figure of the abyssal subject enables moves of deconstruction, of desedimenting, or 'negativating' (da Silva 2022, 44) assumptions of entities with fixed locations and separations across time and space. As Philip says:

Does the inner space exist whole in any language? Other than 'threat' and 'fear'? What is the language of the inner space? Beyond the boundaries of control and fear. Is its language silence?... The outer space c(o)untouring and shaping the inner space; its language of silencing exerting pressure of threat and fear causing the inner space to collapse upon itself like a black (w)hole absorbing everything around it. (Philip 2017, 265)

This does not trouble the female body constructed through patriarchal, colonial space and time to reveal some more 'authentic' body behind it. Rather, it shows that the notion of obtainable 'being' rests on no firmer ground than modern and colonial world-making itself. Thus, for Philip: 'We peeling back layers of silencing and finding what "dis place" is really about. Silence. A different text lying there, a spirit world, an imaginative universe' (ibid., 267).

Philip's engagement with the jamette points us towards a para-ontological shift in understanding a space that is not accessible 'in' the world, by way of ontological clarification, but which is nevertheless 'of' the world.<sup>9</sup> Rather than an obtainable space of

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<sup>9</sup> We use the construction 'of' but not 'in' to highlight the distinction to the usual use of 'in' (as in physically in) but not 'of' (as in not sharing the same values) the world. Whereas the latter distinction – 'in but not of the world' – highlights a subjective or perspectival

opposition or negation (achieved through positing an alternative identity), we understand Philip's reading of the jamette along the lines of a non- or ante-ontological position – an 'imaginative universe' (ibid.) – where everything exists, actually, possibly, and virtually. As da Silva (2022, 291) clarifies:

...the particle *in-* remains in the field of knowledge and presumes that it has or can obtain what is needed for a definition, explanation, or interpretation to arise. The particle *non-*, in contrast, opens up a whole range of unknowable im/possibilities and virtualities as well as actualities; it is not in the order of the form (concept, category, definition) but in the register of matter as *pars* (the plenitude of existence), namely *corpus infinitum*.

'Corpus infinitum' is a powerful term for abyssal work. Reading it more conservatively, along the lines of Barad, as da Silva says, would point us towards 'a statement regarding the reality of something', namely, 'the im/possibility of stating that there is a *what* there' (ibid.). Thus, for Barad, the focus would be upon the oppressions and ethics of world-making cuts and delineations. This is whilst, for an abyssal approach, *corpus infinitum* refers to how the project of colonialism was 'activating' for an 'undetermination' (ibid.) (*ante-ontological*), which is important for the assembling of a figurative *subject* who refuses 'the fixities created by modern thinking and the context it has designed and justifies' (ibid., 293).

As we have been exploring in this chapter, an abyssal analytic is different from relational ontologies, or post- and more-than-human approaches, which, in their focus upon empirical

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difference, the difference we highlight here – 'of' but not 'in' the world highlights an ontological one. We also note that da Silva uses the construction 'of a being *of the world*' drawing upon Glissant's understanding of opacity (along the lines of Chapter 1 in this book, rather than in terms of rhizomic becoming) and Karen Barad's articulation of ontological indeterminacy, describing phenomena as being 'not in the world, but *of the world*' (da Silva 2022, 293, n.27, italics in original).

relations and interaction on the surface of appearances, necessarily disavow the socio-historical centrality of coloniality in the forging of the modern episteme, suggesting that we can correct or adjust the errors of abstract or reductionist modern and colonial reasoning and move on. For the abyssal analytic, abyssal socialities that problematise the 'givenness' of entities 'in' the world, emerge inseparably from modern and colonial world-making. Thus, in problematising the veil of colonial, patriarchal, hierarchical, space and time, Philip turns to:

