‘Girls Welcome!!!’¹
Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory

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Word of new intellectual developments tends to travel indirectly, like gossip. Soon, more and more people feel the need to know what the real story is: they want manifestos, bibliographies, explanations. When a journal does a special issue or commissions an editorial comment, it is often responding to this need. We have been invited to pin the queer theory tail on the donkey. But here we cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor donkey’s present condition. Queer Theory has already incited a vast labor of metacommentary, a virtual industry: special issues, sections of journals, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and dictionary entries. Yet the term itself is less than five years old. Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist.

—Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What does Queer Theory Teach us about X?”²

Ecological criticism and queer theory seem incompatible, but if they met, there would be a fantastic explosion. How shall we accomplish this perverse, Frankensteinian meme splice? I’ll propose some methods and frameworks for a field that doesn’t quite exist—queer ecology

—Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology”³

¹ The editors wish to note that Christopher Vitale has promised to write a response to this position paper in the near future on his blog which can be found at http://networkologies.wordpress.com/.


³ Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology,” PMLA 125.2 (March 2010): 273–282. If you are persuaded by my argument that SR and OOO theorists have always been interested in queer theories and committed to antiheteronormative
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Frankensteinian Meme Splice  
(or how hot are queer theory and speculative realism?)

I begin with two epigraphs, both of which were Guest Columns written for, commissioned especially by, the *PMLA*. Although they are separated by fifteen years they both make some strikingly similar points which are relevant for someone attempting to chart the potential connections or intimacies between queer theory and speculative realism (and in this position piece I’m placing quite a strong emphasis on object oriented ontology which is just one offshoot of speculative realist thinking). The first thing we might emphasize is the need to pin things down, to say what exactly queer theory is and does and to be entirely clear about what speculative realism is and what precisely it is that speculative realists do. Yet, perhaps the power and virtue of both queer theory and speculative realism, what makes them so compatible, is that neither is a delimitable field. Part of the attraction of both is their very undefinability, their provisionality, and, most importantly, their openness.

Let’s spend a little time with the guest column written by Berlant and Warner, a very rich essay which sadly isn’t often read or cited nowadays. In 1995 Queer Theory was arguably at its peak (at least in the United States) and people were calling for definitions, even though, as Berlant and Warner point out, it was barely five years old as a term and a field of inquiry. Queer projects then one could look to Morton’s earlier piece “Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, the Strange Stranger and the Beautiful Soul” in *Collapse VI* (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2010), 195-223, where he says that “Desire is inescapable in ecological existence. Yet environmentalism as currently formulated tries to transcend the contingency of desire, claiming that its desires if any are natural. Organicism partakes of environmentalist chastity. ‘Nature loving’ is supposedly chaste... and is thus slave to masculine heteronormativity, a performance that erases the trace of performance,” ibid., 214. It is important to note that both of these articles appeared before Morton’s now famous conversion to Object Oriented Ontology. See “All you need is love” on his *Ecology without Nature* blog: http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/08/all-you-need-is-love.html
Then was, as they say, “hot.” Right now speculative realism is ‘hot’ and the sheer pace (largely thanks to the blogosphere) with which it has evolved, developed, and extended its pincers into and across disciplines, is nothing short of astonishing. If the ‘birth’ of queer theory can be dated to 1990 at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz where the term was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis, then we can locate the ‘origin’ of the term speculative realism to a workshop which took place at Goldsmith’s College, the University of London in April 2007. The perception that queer was ‘hot’ for Berlant and Warner arises from “the distortions of the star system, which allows a small number of names to stand in for an evolving culture.” This has also happened with speculative realism and its splinter faction object oriented ontology where, in both cases, four ‘star’ names stand in for a rapidly evolving field. The “four horsemen of the philosophicus” who are associated with the founding of speculative realism (despite their many differences and divergent interests) are Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant. And the quartet of object oriented ontologists are Harman, Ian Bogost, Timothy Morton, and Levi Bryant. But, as with early queer theory, “most practitioners of the new queer commentary [speculative commentary] are not faculty members but graduate students.” The accelerated pace with which speculative thinking has grown and impacted

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6 The proceedings of that event can be found in Collapse III (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2007) which includes the texts from Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux and questions and answers from the audience. Alberto Toscano spoke at the second event (in place of Meillassoux) but is not generally associated with SR.
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upon other fields (both inside and outside the academy and institutionalized disciplines) has largely been because of the blogosphere and the work of graduate students such as Ben Woodard (who blogs at Naught Thought), Paul Ennis (who blogs at Another Heidegger Blog), Taylor Adkins (who blogs at Speculative Heresy), Nick Srnicek (who blogs at The Accursed Share), and others. Again, as with queer theory, this “association with the star system and with graduate students makes this work the object of envy, resentment and suspicion. As often happens, what makes some people queasy others call sexy.”

10 As we shall see, it is largely the association of speculative realism (and object oriented ontology) with four male philosophers which has made those calling for a queering of speculative thought and a diversification of its interests to become queasy. In a recent Facebook thread on the lack of women in speculative realism, one commenter referred to SR and OOO as a “sausage fest.” One could argue, in paranoid fashion, somewhat queasily, that speculative realism is unfriendly to those working in gender studies, critical sexuality studies, neovitalist and neomaterialist feminisms, and queer theory. But, in this paper, in a more reparative frame of mind, I want to suggest that speculative realism and triple O theory (as Timothy Morton has recently dubbed object oriented ontology) have always already been interested in and attuned to issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, feminism, and queerness. One could go even further and say that the “perverse, Frankensteinian meme splice” Timothy Morton dreams of has already been accomplished (but that doesn’t mean that the work is done, far from it).

Undefining Speculative Realism

Berlant and Warner write that, in their view, “it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing, especially one dignified 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.”\textsuperscript{11} Even though SR and OOO are almost always dignified by capital letters (I prefer not to capitalize them in this essay), they too “cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program”\textsuperscript{12} and I share Berlant and Warner’s desire “not to define, purify, puncture, sanitize, or otherwise entail the emerging queer [speculative realist] commentary”\textsuperscript{13} or to fix a “seal of approval or disapproval”\textsuperscript{14} on anyone’s claims to queerness or to speculative realism. Furthermore, I agree with them that we ought to “prevent the reduction” of speculative realism or object oriented ontology to a “speciality” or a “metatheory” and that we ought to fight vigorously to “frustrate the already audible assertions that queer theory [speculative realism] has only academic—which is to say, dead—politics.”\textsuperscript{15} For me, much of speculative thinking’s allure is its openness, its promissory nature, and that much of what goes under its name has been “radically anticipatory, trying to bring a [non-correlationist, non-anthropocentric, even queer] world into being.”\textsuperscript{16} Because of this very provisionality, and an attendant welcomeness to its own revisability, any attempt to “summarize it now will be violently partial.”\textsuperscript{17} But we might see some value in the violently partial accounts, the meme splicings, the shortlived promiscuous encounters, I’ll be trying to stage here in this ‘position’ paper.

