

# The Americas: A Relational or Abyssal Geography? An Interview, Barbara Gfoellner and Jonathan Pugh

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Jonathan Pugh, Professor of Island Studies at the Department of Geography at Newcastle University, is a leading scholar in island studies. He is renowned for his critical reflections on the prominent role which islands and thinking with “islandness” is playing in the generation of different contemporary pathways of critical thought. His earlier work contributed to scholarship challenging perceptions of islands as insular, and thereby joins key concerns in archipelagic studies, by delineating a “relational turn” in island studies.<sup>1</sup> Pugh’s more recent work, together with David Chandler, is interested in the role of the island in the Anthropocene, examined in his “Anthropocene Islands” project and their co-authored book *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (2021). His latest research conceptualizes what Pugh and Chandler call “the abyssal,” a radical critique of modernity, by drawing on Caribbean and Black scholarship in their book *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (2023).<sup>2</sup> This interview teeters between these debates and is a result of written reflections and verbal correspondence between Jonathan Pugh and Barbara Gfoellner over several months throughout 2021 and early 2022. The final interview is an edited version of their discussion, which started off with reflections on archipelagic studies and its relevance for the Anthropocene and organically moved to Pugh’s more recent theoretical reflections on “the abyssal.”

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Let’s perhaps start with your background as island studies scholar. You have examined the turn to “thinking with the archipelago”<sup>3</sup> that, with its geographical formation, evokes multifaceted entanglements, assemblages and mobilities instead of isolation and separation. How do you understand “archipelagic thinking,”

as it has broadly manifested in the humanities, and how do you situate archipelagic thinking in relation to transnational American Studies?

**Jonathan Pugh:** The first thing I need to clarify before we start is that, rather than being normative, most of my present work (in collaboration with David Chandler) is about analyzing broader schematic shifts in critical thought. This means drawing out strands of critical thought that work *across* contemporary debates and developments. This is also what I'll be doing in this interview.

At the most generic level, I think when we are talking about the shift to transnational American Studies, and what “archipelagic thinking” brings to this, we are first of all talking about the broader turn to *relational understandings of being and knowing* across the wider social sciences and humanities, rather than neatly bounded or coherently contained understandings of individuals, place and culture. That is, we are talking about a crisis of faith in top-down modern reasoning, a telos of linear progress and fixed grids of space and time. For Fishkin, in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, there is this need to develop a more relational understanding of the United States as a “participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the central aim of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* is to interrogate “borders both within and outside the nation [by] focusing on the multiple intersections and exchanges that flow across those borders.”<sup>5</sup> We see this in many contributions to this journal; in, for example, Bryce Traister’s observation that in American Studies “[t]he old and comforting cartographies will no longer do,” and when, for Paul Giles, the turn to transhemispheric American studies will put “another stake through the heart of the unquiet corpse of American exceptionalism.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, Oliver Scheiding has developed the notion of “Transnational American Studies as relational studies;”<sup>7</sup> and, as Laura Doyle aptly surmises,

[w]e might say that we have worked our way down to the ground-zero of nations: their transnational production ... [S]cholars have widened the frame: instead of focusing solely on how nations define persons and institutions, they have begun to piece together the myriad and multisided histories within which nations themselves have taken shape and in turn exerted their force.<sup>8</sup>

Leading authors Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Stephens provide a salient illustration of what *archipelagic thinking* brings to such debates in their influential text *Archipelagic American Studies*, which seeks to interrogate

how the narrative of continental America (which has been a geographical story central to US historiography and self-conception) has so completely eclipsed the narrative of what we are terming “the archipelagic Americas,” or the

temporally shifting and spatially splayed set of islands, island chains, and island–ocean–continent relations which have exceeded US-Americanism and have been affiliated with and indeed constitutive of competing notions of the Americas since at least 1492.<sup>9</sup>

Today, much work seeks to decontinentalize the Americas by engaging in such tropes as archipelagic thinking, networks, flows, mobilities and assemblage.<sup>10</sup> More generally, as David Chandler and I draw out in detail in *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*,<sup>11</sup> there has been an explosion of interest in islands, islanders, and thinking with “islandness,” across the social sciences and humanities, in order to critique modern frameworks of reasoning, and to stimulate alternative, relational ways of understanding being and knowing.

**Barbara Gfoellner:** The increasing attention to archipelagic geographies and relationalities in academic scholarship springs from earlier critical debates, such as the “spatial turn,” which stimulated a critical rethinking of space, a “relational turn”<sup>12</sup> or approaches to transnational studies that examine complex entanglements across borders. What spatial formats and imaginations are emerging today out of archipelagic epistemes and mobility practices? In your recent book with David Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*, you emphasize the vital role of islands and “islandness” for contemporary research in the context of the Anthropocene. What is it about islands that makes them so productive for ecocritical and what you call Anthropocene thinking?

**Jonathan Pugh:** You are right, within the Western academy, the relational turn was stimulated by earlier moves, like the spatial turn, which increasingly took place across the social sciences and humanities in the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, arguably the key figure of the spatial turn, Doreen Massey, wrote about islands in *Marxism Today* from a relational perspective, back in 1991:

In her portrait of Corsica, *Granite Island*, Dorothy Carrington travels the island seeking out the roots of its character. All the different layers of peoples and cultures are explored; the long and tumultuous relationship with France, with Genoa and Aragon in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, back through the much earlier incorporation into the Byzantine Empire, and before that domination by the Vandals, before that being part of the Roman Empire, before that the colonisation and settlements of the Carthaginians and the Greeks ... until we find ... that even the megalith builders had come to Corsica from somewhere else. It is a sense of place, an understanding of “its character,” which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognise that, without

being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.<sup>13</sup>

In the years since the spatial turn, as you say, developments in the Western academy have pushed much harder than Massey did against the assumptions of modern reasoning, bounded conceptualizations of space and place, the subject of modern reasoning and its metaphysical divides (mind/body, subject/object, human/nature)—as witnessed in, for example, the rise of new materialisms, posthumanisms, assemblage theory, science and technology studies, actor-network theory, and so forth. These kinds of critical developments seek to offer, in the place of modern reasoning, a productive range of alternative relational ontologies and epistemologies.