A race! – of women mashing the ground – dancing and wining their all, any and everything and is Carnival time again and the jamettes coming back and pulling all those middle-class and upper-class women onto the streets; the only war now is between the Carnival bands and is so the women coming, flowing down the streets with the skimp and scant of their costumes, carrying their staffs – their *lingas* and they wining and wining round and round *displace* – African and Indian alike – *tout bagai* wining and wining – *yoni* round and round the *linga* of their Carnival staffs and they dancing through the streets – *oh, for a race of women!* – shaking their booty, doin their thing, their very own thing, jazzin it up, winin up and down the streets, parading their sexuality for two days – taking back the streets making them their own, as they spreading their joying up and down the streets of Port of Spain... It is the only time of the year that women – old, young, thin, fat, women women – can exhibit their sexuality without undue censure or fear under the benign gaze of OUR ROYAL WILL AND PLEASURE. (Philip 2017, 271, italics in original)

We see this reading of carnival as a figuring of a different kind of logic which possesses the 'inherent potentiality' (ibid., 267) to register how the 'reality' of being itself – produced through colonial, patriarchal, hierarchical, space and time – is based upon nothing more, nor less, than the violent reproduction of the global colour line. For the abyssal analytic, even as ontological insecurity is inescapably at the heart of world as abyss, this is not something

that can be wished away; an abyssal framing seeks to ‘claim, rather than disavow’ ontological insecurity (Moten 2016, 16). The figure of the subject of the abyss – of the Middle Passage, the hold of the slave ship, plantation slavery, creolisation, carnival, the jamaette, and of certain readings of key Caribbean texts, explored so far – is a product of displacement, of ontological insecurity. Thus, the task of abyssal work is not the construction of an elusive Caribbean identity, revolutionary subject, or project, but the ongoing *practice* of paraontological critique.

### **The Attraction of the Abyss for Contemporary Critique**

...what kinds of questions become unavoidable when we begin  
within the force of history rather than with a claim about ontology?  
(Povinelli 2021, 2)

Rather than reforming or improving the world of modernity and putting ideas of progress and futurity ‘back on track’, abyssal thought rejects the lure of ‘the world’ as constructed through a modernist imaginary. Any subject position that is ‘in’ the world necessarily becomes suborned to discourses of salvage and survival. For relational, new materialist and more-than-human critiques of modernist thought, there is another ‘more real’ ontological reality, one that comes into consciousness because of a crisis, such as the Holocaust, climate change, or, more recently, the Coronavirus pandemic (for example, Bratton 2021; Latour 2021). This is nicely captured in the title of Benjamin Bratton’s book, *The Revenge of the Real* (2021). The Coronavirus crisis is seen to bring to the surface relationships and dependencies that were otherwise obscured by the abstractions of the modernist episteme with its imaginaries of autonomous subjects and universal forms of scientific reasoning. The bringing to the fore of these relational interdependencies is then held to enable a shift in thinking, returning humanity to the ‘real’ world where account can be taken of environmental costs for sustainable futures.

In contrast the key to abyssal thinking is a structured positionality that punctures the veil of modernist thinking, but not in ways that bring humanity back ‘Down to Earth’ to ‘reality’ as Bruno Latour argued (2018). Abyssal thought does not seek to substitute a ‘real’ ontology of entanglement for the reductionist imaginary of modernist distinctions. The abyssal call for ‘ending’ the world is a refusal and disruption, or a process of demonstrating the violence and arbitrariness of the incisions of the modernist imaginary, rather than any seeking to return to a richer world of inter-relation and co-dependency. The abyssal project seeks to end this ‘world’ and to problematise its ontological assumptions of ‘world’ and ‘subject’. One example, of what might be seen as an abyssal approach, is the powerful contraposition of a slave positionality and that of those granted rights of ‘civil society’ as articulated by Fredrick Douglass, in his 4<sup>th</sup> of July oration at Rochester in 1852:

What, to the American slave, is your 4<sup>th</sup> of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages... (cited in Du Bois 1998 [1935], 14)

Abyssal thought sees modernity as a charade, a world which is necessarily forced to disavow the violence and destructiveness of its founding and ongoing reproduction. From within modernity this charade cannot be seen for what it is, its violence and destructiveness is apparent but veiled, leaving only a self-understanding of modernity as progress; as wars, deaths and destruction are seen as unfortunate costs to be paid on the path to development and peace. This ‘veil’ inverts the logic at play, naturalising or reifying

the appearances of the world as inevitable ‘side-effects’ or ‘unintended consequences’. For abyssal thought, what is at stake is the task of refusal and deconstruction of this world as it appears. It is for this reason that W. E. B. Du Bois’ short story ‘The Comet’ (1920a) presents the supposed near total extinction of humanity as a moment of liberation for an individual considered to be less than fully ‘human’. 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:

“Death, the leveler!” he muttered.

