

Problematizing the geographic subject: An abyssal approach

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Abstract

We respond to the generosity of the commentaries on *The World as Abyss*, elaborating how Abyssal Geography problematises what we call the ‘Geographic Subject’ and Human Geography as an irreconcilably modern discipline.

Keywords

Abyssal geography, geographic subject, human geography, ontological turn, relational turn, *The World as Abyss*

Abyssal geography

We are grateful to Neha Kohli, Thomas Jellis, Barbara Gfoellner, Andrew Baldwin, and Lucas Pohl for engaging so generously with *The World as Abyss* (Pugh and Chandler, 2023). This book is part of an ongoing project of experimentation and clarification of ‘Abyssal Geography’. Thus, as we reflect here, we are also grateful to other geographers who have engaged with our ongoing work in this area.

The focus of Abyssal Geography is the lure of the contemporary world, where a subject is only understood as a subject through its self-determined becoming within this world. Both supporters and critical commentators of modernity have long converged on this definitional characteristic of the modern subject, which, without the capacity to understand itself as a subject would merely be, as Fanon (1986 [1952], 89) underscored, ‘an object in the midst of other objects’.

Through developing an abyssal approach, we have come to understand the modern subject as the ‘Geographic Subject’, constitutive of today’s world-making logic of individuation. For, whether in contemporary *affirmative* approaches (e.g. algorithmic sensing, cybernetics, more-than-human poiesis, the aesthetic attunements of the subject), or *negative* approaches (e.g., inhabiting impotentialities, affective interstices and impasses in worldly relations), the subject is only understood as a subject through its differential relational becoming. Precisely then, the modern project continues, with subjects always and already imbricated within the

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world of their self-making, responsabilised and subordinated to this world.

The co-constitutive pairing of the subject and the world as a meaningful register for the becoming of this subject thus becomes the framing, or 'grid', within which modernity is contested. The problem of critique is then its subordination to this world, without a legible outside. This is the modernist problematic. The problematic, if you like, of Human Geography itself. It is also the problematic of Abyssal Geography, concerned with exploring the contemporary limits of critique, the difficulties of shaking off the lure of this subject and world. Jellis enables us to clarify these stakes of Abyssal Geography in stating that:

The 'modern ontology' presented [in *The World as Abyss*] is one of entities which are located in fixed grids. Such an ontology has long been troubled by the eclectic kinds of poststructuralist thought that geographers have engaged with.

Thus, Jellis asks, why do we not make more of 'how geographers (and others) might actually be more receptive to such arguments, given the latent scepticism which already exists with regards to all things fixed and located'. To clarify, when we employ the terms 'grid' and 'fixed' we are not adopting the terminology more usual in Human Geography, where Euclidian fixed grids of space and time have, of course, 'long been troubled' by attentiveness to relational movements, flows, ontologies, epistemologies, and otherwise. We are talking about something distinct: the foundational, 'fixed', 'grid' of the subject and the world: the ground that has no other ground than 'entities in their relational becoming' (Pugh and Chandler, 2023, 43). To further illustrate, even with the recent problematisation of the relational turn, with the emergence of the 'negative turn' and 'negative geographies' (and with the question of their relationship to our abyssal approach raised by Pohl and Jellis), our key distinction is that Abyssal Geography centres upon how the affirmative and the negative movements of the subject (un)making itself in worldly relational becoming are, in fact, two sides of the same coin: the *modus operandi* of

the Geographic Subject, enabling it to keep on extending its limits of 'thinkability' and world itself in new ways.

For our project, then, Human Geography itself is a central concern: precisely because a subject incapable of understanding itself as a subject, becoming in relation in the world, is an anathema to the discipline. What Tobler (1970) called this foundational or 'first law of geography' (quoted in Carter-White et al., 2024, 4), makes it a field which cannot conceive of a subject barred from relation. Geographer Ben Anderson (2023, 1) importantly asks, 'what, if anything, is the outside of relations?' This subordination to the grid, this mode of enframing or worlding, limits the possibilities of thought to the generative, the relational, the 'geographical'. As Jellis states, in this world, 'unmaking' can only ever be 'at the same time' 'remaking'. For this reason, 'geography is yet to be sufficiently disturbed and deconstructed so that it no longer relies on the dialectical certainty of recuperation and sublation of the negative by the positive' (Carter-White et al., 2024, 2). Human Geography as a discipline is stabilised via the (re)production of a certain set of subject assumptions.

