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Placing critical geographic thought. A commentary on David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh's 'Abyssal geography'.

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Chandler and Pugh's (2023) paper on 'Abyssal Geographies' poses a remarkably difficult *geographic* challenge to contemporary geographic thought. Their turn to the abyssal through engagement with the work of Caribbean and Caribbean-inspired thinkers—notably, Glissant, Benítez-Rojo, Moten and Sharpe—strives to 'question the lure of ontology' (Chandler and Pugh, 2023: 1), and it does so by foregrounding how, as Pugh (2020) has written elsewhere, ontologies are human creations. They are products of our affective, libidinal and practical engagements, and these engagements always 'take place' somewhere. Where we think from, in other words, matters just as much as how we think. The paradigmatic example of this is Glissant's (1997) Islander on *The Black Beach*. In this passage, Glissant's narrative at once strains to describe the man while also recognizing the man's unavailability to thought: an 'irreducible opacity which both marks and suspends colonialism's defined spatial and temporal pathways' (quoted from an earlier version of the lecture paper circulated before the conference presentation). This is abyssal thought: the suspended inhabitation of encounter that does not allow itself to become sedimented into familiar categories of subject/object, self/other, space and time. But—and this is the important point—it is *geographic* work: it is a style of engaging difference; it allows difference to continue to unsettle coordinates that would give the encounter a determined meaning. Glissant's encounter escapes ontology through refusing the desire for categorical clarity, which is a refusal to construct a 'world' where the totality of the walker's existence—his gait, his name, his (lack of) speech—is transparent to thought.

Abyssal geographies, as I read them in Chandler and Pugh's work, thus direct our attention to the entwinement of desire and thought, where-ever thinking takes place. To think from the Caribbean, in turn, is to express what Claire Colebrook (2021) might call a world-destroying desire: a desire expressed through the categories of this and other worlds even as it strives and hopes for the destruction of all worlds. For what else can the response to the geocidal and genocidal violence of the modern world, what Farhana Sultana (2022) calls 'climate coloniality', be other than this—a refusal to sustain the world that promises a universal 'we' a better future only through the parasitic consumption and instrumental destruction of racialized others' futures.

Abyssal geographies might thus be characterized by a radical rethinking of place as libidinal positionality. Place offers a distinct vantage on both the modern world constructed through 400 years of colonial violence, and its opaque surrounds that, like

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Glissant's man on *The Black Beach*, elude capture and categorization (Harney & Moten, 2013). But the vantage of place is also oriented in distinct ways towards the modern world and its surrounds. Our thought from place can circle the wagons and defend the world against desedimentation, or strive to bring about its destruction.

The sense of a libidinal positionality is, I would argue, an inescapable *geographic* challenge for geographic thought. Chandler and Pugh in other words, challenge us to dwell on the taking-place of geographic thought, to allow our own encounters with difference to unsettle our sedimented categories and disciplined practices. They are, or course, by no means the first to pose this challenge, as a number of scholars writing from Feminist, Black, Indigenous and Queer geographies have cast a critical eye on the disciplinary norms that shape the everyday doings and thinkings in contemporary anglo-American geography. Such calls for what Natalie Oswin (2019) calls an 'other geography' are well-heeded. Chandler and Pugh's paper, I would argue, contributes to this ethical and political labour by offering one possible style of thought for identifying and unsettling certain tendencies in critical geographic thought that continue to confront the violence of the modern world with demands for analytical, ontological and political purity.

By purity, I mean, following Nahum Chandler's (2014) work on W.E.B. DuBois, a stabilized ground of thought that provides the thinker with ethical, political and analytical certainty. In contemporary geography, we can see this purity at work in several ways. Work on the post-political, for example, reflects a concern with the modern (and post-modern) debasement of an originary ground of politics, the political. Its pursuit of political purity leads to predictable diagnoses of any form of technical or calculative practice as post-political, and thus always ethically and politically compromised (see also Beveridge & Koch, 2017; Cox *et al.*, 2022). Work on more-than-human ontologies, from a different angle, similarly strives to locate an alternative ground for truth and politics outside the humanist subject (Wakefield, 2020). In the process, political struggle becomes reduced to a matter of speculating on the world in new ways.

These are just two examples. While their political and ethical commitments are laudatory, a libidinal desire for purity at the heart of each body of thought directs their efforts towards world-saving rather than world-destroying engagements with difference. In the process, such tendencies continue to instrumentalize difference and direct the use of difference towards the thoroughly modern project of saving the world from the violence of modernity. The demand for purity is not solely an academic or theoretical matter. It can lead to a variety of forms of violence both within and outside the discipline. As Eden Kinkaid and colleagues argue in a series of recent articles and commentaries, the desire for purity can reinforce exclusionary identity politics that narrowly bounds who counts as a geographer and how such geographers can and should think (Kinkaid & Fritzsche, 2022; Kinkaid *et al.*, 2022). And as Kate Derickson's recent article on opacity, Black Feminist epistemology, and the study of dispossession in Gullah/Geechee country demonstrates, this can lead some geographers to place demands for transparency on research partners that repeat colonial forms of surveillance, monitoring and extraction (Derickson, 2022).

Chandler and Pugh's paper thus provides us with additional tools to further unsettle the sedimented subject of white, heterosexual, male, Anglo-American geography. It does this by enabling us, through the (para)category of the abyssal, to foreground the geographies of geographic thought, the opaque linkages between desire and a thought that must always take place some-where.

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Indeed, if this paper left me wanting, it's precisely around the question of how work on abyssal geographies might be brought into deeper resonance with recent movements in geographic thought that are similarly striving to un-world the discipline? How might abyssal geographies speak to and draw from, for example, abolitionist geographies, maroon geographies, negative geographies, Black ecologies, or Queer geographies? To be sure, this is not the issue that Chandler and Pugh seek to address, where they focus on exploring the shift towards the Caribbean in contemporary critical thought, and its significance for critical geographic theory. But along the way, their journey takes us past several places where other forms of geographic thought are also taking place, and perhaps through thinking with the abyssal at these and other sites we can further link critiques of geographic thought with critiques of everyday practices that make up the world of academic geography.

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