“And the revealer,” she whispered gently...

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 localised to New York and the normality of racial domination is quickly restored, the man threatened with lynching after being spotted with the white woman.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, work in the abyssal framing could be seen as sharing some conceptual aspirations with critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School (Jeffries 2016; Buck-Morss 1977). Perhaps this approach is exemplified most clearly in Walter Benjamin’s final essay, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in which he argued that ‘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

Abyssal thought works differently from approaches which seek to understand reality in other more ‘truthful’ or ‘scientific’ ways, in the line of Enlightenment thought from Kant onwards, affirming what exists. Instead, abyssal thought seeks to problematise assumptions that reason is capable of adequately grasping reality. As we have stressed, one of the most important analytical attractions of abyssal work is its paraontological focus. This places abyssal work in clear distinction to much contemporary critical work, because the relational and ontological turns necessarily suborn us to affirming the empirical appearances of the world as given. The rejection of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and its replacement with creative practices and the tracing of networked effects leaves little space for any possibility of critiquing the world that exists. At the same time, the search for alternative modes of access to the reality of the world, has been increasingly problematised for the instrumentalising and appropriation of non-Western knowledges, cosmologies, and cultural practices. It is becoming clear that attempting to ‘save’ or ‘salvage’ the world (just as much as attempts to imagine living on ‘in the ruins’ after the end of the world) can only maintain the imaginaries of both human and world, enabling new (if scaled back) practices of ‘productivism’ and a ‘palliative politics’ of acceptance and submission (Machado de Oliveira 2021). Not so with abyssal work.

Throughout the history of modernity, attempts to imagine the world otherwise have tended to divide between those that privilege the workings of nature or ‘life’ and those that privilege the inner workings of ‘history’. In modernity, dominated by Enlightenment conceptions of reason, it was the inner workings of ‘history’, in line with an anthropocentric reasoning, that allegedly guaranteed that there would be ‘progress’ despite the ‘bumps in the road’ of coloniality, genocide and now ecocidal global warming. As faith

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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)

in modernity's promise wanes, ontological visions seek to replace the telos of anthropocentric 'history' with that of 'nature' or life itself; allegedly given an immanent meaning or purpose as a set of differentiating negatropic relational understandings enabling the world, imagined as 'posthuman', to have another chance at sustainability and recuperation.

The choice of two dominant ontological framings of the transcendental human subject of 'history' and the immanent interactive working of 'life' can appear to be that of Scylla and Charybdis. To be suborned by the demands of 'history' would be to subordinate intellectual and ethical freedom to the pragmatic needs of revolutionary class struggle, to the vanguard party or to a scientific and technical elite. To be suborned to the demands of nature, to 'what the planet is telling us' (Burke et al. 2016), or to nature's unappointed interpreters and guardians, would be equally authoritarian. It is little wonder that there is a demand for ethical, political alternatives which promise an escape from being suborned to the world as requiring saving at the cost of disavowal of the lives already sacrificed to its maintenance (Colebrook 2020).

Prior to contemporary approaches of the abyssal, critical theorists struggled with how to move beyond the 'veil' of empirical appearance, beyond the assumptions that the world as given was naturally there 'for us', rather than a social and material product and therefore possibly otherwise. A good example might be the theorists of the Frankfurt School, exemplified in the struggle of Adorno to ground his negative dialectics in the subject giving itself over to the object to break the hold of ideology over its own subjectivity (Adorno 2007; Buck-Morss 1977, 85). As Adorno argued, to break from the automatically socially produced '*consensus omnium*' (italics in original), 'to give the object its due... the subject would have to resist... and to free itself as a subject' (2007, 170–1).<sup>11</sup> As Adorno stated, seeing through the

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<sup>11</sup> However, it was difficult to find a way out of the structuring of the social world that barred this resistance:

The delusion that the transcendental subject is the Archimedean fixed point from which the world can be lifted out if its hinges – this

mystifications of a modernist ontology of being, the reification or naturalisation of products of contingent socio-historical processes, was not merely a matter of reasoning or subjective understanding; 'reification is an epiphenomenon... the trouble is with the conditions... not primarily with the people and with the way conditions appear to people' (2007, 190).