Now, I say this is all taking place “in the world” when today we know that, for many contemporary writers, the key stakes have already been re-framed in such a way that, just as there is no such thing as a coherently bounded “nation,” there is no “world” as a graspable object, separate from the human, after the Western contemporary crisis of faith in modern reasoning.<sup>14</sup> For those interested in “continental” approaches, Derrida said it quite precisely some time ago: Once faith in modern reasoning, its metaphysical assumptions and binaries, collapses, we are faced with the stark realization that “there is no world, there are only islands.”<sup>15</sup> Today, with the force, direction and momentum of more contemporary debates in mind, we do not need Derrida to tell us this. The notion of a “world” which could be grasped as a coherent object has collapsed on a much deeper societal and cultural level across both mainstream policymaking and critique, and—as debates around phenomena like the Anthropocene tell us—“world” has been replaced with the mobilizing trope of *relational entanglements*, which, for many contemporary commentators, has risen to the fore as the central problematic for much critical debate.<sup>16</sup> From Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory<sup>17</sup> to mainstream concepts like “resilience,”<sup>18</sup> and from developments in Western critical theory which seek to “stay with the trouble” of relational entanglements, involving authors like Anna Tsing<sup>19</sup> and Donna Haraway,<sup>20</sup> to various contemporary framings of Indigenous ontologies,<sup>21</sup> much debate today is generated in terms of how to develop relational ontologies and epistemologies, understood as productive alternatives to modern reasoning.

It is precisely here, David and I contend, that islands—more specifically, what we call thinking with “islandness”—have risen to such prominence in critical debate; whether in critical theory,<sup>22</sup> mainstream policy making,<sup>23</sup> artistic<sup>24</sup> or poetic projects.<sup>25</sup> The “outside” of modernity, of the continental nation state, the island and islander, has shifted their position; precisely because, for a very long time in the Western imaginary, from Charles Darwin<sup>26</sup> to Margaret Mead<sup>27</sup> and Marilyn Strathern,<sup>28</sup> and from Édouard Glissant<sup>29</sup> to Kamu Brathwaite,<sup>30</sup> Epele Hau’ofa<sup>31</sup> and Derek Walcott,<sup>32</sup> islands have been held as privileged sites for understanding and developing relational ways of thinking about being and knowing. It is the heralded capacity of islands and islanders to respond to the environment, as shaped by relational agency, that is the

key way of understanding why islands have become so central for contemporary Anthropocene thinking. The relations and feedback effects associated with the Anthropocene are widely held to be masked by and hidden from a reductionist modern ontology and epistemology. But, as we draw out in detail in our book, working with islands plays a vital role in Anthropocene thinking as it is precisely with islands that these relational effects come to the fore. Thus, whilst we engage a lot of “real” islands, we draw out how the conceptual power of *islandness* more generally has become extremely generative for a remarkable amount of contemporary Anthropocene thinking—from forest islands of relational entanglements<sup>33</sup> to designing gardens and cities,<sup>34</sup> to National Parks in Texas.<sup>35</sup>

It is in this sense that we can say that the current turn to islands and islandness was “overdetermined,” once the “world” of modern reasoning, its fixed grids of space and time, its linear telos of progress, started to collapse. Now, of course, the relational approaches being developed by thinking with islands and archipelagos today differ from the past, or they modify them to a greater or lesser extent. It is with this in mind that in *Anthropocene Islands* we analytically draw out the prolific rise of what we call the *contemporary* relational ontologies of “Resilience” and “Patchworks” and the relational onto-epistemologies of “Correlation” and “Storiation,” where thinking with islands has become an important *generator* of broader Anthropocene thinking. These analytics can be seen on a sliding scale or continuum as increasingly losing modernist constraints—both in terms of (1) a shift from linear causality and universalism and (2) away from the foundational grounding of the Kantian subject in terms of conceptions of (linear) time and (flat) space. Thus, as relational ontologies, Resilience has relatively more modern legacies than Patchworks, and, as onto-epistemologies, Correlation is relatively more modern when compared to Storiation. But the take home point here, in relation to your salient question, is that the key spatial imaginary which emerges is that of *islandness*, as this generative force for the development of critical thought and Anthropocene thinking. Islands have become important liminal and transgressive spaces for work in contemporary critical thought more generally, from which a great deal of critical thinking is developing alternatives to hegemonic, modern, “mainland,” or “one world” thinking.

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Regarding Storiation, I am also thinking of the Jamaican scholar and writer Sylvia Wynter. She reminds us that *the human* should not only be understood in biological terms and instead evokes the notion of *homo narrans*: we are as much bios as mythoi; our human capacity to speak, to use language, to imagine is an essential part of being human, of survival, we are essentially a storytelling species. As Wynter asks, “How can we come to know / think / feel / behave and subjectively experience ourselves—doing so for the first time in our human history *consciously* now—in *quite different terms*? How do we *be*, in Fanonian terms, hybridly human?”<sup>36</sup> This evokes a very mobile way of thinking and being in the world, one that also allows thinking outside of ourselves; and it very much speaks to your particular analytic of Storiation, which you outline in *Anthropocene Islands*. How can Storiation, an onto-

epistemology that fosters the speculative mode, help us think in the ruins of/after the end of the world?