So, what follows is “a kind of anti-encyclopedia entry.”\textsuperscript{18} If, for Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory is not the theory of anything in particular, and has no precise bibliographic shape”\textsuperscript{19}
then I would like to suggest—with a wilfully disingenuousness since after all SR does have a working bibliographical shape which one can easily constitute—that speculative realism and its tentacled offshoots is not the theory of anything in particular either. We might, to paraphrase Morton, say that speculative realism is the theory of everything. If we turn speculative realism into a capital t Theory we risk forgetting the differences between the various figures associated with it and the variegated contexts in which they work. As Berlant and Warner caution, “Queer commentary [and speculative realist commentary] takes on varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences in various contexts” and if we try to pin the tail on the donkey by imagining a context (theory) in which queer or speculative realism has “a stable referential content and pragmatic force” then we are in danger of forgetting the “multiple localities” of speculative realist theory and practice. No one corpus of work (Harman’s for example) or no one particular project should be made to stand in for the whole movement, or what Paul Ennis has recently called the “culture” of speculative realism.

If speculative commentary were simply reduced to being the province of one particular thinker then its multiple localities would be worryingly narrowed and its localities would

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20 The Speculative Realism pathfinder maintained by Eric Phetteplace is a wonderful resource: http://courseweb.lis.illinois.edu/~phettep1/SRPathfinder.html. But it itself is permanently under revision, a construction site, as he add new names, terms, blogs, books.

21 Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology” in Qui Parle (forthcoming). Tellingly, he refers there to “the effervescent philosophical movement known as ‘speculative realism’ [note the inverted commas]” as ‘cool’ by which we might understand him to mean ‘hot’ in Berlant and Warner’s sense.


23 Ibid., 344.

24 Ibid., 345.

25 See Paul J. Ennis, “The Speculative Terrain” here: http://ucd-ie.academia.edu/PaulJohnEnnis/Papers/380565/The_Speculative_Terrain. Ennis shares my conviction that speculative realism is alive and well and exists but that it is irreducible to one single definition.
become merely ‘parochial’ like “little ornaments appliquéd over real politics or real intellectual work. They [would] carry the odor of the luxuriant.” If the work of Harman, or Bryant, or Meillassoux is made into a metonym for speculative theory or speculative culture itself, and if they are held to be exemplary cases (either for good or for bad) then what we lose is the original impetus behind speculative realism and queer theory in the first place: “the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave.” And we would leave speculative realism open to charges of political uselessness and glacialization, “the infection of general culture by narrow interest.”

But let us, at least provisionally, disambiguate, to use a Wiki-ism that J. Hillis Miller is rather fond of. Speculative realism describes the work of a very disparate group of scholars (Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman) reanimating some of “the most radical philosophical problematics” through a “fresh reappropriation of the philosophical tradition and through an openness to its outside.” The term was coined by Ray Brassier, organizer of the first symposium on speculative realism, the proceedings of which appear in Collapse III. However, Speculative Realism is generally considered “a useful umbrella term, chosen precisely because it was vague enough to encompass a variety of fundamentally heterogeneous philosophical research programmes” as Brassier admits in a recent interview.

These philosophies, while at once radically different from one another, could be said to find some coherence in their opposition to correlationist philosophies. To quote the Ray Brassier interview again,

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27 Ibid., 345.
28 Ibid., 349.
29 Robin Mackay writes this on the jacket for volume II of Collapse which features essays from Brassier, Meillassoux and Harman.
the only thing that unites us is antipathy to what Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’—the doctrine, especially prevalent among ‘Continental’ philosophers, that humans and world cannot be conceived in isolation from one another—a ‘correlationist’ is any philosopher who insists that the human-world correlate is philosophy’s sole legitimate concern.

The Wikipedia entry for speculative realism offers some further shared ground:

While often in disagreement over basic philosophical issues, the speculative realist thinkers have a shared resistance to philosophies of human finitude inspired by the tradition of Immanuel Kant. What unites the four core members of the movement is an attempt to overcome both ‘correlationism’ as well as ‘philosophies of access.’ In After Finitude, Meillassoux defines correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” Philosophies of access are any of those philosophies which privilege the human being over other entities. Both ideas represent forms of anthropocentrism. All four of the core thinkers within Speculative Realism work to overturn these forms of philosophy which privilege the human being, favouring distinct forms of realism against the dominant forms of idealism in much of contemporary philosophy.31

A ‘foundational text’ for speculative realism, then, is Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude, a text which boldly insists on the “necessity of contingency”32 and critiques the post-Kantian primacy of, as Robin Mackay puts it, the “relation of consciousness to the world—however that may be construed—over any supposed objectivity of ‘things themselves.’”33

31 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_realism. Again we should say that the Wikipedia entry is constantly being revised. According to the Speculative Realism pathfinder Michael Austin (who blogs at Complete Lies) frequently updates this page.


33 Robin Mackay, “Editorial Introduction,” Collapse II (Falmouth, U.K.: Ur-
Meillassoux calls his own non-correlationist philosophy a speculative materialism. One strong critic of Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, in his *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* yolks revisionary naturalism in Anglo/American analytic philosophy to speculative realism in the continental French tradition. He terms his own approach as ‘transcendental realism’ or ‘transcendental nihilism’ (a position he at least partially shares with critical realist Roy Bhaskar) while the British philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant works with a post-Schellingian materialism to produce a speculative nature philosophy that some call ‘neo-vitalism.’ Graham Harman, heavily influenced by the Actor Network Theory of Bruno Latour has long been advancing an object-oriented philosophy, emphasizing ‘vicarious causation’ which turns toward objects and demands a humanitarian politics attuned to the objects themselves. So, despite their many differences these four thinkers have been most closely associated with the development of what has come to be called ‘speculative realism,’ a term Brassier thinks is now “singularly unhelpful.”

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35 See Bram Ieven’s “Transcendental Realism, Speculative Materialism and Radical Aesthetics,” paper presented at Duke University’s Speculative Aesthetics working group, which interestingly is presided over by the feminist scholars Priscilla Wald and N. Katherine Hayles and the queer theorist Zach Blas. See the programme and texts here: http://fhi.duke.edu/projects/interdisciplinary-working-groups/speculative-aesthetics

36 See especially Iain Hamilton Grant’s *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006).


38 Brassier and Ieven, “Aesthetics of Noise.”
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this should remind us that Teresa de Lauretis, who coined the term queer theory in 1990 dismissed it four years later as a “vacuous creature of the publishing industry.”39 Perhaps the most ‘cool’ offshoot of speculative realism has been object oriented philosophy (the term is Harman’s and dates quite some way back to 1999) and its twin object oriented ontology (the term was coined by Levi Bryant). Again the four main thinkers associated with this splinter group (Harman, Bryant, Morton and Bogost) are very different: Bryant has a uniquely Lacanian take on the democracy of objects, Morton works on ecology, and Bogost writes about video game theory and what he calls ‘alien phenomenology.’ Ben Woodard has wondered about the ‘regnant’ status of OOO/OOP compared to the many other variants of speculative realism. He asks:

OOO/OOP will no doubt continue to grow and I often wonder why (besides having multiple prolific internet presences) it is the strangest/strongest of the SR factions. I think the best explanation is that the approach and even name of OOP reeks (justifiably) of novelty and this is only supported by the fact that Harman and others take what they need from philosophers and move on. This is not an attack but a high form of praise. For instance, it would be hard to call any user of OOO/OOP Heideggerian, Whiteheadian or even Latourian (though the latter would be the most probable) whereas Grant could easily be labeled Schellingian, Brassier Laruelleian (though less and less so over time) and Meillassoux Cartesian, Badiouian or, against his will but accurate I think, Hegelian40


40 See Ben Woodard, “Speculative 2010,” http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/speculative-2010/. Levi Bryant, who blogs at Larval Subjects, disagrees and says: “I have a somewhat different theory. While the strong internet presence of OOO/OOP certainly doesn’t hurt, this is an effect rather than a cause. In my view a successful philosophy has to create work for others and for other disciplines outside of the philosophy. This work is not simply of the commentary variety, but of the variety that allows others to engage in genuine research projects according to– I hate the word, but have to use it–a paradigm.” See “New Intellectual Trends,” http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.
For the remainder of this position paper, however, I want to focus on OOO because those associated with it, particularly Bryant, Morton and Bogost, have been at the forefront of the (often virulent) debates about queer theory, object oriented feminism and speculative realism.\footnote{Another figure associated with OOO (but from a critical Whiteheadian angle) is Steven Shaviro who has written a great deal about both sexuality and queer theory. He is also one of the leading lights in the nascent field of Gaga Studies where unexpected interventions have been made into OOO debates. To take just a couple of examples: Firstly, Judith Jack Halberstam has described Lady Gaga’s \textit{Telephone} video with its “phones, headsets, hearing, receivers and objects that become subjects, glasses that smoke, food that bites” as “an episode in Object Oriented Philosophy…whether the philosophy in question is drawn from Žižek on speed, Ronell on crack or Meillassoux on ecstasy, this video obviously chains a good few ideas to a few very good bodies and puts thought into motion.” See “You Cannot Gaga Gaga,” http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/you-cannot-gaga-gaga-by-jack-halberstam/. Secondly, Kristopher Cannon has described the bulge in Gaga’s crotch at the AMA awards from the point of view of the cloth itself: “I think that this example is one which could also bridge several discussions—ranging from gender (and feminism) to sex/ed behavior and objects to art and fashion and avant-garde aesthetics. The object we would see here is the ever-so-subtle (penis-shaped) bulge, appearing when she bends—a bulge afforded by the way her belts, strap(-on?)s, and/or stitched seams align—a bulge she gets because of the clothing she wears. Not only might this be a moment (a la OOO) where the clothing becomes hard because of the way Gaga wears it, but it is also a moment where Gaga gets a hard-on because of the fashions she fetishizes.” See “Telephoning the Cloth that Wounds,” http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/08/04/lady-gagas-phallicity#comment-2120.} I want to turn now to that brouhaha about queer theory and the putative non-politics of speculative realism which raged across the blogosphere in 2010.

\textbf{Queering Speculative Realism} \\
\textit{Everything populating the desolate wastes of the unconscious is lesbian; difference sprawled upon zero, multiplicity strewn across positive vulvic space. Masculinity is nothing but a shoddy bunkhole from death. Socio-historically phallus and castration might be serious enough, but cosmologically they merely distract from zero; staking}
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out a meticulously constructed poverty and organizing its logical displacement. If deconstruction spent less time playing with its willy maybe it could cross the line.

—Nick Land, The Thirst for Annihilation

During his live-blogging at Object-Oriented Philosophy of the “Metaphysics and Things” conference held in Claremont in December 2010, Graham Harman recounts a question and answer session between Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and the audience. He says approvingly that Haraway “agrees with Latour that nothing should be allowed to explain anything else away. And certain forms of correlationism make precisely this error [Haraway has clearly read Meillassoux].” She says that:

Speculative realism is a term I’m still learning to use in a sentence, as if in a school assignment. Speculative realism is the new kid on the block that has adopted a label for itself, which may sound mean, but all kinds of interesting things are going on under that label and so she may want to live on that block. Not enough girls in speculative realism which makes her mad, but she’s still curious and seduced by it [Note: Girls Welcome!!!].

Harman concludes that “overall Haraway [is] a bit more condescending than necessary about speculative realism (most of us really like her stuff), but she does sound interested.” It is true that Haraway sees speculative realism as a new kid on the block but she is far from condescending. In his own

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43 Stengers is the only woman included in the landmark volume The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism edited by Harman, Bryant and Nick Srnicek (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2010). Harman explains the reasons for this here: “The collection also has great national and generational diversity. Unfortunately, it admittedly has horrible gender diversity (Isabelle Stengers is the only woman in the collection). To that my only answer is: we tried to do better. The invitation list and the contributors list do not entirely overlap. Sometimes people are just too busy, which of course is as good a sign for them as it was unlucky for us.” See “Very Close to Publication,” http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/12/21/very-close-to-publication/.

live blog notes for her keynote paper at the same conference Harman himself quotes her as referring to “‘the openness or dare of what has been called speculative realism.’ Wow, SR is really in the lexicon now” shortly before asserting that “we now have technical-biological capabilities to generate new organisms without hetero-normativity, in ways that queer theory has never dreamed of.” While Haraway is right to say that SR is a new kid on the block she is equally correct that its appearance on the scene is an invitation, or a dare even, to queer theory to go beyond itself. What she is disappointed by is the fact that so few girls seem to have been invited along for the ride. Haraway reassures her that girls are indeed welcome (his exclamation gives this paper its title) and we shall see that quite a few girls have (always) already accepted that invitation.

If this all sounds rather cosy in December 2010 then we need to go back to a furious argument which took place between Chris Vitale (who blogs at Networkologies), Levi Bryant, Michael (who blogs at Arcade Fire) and Ian Bogost in June and July of 2010 about the question of “Queering Speculative Realism.” While the arguments were often heated and personal in nature they did have the effect of putting gender, sexuality and queer theory very firmly on the speculative realist agenda (as well as forefronting the very politicality of speculative realism too).

The trouble started out with Vitale’s highlighting the absence


46 Paul Reid-Bowen has blogged about Haraway and object-oriented ontology and is pleasantly surprized by how many “parallels and resources there are between her work and OOP” especially the Latourian aspects of her writing on cyborgs. See “Haraway and Object Oriented Ontology,” http://paganmetaphysics.blogspot.com/2010/01/haraway-and-object-oriented-ontology.html. Perhaps the ideal location for staging an encounter between Haraway and SR/OOP would be to revisit her first book (not often read these days) from 1976, Crystals, Fabrics and Fields: Metaphors That Shape Embryos (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004).
of gender and queerness in SR/OOO and how this blunts, in his opinion, the political edge of both. He wrote:

To what extent do we still need, or continually need, to queer philosophy? Let me be clear on what I mean by this. To what extent do we still need, or continually need, to work against the normative tendency of philosophy to be a predominantly white, male, heterosexual, middle-to-upper middle class discipline? Why is or has this been the case? What are the implications, and even philosophical implications, of this?