The Abyss and the Caribbean

During the early stages of our project, we were particularly interested in exploring the ways in which Caribbean writers and poets were, as Koli underscores, increasingly turned to in contemporary critical thought. Our central focus was upon how this work was read via what could be called the 'ontological turn' in critical Black studies. It is through these readings that we formulated the abyssal approach as a distinctive heuristic. Jellis raises the salient question: is the Caribbean necessary for abyssal thought? As authors such as Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant draw out, in work crucial to contemporary readings of Caribbean thought, this world, the world of Human Geography, was itself forged through the Caribbean, through a foundational ontological violence, such that a world of relation, a world of subject and world, came into being. For *this* world, for relation to exist, the human as subject needed to be cut from the

nonhuman as object. This cut was a racialising one. *The World as Abyss* delineates the ‘abyssal’ and the ‘world as abyss’ as violently forged through modernity as a world-making project.

Our concern was with thinking through how the Caribbean was read in contemporary thought, not with starting *de novo* on a conceptual project. For us, the conceptualisation of this world in abyssal terms, bringing ontological violence to the fore, came to be of fundamental contemporary importance. We are in no doubt that there are many other potential starting points for engagements with critical Black studies or with political ontology or with the abyssal as an approach. We are pleased that others have found our outlining of what we understand to be an abyssal approach useful for their thinking in different regions and contexts. This is, for us, the point of seeking to heuristically clarify a distinctive, and for us paradigmatic, approach. Gfoellner develops this through Caribbean poetics, Pohl thinks with psychoanalysis and the ‘abject’, Koli with ‘islands and sea materialities’, whilst Jellis draws out its relationship to geographers. This is all good as far as we are concerned.

Relation to relation

Gfoellner relates an abyssal approach to a recent ‘urgency in critical theory that attempts to theorise beyond the holds of relationality, convoluted and entangled with modernity’s world-making’. Pohl similarly emphasises the growing interest in ‘world-destructive politics’. For us, an abyssal approach is very much connected to contemporary critical thought, particularly to the ontological turn across the social sciences and humanities. While it has precursors and similarities with other ‘world-ending’ or ‘non-philosophical’ perspectives, its purchase is fundamentally contextual. We think Baldwin therefore makes a very important point that the appeal of abyssal approaches very much depends on where one might stand in relation to contemporary thinking and contemporary problems. He argues that we ‘presume the predominance of relational and new materialist thought within critical scholarship on the Anthropocene’. Yes, we do. And we think that the exhaustion of modernist constructions of

subjects and their worlds creates a different context for critique. The human/nature, mind/body, subject/object divides may have been disrupted in all manner of ways, in broader critique within Human Geography, but, for us, the division that matters for the importance of abyssal work is that the world is still violently rendered by the Geographic Subject, that is from the *positionality* of a subject in relational becoming. As Koli underscores, abyssal work ‘offers a distinct mode of critique that problematizes notions of “subject” and “being” in a world that is “veiled as natural”’.

Abyssal thought is distinctive in that it is not interested in world-making but in problematisation. In this world constituted through the generic logic of the subject of differential becoming, the task is always already to bring more of the world in – more of the plurality of the political (Baldwin), more of the multifaceted nature of the Caribbean (Jellis), and so on. A related critique from Baldwin is that we do not ‘distinguish between gradations of relationalist and new materialist thinking’. We do not. Of course, there are differences and nuances within relational thought but the central point for us is that these keep the *foundational* ontological violence of the world intact. As Baldwin says, we are interested in ‘nothing less than the end of *this* world’, because, for us, framing the stakes in terms of gradations, pragmatism, or sliding spectrums, is always already to set them up in such a way that there is no alternative but to be suborned to the lure of the subject and the world. As Koli says, what ‘distinguish[es] abyssal thought from these engagements is its positionality of the impossibility to be in the world in a redemptive capacity. It does not ... see refusal as redemption’.