**Jonathan Pugh:** What we call the recent rise of Storiatic approaches forcefully disrupts the modern binaries of subject/object, thought/being. Storiatic ontologies engage islands and island cultures as important *intra*-relational “holding” sites for generating knowledge of the effects, traces and afterlives of modernity and colonialism by way of more speculative approaches and practices. Here, islands and island cultures are once again regularly enrolled for the development of Anthropocene thinking; this time being employed to highlight how there is no “away” and no “past” in the Anthropocene<sup>37</sup>—exemplified by how, when it comes to such vast, multidimensional forces as global warming, there is no isolated or cut-off island existing “just over there” beyond the horizon. Some of the forces of global warming play out more immediately, e.g., in the intensified hurricanes hitting islands around the world every year. Others stretch out for hundreds of thousands of years, in how long it takes for carbon to dissolve in the oceans surrounding islands. Examples regularly invoked in Storiatic approaches include the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,<sup>38</sup> plastic washing up on island shores,<sup>39</sup> the embodied movements of islanders existing within the ongoing legacies of colonialism,<sup>40</sup> or islands as holding spaces for nuclear testing and fallout.<sup>41</sup>

Here, Kamau Brathwaite is a particularly good example of how older island writers are today being reengaged for the development of new strains of critical thought.<sup>42</sup> When Brathwaite informs us about the Caribbean “nanna” he watches sweeping the sand on the beach, he understands that colonialism is “held” in her embodied actions—“in ‘our nanna’s action, like the movement of the ocean she’s walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (“reading”) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future ... .”<sup>43</sup> What is at stake in Brathwaite’s Storiatic is the working through of *intra*-, rather than *inter*-, relations; colonialism and the island condition register as her embodied movements as she sweeps. Brathwaite famously employs the term *tidalectic* to describe this islander psyche which is a product of colonialism and the Caribbean island condition.<sup>44</sup> He goes to great lengths to distinguish tidalectics from European frameworks which always center the human subject as storyteller. Thus, Brathwaite’s is not a story *about* an islander; it is a Storiatic which explicitly seeks to work with and think from her islander life and embodied movements themselves. Our book explores how Storiatic approaches map across a wide range of contemporary works. More recently, Craig Santos Perez, an Indigenous Chamoru from Guåhan (Guam), reflecting upon the analytic of Storiatic we draw out in *Anthropocene Islands*, says that “much of” the Pacific ecological and climate change literature he is working on with Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and Leora Kava “expresses Storiatic, or the afterlives and haunting legacies of imperialism in the Pacific.”<sup>45</sup>

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Brathwaite’s tidalectics is a very apt example of how mobilities can be embodied and are embedded, always shaped by a wider web of

relations. Mobility is also central to the thought of Relation, as Glissant writes, “Relation is movement.”<sup>46</sup> The question of Relation(s) is a key premise of archipelagic thinking as any archipelago can only be imagined in its relationship to something else. In a transnational sense, the thought of Relation also allows us to see archipelagic connections across places that might seem far apart and/or separate, such as when we think of relations of dependency of former colonies. I know you are interested in understanding how Glissant informs recent critical thought. Can you talk about different forms of relations—relations of domination as opposed to Relation in Glissant’s sense, with a capital R?

**Jonathan Pugh:** Well, I truly think Glissant is fast becoming one of the most important figures of contemporary critical thought. In just the last few months Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli,<sup>48</sup> and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten,<sup>49</sup> for example, all have Glissant at, or close to, the center of their work. Take Spivak, for example, who very recently said “we need archipelago-thought. Édouard Glissant ... We must displace the heritage of postcoloniality into island-thinking ... I have lived for sixty years on the island of the Americas.”<sup>50</sup>

Given all the recent criticism of white academia’s revealing of interrelational entanglements on behalf of the Other—and even, after the Western crisis of faith in modern reasoning, the turn to appropriate Indigenous relational ontologies to “save the West from itself”<sup>51</sup>—a great deal of work is now carving out alternative critical pathways by turning to Glissant.<sup>52</sup> Moten and Harney,<sup>53</sup> two prominent critical thinkers, have been drawn to Glissant in particular, and, like many others today, the Caribbean as a region more generally which positively enables the generation of different trajectories for critical thought. Here I think that if islands and archipelagos have become highly generative for broader relational approaches which seek to disrupt bounded notions of the nation, individual, place and culture, as discussed above, then it is the Caribbean which is emerging as a key region for this more recent critical trajectory. New developments are foregrounding how what Glissant calls the “opacity” of Relation is both constituted through and, importantly, problematizes and undoes “thought of the Other.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the momentum of debate now seems to be shifting, more towards Glissant’s the “other of Thought;”<sup>55</sup> which moves *opaquely* in

[t]he other direction, which is not one, distances itself entirely from the thought of conquest; it is an experimental meditation (a follow-through) of the process of relation, at work in reality, among the elements (whether primary or not) that weave its combinations .... This “orientation” then leads to following through whatever is dynamic, the relational, the chaotic—anything fluid and various and moreover uncertain (that is, ungraspable) yet fundamental in every instance and quite likely full of instances of invariance.<sup>56</sup>

What contemporary authors find so appealing in Glissant is that his turn to “opacity” highlights “an irreducible singularity,”<sup>57</sup> which is not obtainable in terms of a trackable “individual-in-relation.”<sup>58</sup> As Glissant clarifies: “The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”<sup>59</sup> Today, Glissant is less enrolled as being about readable subjects “of” or “in” relation, or in support of notions such as “hybridity,” or creolization in terms of mappable relational entanglements, but rather for his attention to the opacity of *irreducible* confluences. Here are just a couple of contemporary examples:

To insist upon a group’s “right to opacity” in sociocultural terms, therefore, is to challenge the processes of commensuration built into the demand for that group to become perceptible according to existing conceptions of the world. It is a way of asserting the existence in this world ... incomprehensible from within the common senses that secure existing hegemonic relations.<sup>60</sup>

... the vagary of black being that cannot be catalogued. That capaciousness resonates with Édouard Glissant’s phrase “consent not to be a single being,” where “consent,” as Fred Moten argues, “is not so much an act but a nonperformative condition or ecological disposition” (*Black and Blur* xv).<sup>61</sup>

Now, my more recent work (which I am developing with David Chandler) is not an approach which argues over the precise details of what Glissant did, or did not, say. For some, he obviously fitted into the earlier turn to relational ways of thinking. For example, mapping well enough into an understanding of creolization framed in terms of relational ontology and rhizomatic subjects of open becoming. But what we are interested in is *shifting patterns of contemporary thought*. What matters here, for us, are the broader analytics which can be drawn out today; how contemporary authors are now returning to older scholars, like Glissant, and how their current framings are re-shaping the stakes of present debate. Here, we want to highlight the emergence of a new analytical frame in recent Black studies which I think is very important for American and transnational American Studies, what David and I call “abyssal thought.”<sup>62</sup> This works differently from dominant relational ontologies in the social sciences and humanities. Analytically, abyssal thought is highly distinctive from the “relational turn.”

