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Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (University of Westminster Press, 2023)

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The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene (2023) by scholars Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler is unique in its careful treatment of the Caribbean as an atemporal and aspatial disaster and, by extension, an incubator of and for resistance and refusal. In other words, it is accountable to the unconditional violence of trans-aqua racial slavery and European colonialism, and as a result is better equipped, to theoretically and conceptually challenge the disciplinary approaches of the Humanities, humanism, and the Anthropocene. As such, *The World as Abyss* is well-positioned to forward an ethical confrontation with the ontological and epistemological violence underwriting the modern world and to think outside the concepts that drive both the terra and aqueous formations of the Caribbean.

Those familiar with their previous book, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (2021), will get the sense that *The World as Abyss* is its critical companion. Whereas the latter takes up the tension and frictions between islands and the Anthropocene, the former turns specifically to modernities ontological and transcendental planes and configurations of the Caribbean, while honing-in on the critics of the Anthropocene as being blinded by the continued socialisation of racial slavery and colonialism. In some ways, *The World as Abyss* is a blackened expression of *Anthropocene Islands*, for they turn away from the so-called ethical and fugitive expressions of western modernity and ascend into the imaginary of the black abyss. For example, the Anthropocene and its adjacent concepts look different when viewed from this abyss, for it stands outside the paradigm, the onto-epistemological time of modernity itself. In order to take up this perspective, they turn to the insights of those that have suggested that modernity is sutured by the Caribbean and therefore is central to any hereafter - which is expressed through a fidelity with black thought. Principally, *The World as Abyss* takes up, although not exclusively, the conceptual language of Eduoardo Glissant, the methodological compulsion of Nahum Chandler, and the poetic spirit of Fred Moten and Denise Ferraria da Silva.

Staying true to Glissant's notion of abyss (1997; See also Drabinski 2019), Pugh and Chandler maintain that the abyss is figurative rather than determinant (even literal) and that any contour of a new world needs to emerge from the abyss so as not to capitulate to the order, and by extension limits of subjectivity and the dominance of empiricism (pp. 2-3). Starting in chapter one, Pugh and Chandler urge thinkers of the Anthropocene to abandon the ontological fidelity of phenomenological and ethnographic evidence that simply reproduces identitarian variants from within (not outside) the normative ways of being (ontology). As they suggest, "abyssal sociality" helps clear the ground to engage and see clearly the violent modernist architecture of the human and the social (p. 5). As a means to confront the Anthropocene through the Caribbean, they ask readers to wallow in the abyss rather than

performatively acknowledge the problems in *this* world only to infinitely revise it. Rather than work from a "world-additive" position they work from a "world-subtractive" position which is predicated on ending all relations to the Anthropocene and not about simply racialising the Anthropocene (p. 11). Relatedly, it should be made clear that Pugh and Chandler deploy "abyss" in ways that do not square with decolonial(isation) projects that seek to affirm and amplify this world through endless difference. They buck the instrumentalisation of difference that too often is used to set the linear path of history right. Deploying an abyssal frame requires new modes and methods of research; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, colonialism, popular culture, and ethnography, not simply the reformation of that which continues to ravage the Earth.

Recognising the risk of such abstract discussions located in chapter one, Pugh and Chandler make clear in chapter two that their use of Caribbean modes of cultural practice are not about Caribbean identities per se, but the ontological conditions from which identities emerge. As they state, this work is "not formulated upon an abstract metaphysics but derived from a figuration of the world as experienced through the prism of differentiated ontological standing" (p. 25). It is not about reconfiguring, or reforming ontology, so that it may "project itself upon the world" (p. 23), but working from the place of indeterminacy and refusal. In doing so, the abyssal subject is understood to be paraontological (pp. 20-21), emerging from the "abyssal cuts" that construct modern racial subjects (p. 23).

In order to highlight that the abyss cuts both ways, Pugh and Chandler work with some of the conceptual gifts from the late Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo. In particular, they emphasise his use of "between" as an ante-ontological force, not a mediating relational suture that lends itself to cultural entanglement (p. 28). For example, the Caribbean, or any island formation for that matter (e.g. Cape Verde) are not simply laboratories of "creolization…[where] notions of hybridity and intersectionality (25)" are played out but illustrations of resistance to "modernity's ontological clarification" that begets another world-making genre of being altogether (p. 41). This allows them to de-emphasie identity and subjectivity and take up the recursive violence that constitutes the Caribbean through time and space. The "abyssal sociality" that emerges between subjects (pp. 27-41) makes a circus of the ontological coordinates of what Benítez-Rojo calls the stratagem of the plantation (i.e. understood as more than as space) (pp. 29-30). As they state:

> *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* (p. 34).

By way of example, carnival is no longer understood as an event of oppositional release, à la Brecht, but a removal of flesh which is the marker of racial violence (Spillers, 2003). In this instance, the abyssal subject emerges between both the racialised and symbolic poles of the Caribbean. Too often carnival, along with the *jamette* (pp. 44-46), the creole and more are used, knowingly and unknowingly, for the reproduction of historical and temporal coherence, the ontological determinacy of *this* world. Whereas, if carnival and other modes of practice are understood to be paraontological, they are in the world, but not of the world (p. 45). Put slightly differently, being an abyssal subject is the subjective recomposition of non-being; that is, it is not of the violence, like in the case of being wretched, but in spite of it.

The claim here is that modernity is often not seen and understood for what it is, in part a structure of deception that hides "its violence and destructiveness" (p. 49). Therefore, the goal for any abyssal project is to escape the dialectics of western history, western reason and scientific means, work beyond negation and make plain the world as it is structured. The caution that Pugh and Chandler drive home in chapter two, is to be wary of relational and ontological frames and arguments that at their core are often just different ways to reorder and save *this* world. Key to their argument is that:

> *The abyssal framing does not rely on a subject capable of unmaking itself through its own volition… Neither does it rely on tropes of victimhood and vulnerability* (p. 53).

