

**ARTICLE**

# Critique beyond relation: The stakes of working with the negative, the void and the abyss

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**Abstract**

The ‘relational turn’ has been widely embraced in Human Geography and related fields over the last couple of decades as an alternative to the hubris of modern and colonial reasoning. Yet, increasingly, concerns over the extent that contemporary conceptualisations are overly ‘generative’, ‘productivist’ and ‘affirmational’ has come to the fore. There is significant interest in the possibilities for more negative understandings, highlighting failure, attrition, voiding, exhaustion, impotentiality, incompleteness and attributes of ‘non-relation’. We draw out how, to date, most of these approaches have developed a hermeneutic approach, seeking to bring the negative and the non-relational into the world as forces of disruption and refusal, holding open other possibilities of knowing and being in the world and enabling alternative political imaginaries. This paper seeks to outline an alternative mode of critique, one that places both relational and negative approaches under the scrutiny of an ‘abyssal’ approach. Here, after Fanon, the world violently forged into the global colour line is bifurcated via the construction of the modern subject, capable of reading itself as a subject in the world and through Human Geography as a field of study. In this always already antiblack world, the goal of ‘Abyssal Geography’ is not to continue worlding the modern subject in new ways, but to analyse and critique the mechanisms and shifts in critical thought through which Human Geography continues to salvage and to redeem the purchase of the modern subject and the world.

**KEYWORDS**

abyss, Abyssal Geography, critique, Human Geography, negative, void

## 1 | CRITIQUE BEYOND RELATION

Recent developments in the social sciences and humanities seek to move beyond or think otherwise to the ‘relational turn’ and reflect an interest in what we are calling ‘critique beyond relation’. We use ‘relational turn’ to refer to a range

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of theoretical approaches which reject the modernist ontology of fixed laws and essences, grounded upon binary separations, such as the human/nature, mind/body and subject/object divides. Instead, relational approaches affirm, sense and attune us to the dynamism and complexity of relational entanglements in the world. However, the straight-forward acceptance of relational approaches, such as actor network theory, new materialism, affect theory, posthumanism, and pluriversal approaches, is increasingly being called into question. Much of the relational turn, driven by concerns of the Anthropocene in particular, is now being scrutinised for reaffirming, rather than challenging, modernist constructions of an available and instrumentalizable 'world'. There is a search for alternative approaches which do not seek to be 'generative' (Ramírez-D'Oleo, 2023) or 'productivist' (Culp, 2016), which do not jump to easy assertions that we can move 'beyond' or be 'outside' or 'after' modernity (Hine, 2023; Machado de Oliveira, 2021). There is a desire to curb some of the more affirmative or even celebratory aspects of work on relational futures and alternative possibilities.

Perhaps representative of this, more negative, 'turn' is Vanessa Andreotti's work, such as the monograph *Hospicing Modernity* (Machado de Oliveira, 2021) and with the collective *Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures* (n.d.) which emphasises that there can be no escaping imbrication within colonial modernity and no imaginaries of clean and pure breaks from this. Reflective of such concerns, Ramírez-D'Oleo (2023, p. 8), in *This Will Not Be Generative*, describes how the relational turn extends, rather than challenges, colonial modernity's appropriative gaze, with relationalist approaches having a:

... positivist or additive propensity. The 'more' is just as likely to be rhetorical as physical or biological ... [For leading posthumanists such as Donna] Haraway, 'more' is also bound with pathos. 'Caring', she writes, 'means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning' ... These writings encrust generativity with seemingly positive descriptors (e.g. 'caring' 'loving', 'thick', and so on), disguising the destruction also taking place.

Ramírez-D'Oleo, 2023, p. 4

A concern to engage the world beyond affirmative imaginaries of relation and entangled processes of becoming has also begun to emerge in the discipline of Human Geography. Theorists seeking to highlight the importance of working with negativity include Thomas Dekeyser, Paul Harrison, Anna Secor, Mitch Rose, David Bissell, Vickie Zhang and Jose Luis Romanillo, among others (Bissell et al., 2021a; Dekeyser et al., 2022; Kingsbury & Secor, 2021). These authors have collectively and individually participated in a call for greater scrutinisation of 'relational thought, vitalist philosophies and affirmative ethics' (Dekeyser et al., 2022, p. 5), and have started to push to the fore such concepts as the 'nonrelational' (Harrison, 2007; Rose et al., 2021a), 'worldlessness' (Dekeyser, 2023a), the 'abyssal' (Chandler & Pugh, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Pugh, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Pugh & Chandler, 2023), the 'negative' (Bissell, 2023; Bissell et al., 2021a; Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021), the 'void' (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021), the 'post-foundational' (Landau-Donnelly & Pohl, 2023), 'disoriented geographies' (Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019), geographies of 'suspension' (Mohamed, 2023), and critiques of the 'lure of redemption' (Dawney & Jellis, 2023). These, increasingly popular, approaches encourage a shift from a celebration of relational generativity to more sceptical framings highlighting limits to knowledge and understanding.