Let’s even look at the Speculative Realist movement, or the bloggers associated with it. Am I the only one who is ‘gay’ or ‘queer?’ Is there anyone who doesn’t get white privilege on a regular basis? Even though I’m Sicilian-American, I get white privilege on a continual basis. Are there any women who regularly blog on philosophy, speculative realism (I can only think of Nina Power, and yet she doesn’t really deal with issues related to speculative realism that much...)? And let me be clear about this: I don’t think it’s a sin to be born a man, or to be hetero, or to have whitish skin. But I do think it’s important that if you get a certain type of social privilege, you fight against it. And that means, I think, trying to dissect the way this produces epistemological privilege of various sorts. So, I do think that if the speculative realist movement is predominantly white, male, hetero, we need to not only ask ourselves why this might be, but how it impacts our thought, and what we can do about this.47

Bryant responds by saying that he finds Vitale’s worries “admirable” but pointedly rejoinders that “Vitale knows next to nothing about the sexual preferences or backgrounds of the various figures in the SR movement (assuming it can be called a movement).”48 While I sympathize with Vitale’s concerns too, I would side with Bryant here because queer is as much of a portmanteau term as speculative realism and


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is a non-gender specific rubric which is pitched against normativity, what Michael Warner calls regimes of the normal, rather than heterosexuality. Queerness is a positionality, a posture of opposition to identitarian regimes, rather than a statement about sexuality of the kind Vitale makes. Bryant goes on to question Vitale’s identity politics and claims that “the overwhelming desire to label or subsume ourselves under a particular identity, can be seen as a symptom of how contemporary capital functions. The problem is that this symptom, like all symptoms, obfuscates or veils the social relations that generate the symptom. The point here is that we shouldn’t concern ourselves with questions of identity, but that we should raise questions about how this particular form of politics might very well function to perpetuate the very structure that generates these crises in the first place.” Queerness, as Bryant quite cogently asserts, is about a disentanglement from heteronormative and hegemonic regimes. If we insist on beginning queering speculative realism by labeling ourselves as ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ (or wanting to know about the sexual orientations of those who practice it) as Vitale does, then we are very much on the wrong track.

Bryant takes particular exception to a response post from Michael at the blog Archive Fire to the original Vitale entry. Michael writes:

I want to briefly address his specific question with regards to ‘queering speculative realism.’

Overall, I believe we will begin to see a lot more diversity creep into the general thrust of Speculative Realism (SR) when it begins to get picked up by artists, radicals and other non-institutional intellectuals. That is to say, the issue of queering and engendering diversity is more a problem with institutionalized intellectuality as such than with SR

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50 Vitale makes similar claims about privilege and identity in his long post “Queer Mediations: Thoughts on Queer Media Theory” although he is not addressing SR there. See http://networkologies.wordpress.com/2009/12/07/queer-mediations-thoughts-on-queer-media-theory/.
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specifically. Academia in general is still very much a white-boys club. The issues of privilege, access and univocality—and even aesthetic-ideological preference and distinctions—are deep class issues at the heart of Western society and deeply embedded within our institutional education systems. And I don’t think we can expect SR to diversify and become overtly political if it remains entangled in the academic/blogging/philosophy assemblage.

In less words, we can’t expect SR to treat the symptom without its adherents (for lack of a better word) first, or also attacking the root causes of a much larger dis-ease at the core of their disciplines. SR will simply perpetuate the problems existent within the institutions that SR thinkers and bloggers are entangled with. Again, diversity will come when SR is ‘contaminated’ from outside the academy and taken up by non-philosophical modes of intellectuality.\(^5\)

Bryant is insulted most by the insinuation that speculative realism is an ivory tower discourse practiced by those in powerful academic positions and that its ideas don’t travel very far beyond the confines of the academy. He responds (and again I agree with him if not caring much for his tone) that OOO is an open discipline, a dare in Haraway’s terms, and that he ardently hopes it will create “projects for other people:”

OOO is among the most open philosophical movements that’s ever existed. On the one hand, OOO has generated a large inter-disciplinary interest from people both inside and outside the academy. Not only has OOO drawn interest from rhetoricians, anthropologists, media theorists, literary theorists, biologists, and even a handful of physicists, it has also drawn the interest of artists, activists, feminists, and so on. In the forthcoming collection edited by Ian Bogost and I, Object-Oriented Ontology, there will be an article by the performance artist and feminist Katherine Behar, as well as contributions from media theorists, literary theorists, technology theorists and others. On the other hand, through the medium of blogs, we have opened the doors to the participation

of anyone who comes along, regardless of whether they are in academia or not. On this blog alone there are regular interactions between computer programmers, office workers, poets, environmentalists, novelists, comedians, and a host of others outside the academy. Michael can go fuck himself with his suggestion that somehow we’re trapped within the ivory tower walls of the academy, ignoring anyone who is outside the academy or from another discipline. I, at least, interact with such people every day.52

Bryant confesses earlier in the same post that he finds Vitale’s question as to what OOO has “to say about race, class, and gender?” irritating. But, as Vitale points out in a further response to Bryant, he then himself goes on to produce a brilliant OOO reading of American History X which is responsive to questions of race.53 Strangely, however, Vitale does not pick up on the very last part of Bryant’s post where he utilizes Luhmannian systems theory to describe the way Spivak’s notion of the subaltern flags blind spots in any hegemonic system (be that race, class, gender, or sexuality). “Resituated in terms of object-oriented ontology,” Bryant says, “the subaltern is a system in the environment of another system that nonetheless belongs to the unmarked space of that system within which it is entangled.” What Bryant is here calling the subaltern could just as easily refer to the queer, and is “something like the politics of the part-of-no-part described by Rancière.”54

Before coming back to Bryant let us take a closer look at Vitale’s “Queering Speculative Realism” post. He argues there that “Speculative Realism, for whatever we think of this name, is mostly a movement which works to bring speculation and science into a greater rapprochement. But what are the

52 Bryant, “Vitale on SR and Politics.”
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political implications of what we’re doing?" He goes on to
state that speculative realism is far too concerned with the
ontological (philosophical research) rather than the ontic (the
messy stuff of actually existing arrangements in culture and
politics), a charge that has often been levelled against Judith
Butler we might add, and that:

Epistemology and ontology, the current focus of speculative realism,
aren’t enough. We need a politics and an ethics from this movement,
yes? Does SR have something to say about race, gender, sexuality, or
global capitalism? Something that comes from a particularly SR ap-
proach to the world? It’s my sense that unless philosophy develops all
these sides of itself, it isn’t complete. Must philosophy be complete this
way? My sense is that it should be. I’m not sure if my own work does
this, but I think it is a challenge to myself that I need to make sure I
at least work to fulfill.