They make, in other words, a principled plea against the discourse of self-possession. At its core, the abyssal subject names the violence of racial slavery and colonialism and out of this undermines all normative claim about racialisation so as to reverse course. An abyssal frame claims racism spawns race, rather than that race begets racism.

Clearly, abyssal work is really a matter of framing and in turn asking questions from the abyss and not from modernity's ground. The point, as they illustrate in chapter three, is to hold western time/temporality in suspension. In order to explore how racial slavery's world-making habits are ongoing (64) and how "particular Caribbean modes of practice," therefore, exceed temporality (p. 65), Pugh and Chandler pair linear time with racial capitalism and racial slavery, and abscond from pairing it with western development and progress. To think from the abyss is to "hold time" and space in suspension without prescription. As such, "to invert the stakes of analysis and critique" (p. 78) is to get away from what Cedric Robinson (1980) would call the "terms of order" of *this* world that then open up the possibility for new modes of existence which ultimately are predicated on nonexistence.

Pugh and Chandler urge the reader to pull away from "the container view of space and time" (81), to work, as C.L.R James (2013) once put it, "beyond a boundary" in order to access "where things are whispered" (Harney and Moten 2013, p.97). In doing so, they extend the idea of abyss (as a proxy for blackness) as a paraontological mode of being that is literally connected to (and produced by) all that is constitutive of the Caribbean. "Rather than posing an ontology which could be recuperated, what is foregrounded," in the uncontainability of blackness "is the loss of narrative and the dissolving of space" (66). The paraontological is not an illustrative example of critical fabulation, but the dismantled manifestation of the subject as bounded and merely entangled. The paraontological is not necessarily a state of being, but a form of sociality, where one risks their sense of autonomy and self-determination. Put another way, it is important to keep in mind that Pugh and Chandler are careful to stay clear of conveying a humanist project that is structured around an account of liminal subjects or what Povinelli calls the "analytics of existence" (2021, p. 88). This tendency that they exhibit throughout the book demonstrates the indispensable insights of the critical Black Studies tradition for accurately comprehending the Caribbean. They show how this tradition problematises any presuppositions on power, violence, and culture in the Caribbean. In so doing, they illustrate how the political typologies often used to understand the Caribbean, post-colonial or otherwise, as well as those shaping discourses of sovereignty, nationalism, and globalisation that espouse solidarity with Caribbean peoples, are organised by violence and disavowal.

In the end, certain readers will be frustrated with Pugh and Chandler's emphasis on the figurative and more so what this figurative subject looks like in the future. Yet this is precisely

the point. As they make clear in the conclusion (chapter four) "this is not about revealing another reality…but experiencing modern reality as the ongoing work of violence and artifice' (p. 83). Modernity is not out of joint, but working as it should and the problems of the Caribbean and beyond are not the result of political inertia. Thus, in order to comprehend the condition of truth, one must work from the abyss of which the Caribbean is at the vortex. Once again, the abyss is not a heuristic method for reformation; it is not a decolonial gesture or an act of overcoming all that is veiled. Rather, it provides the theoretical grounds from which to frame any historical or phenomenological study. This is not to say that island ethnographies, for example, should not be conducted, they just have to happen differently. If taken seriously, *The World as Abyss* changes the way one would conduct ethnography in the Caribbean, an ethnographic practice that moves beyond curating and documenting the voices at the margins or the creolised constructions of island life to now a practice of noting the nonsubject, rather than the cultural subject. They would in some fashion explore the figures of anonymity, driving home the point of non-existence rather than no-existence.

For the most part, *The World as Abyss* successfully privileges world destruction over the construction of a commensurable and compossible whole. That is, it places a wager on the end of the world as it presently exists and calls for putting an end to the idea of the world as a guide for thought and praxis. While I am deeply sympathetic with their overall argument and I appreciate how they do not get bogged down in ideological debates that are so common in the academy today, namely pessimism versus optimism, there is one area where I would push Pugh and Chandler, namely their use of ontology and subsequently paraontology. I think a closer look at paraontology suggests a position of being alongside ontology rather than existing outside of it. Paraontological relationality is (necessarily) in intimate dialogue with ontology and it relies on the same semiotics of human subjecthood: interiority, sentience, capacity for refusal—all of which require corporeal coherence (possession of body as opposed to flesh). In other words, I would complicate the "paraontological power of no-thingness" (p. 87), for there is a privileging of the concept that disavows how the paraontology of blackness works through desire, but never reducible to it, which too often drags the reality of black struggle down to the level of a fictional commons where all races live together. That is, how can we be sure that this is not just another example of how blackness, understood as an abyss, bears the burden of exemplified possibility?

Once again, like many of the islands that constitute the Caribbean, *The World as Abyss*, is small but its impact is large and its writing is robust. For those who write, think and teach about the Caribbean, working from the abyss is not a different accounting of history. The abyss is not simply a geographic space where multiple forms of Caribbean hybridity and cosmopolitanism live. Pugh and Chandler do not provide answers or give prescriptions. Rather, they help create the onto-epistemological grounds for discovery, a domain to experiment with living differently (against time), experimenting with the powers of nonexistence. Simply put, the abyss is not a place nor a static condition, but a framework for something else: a laboratory for abyssal experimentation in thought and practice. *The World as Abyss* is a theoretical manifestation of Robert Nesta Marley's declaration "We refuse to be, what they wanted us to be" (1979).

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