This paper heuristically constructs two analytically distinct approaches in response to the affirmative work of the relational turn. The first, which we analyse in the next section of the paper, is currently prevalent in Human Geography and related fields and works within the interpretive or hermeneutical tradition. This involves the positing of a world beyond obtainable knowledge and relational assumptions of generativity. A world which is enrolled by the researcher in order to problematise assumptions of the real, to provide openings that destabilise certainties and closures. This approach brings to light and challenges the appropriative power and the modern and colonial legacies of the relational turn. It invokes the non-relational, negation and the non-ontological as disruptive forces, problematising the normative, generative and productive assumptions that are seen to underpin relational ontologies.

The second half of the paper develops and distinguishes an alternative critical approach that also seeks to take critique beyond relation: the abyssal approach. Here, we seek to expand upon our initial presentation of 'Abyssal Geography' (Chandler & Pugh, 2023a, 2023b; Pugh & Chandler, 2023; see also Dekeyser, 2023b; Grove, 2023; Phillip-Durham, 2023; Philogene Heron, 2023), and subsequent discussions of the importance of the figurative nature of abyssal work (Carter-White et al., 2024; Chandler & Pugh, 2024; Gfoellner, 2024; Jellis, 2024; Lesutis, 2024; Pohl, 2024; Puente-Lozano, 2024). The purpose of this paper is to explore negative approaches and the stakes involved in the 'metapolitical' (Chipato & Chandler, 2024) framing of the abyssal approach. The distinction between these approaches is at the heart of debate and discussion of questions of ontology in critical Black studies (see Hart, 2020, for a useful overview) and we seek to draw on some of this discussion in this paper. From our abyssal perspective, we problematise approaches that focus speculatively

upon the negative and non-ontological and argue that they essentially add to and refine rather than effectively break from modernist conceptions of the world and subject. We draw out the implications of this analysis for Human Geography, as a generative field of subject-world becoming, through which ontological claim-making becomes possible along with imaginaries of salvage and redemption.

## 2 | HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: NEGATIVITY AND THE VOID

In Human Geography, conversations around the non-relational are fairly new and have tended to adopt an open and explorative tone. Even as they strain against the relational turn, most have tended to adjust, rather than discard, relational approaches. By this we mean that the critique of the relational turn can be seen as perhaps also the continuation of the relational project. The relational turn problematised a modernist approach because this was seen as reductive and limiting, abstracting from a reality that was dynamic and multiple. The relational turn thus sought to bring more of the world back into analytical consideration. The world of processes, of interconnection of entanglements, the world of Bruno Latour's 'missing masses' (Latour, 1992) or of Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010). In seeking to make the world more 'realistic'—in adding processes, dynamism and individuation to the linear causal imaginaries of Newtonian physics and the fixed grids of the spacetime generated by Cartesian Man and the Kantian subject of Enlightenment—relational ontologies sought to bring into being a world unrecognised by a modern ontology of entities and essences.

Just as the relational turn placed a modernist ontology into question, accusing it of mistaking a tiny surface of appearances for the world itself, so the critique of the relational turn has sought to repay the favour. A richer understanding of the world of processes and relations needed to bring in everything, not just positive and affirmative stories of creativity, generation and immanent possibility. An important early work on non-relational geographies is Paul Harrison's widely cited article "How shall I say it ...?" Relating the nonrelational' (Harrison, 2007). Like many others in Human Geography, Harrison does not seek to 'argue against "thinking relationally"', but rather for the 'insistent and incessant import of the *nonrelational*' into how we think about representation (ibid., p. 591, emphasis in original). A Derridean geographer, Harrison powerfully argues that it is not a failure, but constitutive of representation itself, that it will always fall short: 'a promise, or a prayer, a will, a desire, or a fidelity, indeed the taking-up of a stance or disposition, all of these affirm and accede to just as they are held out into and reach out across an uncertain distance, an interval or spacing, one to the other' (Harrison, 2007, p. 592). Thus, Harrison made a salient contribution to how geographers think through our representations of the world. He troubled representation as a coherent way of making the world available, drawing out how uncertain, unnavigable, interstices and breaks are intrinsic to representation itself.

Although Harrison's early intervention was more specifically focused upon the prevalence of non-representational theory in the early 2000s, more recently, the important collection Harrison edited with David Bissell and Mitch Rose, *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits* (Bissell et al., 2021a), makes the stakes of the non-relational more overtly political. Those involved in *Negative Geographies* reflect the increasing uncertainty towards the relational turn in Human Geography. In fact, they open by saying '[t]his book emerges from a growing sense that we are living in negative times' (Rose et al., 2021a, p. 1). Troubled by the ongoing celebration of relational generativity and the affirmational vibrancy associated with the relational turn as an essentially productive paradigm, they argue that such a stance feels out of sync with the times:

... while our contemporary theoretical landscape is full of discussion about the possible, the potential, and the infinite nature of human (and nonhuman) capacity, such optimism seems curiously disconnected from the reality of our time. Our central contention is that the relational thinking that has come to characterize cultural geography *does not sufficiently consider the question of limits: the limits of capacities, powers, and relations*. We are not against relational thinking. But we do contend relational ontologies leave little space to admit finitude and the problems that the nonrelational poses.

Rose et al., 2021a, pp. 2–3, italics in original

*Negative Geographies*, like *A Place More Void* (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021), published in the same year, has become a key text for human geographers interested in questioning the relational turn. Although there are differences, in this paper we focus upon what binds them together as part of an increasingly important framework of 'critique beyond relation'.

