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World-ending flatness

“...you get caught up in the cut and thrust of theoretical argument and theoretical doubt...” (Brand, 2018: 67)

It took me a while to figure out what the affective tone of *The World of Abyss* is. This uncertainty left me wondering how to respond; to question what form a response could take, a response that could enter into dialogue with the book on its own terms, a book which sets itself ‘the task of refusal and deconstruction of this world as it appears’ (50). *The World as Abyss* promises a distinctive approach to the crisis of modernity, outlining how abyssal thought does not correct the various errors of modern reasoning but, more radically, refuses the lure of remaking the human and the world’ (3). As Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler note, such an approach ‘problematizes ontological fixity, rather than engaging in ‘productivist’ salvific imaginaries of world-making’ (4). The target here is scholars – Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Anna Tsing are all named – who inadvertently affirm the world of modernity, if only temporarily, in order to offer other forms of worldmaking. Instead, the book examines a series of figures to begin undoing such reasoning. The primary figure is, of course, the abyss, which is variously described as a perspective, inhabitable, and non-worlding. The abyss offers a different point of departure, one which ‘does not offer us a prescriptive ontology’ (77) or, perhaps, any ontology at all. Heady stuff indeed!

The book brings to the fore the grounding violence and ontological terror of colonial worldmaking, precisely because such violence and terror tends *not* to appear; it is rendered as ‘natural’ and ‘invisible’. Abyssal work ‘does not *reveal* “another reality” beneath or other to this world but exposes this world as the product of the ongoing work of colonial violence’ (24, my emphasis). The abyssal critique of modernity is not simply ‘a moral indictment of the savageness and cruelty of capitalism’ (43) but seeks to question ‘the categories through which modernity and racial capitalism has “worlded” the world’ (83). Put otherwise, the book asks how does such foundational violence delineate subjects from objects? This abyssal approach is described as ‘lifting the veil’ (35) or ‘bringing to the surface’ (13), and appears, despite the authors’ disavowal, to be revelatory. This is not ‘seeing from within the world to a veiled “beyond”, but rather seeing out from “behind” or from the other side of the veil: theorising from the abyss’ (83). The

question that emerges for me here is why does such an account rely on the notion of revelation? Or, more specifically, what is it about the abyss that extends or troubles other extant accounts of world-making violence?

One of the striking aspects about the book's argument is that it is tethered to the Caribbean, figured as 'an analytical and methodological gift' (15), as well as a 'geo-spatial ground' (5) for what follows. Later the book suggests that abyssal work operates through a 'groundless ground' (55; 69). This appears to be an attempt to ward off the appeal of some kind of grounds for thought; an ungrounding of sorts. At one point, we find that 'there is no ground other than the ongoing paraontological critique of the violent artifice of colonial and modern world-making' (87). But if the abyssal threatens the sense of a ground for thought, why does it need the Caribbean? The book goes to some lengths to clarify that the book is not about the Caribbean as such – it is instead that 'particular readings of Caribbean modes of practice and Caribbean writers [are] generative' (14), my emphasis) – and Pugh and Chandler even suggest that abyssal work does not necessarily rely upon the Caribbean. But is there not a danger in presenting a review of scholarship that is corralled under the banner of 'the Caribbean'? There is a gloss to the review which at times smooths the various thinkers into an abyssal 'heuristic' (elsewhere 'analytic' or 'schematic'), while at the same time suggesting that the 'world as abyss is the ending of the world of coherence' (Pugh and Gfoellner, 2023: 316). There is, then, an interesting tension between the abyssal as both heuristic and as desire for incoherence.

Abyssal thought not only 'operates at the level of ontology' but also 'escapes the affirmative grounds of ontology' (10). The 'modern ontology' presented here 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 has engaged with. My intention here is not to undercut the claims of 'radical distinctiveness' for abyssal thought but to question why more is not made 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. Instead of ontology, we are presented with 'paraontology': a means to sit with, rather than to disavow, ontological insecurity. Paraontology, as Pugh and Chandler read it, is not about creating an alternative ontology or a search for new categories but is about dissolution. A paraontological approach is

concerned with ‘radically dissolving ‘being’ and the fixities of modern spatial and temporal imaginaries’ (90). Here, I cannot help but think of the resonances with Deleuze and Guattari’s work on becoming, which is also concerned with troubling fixity and being – a shift from ontology to ontogenesis – and its uptake in much geographic thought. But what we have with paraontology and the abyssal is, ostensibly, an undoing with no vector.

The key ethos of the book is not to undertake a project of remaking so much as a project of unmaking. But this raises a question: is this project not itself adding to, and in so doing, remaking the world? How, in other words, is unmaking not – at the same time – also a remaking? It may be that this betrays my own theoretical proclivities, but I do wonder how such a project can only operate to undo. Moreover, while the book aims for refusal and deconstruction and is set against productivism, it nevertheless seems to be drawn towards the generative. As the book notes, ‘abyssal work is an invitation encouraging and generating opportunities to push further’ (81); it is, in short, ‘a generative political and ethical project’ (3). Does this lure of generativity thwart the aims of the book and its steadfast refusal of the world? Does a desire for generativity (Ramírez-D’Oleo, 2023) trump all, even in abyssal work? How too does the generation of new figures (or figurative assemblings) sit alongside the dismissal of productivist imaginaries?

This is a ‘punchy theory-manifesto’ (Dekeyser, 2023: 608), and one which has great ambition: to ‘invert the stakes of analysis and critique’ (78), no less. This is to be applauded. And it is clear that the book diagnoses, and responds to, ways of thinking which ‘promise an escape from being suborned to the world as requiring saving at the cost of disavowal of the lives already sacrificed to its maintenance’ (52). This is crucial work. And yet the affective tone which finally registered for me was of a peculiar, discomfiting flatness. The source of the flatness, truth to tell, is difficult to diagnose. I wondered if it might be because the shock of the book’s argument is partly curtailed by its announcement, by their own admission, in various other iterations (Chandler and Pugh, 2022; 2023a, 2023b; Pugh and Gfoellner, 2023; Pugh, 2022), or because it speaks to other ongoing efforts to think the end of ‘the world’ that are familiar to geographers (see, for instance, Colebrook, 2023). I wondered too if this flatness emerges from a theoretical doubt about some of the tensions that run through the book (between ground and groundlessness, between ontology and paraontology, between unmaking and

remaking). Or might it be that such flatness is an expression of something else? Might such a project of world-ending be intimately, and necessarily, linked with feelings of quiet despair?

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