While he concedes that speculative realist thought comes
“in many varieties” Vitale is concerned that (and he doesn’t
exculpate himself here) “we” underplay “the politico-social
sides of philosophy in the speculative realist movement as it
stands now.” Ian Bogost replies in an equally irascible fashion
to Vitale and Archive Fire by saying that

the argument generally goes like this: philosophies need to include
political and ethical positions to be complete. Privileges (like race,
gender, and class) make it easy to ignore certain assumptions, and the
whiteness and maleness and heterosexism of philosophy writ large
automatically infects speculative realism, for it is a product of institu-
tions propped up on those privileges.

55 Harman writes, albeit in a different context, that “there’s certainly a lot
more potential in OOF [Object Oriented Feminism] than there is in the
‘All-Things-Shall-Be-Destroyed-By-Science’ wing of SR, which drags its jug-
gernaut through cities, forests, museums, and zoos, crushing all entities and
leaving in their wake only the powder of mathematical structure.” See “Levi
on Reid-Bowen on Feminism and OOO,” http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.
com/2010/01/22/levi-on-reid-bowen-on-feminism-and-ooo/.

56 Vitale, “Queering Speculative Realism.”
But for Bogost OOO is always already political insofar as his approach, his turn to objects “is itself part of the path towards a solution, of paying attention to wordly things of all sorts, from ferns to floppy disks to frogs to Fiat 500s.” So, for Bogost, “political and ethical positions in philosophy and theory...are thus, I would argue, fucked (to use a term that is truly populist).”

However, Bryant is far more sanguine about the political and ethical (and queer) potentialities of SR in posts written before and after the Vitale flare-up.

Let’s start with the blog post written after the argument (in August 2010) over the masculinism of speculative realism before circling back to the earlier post (which might have obviated the whole debate in the first place). Here Bryant talks about mess as something we abhor in our research practices, a term he takes from the social scientist John Law, who in his book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* makes a case for “quieter and more generous methods.”

Bryant writes:

What we abhor, to use John Law’s apt term, is a mess. Everywhere we think in terms of relations between form and content, form and matter, where one key term functions as the ultimate form (which for Aristotle was the active principle and associated with masculinity) and where all else is treated as matter awaiting form (which for Aristotle was the passive term and was associated with femininity). In short, our theoretical framework tends to be one massive metaphor for fucking and the sexual relationship. Of course, it’s always a fucking where the men are on top in the form of an active form inseminating a passive matter. And again, that active form can be the signifier, signs, economics, the social, form, categories, reason, etc. What’s important for masculinist ontology is that form always be straight and one. I’ll leave it to the

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What Bryant is arguing for is a spreading or diversification of approaches to method and similarly Law argues for “symmetry” as opposed to a phallic ontology/methodology and he calls for a wide ranges of metaphors for both imagining and responding to our worlds (he calls these ‘method assemblages’). The political stakes of this are that these methods call forth worlds, helping us to both imagine and take responsibility for them (this seems to me to be the very political underpinning of the work of all four main OOO theorists). Among Law’s metaphors for imagining and taking responsibility for our worlds are “localities, specificities, enactments, multiplicities, fractionalities, goods, resonances, gatherings, forms of crafting, processes of weaving, spirals, vortices, indefinitenesses, condensates, dances, imaginaries, passions, interferences.”

Moving on from his discussion of our abhorrence for mess in favor of a phallic univocity, Bryant says this:

What the masculinist passion for ground abhors, however, is the idea of a multiplicity of heterogeneous actors acting in relation together. It is not economics that determines all else. It is not biology that determines all else. It is not neurology that determines all else. It is not signs and signifiers that determines all else. It is not cows and roads that determine all else. It is not history that determines all else. No, the world is populated by chairs, cows, neurons, signs, signifiers, narratives, discourses, neutrons, chemical reactions, weather patterns, roads, etc., all mutually perturbing one another in a mesh. In other words, we have all sorts of negative and positive feedback relations between these different spheres functioning as resonators for one another.

We might take from this that speculative realism and queer theory are in a dance of relation with eachother, are enmeshed

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59 Ibid.


61 Levi Bryant, “Unit Operations.”
and mutually perturb each other. As Bryant goes on to write: “What we have here is a mesh of non-linearities without ground. What we have here are all sorts of agencies and objects feeding back on one another, modifying one another, perturbing one another, translating one another.” And this choreography involves castrating a certain Lacanianism:

What I’ve tried to formulate is an ontology without phallus in the Lacanian sense of the term; or rather an ontology where phallus is recognized properly as the masquerade that it is (here an analysis of projective identification in the portrayal of woman as masquerade is an appropriate critique of psychoanalysis). The point is not that the signifier and fantasy do not play a role, but rather that we must see the role that these things play as a role among other actors in a complex network of feedback relations. An ontology without phallus is an ontology where there is no fundamental interpretant, no ground of all else, no final explanatory term. 62

Bryant then shifts from discussing the phallus to a ‘review’ of Ian Bogost’s book Unit Operations and his alien phenomenology of objects. He explains that

in Unit Operations, Ian [Bogost] contrasts unit and system. As Ian writes, ‘Unit operations are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems…I contend that unit operations represent a shift away from system operations, although neither strategy is permanently detached from the other’ (3). This asemiotic understanding of unit operations hinges on the fact that ‘the unit can always explode the constraints of system, or that systems are always occasional, local stabilities from which units can escape to create a new surprise.’63

The last sentence could just as well describe Bryant’s own understanding of subalternity and second order systems discussed earlier.

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
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Bryant wants to focus in on the operation part of unit operations and how this leads to messy creativeness and amongstness rather than phallic univocity. He explains that

In his early work (I suspect we’ll find that he’s of a different view once Alien Phenomenology comes out), Bogost is deeply influenced by Badiou’s concept of the count-as-one (which has been a longtime fascination of mine as well). The count-as-one is, in Badiou, an operation that transforms an inconsistent multiplicity into a consistent multiplicity, literally counting it as one, or transforming it into a unit. The count-as-one is an operation, something that takes place, not something that is already there.64

Bryant goes on shortly after to say that

In short, unit operations produce, they generate a new entity, whereas system operations re-produce, they iterate an already existing pattern or object. This, really, is what is to be thought in the mesh of exo-relations among the heterogeneous actors populating the heteroverse of flat ontology: What are those exo-relations that reproduce existing units and relations and what are the operations that produce entirely new entities or agents? And if we are to think this, we must think a complex interplay of a variety of different types of entities, how they contribute to the production of new entities, and must avoid our phallocentric inclinations that would erect only a single ground of being…we must think processes of unitizing without abandoning objects.65