In *Negative Geographies* the key point about working with the negative is the problematisation of epistemological assumptions of potentially knowing the world as a totality. The negative works as a constraint to human hubris based on Enlightenment assumptions of the telos of progress:

The underlying purpose of this book is to question this faith [in Enlightenment progress]. Without wanting to undermine the political potential of the human or denigrate the human desire to pursue and create change, we want to recognize how all such efforts are necessarily limited, bounded by certain existential conditions of being a living being.

Bissell et al., 2021b, p. xii

What is coming to be known as the ‘negative turn’ in Human Geography often foregrounds themes such as impotentiality, incapacity, suspension and exhaustion (see, for examples, Bissell, 2021; Joronen, 2023, Mohamed, 2023; Dekeyser et al., 2024). We are interested in drawing out heuristically how the contemporary turn to the negative in Human Geography works analytically as a necessary corrective to the relational turn. As Rose and colleagues state, the role of the negative was previously central for the critical and existentialist traditions as a way of moving beyond contradictions and impasses (Rose et al., 2021a, p. 12). Contemporary approaches instead seek to stay with the impasse as an enabling condition:

Nonrelations draw attention to aspects of experience that are radically incommunicable ... Our aim here is to suggest that there is a politics to letting otherness be other, rather than seeking to enrol this otherness into our own schemas of comprehension ... it is this situation of not knowing, of our distance from others, that invites us into the labour of creating relations. We want to engage with and encounter others not so much in spite of, but because of, such limits.

Rose et al., 2021a, p. 23

In *A Place More Void*, for Jess Linz and Anna Secor: ‘A politics of and for the impasse hold open the portal to the ontological impasse—the void as a fluctuating field of emergence in all its potentiality and danger ... It is a generative space that offers us tools and politics...’ (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021, p. 201). Key therefore, for recent debates which engage negativity and the void, is that they are not projects of knowing more or stabilising the world. Instead, as Kai Bosworth proposes, they are ‘a politics based on nonknowledge’ (Bosworth, 2021, p. 49); importantly, declining the affirmative certainties of ontology and relation, in favour of the non-ontological and non-relational as forces in the world. ‘The negative is not an ontology. It does not make claims about what the world is or provide new objects to describe its various constituent components’ (Bissell et al., 2021c, p. 288, italics in the original). Whereas ontology affirms the subject and the world, the negative, it is claimed, ‘frees us from such affirmations’ (ibid., p. 289).

In contemporary work with the negative, the void is a force that not only ungrounds modernity’s all too coherent understandings of subject/object, human/nature, mind/body divides. It also ungrounds the certainties of more recent relational approaches, systems of thought, which claim to be able to make processes of relation and differentiation available to us. As Lucas Pohl argues: ‘The starting point is no longer to foster a form of representation that enables us to capture the ontological complexity of things, but to insist on the void as the ontological impossibility of a full representation of the thing itself’ (Pohl, 2024, p. 294). The void is politically and ethically vital as an irreducible outside that reveals the limits of ontology, the limits of beings, the phenomena of appearance. In *Negative Geographies*:

... the negative is spatial because it is separate—it stands apart from the world of creating and doing. Indeed it is the separation, the fissure between positive space and negative space that ensures the negative’s unalienable difference; that negative geographies remain a site of radical alterity, an absolute outside, forever removed from that which could touch, relate, and thus potentially transform, colonize, or otherwise transfigure.

Rose et al., 2021a, p. 5

The ability to sense or to intuit the negative or the void enables a fuller awareness of limits. But even as they are framed as absolute limits, they are analytically understood as ‘in’ the world: there is a subtraction from the coherences of affirmational ontology and relation and an adding in of an aesthetic awareness of non-relation. Thus, for example, Rose uses the void to push material semiotics, the hermeneutics of signs, further ‘by examining how bodies not only interpret what they sense but also what they do not sense’ (Rose, 2021, p. 119). In doing so he seeks an aesthetic attunement not only to

relation but also to the absence of relation (p. 127). It is in this lack and incapacity that a new approach to methodology, that of interpretive hermeneutics, comes to the fore. As Timothy Laurie and Hannah Stark write in *Proust and Signs*, for Deleuze, it is inability and incapacity that enables love to become ‘an apprenticeship in signs’, ‘engendering a sensitivity to the depth and life of signs emitted by others’ (cited in Zhang, 2021, p. 114 fn 1).

This dominant approach to critique beyond relation, in Human Geography, remains close to readings of the human which seek to productively imagine alternative possibilities beyond the closures of the Anthropocene (see also Hui, 2021). Working with the negative or void enlists the negative as an ethical and aesthetic project of becoming otherwise (Rose et al., 2021a, p. 25). Indeed, admitting the negative as an irresolvable limit: ‘might actually be much more about affirming the unimaginable richness and complexity of a world that overwhelms our capacities even as it undermines our illusions of mastery’ (ibid., p. 25). Likewise, for Jess Linz and Anna Secor in *A Place More Void*: ‘We do not have answers. We do not want answers. We are beyond hope, and we want more problems ... It is all about orientations and affects ... We act without grounds for action ... We expect failure ... We know that failure is generative’ (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021, p. 211). The negative and the void are unknowable but are in the world as a promise of other possibilities. In fact, it is the certainty of the limit, ‘of subtracting [rather] than provisioning’ (Rose et al., 2021b, p. 289), of never being able to fully know or to fully control, that constitutes the openness of becoming.