Adorno made the point that breaking from the subject position of a being 'in' the world is not straightforward, this was because our being in the world appears to be natural to us. So natural that, for example, uniting as a collective human race to fight climate change seems to be non-negotiable. To use this example then, belief in a collective emergency would raise questions about any relative lack of engagement in environmental activism (Bell and Bevan 2021; Taylor 1993). Assumptions of a natural consensus would shape a response to this by addressing problems of presentation and access to these movements. This framing, that assumes a shared set of interests and investments, in saving 'the world', carries a high moral charge, naturalising the assertions of a 'One World World' (Law 2015). The questioning of this assumption is not easy from within this 'world'. However, a break from this '*consensus omnium*' is considerably easier (and some would argue essential) if one's everyday lived experience undermines this assumption of a worldly positionality.

The abyssal framing does not rely on a subject capable of unmaking itself through its own volition (a sort of super transcendental subject). Neither does it rely on tropes of victimhood and vulnerability, often associated with a diminished subjectivity, and alleged to be potentially able to escape or exceed capitalist capture, where weakness 'magically' becomes a source of power (Noys 2012, 17). Rather, the abyssal subject is 'of' but not 'in' the world (see footnote 9 above). Abyssal critique operates without a subject essentialised as having futural properties or capabilities but also lacks any

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delusion, purely in itself, is indeed hard to overcome altogether by subjective analysis. For contained in this delusion, and not to be extracted from the forms of cogitative mediation, is the truth that society comes before the individual consciousness and before all its experience. (Adorno 2007, 181)

alternative transcendental power. Critique is based precisely upon a figurative abyssal positionality that lacks an ontological standing beyond the violence of the abyssal cut that grounds modernity. It is this special property of the abyssal figure, without grounds or identity, that paradoxically grounds and gives immense historical and ethical force to abyssal critique. Because this critique is without ground, without telos or goals, it is necessarily in non-relation to the world of being (of fixed entities and essences).

Elizabeth Povinelli (2021), an author we learn much from, argues that critique should be located within ‘the force of history’. She writes: ‘To begin with an ontological claim purges Western thought of its colonial history, namely, the historical conditions that give rise to such thought’s modern methodological and epistemological maneuvers’ (2021, 16). However, while the target of her critique, the narrow empiricism and the abstract, timeless, metaphysical assumptions of new materialist and relational ontology, is an important one, the alternative she offers is perhaps less clear. What does it mean for critique to be located within ‘the force of history’? The question of how it might be possible to develop a situated positionality of critique in our period of a crisis of modernist politics is one that we feel is not easy to resolve.

In many ways, similar questions of historical consciousness and of ontology were at the heart of disagreements between members and associates of the Frankfurt School in the wake of the collapse of communist and socialist opposition to war and fascism in the 1930s and 1940s (this point is also inferred in the work of Paul Gilroy, for example, 1993, 55). Some, like György Lukács and (at times under the influence of Brecht) Walter Benjamin, grounded critique on a modernist ontology, putting faith in a metaphysical understanding of history as progress, expressed by the proletariat as the revolutionary class (Buck-Morss 1977). For others, such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, critique had to be grounded independently of any ontology of a transcendental subject or process (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). However, the problem with grounding critique independently of any subject of history is that the ‘force of history’ easily becomes just as abstract and timeless as metaphysical approaches. How do we square this circle?

