

Queerness, Openness

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The state of queer theory today is somewhere between death and life. Since Teresa de Lauretis coined the term at a conference at the University of California Santa Cruz in 1990, this body of theoretical work, it has been claimed, has quickly peaked—or reached an impasse—within the last 15-20 years. In fact, de Lauretis gave up on the term only after three years, claiming that “queer” had already been taken over by the various mainstream institutions and establishments it was created to resist against.

Yet, if queer theory always promises an openness to its future and constantly insists on its inability to be pinned down or limited, what has happened to queer theory, when so many proclaim its usefulness is over or pronounce its outright death. There are many thoughts, suggestions, and disagreements about this: while some suggest queer theory never made good on its promise of openness, others note that queer theory’s very openness and amorphousness fatally diluted it. Perhaps the problem with the “peaking of queer theory,”¹ as David Ruffolo calls it, is that queer theory has not been open enough.

We began to hear these calls for a new direction, a new openness, in 2005, when an issue of *Social Text* titled “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” was released, edited by David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and

¹ David Ruffolo, *Post-Queer Politics* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009): 1.

José Muñoz. Their introduction sets up a critique of queer, pushing for a “renewed queer studies” that attends to various intersectionalities, such as globalization and neoliberalism.² Yet, queer theory still finds itself stuck in an argumentative mire, now somewhere between identity politics and neo-materialisms. While a queer feminist theorist like Anamarie Jagose wants to keep queer theory in dialogue and relation to the feminist theories and political struggles it emerges out of,³ others radically move away from these initial frameworks toward a primarily Deleuzian materialism. In 2007, Elizabeth Grosz delivered a keynote address to the Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke University on her dreams for a future feminism. In this talk, she outlined a feminism that could be, that ought to be, by faulting feminist theory for focusing too strictly upon identity politics and the subject as well as privileging the epistemological. Grosz proffered a feminism that delves into the Real, what she calls material chaos, by shifting feminist theory to account for that which is beyond the subject—the ontological, sexual difference, a primordial difference that exists before language or representation. For Grosz, this is a feminism that does not confirm or confine but expands outwards in “a process of opening oneself up to the otherness that is the world itself . . . that makes us become other than ourselves, that makes us unrecognizable.”⁴ Grosz’s desire for a new feminism is echoed in various ventures that followed shortly after, into queer theory, materialism, and the nonhuman. In 2009, David Ruffolo published *Post-Queer Politics*, in which he argues

² See David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Muñoz, “Introduction,” *Social Text* 23 (2005): 1.

³ See Anamarie Jagose, “Feminism’s Queer Theory,” *Feminism & Psychology* 19 (2009): 157-74.

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, “The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges,” 2007 (unpublished).

that while queer has reached its peak, a move away from subjectivity and the queer / heteronormativity dualism toward a focus on process, becoming, and matter à la Deleuze and Guattari can generate a new kind of queer theory that does not rely on the subject, heteronormativity, performativity, or even the human. Timothy Morton's recent work on queer ecology continues to bring queerness to bear on the nonhuman⁵, but it is Michael O'Rourke that is forefronting a new direction in queer theory that directly intersects with various threads and off-shoots of speculative realism. In his introduction to *Post-Queer Politics* with Noreen Giffney, Ruffolo's post-queer politics is likened to Reza Negarestani's polytics, revealing a queerness that is in the process of being opened by the outside.

This all brings me to a question: why engage queer theory in a collection of writings on *Cyclonopedia*? Why bring a body of work that in so many ways is antithetical to Negarestani's writing? As O'Rourke has clearly pointed to and others hint at, I would like to suggest that there is a queerness in *Cyclonopedia*, a queerness that queer theory could learn and benefit from, as it continues to oscillate between old and new waves. Perhaps this is a queerness that is already radically opened beyond what has become the canon of queer theory, and so the word queer does not hold, cannot hold, does not surface, but is there just under the surface. Perhaps *Cyclonopedia* asks for queerness: within a queer or feminist context, when Negarestani writes that "the conflict between genders is an anthropomorphic folly,"⁶ he picks up on a controversial fractioning of feminist theory from queer theory. In her 1984 essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a

⁵ See Timothy Morton, "Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 125 (2010): 273-82.

⁶ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 169.

Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin suggested that feminism, while useful for thinking the category of women (or gender), is not so for sexuality; she writes, “It is not reducible to, or understandable in terms of class, race, ethnicity, or gender.”⁷ Historically, queer theory has addressed sexuality beyond gender, so if Negerastani, like Rubin, wishes to think sexuality—or love, in the case of *Cyclonopedia*—outside of gender, queer theory appears to be an unavoidable intersection.⁸

In this paper, I’d like to experiment and test out Negerastani’s queerness: by teasing out, unearthing, the queerness in *Cyclonopedia*, making it more explicit. I’ll do this by exhuming the hole complex and hidden writing, decay, and love. Importantly, I am not arguing to leave behind the older queer theoretical works that focus on identity and subjectivity; this is rather to put queerness to the test, to see if it can still exist when opened, stretched, widened, to the polytical. Notably, I am not bringing queerness to *Cyclonopedia*; queerness is already there, waiting to be exhumed, and like we are told in *Cyclonopedia*, exhumation defaces, messes up, changes. This queerness, when exhumed, will be different from *Cyclonopedia* and queer theory; it will be another kind of queerness that overlaps, or better, decays into both. We could say that *Cyclonopedia* gives us an abstract diagram for another queerness, just as O’Rourke & Giffney describe Ruffolo’s post-queer politics offering a diagram for queerness through Deleuze, just as

⁷ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 22.

⁸ There is a blurring or confusion between love and sex in *Cyclonopedia* that I’ll briefly address later.

Dr. Hamid Parsani finds the Cross of Akht a diagram for intrepid blaspemy, petropolitical undercurrents.

EXHUMING QUEERNESS IN *CYCLONOPEDIA*

In Michael O'Rourke's forthcoming article on queer theory and speculative realism, he offers us a valuable passage from "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?" by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner; they write, "it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing, especially one defined by capital letters. We wonder whether queer commentary might not more accurately describe the things linked by the rubric, most of which are not theory. . . . Queer Theory is not the theory of anything in particular, and has no precise bibliographic shape."⁹ What O'Rourke, Berlant, and Warner are highlighting here is queerness not as a theory or thing but queerness as a model for reading and writing, a kind of commentary, that can be applied to potentially anything. A shorthand for this familiar model is simply "queering."

In *Cyclonopedia*, we are also given models for reading and writing. The archeologist being studied, Parsani, claims that "archeology, with its ingrained understanding of Hidden Writing, will dominate the politics of the future and will be the military-science of the 21st century."¹⁰ Archeology here can be understood as the exhumation of plot holes through the () hole complex.

The hole complex is a model for grasping the earth as a "destituted Whole" and a "holey-mess." The hole complex subverts the solidity of earth and ungrounds it. The hole complex is "the zone through which the Outside gradually but persistently emerges,

⁹ Michael O'Rourke, "'Girls Welcome!!!' Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory," *Speculations* 2 (2011): 275-312.

¹⁰ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 63.

creeps in (or out?) from the Inside.”¹¹ The earth is turned into an insurgent mess. When the solidity of the earth is subverted, the holes that emerge are polytical. These holes, a confusion of solid and void, are inconsistencies, anomalies, material differentiation. In *Cyclonopedia*, they are connected via oil, narration lubes. Reading through the plot holes is to follow the narration lube. This act of reading moves from surface to the depths via holes: “for every inconsistency on the surface, there is a subterranean consistency.”¹² To read this way ungrounds, toppling foundations. Negarestani calls this hidden writing, a model of complicity with the hole complex that asks us to read through plot holes.

Does queer theory not have a similar model for writing and reading? Queer Theory’s mode of operation has been to take an object that is rendered stable, normal, accepted, solid and destabilize it, reveal its construction, expose its holes. This is what Berlant and Warner call queer commentary, what I have said is queering, but the difference between queer commentary and Hidden Writing is the logic or narration that runs through these holes. Queer Theory’s aim at destabilization has commonly been to reveal a heteronormative logic at work in constituting whatever is the object of commentary. To take up Negarestani’s models, we could say that queer theory’s hole complex makes holes by queering and exposes the logic leaking out and running through these holes to be heteronormative. Queer Theory’s subterranean consistency is heteronormative. Yet, what is different about the hole complex and Hidden Writing is that the patterns of holey-emergence are never known, that is, “things leak into each other according to a logic that does not

¹¹ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 44.

¹² Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 53.

belong to us.”¹³ *Cyclonopedia*’s hole complex is of a more fundamental, material difference, one that does not necessarily concern itself with language, identity, and subjects. These kinds of material differentiations and anomalies are exactly what theorists like David Ruffolo and Elizabeth Grosz are attempting to formulate in queer and feminist contexts. What are these leaky holes revealing? Certainly narrations that go beyond the subject, but queer theory always wants to read them as heteronormative. Could another queer theory be open to reading the heteronormative aspects of this logic alongside the components that do not belong to us?