The negative turn has attracted much attention in Human Geography, but also raised some questions. Ben Anderson (2023, p. 1) engages the ‘fraying of the promise and hold of relational thinking’, but also poses the question to the discipline: ‘what, if anything, is the outside of relations?’. How much does this recent work really add to a longer concern with ‘the dynamics of ordering-disordering that form relational configurations?’ (Anderson, 2023, p. 1). Such concerns raise the spectre of the extent to which this work offers us a distinctively useful understanding or approach. For Peter Merriman (2024, p. 13):

... while these ‘negative geographies’ may raise important political questions around experience, judgement and critique, their binary language of addition and subtraction, affirmation and critique, etc. slips into a constructivist, pointillist and binarising ‘building’ approach, whereas scholars would be best placed to work across such a negative/positive binary by focussing on the incessant becoming, unfolding and transversal practices of judging, sensing and experiencing.

Notwithstanding these critical points, there can be little doubt that work with the negative and the void enables new, alternative approaches, ones that emphasise the importance of hermeneutics or interpretation (rather than the empirics of correlating, tracing and sensing), in seeking to go beyond what can be known and grasped in relational ontologies of becoming and emergence. The productiveness of this approach in the construction of less hubristic and appropriative modes of being can be seen in the work of Yuk Hui, who argues that the speculative hermeneutical approach (‘cosmo-technics’) could be seen as the ‘epistemology of the non-rational’ (Hui, 2021, p. 123) or ‘the epistemology of the unknown’ (p. 254), ‘beyond phenomenal truth’. For Hui, speculatively opening to alterity, even if this alterity is ungraspable or not fully knowable, becomes an affirmative act, enabling the actualisation of hidden potentiality within the subject itself (p. 165). The other, the outside, the unknowable, is the basis for this generative recursivity of individuation, of becoming as a process of the negation of the self (Hui, 2015).

The existence of the speculative unknown is a fundamental barrier to rationalist forms of appropriation but is nevertheless generative. This is because it is precisely this inaccessibility itself that provides a training for sensitivities, for attunement, for the enabling or emergence of new capacities for responsivity (Hui, 2021, pp. 173–174; see also Pugh, 2023b, for the lure of the unavailable world for algorithmic governance). Thus, perhaps counterintuitively, the emphasis on the negative, on non-relation and the unknowable, crucial to the project of the undoing or the unmaking of the subject, becomes generative for new forms of governance (Chipato & Chandler, 2024; Pande et al., 2019). By bringing in non-ontology and non-relation as unobtainable forces *in* the world, these approaches risk appearing little different to the relational approaches they critique, which also seek to enable the human subject to think beyond the reductive categories of understanding of a modernist ontology.

As a way out of this impasse, in the second half of this paper we draw upon recent work on the issues at stake in thinking against and beyond ontology and in working with the negative and the non-relational in the field of Black studies. It is perhaps not surprising that this field is producing some of the richest discussions on questions of ontology and negation, when contemporary discourses on negation, unmaking the subject, and openness to alterity, very much fall in line with Kant and Hegel's highly racialised understandings of the self-making and self-negating subject of modernity, negating the constraints and limits of backward prejudices and cultural and ideological constraints, through the constant process

of becoming other to itself. Rei Terada, in her recent monograph, terms this demand for the negation of identity-based ties and cultural constraints a new ‘metaracial’ discourse (Terada, 2023, p. 27). As Denise Ferreira da Silva has pointed out, the global colour line was constructed upon the modernist bifurcation between the fully human subject, capable of self-transformation, and the less than fully human subject, unable to free itself from the hold of fixed beliefs and values (Ferreira da Silva, 2007).

### 3 | ABYSSAL GEOGRAPHY

Human Geography is the problematic of human relation and interaction with the world. But the problem of relationality is foundational to Human Geography as a discipline in another, even more fundamental sense. For, if Frantz Fanon (1986 [1952]) is correct, as we think he is, the long *durée* of modernity violently forged the world into subjects capable of relation, who can read themselves as subjects becoming in the world (subjects capable of progress and development), and barred subjects who cannot read themselves as subjects *in* the world (that lacked the capacity for transformation). Human Geography has played the major disciplinary role in clarifying and reinforcing this distinction—the distinction of the global colour line. In ontological work in Black studies, this distinction between those in the world and those denied ontological standing is fundamental. This is important for thinking the problematic of the negative because Human Geography done by a subject who could not read itself as becoming *in* the world would be an anathema to the ‘Geographical tradition’ (Livingstone, 1992). Human Geography as a discipline can only exist for certain subjects. As we will discuss in this section, the transformative and individuating approaches of non-ontological or negative geographies work within the confines of this tradition.