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Perhaps we could start to draw out what you mean by abyssal thought here, particularly its distinctiveness, by placing abyssal thought in relation to your previous work in *Anthropocene Islands*. In that book you evoke the notion of thinking and living “after the end of the world,” alluding to Anthropocene



scholarship like Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), where "the end of the world" is understood as a world influenced by modern and colonial regimes that engendered (harmful) changes on the earth now referred to as the Anthropocene. "After the end of the world" also evokes a paradox: that there is an "after" once the world has ended for some and thus implies multiplicity and repetition despite "the end": the end of the world has already happened multiple times for some species, animals, and Indigenous Peoples. How does the "end of the world" figure differently in the more recent abyssal thought you are now interested in?

**Jonathan Pugh:** The abyssal analytic that David and I are beginning to draw out from recent Black studies reconfigures such debates, posing significant challenges for Anthropocene and American Studies, the relational and ontological turns. Again, to be clear, what we are talking about here is a *schematic* analysis which we are drawing out from contemporary debates and developments. Thus, whilst the work of any individual scholar may or may not blur the lines, for the sake of clarifying an analytical distinction, we approach the stakes of abyssal thought as *distinct* from relational ontological approaches.

Central, for our reading of the emergence of the abyssal analytic, is how, as we learn from Du Bois, Fanon and Césaire, the world cannot be separated out from the violence that forged the antiblack modernist ontology of "human as subject" and "world as object." Key is how, for many contemporary commentators, *this world has not ended*. What distinguishes the abyssal analytic is that it is not however about correcting modern frameworks of reasoning, rethinking the human and world in terms of relational ontologies and epistemologies. Rather, the task of abyssal work is that of problematising and undoing the human and the world (we draw this out from such contemporary works as Denise Ferreira da Silva,<sup>63</sup> Harney and Moten,<sup>64</sup> Chandler,<sup>65</sup> R. A. Judy,<sup>66</sup> Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis<sup>67</sup>). Theorizing from the abyss deconstructs—or more precisely, *desediments*<sup>68</sup>—modern ontological world-making. Central for the abyssal analytic is what we draw out as the abyssal *subject*,<sup>69</sup> which is not a literal alternative ontology to the subject of modernity, but a *figurative critical positionality* which exposes modernity's ontological framings, cuts and distinctions, revealing them as artifice. Following Nahum Dimitri Chandler,<sup>70</sup> we might frame abyssal thought as paraontological, problematising foundational claims, rather than productively revealing of an alternative "reality" or other modes of "being."

In our book, *The World as Abyss*, we explore how particular readings of Caribbean modes of resistance and survival—from the Middle Passage and the hold of the slave ship, through to the maroons, creolization, carnival and Caribbean speculative fiction—have become highly enabling for the emergence of an abyssal analytic. For abyssal modes of critical thought—in which the stakes are ontological—a particular reading of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* becomes important. Glissant famously opens by moving through the three abysses of the Middle Passage: the slave ship hold, the depths of the sea, and the gradual forgetting of African origins on the Caribbean plantation. Crucial for David and I about the work we draw upon for the

abyssal analytic is the resulting lack of ontological security of the ~~subject~~ of these abysses—becoming the “no-thing” contemporary authors like Hortense Spillers and Harney and Moten<sup>71</sup> speak of—lacking a perspective from which to see the world in its own image.

For many critical commentators in the past, the lack of rootedness of the ~~subject~~ of the abyss was framed in terms of a “rhizomatic subject,” *open to the world*. We see this in how, for example, creolization has been frequently reduced to a productive relational becoming, or in notions of hybridity and intersectionality, where the key point is that the subject is the product of the comings together of ongoing relational entanglements. Drawn from different parts of Africa, forced in the hold of the slave ship, people shared little in the way of common languages or identities, so *improvisation* is said to be a mark of Caribbean culture. However, in the abyssal analytic, the stakes are framed as *non-relational*, rather than relational, as can be drawn out from Benítez-Rojo’s reading of carnival.<sup>72</sup>

Let’s suppose that we beat upon a drum with a single blow and set its skin 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.<sup>73</sup>

In Benítez-Rojo’s thinking of “Caribbeanness” as “carnavalesque,”<sup>74</sup> as he says, “every repetition is a practice that necessarily enables a difference and step toward nothingness.”<sup>75</sup> This is central for the drawing out of an abyssal analytic and the figurative abyssal ~~subject~~, which does not literally exist “in” the world of ontological cuts and distinctions, but rather reflects how “no-thingness manifests itself as a kind of practice [of] differentiation without separation [citing da Silva 2016<sup>76</sup>]<sup>77</sup>—desedimenting, de-worlding, *subtractive* of ontological clarifications. This is also why the abyssal ~~subject~~ is necessarily *figurative* rather than literal, because it enables a critical positionality which problematizes ontological world-making, whilst not being obtainable in the world of ontological clarifications and distinctions.