It is our understanding that figuring the world abyssally – engaging aspects of the historical experience of the Caribbean as a forcing ground for modernity, materially and ideationally – is one way of figuring a positionality of critique from ‘within the force of history’. This moves us beyond the choices of essentialising an historical subject as an expression of an immanent telos, or a timeless and ahistorical metaphysical alternative without a subject of political possibility. It does this through the assembling of a structural position of a (barred) *subject* excluded from the world of modernity and thus lacking in ontological security or ground from which to place itself in relation to others politically. This is a subject which is ‘of’ the world and excluded from being ‘in’ the world, materially and ideationally. A liminal subject.<sup>12</sup> We suggest that this *subject* appears to meet the requirements of the contemporary moment in providing a groundless-ground for thoroughgoing critique and for the rejection of the lure of ‘the world’.

The abyssal *subject* and abyssal sociality enable a grounding of critique that is missing in philosophical approaches that could be construed to pursue similar ‘world-ending’ aspirations. Of these, perhaps the thinker most closely associated with the desire to reject the ontological ‘decisions’ of modernist thought is François Laruelle. Abyssal approaches, we argue, only appear to align with the non-philosophy of Laruelle (2017), influential in Western critical

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<sup>12</sup> Glissant (1997, 7) writes that the Caribbean person figuratively ‘lies inside and outside of the abyss’. On the one hand, ‘inside’ the abyss, through how: ‘Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies’ (1977, 8). On the other hand, they simultaneously live ‘outside’ the abyss, living through the ongoing violence of the modern and colonial project, its carving out of the human and the world. For Glissant, the choice should be obvious: ‘We take sides in this game of the world’ (ibid., 8), where the ‘experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of change’ (ibid., 8). As with the ‘abyssal’ work we engage throughout, this statement completely inverts the stakes of a metaphysics of liberation.

thought and increasingly discussed in relation to contemporary Black studies (Culp 2021; Smith 2016; Barber 2016; Dubilet 2021). For Laruelle (1991, 4), the Real, or what he sometimes calls the One, radically marks what is excluded from the world and cannot be obtained in the world of ontological clarifications; it is ‘without opposite: even light, which tries to turn it into its opposite, fails in the face of the rigor of its secret’. Thus, the Real is an irreducibly opacity, what Laruelle (1991, 1) calls ‘the black universe’.

As Alex Dubilet argues (2021), the weakness of Laruelle’s approach is that it is not grounded *enough* in the world; that is, in the real historical forces which enable a positionality of radical critique. As Dubilet says, in not paying attention to the grounding forces of history, Laruelle gives too much ‘autonomy to radical immanence’ (ibid., 66) which has ‘a certain independence from the world’ (ibid., 66). Dubilet continues:

...pace Laruelle, [there is a need] to render immanence neither as autonomous nor as heteronomous, but to see it as carrying a force of the antinomian or even the antenomial: that is, a force that precedes while refusing the imposition of the nomos of the world. In this way, it eschews the names and normativity of the world while also avoiding becoming a reactive, derivative force against the asserted primacy of nomos, an assertion whose persistent lie it repudiates. It is, as an index of the real in rebellion against the world, what puts the nomos in unending suspension... It indexes nameless, dispossessed life in common that anamorphically exhibits the world to be, in Moten’s words, ‘the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life.’ (Dubilet 2021, 67)

For Dubilet, it is in paying attention to the force of history, the historical (re)making of the world, that we get to the ‘immanent abyssal ground’ (ibid., 71). We therefore think that Benítez-Rojo’s (2001) argument (see Chapters 1 and 2), that the ‘repeating island’ expands outwards into the world beyond the cartographically defined Caribbean, is important for rethinking the world as abyss. States like South Carolina were founded in the mid-to-late

1600s by planters and slave owners from Barbados who wanted more land for cattle (Allison 2013). Managed by slaves who they brought from Barbados to South Carolina, perhaps making these slaves the first ‘cowboys’ (Allison 2013), the cattle provided meat to Caribbean islands with scarce land resources that had already been given over to monoculture, such as sugar production.