The recent attention to the turn to the negative attempts to work with and upon subjects capable of reading themselves as in the world (modern subjects), able to affectively undo or unmake themselves by attuning to the world, sensing the absences, voids and impasses. Precisely in this way, Fanon’s foundational ontological violence remains intact. For Fanon, for Black subjects, barred from ontological security, the approaches to the negative can never be an opportunity for growth through work upon the unmaking and the remaking of the self. The Black subject remains the necessary foil for the becoming Other of the subject of Human Geography. ‘Ontology ... does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man’ (Fanon, 1986, p. 110). If the Black subject was to engage in the speculative imaginaries of the negative, the process of undoing or unmaking would be a process of ontological death: by necessity a process of becoming Other would be a process of becoming White (*ibid.*, p. 12). Thus, there can be no relation to the powers of non-relation, the negative, when the world beyond ‘reason’ is already barred (*ibid.*, p. 127).

The abyssal approach seeks to enable a different mode of problematisation, beyond relation but also beyond the negative relational approaches of non-relation. The reason for this is precisely the awareness that relation and non-relation are two sides of the same coin, as are discourses of affirmation and negation. The modern humanist framework of development through self-negation as self-growth and adaptation requires both relation and non-relation in order for movement, for change, and for transformation to take place. The modern subject is always negating itself, always freeing, emancipating, unmaking itself in relation to otherness which is necessarily unassimilable or unknowable without self-work. It is this work on the self which is at the core of the modern subject’s distinction from the non- or less-than human, still tied to dependencies, impacted upon but lacking the powers of self-determination.

We think the fact that negativity has traditionally been the driving force, distinguishing the modernist subject from its others, has been obscured in Human Geography and related fields by a focus on the products of this negativity, the generative dynamic of history, of temporality as individuation in the face of entropy. As Rei Terada forcefully argues, for the classical theorists of the Enlightenment, it is only in the confrontation with the negative, with non-relation, that history unfolds (Terada, 2023, p. 28). This holds the same for Hegel as for more contemporary, cybernetic, readings of the individuating subject that gives substance to history (temporality as a force itself rather than understanding time as an empty grid; see, for example, Hui, 2024, p. 45). The formative role of the negative often goes unrecognised in the attention to the subject’s becoming through overcoming challenges and difficulties enabling self-growth.

The hermeneutics of the negative (much like the relational turn) have tended to be characterised by privileging subjects capable of attuning to forces beyond the perception of the senses as well as training, or empowering others to do the same through the ‘decolonization of our unconscious’ (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p. 239). For critical interlocutors, like Ramírez-D’Oleo (2023, p. 14), negative approaches are still relational and, in fact: ‘Relationalists obscure that what looks like relation from one perspective is parasitism from another. In this parasitic relationship between the non-black subject

and the black or black(ened) position, the parasitism is sublimated'. This critique is not based upon an alternative way of seeing beyond ontology but rather a way of seeing that problematises ontological claims and assumptions.

The excluded Other, that serves to enable the modern subject to experience the negative positively, needs to be brought into relief. As Terada states:

Hegel's radically anti-identitarian movement of subjective undoing walks in the tracks laid by subject building, 'rewriting the other as therapeutic environment.' Subject building and shattering are two kinds of 'training', humanist and posthumanist, with the same entrance requirements and effects.

2023, p. 29

The work with the negative that is essential to the becoming other of the modern subject is at the heart of the racial bifurcation of the global colour line. Here, in critical Black studies, there are a number of approaches to the negative and ontology. As Terada states, for an Afropessimist approach, such as for Frank Wilderson (2010, p. 75), Black figures are projected as the negative itself, inhabiting the space of non-relation (Terada, 2023, p. 30). In Terada's framing of the 'metaracial': 'They are lined up before the Real along with others, but they singularly fail to notice it, and so are distant from negativity by their own error' (Terada, 2023, p. 30).

Without access to the negative, Black life is imagined to be experienced as a series of events and surprises which have no impact upon the sense of self or relation to the world. In lacking openness to the world beyond appearances, there can be no historicity, no historical subject capable of autonomous becoming. To state otherwise, the spur of the negative or the non-relational has a differential effect depending upon the attunement and sensitivities of the subject. In the Eurocentric, colonial, canon of Enlightenment thought, it is those who are most able to progress and develop in the face of the limits of the negative and the unknown—that is, the most sensitive and attuned—who are deemed to be fully Human. Those who stay placid or static in the face of these limits and constraints are deemed to lack the power of self-growth as self-governance and are understood to be purely externally shaped and determined.

The importance of Terada's engagement with the centrality of the negative to the construction of the modern ontology of the subject (becoming through time as teleology) and world (as available foil for the subject's self-growth) is not just its origins in the colonial racial bifurcation of the world (see also Ferreira da Silva, 2007). The importance of *Metaracial* for the argumentation here, and for the development of our abyssal approach, is its importance for contemporary understandings of Human Geography. In order to make clear both the differences and continuations with contemporary imaginaries, deploying the negative for self-making and unmaking, and those developed in the cauldron of colonial modernity and racial capitalism, Terada distinguishes antiblack racism from antiblackness as a move to suture or cohere the ontological order.

Antiblack racism is a socio-historical set of distinction-making cuts replicating and legitimising the structuring violence of modern chattel slavery, colonial dispossession and racial capitalism. This needs to be distinguished from antiblackness as used in contemporary Black studies to problematise the ontological bifurcation of the world expressed in a range of binaries such as between subject and object, human and non-human, nature and culture, form and matter, and figure and ground. This fundamental bifurcation is antiblack in that the cut between the self-determining autonomous (modern) subject, and the non-human or not fully human subject lacking the powers of self-making and (historical) world-making, is at the core of these binaries. It is this binary, which is itself productive of the Geographical subject, the subject constantly remade through relations of negation, in the self-negating, self-developing, experience of the other.