Today, much work that could be read as abyssal, from Harney and Moten<sup>78</sup> to Spillers,<sup>79</sup> conceptually enrolls the “hold” of the slave ship in a way that is enabling for what we draw out as the figurative ~~subject~~ of the abyss. Again, it is not literally the hold of the slave ship (just as it is not literally carnival), but the ontological (inescapable) condition of the abyss, constructed through the event of the Middle Passage,

which matters for the trajectory of recent critical thought David and I are interested in—that is, the conceptual possibilities of enrolling *the world as abyss*. Thus, for Harney and Moten,

there are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship. The ordinary fugue and fugitive run of the language lab, black phonography's brutally experimental value. Paraontological totality in the making. Present and unmade in presence, blackness is an instrument in the making. *Quasi una fantasia* in its paralegal swerve, its mad-worked brain, the imagination produces nothing but exsense in the hold ... Having defied degradation the moment becomes a theory of the moment, of the feeling of a presence that is ungraspable in the way that it touches ... what is mistaken for silence is, all of a sudden, transubstantial ... . We are the shipped, if we choose to be, if we elect to pay an unbearable cost that is inseparable from an incalculable benefit.<sup>80</sup>

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Harney and Moten prominently use the term “paraontological.” Could you expand on this term in the context of the abyssal? I am also reminded of Glissant and the notion of the nonworld, where all modes of colonial, modern reasonings that shape whatever we have come to understand as “the world” are refused. Instead, as you say, he offers us “opacity” and the “abyss” as “a projection of and perspective into the unknown.”<sup>81</sup> So the “unknown” appears as a way of being, and also a way of “wander[ing] without becoming lost.”<sup>82</sup> How does paraontology and abyssal thought reconfigure how we think about the unevenness of relations and mobilities differently from the relational and ontological turns, and does this present a new way of moving within the abyss?

**Jonathan Pugh:** I saw that Nahum Dimitri Chandler (2010) has published in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. I believe Chandler to be one of the most important writers today, and his “paraontological” approach<sup>83</sup> a crucial development in critical thought. He has been seminal for authors like Harney and Moten, and what David Chandler and I are calling “abyssal thought” more generally. As Marquis Bey clarifies:

a notion of a paraontology ... functions as a critical concept that breaks up and desediments. By way of this, it permits the rewriting of narratives and the very conditions of understanding the present as such. Importantly, the goal is not to create a different, alternative ontology. Paraontology is not a search for new categories, as if categorization is a neutral process. It is not; categorization is a mechanism of

ontology, an apparatus of circumscription. What the para-ontological suggests is a dissolution.<sup>84</sup>

Nahum Dimitri Chandler's *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* illustrates his paraontological approach through many examples.<sup>85</sup> One example draws upon the Caribbean enslaved, and later abolitionist, Olaudah Equiano, and his self-reflective story *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789. I do not have the space to go through the nuances and details of Chandler's formidable analysis. Suffice to say, Chandler draws out how Olaudah Equiano, "a slave, comes to recognise that it is his relation to property that organises his relationship to humans, both to himself and others,"<sup>86</sup> and that this relationship is built upon nothing more than abstract relations. As Chandler examines, Equiano's self-narrative powerfully illustrates this through a series of ironies arranged around one central irony—if "Equiano, as property, acquires property (albeit small), he can transform his relationship to humans, including himself."<sup>87</sup> But it is how Equiano can be read or drawn out as a figurative abyssal subject, that opens up the problem of being itself, not just the problem of the human as subject, which is where the radical import of a paraontological approach is to be found.

What Chandler demonstrates through Equiano's life story, is that there is no absolute or singular gesture of or for being. Through the many ironies of Equiano's life, Chandler shows us that there is no principle of being that maintains its pertinence; and that it is in tracking the figure of the unsovereign that we may "open the way to the most fundamental account of the dynamics at the heart of the possibility of the subject in general."<sup>88</sup> Equiano's life story, "always strategic and historical, situated, in the last instance,"<sup>89</sup> serves to bring out this "opening,"<sup>90</sup> enabling for the development of a critical positionality which desediments any transcendental illusions of "being."

The relational and ontological turns in the Western academy have been about developing capacities and affordances to *productively* sense and attune to, map and trace, beyond fixed grids of space and time, relational becomings. The world is available, and the human is available to be rethought differently from modernity's human/nature, mind/body, subject/object divides. By contrast, R. A. Judy's *Sentient Flesh*,<sup>91</sup> which we think can also be read in terms of an abyssal approach, unsettles "being" without offering any "positive" ontological alternative. Whereas relational approaches are about "encounters" and attuning to "entanglements," the Buzzard Lope dancers (variously from the Carolinas, Virginia, and the Georgia sea Islands), discussed by Judy, lose their individuality in an irreducible "confluence"<sup>92</sup>—for us, enabling for the assembling of a figurative abyssal subject, undoing ontological cuts and delineations. Crucially then, what we draw out from this for our understanding of the abyssal analytic is that abyssal sociality is a logic of *desedimentation* rather than of spatial or temporal extension. To return to Glissant for a moment, when he is read through an abyssal framing, in terms of "the other of Thought," creolization adds

nothing to the world (in the sense of adding “positive” ontological content), but rather can be engaged as exposing the artificiality of ontological cuts and distinctions of modern worldmaking. As Moten says, a

diffuse gathering of differences—announces a profligate tradition of steps to the side of compositional line, so that what Édouard Glissant calls *l'improvisable* is continually improvised ... [this is blackness as] obscurity ... constantly escaping ... such recalcitrant blur that it's hard to see up in (t)here.<sup>93</sup>

**Barbara Gfoellner:** To dwell on the abyssal analytic a little further, various island writers and scholars have made sense of these kinds of sensibilities you are speaking about. I am reminded of Walcott's notion of the “explorer” here. Asking the question “[w]hat is the nature of the island?” in his essay “Isla Incognita,” he can only look at it through “the opposite method to the explorer's.”<sup>94</sup> Michelle Ann Stephens and Brian Russell Roberts, in their conversation part of this special forum, discuss the “anti-explorer method” as a different mode of mobility, one that does not have the intention to map space and make known all that is unknown. Instead, these mobilities make space for differences and opacity, very much in Glissant's sense of errantry: a sacred kind of wandering with no violent and definite endpoint. How does this relate to the Patchworks analytic you draw out in *Anthropocene Islands* and, in extension, to your more recent understanding of abyssal thought?