Figurative critique

We think it is important to clarify what is at stake in a figurative critique, particularly in relation to the Geographic Subject’s demand that critique should be additive, generative, enabling. This speaks to Jellis’ question about the ‘tension between the abyssal as both heuristic and as desire for incoherence’, while we aim ‘for refusal and deconstruction’ we nevertheless seem ‘to be drawn towards the generative’. Is there then a contradiction at the heart of

the abyssal project? We, of course, think not. The abyssal approach is a paradigmatic – or abyssal – reading. Figurative approaches are necessary for any project that wants to ‘end’ rather than ‘save’ the world. This is the case as much for the early Marx and Engels as for contemporary work within critical Black studies. It is the human subject and its ‘world’ that is the fictional imaginary – as Pohl says, the ‘modern fantasy’ – one which disavows the ontological violence of modernity’s creation and the ongoing effects of ‘primitive accumulation’, of slavery and dispossession.

This, we think is where Jellis’s point about ‘affective tone’ is important, for him this is a ‘world-ending flatness’ of ‘quiet despair’. We feel that this is a very ‘Human Geography’ reading of the figurative as necessarily a problematic withdrawal from the world. The abyssal subject and world as abyss are ‘of’ the world, but precisely because they mark an undifferentiated subject and world, incapable of becoming in relation in the world, they are not ‘in’ the world. The figurative device crucially marks modernity and its lure of worldly relational becoming as the very real product of social and historical violence – of, as Gfoellner says, ‘modernity’s violent hold’. Abyssal Geography’s critical purchase is in problematising approaches – whether affirmative or negative – that seek to disavow the ‘world as abyss’. Thus, unlike currently dominant modes of refusal in critique, Abyssal Geography does not generatively work with the logic of the subject and the world, fugitively seeking out moments of suspension within relation as subjects (un)make themselves in necessarily generative processes of becoming other than themselves. We underscore, such an approach does not problematise but indeed is demanded and intrinsic to the contemporary modern project.

Kohli writes that abyssal work ‘does not activate futurity as it “does not provide an imaginary of a beyond”’ and wonders ‘how might ‘futural properties’ that are not “essentialized” be encountered in abyssal thought?’ To clarify, the importance of the figurative is that the focus is structural. The abyssal subject, much as Wilderson’s Slave (2010) or Denise Ferreira da Silva’s ‘wounded captive body in the scene of subjection’ (2022), is a

positionality that ontologically can have no stake in the world – and thereby no ‘imaginary of a beyond’ or insights into ‘futural properties’ – no satisfaction can be gained from within *this* world. There can be no worldly demands either for recognition, or reform, for reparation or for rescue. In this sense, Abyssal Geography works otherwise to ‘the unavoidable recuperation of negativity and nothingness as they take their place in geography’ (Carter-White et al., 2024, 2). Rather, the abyssal approach highlights how this project of recuperation is necessary for Human Geography as an irreconcilably modern discipline.

Abyssal geography and human geography

Puente-Lozano (2024, 7, emphasis in original) recently raised the question of the stakes, in terms of contemporary modes of critique:

Between the quest for *endogenous* geographic theory that may match [the] professional and academic core of Geography’s identity and the pressing concerns to link geographic scholarship to ever more rapidly changing *abyssal* forms of spatialised critique, [we should generate opportunities] to rethink what is at stake in recent scholarship.

We underscore how Abyssal Geography offers no promise inherent to an understanding of the history and philosophy of geography as a progressive force, where one approach succeeds another, offering better tools for improving the subject and the world. We are ‘not lured by’ this promise (Lesutis, 2024, 3). Thus, while we appreciate the sentiment, analytically speaking, we do not think Abyssal Geography is taking a ‘step forward’ (Puente-Lozano, 2024, 4). Rather, a sidestep. This is because the problem we our engaging, which the commentaries provided by Neha, Thomas, Andrew, Barbara, and Lucas, have enabled us to work through and clarify, seems fundamental to Human Geography itself. Where, as we have said, a subject incapable of understanding itself as a subject in relational becoming in the world is an anathema. Thus, for us, the key task, going forward, is the interrogation of the modes of

thinking through which Human Geography continues to disavow the foundational ontological violence of the world and to delimit critique to alternative modes of (re)worlding of the (Geographic) Subject.

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