To return to archeology, it is a process of exhumation that changes the artifact it unearths by attending to its holes. If we treat an artifact as a piece of hidden writing, a “subsurface [of the artifact] can only be exhumed by distorting the structure [or surface].”¹⁴ *Cyclonopedia*, as a piece of hidden writing, gives us at least two exteriorized subsurfaces when exhumed: 1) a model for queerness that departs from the subject and heteronormativity; or more abstractly, a model for reading inconsistencies and instabilities that acknowledges and confronts the fact that these holes will have a logic that consists, at least in part, on something that has no correlate in the subject, and 2) a model for reading though *Cyclonopedia*’s own plot holes for subsurfaces like queerness, that when brought to the surface, will distort the book--and whatever is exhumed--into something else.

I’d now like to use this model of hidden writing to exhume two more queer artifacts: decay and love. Decay in *Cyclonopedia* introduces a creativity that complicates our human relations to negativity, reproduction, and the future. Negarestani describes decay

¹³ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 49.

¹⁴ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 62.

as an “anti-creationist creativity”¹⁵ that builds subtractively. This formation of decay resonates with current debates in queer theory on the so-called “anti-social turn” and futurity. Decay here seems to be a kind of missing materialist component to these anti-social queer politics. Queer theory needs a theory of decay, an “ethics of degeneration,”¹⁶ to trouble and unground these arguments, including the very axes they reside on. Decay comes to bear on queerness through at least two fronts: 1) it rots the relationships queer theory has to reproduction and futurity and 2) reveals that queerness is always in a state of “taxonomic indetermination.”¹⁷

Negarestani approaches decay architecturally, through his notions of nested interiorities and infinitesimal persistence toward zero. A thing that is decaying exteriorizes its interiorities. When this occurs, the original thing shrinks, becomes smaller, moves closer and closer toward zero (or total annihilation). This is what Negarestani calls intensive negativity. Yet, when the thing exteriorizes its interiorities, these newly exposed interiorities have other interiorities that can be exposed. Negarestani refers to these levels of interiorities that may be exteriorized as nested. This continues, and hence, there is an extensive positivity.

The anti-social turn in queer theory is a debate over the heteronormative, reproductive logics that guarantee the future as well as the relationalities that supposedly emerge in sex.¹⁸ On one side, Lee Edelman refuses what he calls the heteronormative logic of the

¹⁵ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 181.

¹⁶ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 30.

¹⁷ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 184.

¹⁸ See Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Jack Halberstam’s “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Theory,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5 (2008): 140-56.

future, which hinges upon the figure of the child, and therefore, he refuses any future. On the other, Jack Halberstam embraces the anti-social experience of sex that Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani champion and also the negative refusal of the future, but he cites Edelman's absolute rejection of the future as formalist and apolitical. Rather, Halberstam refuses a capitalist, imperial future but wants another, one that especially does not build an exclusion around women, domesticity, reproduction, and children—a dismissal that comes commonly from white queer male scholarship. Yet, on either side, decay exists, persists. Decay delivers to queer theory a different kind of negativity that always provides a future and always produces, if not reproduces. This is the "infinite calculus of rot,"¹⁹ forever toward zero; a future that even queer theory cannot deny. There is a rotting relationality that is not anti-social during sex, and there is a productive future of decay that degenerates all futures, whether those of heteronormative reproduction, Edelman's queer death drive, or Halberstam's punk queer future. While queer theory would certainly respond favorably to a process that builds "without creation,"²⁰ this "without creation" cannot be qualified only by queer refusal and imaginaries. Decay, Negarestani tells us, "ungrounds the very ground upon which power is conducted."²¹ The fulcrum point of power that queer theory relies on here--the same queer-heteronormative dualism--is softened, exteriorized, changed. Decay "exteriorizes all interiorities in unimaginable ways."²² Queer theory must engage with decay because it is always there,

¹⁹ Reza Negarestani, "Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Politics and Architecture of Decay," *Collapse* 4 (2010): 381.

²⁰ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 185.

²¹ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 182.

²² Negarestani, "Undercover Softness," 385.

inescapable, ungrounding how it plans for its futures and no-futures.