**Jonathan Pugh:** In our *Anthropocene Islands* book we describe Patchworks as an embodied process of spatial and temporary becoming and attuning, Teiwa's famous islanding as a “verb.”<sup>95</sup> We invoke Michelle and Brian's “anti-explorer method” as an example<sup>96</sup> and I will look forward to chatting with them sometime about how it relates to abyssal thought. What I will stress again here, in relation to your specific question, is that there is no “end of the world” in abyssal thought. We have not moved beyond the modern ontological project of antiblack worldmaking. The point of abyssal thought is to problematize essentializing assumptions of “world” and to desediment the modern project of the human and the world. But, as I have been saying, it does not reveal “another reality,” as in relational and ontological thinking, rhizomic thought, the pluriverse, the world of many worlds, and so forth. Rather, it is through denaturalizing what has become natural or invisible, that what we draw out as an abyssal approach or analytic exposes “reality” as the ongoing work of violence and artifice. So, to return to your earlier question, abyssal work is not really about the unknown as a way of being (it does not replace one ontology with another ontology). Abyssal work operates from a critical and figurative positionality, rather than a literal one. Theorizing from the abyss, from the critical positionality of the figurative abyssal **subject**, is a way of problematizing and undoing the artifice of being. It is the capacity to determine, to

project coherence and distinction, that is brought into question when theorizing from the world as abyss.

Abyssal thought fundamentally changes how we approach the stakes of critique. Thus, for example, Caliban's inheritance of Prospero's language, his corruption of that language, his chant, would need to be revisited. In an abyssal framing, Caliban reveals the dangerous fantasy of colonial reasoning because he enables us to think in terms of a figurative abyssal subject—the desedimenting power of an abyssal “Being” which is not one; working against “forced convertibility, forced translation, forced access.”<sup>97</sup> The world as abyss is the ending of the world of coherence, distinction and symbolic representation. Shakespeare gave Caliban particularly inventive language. As Derek Walcott said, the most powerful metaphysical wit, the most extreme or “vulgar” juxtapositions of metaphors and similes.<sup>98</sup> In doing so, Caribbean poets like Walcott have said Shakespeare creolized language as much as any Caribbean writer. Recent work which enables us to draw out the abyssal approach has therefore, perhaps quite naturally, taken a great interest in metaphysical wit as a specific style of work, from Shakespeare to John Donne. Harney and Moten's most recent book, published in 2021, ends with an extended reflection on its purchase for critical thought. Saliently, for Harney and Moten, metaphysical poetry, a creolizing of words, has a “calypsonian allure.”<sup>99</sup> The extreme juxtapositioning of metaphors and similes, of inherited concepts, can be understood to work like Benítez-Rojo's<sup>100</sup> framing of carnival; which, as I said earlier, can be read as dissipating coherence and distinctions into “nothingness.” There is no literal “being” or productive understanding of “non-being” available to us. Another “reality” is not counterposed to (Prospero's) white thought, which means that metaphysical wit, in an abyssal reading, cannot be reduced to some sort of productive vitalism. The abyssal analytic foregrounds the forgetting of origins, opposites, and relation, uncompromisingly staying with the hold, with the undoing of obtainable being and relation.<sup>101</sup> Abyssal work stays with this harder line, so to speak, and, as I say, Nahum Chandler's paraontological approach is key. For Harney and Moten, everything is held in potentiality:

the preservation of potenza, of what hasn't happened yet, the preservation of the tendency; the conservation of sub-junctivity that is given in the figure of the quark, the unity of matter/energy that stands at a distance ... an anaphenomenological refusal of the statist impulse and one is reminded that there are things, even in this world, that subjects don't make, as if worldmaking itself were predicated on the assumption that even it could be relinquished with a kind of earthly joy.<sup>102</sup>

What we are drawing out as abyssal thought—through engaging the contemporary readings which are being made of the opacity of creolization, carnival and calypso, and staying with the hold—works to “keep open or keep opening referential suspense.”<sup>103</sup>

**Barbara Gfoellner:** With regard to the key distinctions between abyssal thought and relational approaches that you have elaborated on in this interview, what different modes of thought do these two approaches offer? How will what you call an “ethico-political duty of care”<sup>104</sup> change in regards to these two approaches?

**Jonathan Pugh:** What we are talking about, in abyssal thought, is a radically alternative worldview to the relational and ontological turns: the world reconfigured as abyss. As Nahum Chandler 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, morality, and nation afoot within the domain of the socius called America.”<sup>105</sup> In an abyssal logic, the purpose of critique is not to draw out spatial or temporal networks, tracking assemblages of relations on behalf of the Other, drawing our attention to liminal spaces, disrupting or troubling “nation,” center, and periphery. In the contemporary work we are interested in, the Caribbean is not marginal or liminal, between Africa and the North American continental landmass, but rather the disavowed axis or fulcrum of the (un)making of the world.<sup>106</sup> It is in this sense that abyssal thought radically reconfigures the “transnational” in *transnational American Studies*. In the world as abyss there is little point in framing the stakes in terms of “opening out” to—revealing, shining a light upon, and tracking—the contingencies of different spatial and temporal relations. Abyssal thought is non-relational and not about a “choice” between relations in this way.