The Caribbean thus provides an historical grounding which enables the figurative assembling of an abyssal *subject*. This is illustrated in R. A. Judy’s (2020) *Sentient Flesh*, where he discusses the ‘Buzzard Lope’ dance, undertaken by slaves, variously in the Carolinas, Virginia, and the Georgia Sea Islands. The earliest ethnological record of Buzzard Lope, or ‘shout’, is found in the Gullah-speakers of the Georgia Sea Islands. Participants move around a circle ‘shuffling and stomping their feet, clapping and pattin’ (Judy 2020, 219). ‘At the centre of the shout ring, a solo dancer mimics the movements of a buzzard loping around an object in the center of the circle, usually a handkerchief, representing carrion’ (Judy 2020, 219). Centrally, for Judy (2020, 318, italics in original), this is an act of ‘*para-semiosis*’, where the pattin’ movement against the flesh of the dancers engenders a flight from the body as the property of slavery (see also, Bennett 2020). For Judy:

...flesh *represents* nothing but *signifies* everything, including an unassimilated semiosis, not fully digested into the anthropology of ‘Man’, which can only imagine the world as constituted in the process of production, whether called that or called providence, or nature, over which Man is destined to acquire mastery. (Judy 2020, 250)

Thus, the dance serves to ‘energize a de-fetishizing de-commoditizing semiosis of the flesh. The flesh is not beaten... and contorted in dance to sacrifice for the gods, or even the ancestors, who are always present. Rather, it is worked in semiotic contestation’ (Judy 2020, 245). We read an abyssal approach as developing a figurative positionality which desediments the plot lines of ‘the capitalist sociopolitical economy within which it is circumscribed, articulating

a radical sociality' (Judy 2020, 249).<sup>13</sup> For abyssal work the world of relations, at both the level of the ontic and ontological, is the problem, rather than holding the capacity to offer solutions. Whereas an influential relational ontology, such as Donna Haraway's (2006; 2016), exists in a temporality of becoming through refinement and attunement to literal relations in the world (see also Ramírez-D'Oleo 2023), the Buzzard Lope dancers are lost in, deepen, or expand the possibility for paraontological critique on the basis of a critical positionality which can be read as being 'of' but not 'in' the world. Abyssal work 'does not privilege relations' (da Silva 2022, 155), but rather, in what we draw out as R. A. Judy's abyssal reading of the Buzzard Lope, the flesh and the body are figuratively held in what da Silva (2016) frames as a kind of quantum suspension.

## Conclusion

This chapter has set out the abyssal analytic as a rethinking of the world as abyss, harbouring an abyssal subject and abyssal socialities with the capacity to problematise the human and the world, but without suggesting an alternative, obtainable world beyond. It has done this through engaging contemporary critical work which draws upon specific readings of Caribbean thought and

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<sup>13</sup> As Judy (2020, 243, italics in original) says, all the 'formal resemblance of the Buzzard Lope to the Opete performed in Dutch Guiana and the "John Canoe" in Cuba strongly suggests a common formation originating in the sacrifice rituals of the vulture determined by the *télos* of the cosmology of the Ashanti, Dahomey, and Fanti peoples. Nevertheless, by circumstantial necessity, its performance in the Georgia Sea Islands, Virginia, and the Carolinas uproots the form from its fundamental purpose without effacing the common formal elementals... Formal innovation becomes determinate, indeed becomes the purpose of the performance, in which the Buzzard Lope, along with its patten', energizes a semiosis of the flesh that not only de-commoditizes it, but makes manifest the conventionality of the process that fetishizes the commodity of something of objective value.'

modes of practice, survival, displacement and resistance, to produce a quite distinct critique of modernity. As we have seen, the abyssal framing shares aspects of mainstream contemporary critical thought in its rejection of the modern subject and the abstract and reductionist assumptions of the modern episteme. However, there are three points that we wish to highlight in conclusion to this chapter, which will be further developed in the next chapter. First, is the figuring of an abyssal positionally, as a vantage point for critique, one that enables a certain 'double consciousness' or the under 'privilege' of a second sight (Du Bois 1903; Chandler 2014). Second, is the understanding that the world and its bifurcation, in terms of the global colour line, is inextricable from the modernist imaginary, and that this world is not over but ongoing. Third, the appreciation that rethinking the world as abyss does not seek to imagine or constitute a distinct or separate space, under or other to modernity, but rather seeks to disrupt or desediment this world's underlying assumptions.