While decay interferes with the ways futures are made and maintained in queer theory, it also putrefies the conceptual apparatuses and “bibliographic shape” of queer theory. In his essay “Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Architecture and Politics of Decay,” Negarestani tells us that “If political systems are constituted of formations—both in the realm of ideas and in concrete structures—then, like living species, they also are subject to the troubling deformities brought about by the process of decay.”²³ Negarestani points out that decay offers the “possibility of the generation of one species from the putrefying corpse of another species” and that in decay “one species can uniformly or difformly deform in such a way that it gradually assumes the latitude of forms associated with other species.”²⁴ Where are we in the decay process of queer theory? What are its current gradients of decay? What did it exteriorize out of? What is it exteriorizing into? Decay as a model for queerness’ own transitions and transformations seems incredibly useful for thinking these changes: can we attend to the nested interiorities that have been exteriorized since the inception of queer theory? Is it possible to hold to an older gradient of exteriorization that has since rotted into something unrecognizable?

Like decay, love abounds in *Cyclonopedia*. Typically, it reads quite similarly to queer theoretical arguments against love as heteronormative and ideological. Negarestani refers to love as a “closure,”²⁵ “the end of health,”²⁶ “a failure to escape,”²⁷ a “tyran-

²³ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 381.

²⁴ Negarestani, “Undercover Softness,” 381.

²⁵ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 220.

²⁶ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 85.

²⁷ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 85.

nical possibility.”²⁸ Lauren Berlant, in her essay “Love, A Queer Feeling,” describes love (that is not queered) as a generic, repetitive formalism that traps. Yet, *Cyclonopedia* contains another love, like queer theory offers another love. Indeed, we could say that *Cyclonopedia* is a love letter to the Outside; it is in a process of seducing the Outside, having an affair with the Outside. This is a kind of love that is “catastrophically unpleasant”²⁹ for the subject, love as radical openness. While Berlant cites normativity as a “horror genre,”³⁰ there is something else more horrific that queer theory has not adequately dealt with. Yet, queer theory is slowly opening up toward this kind of love. In Tim Dean’s *Unlimited Intimacy*, gay male barebacking culture is described as “an arena of invention that involves experiments in how to do things with viruses.”³¹ This leads Dean to argue for an ethics of openness and alterity, one that welcomes sex with strangers and promiscuity. For Negarestani, Dean’s depiction of barebacking might be considered economical openness rather than radical openness, which is an openness that one decides one can afford. Decisions of affordance are made by the barebacker prior to experiments with viruses.

Love as radical openness is located most vividly in passages from Parsani’s own writings to *Sorceress*, who the book is dedicated to—is s/he the Outside? When Parsani states that “love is incomplete burning”³² he defines love as a radical material transfor-

²⁸ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 85.

²⁹ Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 200.

³⁰ Lauren Berlant, “Love, A Queer Feeling,” *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 444.

³¹ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 47.

³² Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 39.

mation that blurs, pervades, is a process of “positive disintegration.”³³ This is a kind of love that goes beyond recognition, to a far more radical notion of otherness that the human cannot imagine. Negaerestani calls this a “faceless love.”³⁴ At the end of *Cyclonopedia*, when Parsani calls upon Sorceress: “let’s gather our contagious diseases and make love,³⁵” this making-love seems to echo Dean’s barebacker; there is a decision to afford this openness beforehand. Yet, there is still illegibilities to this encounter, similar to the barebacker: is this love, sex, both, something else? what materials are being exchanged and transformed? Perhaps this making-love and barebacking are moments of radical openness if there is an attending to what cannot be imagined or recognized during these encounters.

How can queer theory respond to such a polytical love? How much must it open? I think queer theory needs this polytical love if it wants to not only escape its peaking but also think its relations to materiality. While Berlant has given us a queer love as transformative, there is something painful and horrifying that her love does not touch because it remains rooted in the human subject. This polytical love does exist in queer history; we have seen it in various forms, like HIV/AIDS. It is queer theory that has attended to these events without a polytical edge. To be clear, queerness is something that has seduced the Outside many times; it is queer theory that has been slow or late to account, address, and think this. While queer theory has maintained a fidelity to queer ways of living, opening queer theory to the polytical may actually strengthen that fidelity as well as contribute to an opening of queerness. Again, can we have a queer the-

³³ Negaerestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 38.

³⁴ Negaerestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 207.

³⁵ Negaerestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 221.

ory that attempts faceless love? Or does this open queer theory into something else, something unrecognizable, something we would hesitate to name queer theory?

The next step in opening queer theory would be to apply Negarestani's exhumed queerness and use it to subject queer theory proper to radical openness, through the schizotragedies outlined in *Cyclonopedia*, to try to arrive at something like a queer polytics. Perhaps that will bring us closer to making queer theory more of a target, more of a good meal, for the outside.