The radical reconstitution of the world as abyss poses a significant challenge to those who engage in Glissant’s “thought of the Other”; that is, through what could be read as the imposition of a relational ethos of care. For relational ontologies, islands, networks, archipelagic relations, and so forth, tend to be available to researcher, ethnographer, or policymaker, to learn from, through sensing and attuning to the complexities of relational beings. By contrast, the abyssal approach problematizes modern ontological world-making but does not replace this with an obtainable or available ontology. Abyssal work is not about disrupting bounded conceptualizations of “nation” by providing alternative ways of worlding the subject in more expansive ways. Rather, abyssal work is about a “de-subjectification” of the subject, providing an alternative logic of refusal. The displaced, in marronage for example, are not obtainable to learn from (in how they undertake practices which can be drawn out as offering us a different way of world-making from moderns). Rather, their “availability” is framed differently, in terms of how they can be read figuratively as *subtracting* from, rather than adding new or alternatively available worlds and delineations. A world reconfigured abyssally does not offer a positive alternative, but is where ontology dissipates with a recalcitrant blur:

what's at stake is not the reform of institutions but the deformation of the institution as such. Corruption is the impairment of purity. Its roots are in a verb that means, to break. The routes of those roots are unmoored, mangrovic and immeasurable. One follows them to the entanglement of generativity and decay, then disappears.<sup>107</sup>

So, what we have been talking about is two analytical modes of thought, which I am drawing out in my current work with David Chandler: one relational (*Anthropocene Islands*), one abyssal (*The World as Abyss*). Relational ontologies are still much more common across the social sciences and humanities today in challenging modern reasoning, the notion of the bounded nation-state, fixed grids of space and time; mobilized and put to work as a way of working against such things as American exceptionalism. Abyssal thought works against continental American exceptionalism too, by making the Caribbean and the Middle Passage more central to the modern ontological project of antiblack world-making. But it works very differently from relational ontologies. Rather than re-make the subject of modernity into a relational subject, whose inter-relations (liminal or otherwise) can be mapped or tracked, opening-up the world, enabling researchers, policymakers, or anthropologists to see the making of the world with more clarity, abyssal thought works differently by reconfiguring the world as abyss. The figurative abyssal *subject*, of the world as abyss, which we analytically draw out from contemporary scholarship, desediments modern ontological world-making by revealing it to be an (all too dangerous) fantasy. This is why abyssal approaches are a threat to the world: In an antiblack world/ontology, the abyss is in (non)relation to the world.

**Barbara Gfoellner:** Thank you, Jon, for taking the time and engaging in these debates on archipelagic studies, “Anthropocene Islands” and “the abyssal.” I am excited to see where this discussion is going from here and to read your book on *The World as Abyss*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Pugh, “Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2013): 9–24, <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.273>; and Jonathan Pugh, “The Relational Turn in Island Geographies: Bringing Together Island, Sea and Ship Relations and the Case of the Landship,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 17 (2016): 1040–1059, doi: 10.1080/14649365.2016.1147064
- <sup>2</sup> Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72>



- <sup>3</sup> See Pugh, “Island Movements.”
- <sup>4</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 24.
- <sup>5</sup> *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (2022), “Home Page,” [https://journals.theasa.net/journals/name/journal\\_of\\_transnational\\_american\\_studies/4307/](https://journals.theasa.net/journals/name/journal_of_transnational_american_studies/4307/)
- <sup>6</sup> Bryce Traister, “The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2 (2010), doi: 10.5070/T821006993.
- <sup>7</sup> Oliver Scheiding, “Worlding America and Transnational American Studies,” in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 41.
- <sup>8</sup> Laura Doyle, “Toward a philosophy of transnationalism,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1 (2009), doi: 10.5070/T811006941.
- <sup>9</sup> Brian Russell Roberts, and Michelle Ann Stephens, “Introduction,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.
- <sup>10</sup> See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Elaine Stratford et al., “Envisioning the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 6 (2011): 113–30, <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.253>; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Stefanie Hessler, ed., *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview Through Art and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); and Mimi Sheller, *Island Futures: Caribbean Survival in the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
- <sup>11</sup> See Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021); and David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh, “Anthropocene islands: There are Only Islands after the End of the World,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 3 (2021): 395–415, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820621997018>
- <sup>12</sup> See Pugh, “The Relational Turn.”
- <sup>13</sup> Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place,” *Marxism Today* 38 (June 1991): 24–29.
- <sup>14</sup> Pugh and Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*.
- <sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

- <sup>16</sup> See Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, “Preface: Postscript on the posthuman,” in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 271–95, <https://doi.org/10.7312/wein17214>; and Eva Haifa Giraud, *What Comes After Entanglement? Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007159>
- <sup>17</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>18</sup> See Ilan Kelman and James E. Randall, “Resilience and Sustainability,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Island Studies: A World of Islands*, ed. Godfrey Baldacchino (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 353–68.
- <sup>19</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom*.
- <sup>20</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- <sup>21</sup> Jan Salick and Nanci Ross, “Traditional Peoples and Climate Change,” *Global Environmental Change* 19 (2009): 137–90.
- <sup>22</sup> See Timothy Morton, “Molten Entities,” in *New Geographies 08: Island*, ed. Daniel Daou and Pablo Pérez-Ramos (Cambridge, MA: Universal Wilde, 2016), 72–76; and Karen Barad, “After the End of the World: Entangled Nuclear Colonialisms, Matters of Force, and the Material Force of Justice,” *Theory & Event* 22 (2019): 524–50, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/729449>
- <sup>23</sup> Kelman and Randall, “Resilience and Sustainability.”
- <sup>24</sup> Tatiana Flores and Michelle Ann Stephens, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>25</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371878>
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Works of Charles Darwin, Volume 16: The Origin of Species, 1876* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
- <sup>27</sup> Margaret Mead, “Introduction to Polynesia as Laboratory for the Development of Models in the Study of Cultural Evolution,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 66 (1957): 145.
- <sup>28</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
- <sup>29</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