The point that Terada makes is that without or even against racist constructions of this bifurcated world, its foundation is antiblackness. It is necessarily an antiblack world as Blackness is the excluded outside that enables both sides—the subject and the world—to constitute a hierarchy of being. This hierarchy is constituted through the subject's relation to non-relation, its ability to develop through engaging the negative, the unknowable. As already indicated in the first section above on Human Geography, the allure of the void, the negative, the non-ontological, is precisely its role in the enabling of the becoming of the subject, aware of indeterminacy, contingency, unintended outcomes and emergent potentialities. The metaracial hierarchies, constituted through discourses of self-negation and becoming other, constitute inferior others as lacking in a will to otherness. Those in the non-Western world, considered to be failing in state institution-building or in economic development, are similarly seen to be lacking in the will to become through opening up to the limits of ontological being.

As Terada insists: 'After Kant, relation is called on to erect a political threshold' and renders the non-modern subject as 'primitivist "resistant" to movement-affirming open relation' (Terada, 2023, p. 104). The key point being that the Geographical subject remains grounded upon antiblackness:

When beyond liberalism, political institutions are no longer imagined to be emancipatory, the pattern continues into the radical beyond of formal politics, still using the radical enlightenment's avowal of undetermined openness, negativity, and emptiness.

Terada, 2023, p. 104

This aspiration to be open to the world and to the beyond of the world is particularly important for the geographic imaginary of the subject. Always seeking to open itself to the beyond of existing boundaries and borders both material and ideal in a process of realisation that continually needs new props and foils that enable a (re)figuring of the negative.

It is no surprise therefore that the geographic and the political subject are closely intertwined. The refusal of the demand for openness, and for the rejection of identitarian, religious, ideological or cultural closures, would then be potential grounds for unequal treatment or the denial of rights or privileges. Demands for minority rights, the respect of cultural differences, or recompense for past collective crimes and traumas, would then appear to mark subjects out as rejecting this demand for open-ended becoming, which is the *sine qua non* of the fully human subject. Thus, the search for negation as self-growth and awareness is necessarily antiblack, as any subject interpellated as other than the Western universal subject becomes always already resistant to the order of open-ended becoming. Or, in acceding to this order, becomes cast as conditionally included but always open to losing these rights or benefits. For the Other, unable to 'escape the anti-black underpinnings' of the world 'to which they belong' (Ramírez-D'Oleo, 2023, p. 28), it is 'a battle lost as soon as it is waged' (Marriott, 2018, p. 345).

The non-White or non-Western subject is always already 'before the law', always already exposed or open to judgement, already prejudged (see also Spivak, 1988). The point is, as made by Derrida, that this prejudgement is ontological in the sense that the distinction between the fully human (unmarked) and the less than fully human (the marked subject) appears to come 'before the law', to pre-exist civil society or modernity and to be a precondition of it, rather than to come after, to be a secondary by-product or prejudice (see Derrida, 2018, p. 9). In our book *The World as Abyss* (Pugh & Chandler, 2023) we briefly turned to Derrida's essay 'Force of law: The "mystical foundation of authority"' (Derrida, 1992). This examines how it is not the status of exclusion or inclusion within the law (of Being in the world) that is at stake. The stakes are not about advocating for a more progressive and inclusive law, or for an understanding of the non-relational and of non-ontological as generative forces which disrupt and detourn the law. Rather, the focus is the necessary but disavowed grounding of law itself in the non-being of Blackness, for Derrida, expressed here in terms of the 'void' or 'abyss':

This moment of suspense, this *epokhe*, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of non-law. But it is also the whole history of law. *This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence*. It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone. The supposed subject of this pure performative would no longer be before the law, or rather he would be before a law not yet determined, before the law as before a law not yet existing, a law yet to come, *encore devant et devant venir*.

Derrida, 1992, p. 36, italics in original

Derrida's point is that there is a cut between law and non-law, which come into being at the same time, but all that appears is law. We could think of this as the world of the modern ontology. From within the world of the cut: 'Every "subject" is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance' (Derrida, 1992, p. 36), 'before the law'. Subjects are cut by the law from non-subjects through the policed borders of citizenship. This cut is continually and violently reproduced but it is *in* the world. It can be opposed and struggled against, it provides a negative and negated outside. Derrida's point is that there is a more fundamental cut that grounds the world ontologically. This foundational cut of law from non-law is obscured and is what enables this structuring of law (see also N.D. Chandler, 2014, 2022; Karera, 2022).

Thus, an abyssal approach is one that seeks to problematise the assumptions of subject positionality and to trouble the explicit and implicit transformative and enabling assumptions of aesthetic or speculative hermeneutics. Pointers towards ways in which this could be done are very much at the forefront of Rizvana Bradley's recent work, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (Bradley, 2023). Key to the construction of the Geographical subject as one capable of the unmaking and remaking of itself, and thus its cut from the not fully Human, is not so much the pseudo sciences of biological determinism and of race and eugenics but the sciences of sensibilities and responsivities. Drawing upon the work of Kyla Schuller (2018), Bradley argues that:



... the entwinement of biopower, sentimentality, and the hierarchical codifications of the sensorial capacities taken as prerequisites for genuine aesthetic judgement were just as important to the modulations of racial-ity in the nineteenth century as the putatively disinterested scientism of comparative anatomy... In such a dispensation, impressability and affectability are cut by a racial distinction whereby 'the plastic body of the civilized and the static flesh of blackness stand at opposite poles ... of sentimental biopower'.