What we might glean from this is that queer theory’s unit operations produce rather than reproduce, that there is not one ‘single ground’ of queer theory, OOO or SR, not one single interpretation of what they are or what they do. Instead they are caught in a mesh, are always in relation to each other and in a gravitational mobility toward each other, and that this mess or mesh of ‘exo-relations’ produces a new kind of theoretical creativity where the concrete concepts of OOO

64 Levi Bryant, “Unit Operations.”
65 Ibid.
and SR can be put to work with and amongst queer theories and concepts.

Now, let us return to an earlier post by Bryant from January 2010 where he anticipates many of Vitale’s charges against SR and OOO and rehearses some of these later arguments. On this occasion he is responding to a post from Paul Reid-Bowen, who blogs at *Pagan Metaphysics*, who was arguing for a realist ontology and a feminist metaphysics in the work of Christine Battersby, Donna Haraway and Luce Irigaray. Bryant forthrightly states that he is unconvinced by a feminist metaphysics (since for him there is just metaphysics) but he does admit that Reid-Bowen is “on to something here.” And what Bryant suggests he is on to is precisely what preempts some of Vitale’s later criticisms of SR/OOP. It is worth reproducing in full:

In the world of cultural studies and the humanities, I think there have been a number of privileged sites that have been directed towards bucking the primacy of anti-realist or correlationist thought than other disciplines by virtue of the nature of the objects that constitute their object of investigation. These theorists have not, of course, in most cases baldly stated their work as a debate between realism and anti-realism, but their work has nonetheless inevitably led them to thinking being in such a way that it is not simply a discourse, language, or a correlation with the human.

Paradoxically, these privileged sites have largely been marginalized in the world of academia and the humanities; no doubt because of the hegemony of anti-realist thought or the status of correlationism as the establishment position. Among these privileged sites I would include environmental philosophy and thought, science and technology studies, critical animal theory, geographical studies, writing technology studies, media studies, queer theory, and, of course, feminist philosophy and thought. I am sure that there are many others that don’t immediately

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come to mind for me. If these have been privileged sites for the development of significant conceptual innovations in the field of realist ontology, then this is because all of these sites of investigation force encounters with real and nonhuman objects and actors that cannot be reduced to correlates of human thought, language, perception, or use but that have to be approached in their own autonomous being to properly be thought.68

After perhaps somewhat unfairly setting Judith Butler’s work to one side because, for him, she places far too much emphasis on discursivity,69 he argues that

feminist thought (and here I am not even beginning to do justice to the richness and sophistication of this thought and what has arisen out of those inquiries) forces an encounter with the real of the biological body and the difference it introduces into the world, the real of the sexed body, that exceeds the being of the phenomenological lived body and the discursive body, while somehow still being intertwined with these other two bodies... the forgetting of the real is always a masculine gesture.70

The most crucial point Bryant makes here, however, is that queer theory, among the other “privileged sites” he mentions above, is, although being a marginalized site of realist thought, “in so many respects, ground-zero for object-oriented ontology.” This is a remarkable assertion: no OOO without queer theory, no SR without queer theory.

OOF: Object Oriented Feminism

One of the newest kids on the OOO block is object oriented feminism, another of Bryant’s privileged if marginalized

68 Bryant, “Feminist Metaphysics as Object-Oriented Ontology,” my bolding.
69 There is a fascinating moment in Undoing Gender where Butler promises to write in the future about “the place of sharp machines” and “the technology of the knife in debates about intersexuality and transsexuality alike,” Undoing Gender (London: Routledge, 2004), 64. But she never has, at least to my knowledge, written about this.
70 Bryant, “Feminist Metaphysics as Object-Oriented Ontology.”
sites for realist thought where the “‘really real’ is placed on neither the side of the natural, nor the human.” Graham Harman humbly admits that he “wouldn’t know how to go about constructing”71 an Object-Oriented Feminism but Ian Bogost has blogged the proceedings of a conference as well as his response to all six papers on this very topic held in Indianapolis in October 2010. The two panels, organized by Katherine Behar, who Bryant mentioned in his response to Vitale above, took up the question “what would a program for object-oriented feminism (OOF) entail?”72 Drawing on Bill Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’73 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun used ‘softwarification’ as a way into reconfiguring the relationship between subjects and objects, linking software’s “historical emergence as invisibly visible (or visibly invisible) object” to gendered “hierarchies embedded in its vapory structure.” Patricia Ticineto Clough, whose earlier work on Deleuze and affect was already making these object-oriented moves, tried to rethink “the relationship of language and a subject” which also bringing to the fore “questions about bodies, desires, phantasms.” In the brilliantly titled “Facing Necrophilia, or ‘Botox Ethics,’” Katherine Behar picked up Catherine Malabou’s notion of plasticity, the ways in which it is able to receive or create form and is situated between the extreme points

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72 The panels was held at the 2010 Society for Literature and the Arts Conference. The first panel dealt with general responses to the organizer’s question and the second panel focused in on the theme of the body. There were two responses from Katherine Hayles and Bogost. You can read all six abstracts and Bogost’s response here: http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented_feminism_1.shtml.

73 Bill Brown has somewhat apologetically developed ‘thing theory’ in such a way that its necessity becomes visible and we could add it to Bryant’s list of privileged if marginalized sites for realist thinking which falls outwith the correlationist circle: “Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone?” In Bill Brown (ed) Things (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.
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of taking and annihilating form, to queer the relationship between living and dead objects:74

Just as Object-Oriented Feminism incorporates human and nonhuman objects, it must extend between living objects and dead ones. This paper explores how self-objectifying practitioners of body art and plastic surgery incorporate inertness and deadness within the living self. First we discuss body art and plastic surgery through Catherine Malabou’s concept of brain plasticity, the constitution of oneself through passive reception and active annihilation of form. Malabou associates plasticity’s destructive aspect with plastic explosives and its malleable aspect with sculpture and plastic surgery. Yet seen from under the knife, plastic surgery and body art seem to make plastic objects in Malabou’s full sense of the term. The plastic art object of surgery kills off its old self to sculpt a new one. This brings us to Botox, the snicker-worthy subject at the heart of this paper. In Botox use, optional injections of Botulinum toxin temporarily deaden the face, Emmanuel Levinas’ primary site of living encounter. With Botox, living objects elect to become a little less lively. Botox represents an important ethical gesture: a face-first plunge for living objects to meet dead objects halfway, to locate and enhance what is inert in the living, and extend toward inaccessible deadness with necrophiliac love and compassion. ‘Botox ethics’ hints at how Object-Oriented Feminism might subtly shift object-oriented terms. Resistance to being known twists into resistance to alienation. Concern with qualities of things reconstitutes as concern for qualities of relations. And, speculation on the real becomes performance of the real. Botox ethics experientially transforms empathy for dead counterparts into comingled sympathy. Setting aside aesthetic allure, Botox ethics shoots up.75

This powerful argument (or parts of it) were already implicit in an early attempt (from October 2008) by Ben Woodard to