- <sup>30</sup> Kamu Brathwaite, *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island, NY: We Press, 1999).
- <sup>31</sup> Epele Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).
- <sup>32</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* (Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1998).
- <sup>33</sup> Andrew S. Mathews, "Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna L. Tsing, Heather A. Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G145–G157.
- <sup>34</sup> Daniel Daou, and Pablo Pérez-Ramos, *New Geographies 08: Island* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2016).
- <sup>35</sup> Cary Wolfe, "Of Ecology, Immunity, and Islands: The lost maples of Big Bend," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 137–52.
- <sup>36</sup> Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. K. McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.
- <sup>37</sup> See Morton, "Molten Entities"; and Barad, "After the End."
- <sup>38</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- <sup>39</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores, "Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art," *Environmental Humanities* 12 (2020): 132–66.
- <sup>40</sup> Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski. *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).
- <sup>41</sup> Barad, "After the End."
- <sup>42</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Hessler, *Tidalectics*; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- <sup>43</sup> Brathwaite, *Conversations*, 34.
- <sup>44</sup> Brathwaite, *Conversations*, 34.
- <sup>45</sup> Craig Santos Perez, "Thinking (and Feeling) with Anthropocene (Pacific) Islands," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11 (2021): 429–433, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206211017453>

- <sup>46</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 171.
- <sup>47</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today,” *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 1 (2021).
- <sup>48</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- <sup>49</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2021).
- <sup>50</sup> Spivak, “How the Heritage,” 27.
- <sup>51</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Can Theory End the World?” *sympløke* 29 (2021): 528.
- <sup>52</sup> See King, *The Black Shoals*; Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis, *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of This World* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2021); and Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
- <sup>53</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013); and Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*.
- <sup>54</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 154.
- <sup>55</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 154.
- <sup>56</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 137.
- <sup>57</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190–91.
- <sup>58</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 126.
- <sup>59</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.
- <sup>60</sup> Keeling, *Queer Times*, 31
- <sup>61</sup> Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 141.
- <sup>62</sup> Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss: the Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene*; David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh, “‘Abyssal Geography’: Plenary Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 44, no. 2 (2023): 199–214, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12473>; David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh, “Interstitial and Abyssal Geographies,” *Political Geography* 98, (2022): 102672, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102672>; Jonathan Pugh, “Relational or Abyssal?” Invited response to Phil Steinberg’s AAG Political Geography plenary paper—“Blue Planet, Black Lives: Matter, Memory, and

the Temporalities of Political Geography,” *Political Geography* 96 (2022): 102619, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102619>

- <sup>63</sup> See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).
- <sup>64</sup> See Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*; Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.
- <sup>65</sup> See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); and Nahum D. Chandler, “Of Horizon: An Introduction to ‘The Afro-American’ by WEB Du Bois—circa 1894,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.5070/T821006987>
- <sup>66</sup> See R. A. Judy, *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiesis in Black* (Durham, NC: North Carolina Press, 2020).
- <sup>67</sup> See Ruiz and Vourloumis, *Formless Formation*.
- <sup>68</sup> Desedimentation is a term we take from Nahum Chandler, who writes: “I specifically propose this concept-metaphor here as otherwise than a procedure that might be primarily one of recovery or return. I think of it as a kind of resetting, a setting afoot or apace, a destabilization . . . . Yet, there is in the question of desedimentation as it has acquired its coherence as a concern for me an ineluctable and intractable movement of force as a massive violence which remains, despite all manner of dissimulations, the very terms of the announcement of existence or being as a problem for thought” (N. Chandler, *X*, 65–66).
- <sup>69</sup> We delineate the “~~subject~~” as being under erasure, lacking ontological being, to distinguish it from a “subject” or “being” which is productively available for ontological clarifications and delineations. Thus, as discussed, the abyssal ~~subject~~ is not generative in the way of a relational ontology of becoming (see Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 3).
- <sup>70</sup> N. Chandler, “Of Horizon”; and N. Chandler, *X*.
- <sup>71</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 215. See Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*.
- <sup>72</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- <sup>73</sup> Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 18.
- <sup>74</sup> Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 307.
- <sup>75</sup> Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 3.

- <sup>76</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability,” in *32nd Bienal de São Paulo: Incerteza Viva*, ed. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 57–65.
- <sup>77</sup> Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons* (New York: Sputnik and Fizzle, 2016), 11.
- <sup>78</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.
- <sup>79</sup> Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*.
- <sup>80</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 94–95.
- <sup>81</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 10.
- <sup>82</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 67.
- <sup>83</sup> Chandler, X.
- <sup>84</sup> Marquis Bey, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 17.
- <sup>85</sup> Chandler, X, 19.
- <sup>86</sup> Chandler, X, 160.
- <sup>87</sup> Chandler, X, 161.
- <sup>88</sup> Chandler, X, 163.
- <sup>89</sup> Chandler, X, 167.
- <sup>90</sup> Chandler, X, 164.
- <sup>91</sup> See R. A. Judy, *Sentient Flesh*.
- <sup>92</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.
- <sup>93</sup> Moten, *Black and Blur*, 227.
- <sup>94</sup> Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita,” in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 52.
- <sup>95</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, “To Island,” in *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader*, ed. Godfrey Baldacchino (Charlottetown, PEI: Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island and Agenda Academic, 2007), 514.
- <sup>96</sup> Pugh and Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*, 9, 16, 19, 89, 99.
- <sup>97</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 114.

- <sup>98</sup> Derek Walcott, "Soul Brother to 'The Joker of Seville,'" *Trinidad Guardian*, November 6, 1974, 4.
- <sup>99</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 156.
- <sup>100</sup> Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*.
- <sup>101</sup> I've learned a lot here from my recent conversations with Fred Moten.
- <sup>102</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 157–58.
- <sup>103</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 158.
- <sup>104</sup> Pugh and Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands*, 168.
- <sup>105</sup> Chandler, "Of Horizon."
- <sup>106</sup> See M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, foreword by Evie Shockley (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 1989; N. Chandler, X; and Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
- <sup>107</sup> Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 160.

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