Bradley, 2023, p. 185

Important for our analysis here is the fact that Bradley does not just alert us to a problematic acceptance of the un-differentiated human subject as an aesthetic subject—a subject capable of self-growth and development through the refinement of aesthetic capacities for un/making itself. More important, and directly related to our approach of Abyssal Geography, is Bradley's analysis of the antiblack world as the disavowed ground enabling the cut between figure and ground or form and matter to start with. The point being that the stakes are not those of who is included and who is excluded from the fully human capacities of being an aesthetic, political or Geographical subject, but rather the basis upon which the aesthetic, political or geographic emerges in the first place.

The cut of the fully human from the less-than-human is also the condition of possibility for 'non-rationalist' and 'post-epistemological' approaches of hermeneutics. These approaches construct an aesthetic subject, one dependent upon distinctions between matter and form, distinctions between figure and ground. Bradley's work problematises these cuts through highlighting their dependency upon antiblackness. We feel it is worth quoting Bradley a little in the process of unpacking the broader argument being made. She states:

The point I wish to underscore is that the metaphysical reduction and partial assimilation of black corporeality is internal to the figure/ground distinction. But flesh can never be completely disciplined into the material purity of ground, just as the 'black body' can never be figured as anything other than dissimulation ... The figure betrays its own absence. The ground is contaminated. Together they form a phantasmatic complementarity-in-contradistinction, a reciprocity which black mediality is continuously forced to make and unmake.

Bradley, 2023, p. 254

The starting point for negative and non-relational approaches, in Human Geography and beyond, is that it is necessary to push through the relational turn to move beyond the ontological and phenomenological constraints impoverishing the ability to grasp both the human and the world. That another way of being human in the world is possible. This neglects the fact that this already assumes precisely what needs to be put into question, the prior existence of subject and world: as if what was at stake was merely where the line would be drawn rather than the world in which line drawing is possible.

Bradley, at least in our reading, facilitates an abyssal approach by drawing attention to the problematic lure of the world as prior to the subject, as existing somehow as a resource to be drawn upon. This world, maintained beyond and outside, is a product of the aesthetic imaginary rather than the scientific one. Bradley states that 'the most ambitious register of the aesthetic imagination ... is, in fact, a metaphysical conceit woven through every instance of phenomenological appearance: that of *the world*' (Bradley, 2023, pp. 281–2, italics in original). It is this aesthetic imaginary that the Geographical subject then draws on and reproduces. She argues that there has been a noticeable turn to the world in recent years 'as a conceptual idiom for advancing ... expanded frameworks for agential activities and entanglements' (ibid., p. 282); this is particularly marked in the turn towards the negative or the non-ontological:

Worlding, otherworlding, reworlding, and counterworlding are each prominent examples of this terminological and conceptual turn toward and, in some instances, ostensibly against or beyond the world ... In many recent scholarly tracts, the semantic pivot from world as noun to world as verb—from world to worlding ... otherworlding or counterworlding [acts] as an explicit refusal of the territorializations of the given and as an affirmative ontological and/or phenomenological registration of resistant or fugitive praxes.

Bradley, 2023, p. 282

Bradley argues that the lure of the world is problematic no matter how negatively or non-ontologically it is conceived, the ability to instrumentalise the world as the negative, the unknowable, the ungraspable background, against which the human subject can potentially become, is necessarily a speculative and aesthetic relationality from which the less-than-fully-human subject is excluded. For Bradley, the question is:

How, then, do we conceptualize the worlding of world from the vantage of the black, who, as Calvin Warren contends, 'is *worldless* ... bordering [in Heidegger's schema,] on something between the wordlessness of the object and the world poorness of the animal'? Or, within the theoretical parlance of *Anteaesthetics*, how do we think with the black anterior which is the condition of (im)possibility for (the worlding of) the world and yet which cannot claim any form of being-in-the-world?

Bradley, 2023, p. 283

The subject of capacities and capabilities—and therefore of hierarchies of knowledge and understanding and of grids of ethicality and civility—stands already pre-given and pre-ordered in this framing, in which 'phenomenological experience, ontological calculus, and aesthetic judgement which undergird every worlding of the world' (ibid., p. 291) continually bifurcate 'the world' in its production and reproduction. The aesthetic imaginary of 'worlding' necessarily implies the ontological grounds of stability necessary for the subject to attune or develop phenomenological sensitivities enabling its becoming, its self-making and unmaking. This process of becoming through time and space is what gives aesthetic and geographic sensibilities to the subject, the Human as subject, that now, of necessity, is held to require a capacity for geographic projection even prior to the acquisitive demands of coloniality and racial capitalism.

