

**Jonathan Pugh & David Chandler (2023). *The world as abyss: The Caribbean and critical thought in the Anthropocene*. London: University of Westminster Press. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-915445-30-8. US\$16.00.**

With empirical distinction, in *The world as abyss*, Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler embrace an unconventional and unique approach, described as “abyssal” to reflect on and critically question conventional notions of modernity. They confront the Western preoccupation with saving the world – especially the Caribbean – and Western notions of logic, reasoning, progress, and civilization. Positioning and leveraging Caribbean frames of reference and critical theorizations, the book problematizes colonialism and many of its entailments and entanglements, contemporary experiences which mirror the colonial experience, and “post-colonial” capitalism, among other things. While attributing many of the current social, political, and environmental ills in the Caribbean to historical racial violence and commodification, *The world as abyss* offers a ‘reality check’, which rejects modernist assumptions about progress and economic development that have often happened at the expense of human development in the global south and developing world.

The book is compartmentalized into four chapters. While relatively short for such complex subject matter, its analyses are well-foregrounded in the works of notable Caribbean historians, poets, and scholars, who have immensely contributed to discussions on the perils of Europeanization and American exceptionalism in the Caribbean region. An effortless and sophisticated movement between the sometimes-blurred lines of time and space, each chapter grapples in one way or another with universal ideas and norms which have not necessarily yielded improved understandings of the “abyss”. Chapter 1, for example, introduces the interplay between object and ~~subject~~, which has contributed to a flawed framing of Caribbean problems. The chapter simultaneously acknowledges the contributions of Caribbean historians, such as C.L.R. James, to knowledge production on world-making, with the Caribbean at the centre of such discourses.

In Chapter 2, *The abyssal Subject*, the Eurocentric imaginary is carefully considered and the works of Caribbean intellectuals such as Édouard Glissant and Fred Moten are delved into to examine concepts of non-being, displacement, and no-thingness, and to further problematize modernity’s narrative of progress. Despite its critical engagement with important themes of structural inequality, structural racism, structural violence, dispossession, erasure, and some contextually relevant historical scenarios, in this Chapter and the book overall, the authors wisely steer clear of being dogmatic and manage to strike a delicate balance between their decolonial deconstruction and the critical works with which they engage on Caribbean thought. This is unsurprising, since in Chapter 1 the authors were careful to point out that the book is:

... not about the Caribbean in all its complexities...but rather about how a particular way of engaging with the Caribbean and Caribbean thought has been enabling for the emergence of a distinct line of critical thought in contemporary debate (p. 5).

By centring Caribbean experiences and writings at the forefront of the analyses, Pugh and Chandler allow for a reorientation and reclassification of power in relation to knowledge and knowledge production in the realm of critical theory, which is much welcomed.

After all, Blackness, Caribbeaness, and Islandness have not historically given way to any great degree of agency or power in the advancement of ideas, norms, and knowledge that have been produced outside of the global north. Furthermore, the ‘force of Caribbean history’ (p. 16), which is alluded to in Chapter 2, has seldom been acknowledged as having a mobilizing effect; but the *weight* of Caribbean history has long been undeniable and manifests itself in various ways throughout the independent and non-independent parts of the Caribbean. In this regard, it is fitting that Chapter 3 emphasizes the relevance of ‘hold time’ and what it means for abyssal framing. Debunking linear conceptions of time, space, and modernity, *hold time* allows for greater reflection on the continuum of structural violence that has haunted the past and present of the Caribbean and encourages a further problematization of modes of thought and reasonings which are reductionist in nature.

The fourth and final chapter rehashes some of the pervasive motifs in the book and attempts to synthesize the main ideas in the preceding chapters. The book’s major strength is the unique deployment of abyss as an analytical tool. Notwithstanding, because of the brevity of the monograph, the repetition throughout each chapter, inclusive of the concluding one, did little to provide more clarity and simplified analyses from which a general audience could have benefitted. The book could have further benefitted from a distinction between Black Studies and Caribbean Studies, because it is important to acknowledge that despite the shared experience with chattel slavery throughout the Caribbean, indentureship has also played a significant role in contributing to the polarization and continued challenges with social cohesion that manifest in some parts of the region. Indeed, indentureship must be acknowledged when we closely examine the tropes of displacement and dislocation that characterize the collective Caribbean experience with servitude. This book will be of interest to advanced scholars in diverse fields, ranging from geography to cultural studies, black studies, Caribbean studies, and island studies. It presents a timely opportunity to consider new methodologies for examining the socio-historical context of the Caribbean that goes well-beyond the conventional boundaries of critical and post-positivist theories.

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