Bradley argues that the self-negating, self-developing Geographical subject is given at the heart of Enlightenment thought:

... predicated upon a metaphysical calculus that anticipates the human subject who would claim the world as his rightful ontological inheritance, the human being whose emergence is predicated upon black nonbeing. In this respect, the calculative thinking evinced in the spatialization of the world as cartography is no less operative in the temporalization of worlding that would bequeath an unbounded horizon to the ontologically bounded and cohesive subject.

Bradley, 2023, p. 294

The Geographical subject necessarily becomes spatially and temporally against the limits of the world, as Bradley states, it matters little analytically whether these limits are cast in terms of the mapping of space beyond the known or the temporal imaginary of otherwise futures opened by moving beyond linear temporalities. For Bradley, therefore, no moving beyond or working outside of ontology, no development of aesthetic sensibility, could possibly avoid reproducing 'antiblack metaphysics and its genocidal hold(ings)' (Bradley, 2023, p. 296).

It has long been pointed out that the Geographical tradition is intimately connected to colonialism and modernity (Carter, 1999; Garba & Sorentino, 2020; Livingstone & Withers, 1999; Mayhew, 2000). What distinguishes Abyssal Geography from negative work in Human Geography, and here we take Bradley's work as illustrative of ways of developing an abyssal approach, is that it cannot invest in the remaking or unmaking of the subject using the world as its foil for becoming otherwise. Bradley's work shows us that aesthetics is always already caught up in and productive of an antiblack world. Indeed, 'the world itself is an aesthetic form, a paradigm defined by the chiasmatic worldmaking of form and form-making world' (Bradley, 2023, pp. 44–5). The Geographical subject endowed with the capacity for aesthetic relationality is carved out of this world. But its apparent pre-giveness denies the original violence of the cut itself, 'foundational to the antiblack world, to carving its essential antagonisms and to suturing its metaphysical fissures' (ibid., pp. 8–9).

An abyssal approach does not deny, of course, that political struggles go on in the world, but analytically speaking comes at the stakes differently; not attempting to hermeneutically engage the outside of ontology, reading the signs and signals of forces of flux and fugitivity, capable of disrupting attempts of ontological capture. At a more general level, Geographers have done much to trouble the notion of the 'knowing subject', and the very concept of knowledge, for example, through engaging aesthetics, affect and new materialisms. For an abyssal approach, a different bifurcation is a stake. What is at stake is the clarification of the grounds, the foundational bifurcation of the world, as in the case of Bradley's work on aesthetics, which is generative of what we have called the Geographical subject—the subject that appears as pre-given. It is this which permits us to make a generalisation of the relational turn. For all their nuances and differences, what is shared by approaches as different as actor network theory, posthumanism and pluriversal approaches is the lure of the world for a subject of capabilities always already understood to be in relational becoming. It is the continuation of this legacy, currently playing out in negative and non-ontological approaches, which Abyssal work engages.

John Wylie (2021, p. 195) writes that a significant challenge faces the 'negative turn' in Human Geography, 'it is difficult to frame the negative without lapsing into positivity and presence'. We agree, but in this paper have argued that

the problem is foundational to Human Geography itself as a modern discipline which can only exist to (re)produce the Geographical subject. To illustrate this point again, when in contemporary work the negative or void is speculatively given properties and qualities, even those of inaccessibility, then it is still 'worlded'. In which case, we are returned to affirmative discourses of the subject and the world (see also Pugh, 2024). Even if the subject is returned to the world humbled and the world imagined to be infinitely unavailable or ungraspable, there is still the subject and the world. Our point is not that Human Geography is adopting a slight of hand here, that the subject/object divide remains because the Human Geographer is still performing mastery in framing the world. Rather, our point is that 'undoing mastery' is precisely how the Geographical subject (re)worlds itself, remaining open in its self-(un)making, while the foundational ontological violence of the world remains intact.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

We have heuristically constructed two frameworks of critique beyond relation. From the perspective of the first, negative and void geographies, we can perhaps look back upon the relational turn as the last refuge of an empiricist approach, largely positivist and employing new developments in the sciences, biotechnologies, algorithmic sensing, cybernetics, more-than-human and material semiotic approaches, to grasp processes of nonlinear emergence. Recent approaches that seek to work with the negative seek to marshal critique by going beyond ontology, not to add to ontology, but putting ontology radically into question (Karera, 2022), bringing to the forefront lack, impotentiality, the void, the unravelling, suspension and incompleteness of Being and relation. To slow or to halt the totalising relational drive, through the power of speculative, affective and aesthetic approaches, rather than empiricist ones.

Our response to the negative turn has been to argue that an alternative critical approach is available, that of the abyssal. The abyssal approach does not see the non-ontological and non-relational as recuperable or instrumentalizable outsides, enabling new (humbler) genres of the human. Rather, it problematises the ongoing lure of the world and the continued engagement with 'worlding geographies'. Perhaps we could understand prominent work with the negative in Human Geography, like earlier relational approaches, as operating at the 'political' level, attuning to, repositioning and adjusting relations *in* the world; generatively working to make the present richer. Working otherwise, Abyssal Geography seeks to expose Human Geography as an irreconcilably modern project, committed to moving beyond the limits of 'thinkability'. As we have drawn out in this paper, ours is a 'metapolitical' critique (Chipato & Chandler, 2024): a politics not of otherwise worlds, but of problematisation, committed to ending assumptions of world and subject rather than enriching them.

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