74 Malabou’s name is rarely invoked in speculative realist (or indeed in queer theoretical) circles but her idea of plasticity is attractive precisely because it is an agent of disobedience, a refusal to submit to a model. See What Should We Do with Our Brain?, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

think speculative realism in relation to the object and ethics. Woodard’s assertion, and this should bring to mind Bryant’s argument about feminist thought and the biological body, is that “the philosophical paradigm of speculative realism can serve to elucidate an ethics of the Real object.” For Woodard, Levinas “sweeps the phallus under the rug of the face” and he suggests that “the object, as a form of immanence” must be “brought into psychoanalysis and opposed to the formal object, the object as concept.” In a typically Schellingian account of slime dynamics, Woodard turns to Iain Hamilton’s Grant’s nature philosophy to argue that “post-Kantian philosophies predominantly ignore the inorganic focusing instead on the opposition of number and animal, epitomized in the contrast between Deleuze and Badiou.” As Woodard understands it, “inorganicity as the self construction of matter, as an ontological protoplasm—the slime of being—provides the very possibility of all philosophy.” Behar’s face-first plunge for “living objects to meet dead objects halfway” obliquely references Karen Barad’s work on ‘agential realism,’ the way bodies intra-act, dynamically and causally. It also calls to mind

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76 Ben Woodard, “The Phallicized Face: Towards an Objectifying Ethics or the (Real) Object of Science,” http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/10/27/the-phallicized-face-towards-an-objectifying-ethics-or-the-real-object-of-science/. In his abstract on feminist metaphysics mentioned above Paul Reid-Bowen confesses that “the irony and/or perversity of proposing this alliance [between objects and objectification], given the history and weight of feminist analyses of sexual objectification, is not lost on me. However, I contend that an Object Oriented Ontology does not run afoul of ethical, political and social feminist critiques of objectification.” Graham Harman comments on this by reminding us that the objects of OOP have “nothing to do with objectification. In fact, they are what resist all objectification. To objectify someone or something is to limit it, to reduce it…by contrast, object-oriented philosophy is by definition an anti-reductionist philosophy. It holds that all things must be taken on their own terms. The reason for complaints about ‘objectification’ is that a false split is made between people and maybe animals who cannot be objectified, and inanimate objects which can. My thesis, by contrast, is that even inanimate objects should not and cannot be objectified.” See http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/levi-on-reid-bowen-on-feminism-and-ooo/.

77 See Karen Barad, “Queer Causation and the Ethics of Mattering,” in Queering the Non/Human, eds. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird (Aldershot: Ashgate,
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Reza Negarestani’s opening up of “the moment of nucleation with nigredo” and the mathesis of decay and putrefaction. ⁷⁸

The meeting between queer theory and speculative realism involves a mutual blackening, a ‘necrophilic intimacy,’ a meeting of necrotizing forces: “if the intelligibility of the world must thus imply a ‘face to face’ coupling of the soul with the body qua dead, then intelligibility is the epiphenomenon of a necrophilic intimacy, a problematic collusion with the rotting double which brings about the possibility of intelligibility within an inert cosmos.” ⁷⁹

Queer theory and speculative realism/object oriented ontology are not so much open to, as opened by each other, in what Bogost calls “carpentry, doing


Negarestani, “The Corpse Bride,” 134-135. See also his “Death as a Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death,” http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=396. For more on Negarestanian necrophilia see my “Cyclonoclasm: Negarestani’s Queer Polytics of the Twist” (forthcoming). In my preface “TwO (Theory without Organs)” to David V. Ruffolo’s Post-Queer Politics (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), x, I make a connection between post-queer politics and Negarestani’s polytics: “We might, borrowing from Reza Negarestani in Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials [Melbourne: Re.Press, 2008], call this a ‘polytics’ of anomalous or unnatural participation with the outside, a set of ‘schizotrategies’ for openness and insurgency.”
Michael O’Rourke – ‘Girls Welcome!!’

philosophy by making things.”

The rest of the papers on the OOF panel turned their attention to the body. Anne Pollock’s “Heart Feminism” asks what “starting from the heart might offer for feminism.” Adam Zaretsky began to formulate an Object-Oriented Bioethics (OOB) and Frenchy Lunning, in a paper on the corset, reflected on the “anamorphic entangled fields of the feminine and the fetish.” Ian Bogost’s extemporized response is interesting since it takes us back to where we began: “I had the expectation that today’s speakers would define ‘object-oriented feminism.’ That they would pin it down, that they would domesticate it, if you want.” But OOF is as undomesticatable as queer theory or speculative realism. It refuses to be pinned down, anatomized, given a precise shape. Instead, Bogost tells us “we saw a fascinating exploration around a theme. A tour of sorts, a kind of Heideggerian pastoral stroll on which aspects of object-oriented ontology were introduced to aspects of feminist theory.” We might supplement Bogost’s observation by saying that aspects of feminist theory were also introduced to aspects of object-oriented ontology in a mutual illumination. As he himself writes in response to Pollock, “going into the

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80 http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented_feminism_1.shtml. This kind of mutual blackening is what has motivated much of the recent Black Metal Theory which shares some important overlaps with speculative realist thought.

81 With the exception of Peter Gratton (see his course syllabus here: http://web.me.com/grattonpeter/2010_Speculative_Realism/Speculative_Realism.html) the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy has been largely absent from speculative realist discourse which is strange given his attention to the sense of all beings-in-the-world, from the human to the animal to the inorganic. The best place to start on Nancy and ‘heart feminism’ however would be his essay “The Heart of Things” in The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 167-188. Jacques Derrida has been equally neglected (frequently ugly debates about Derrida have flared up from time to time in the SR blogosphere in the past year) in both SR and OOO thinking despite some claims that his philosophy anticipates some central OOO concepts. Again, if one simply wanted to start with ‘heart feminism’ you could look to Derrida’s book On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: California University Press, 2005) where he ruminates on Nancy’s heart transplant, technicity and sexual difference.
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body also means going outside of it, like a Möbius strip or a klein bottle.” And this idea extends beyond the biological body because, for Bogost, we have been shown “the value of looking for” Meillassoux’s “great outdoors” inside as well as outside. Object-oriented feminism is, and again this should remind us of Bryant and Barad, “a perturbation of human and world.” Like Butler’s iterability, this agential realism or materialism, which brackets things-in-phenomena allows for new articulations, new configurations, for what Luciana Parisi calls ‘affective relations,’ a community constituted through Barad’s posthuman performativity.82 Such an ethico-

82 Luciana Parisi, “The Nanoengineering of Desire” in Giffney and Hird, Queering the Non/Human, 283-310. Parisi’s work is heavily influenced by the blackened Deleuzoguattarianism of Nick Land and her book Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology and the Mutations of Desire maps a complex web of intricate relations between humans and non/humans. In an interview with Matthew Fuller she explains that:

“Abstract Sex addresses human stratification on three levels. The biophysical, the biocultural and the biodigital amalgamation of layers composing a constellation of bodies within bodies, each grappled within the previous and the next formation—a sort of positive feedback upon each other cutting across specific time scales. In other words, these levels of stratification constitute for Abstract Sex the endosymbiotic dynamics of organization of matter—a sort of antigenealogical process of becoming that suspends the teleology of evolution and the anthropocentrism of life. From this standpoint, the modalities of human optimism, rooted in the net substantial distinction between the good and the evil and the distinct belief in negative forces, fail to explain the continual collision and coexistence of the distinct layers. Following the law of morality, human optimism would never come to terms with its own paradoxes of construction and destruction. And if it does it is soon turned into an existential crisis giving in to the full force of negating power and thus all becomes intolerable. Once we are forced to engage with the way layers collide in the human species—the way some biophysical and biocultural sedimentations rub against each other under certain pressures and in their turn the way they are rubbed against by the biodigital mutations of sensory perception for example—then the moral stances of optimism and pessimism make no longer sense. Indeed we need to leap towards a plane debunked of ultimate moral judgement. A plane full of practice and contingent activities, where we find ourselves plunged in a field of relation—interdependent ecologies of forces (attractors, pressures, thresholds), which trigger in us modifications that resonate across all scales of organization.”

politics (and the queering of the normativities of both queer theory and speculative realism themselves) depends on what Agamben calls ‘the open,’ a process which does not follow some preconceived teleological programme. There can be no program for what queer theory or speculative realism or object oriented approaches do. They are not means to an end but rather means ‘without end.’

Naught Thought: On Ben Woodard’s Queer Speculative Realism

If for Bogost one of the promising aspects of OOF is that it looks for the great outdoors inside as well as outside then we might not see Ben Woodard’s nihilist speculative realism as an ally for object oriented feminisms or queer theories. Indeed in his most recent work Woodard has cautioned that philosophy can only ever return to the ‘great outdoors’ if it “leaves behind the dead loop of the human skull.” That said, Woodard’s essays on his Naught Thought blog have consistently led the way when it comes to queering speculative realism and to advancing the politics of a queered speculative realism. We have already seen his discussion of the “phallicization of ethics” but we might also consider his various writings on gender, sexuality, psychoanalysis, anorexia, trauma as clearing a ground for queer speculations. I will isolate just a few


85 Woodard has engaged with the queer theories of Lauren Berlant on fetal citizenship, Ann Cvetkovich on affect and Lee Edelman on reproductive futurism in a number of posts. For example see “Migrations of Trauma,” http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/01/19/migrations-of-trauma/ and “Trauma’s Transmogrifications,” http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2007/10/27/traumas-transmogrifications/. Three other names one associates with speculative realism, Dominic Fox (who blogs at Poetix), Mark Fisher (who blogs at K-Punk) and Nina Power (who blogs at Infinite Thought),
exemplary posts. As Bryant has reminded us it is masculinism which forgets the real of the biological body and it is feminist thought which remembers it. One figure who has been largely forgotten by the speculative realists is Katerina Kolozova and Woodard returns her to her proper place in his post “Meshing the Real and the Transcendental or Katerina Kolozova.”86 He tells us that “jumping from Judith Butler, to Rosi Braidotti, to Drucilla Cornell, to Derrida, to Lacan (with thinkers such as Badiou, Derrida and Deleuze sprinkled throughout) Kolozova formulates a breathtakingly lucid and powerfully political, theoretical and social system.” One of the reasons why Kolozova has not been prominent in SR discussions is that speculative realism “has been more than slightly ambiguous as to its relation to psychoanalysis.” Bryant and Negarestani are two very obvious counter-examples but Woodard cites Brassier’s limp deployments of the term ‘unconscious’ and its near absence in the texts of other speculative realists as evidence. But Kolozova’s psychoanalytically-inflected, Laruellian non-philosophical system, is clearly a prime, if again shunted to the margins, site for realist and non-correlationist thinking about the body, sexual difference and identity:

If, as Kolozova suggests, the body is the nearest bearer of the Real of our being, how do we articulate a politics which is different from the tired attempts of identity politics? If we carry the real with us, and our experiences can touch upon the real, what is to separate a politics of the embodied Real versus an identity politics? The difference that Kolozova ends on is that since identity is always a failure to grasp the Real and sense the World, as experiential, is what forces and faces the Real of such materialism, we can only remind ourselves that such a world is not-All, that the World can never grasp identity as such let alone any singular human in their automatic solitude. The strength here is that Kolozova seems bolder than Badiou in dismissing the pre-Evental

have also critiqued Edelman’s book No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.

non-subject and more optimistic than Transcendental Materialism in that not only can the subject think the gap that it is but that the gap does the thinking, that the Real itself desires to be transcendental to, in a sense, be political.\footnote{Ibid.}

Shortly before this post on Kolozova’s politics, Woodard had worked though a provisional speculative realist politics (in June 2008, two years exactly before Vitale’s post on the lack of political engagement of SR), wisely rejecting Lee Edelman’s No Future and its misleading politics of the Real along the way.\footnote{Ben Woodard, “Heaps of Slime or Towards a Speculative Realist Politics,” http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/06/20/heaps-of-slime-or-towards-a-speculative-realist-politics/. In their interviews with Woodard in The Speculative Turn both Žižek and Badiou argue that speculative realism lacks political purchase.} Woodard gently argues that the “End of Time” section of Brassier’s Nihil Unbound “leans towards what might be a politics, in that, jumping from Freud’s theory of the drive as repetition, there is an inherent will-to-know in humans that is, contrary to most of the universe, negentropic.” The question he proceeds to ask is: “how does one account for the genesis of the multitude in a non-vitalist way, in a philosophically realist way, that does not occlude the possibility of politics?” He partially answers that speculative realism “provides a step in the right direction in that it illustrates the radicality of thought by ‘immanentizing’ the transcendental by binding it to the object.” But the full answer he moves towards is that the implicit politics in Speculative Realism is found in its return to slime as the trace of life, that the smudge of materiality cannot be idealized away, not even in the most basic form of relation itself, in the notion of currency and exchange. This zero point of being is, in a sense, a paradoxically deanthropomorphized bio-politics—that matter matters in that it can think itself as such without recourse to the reflective structures of ethics or democracy. Speculative Realism exposes that the zombic hunger of Hardt and Negri’s multitude is a form of thinking and not a form of being. The psychoanalytic contribution here is that
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capital, while inhabiting the drive’s mode of iteration, is still subject to alteration. In thinking capital as object we highlight the objects around it as possibly dissociable from it such as democracy and the social.

Conclusion: Some Sightings and Speculations

In Circus Philosophicus, Graham Harman asks us to imagine a “giant ferris wheel” with thousands “of separate cars, each of them loaded with various objects.”89 This final section paints a picture of several ferris wheels, each one containing glimpses of encounters between queer theory and speculative thought, which readers can then pause and fix in their minds as they continue to wheel around.

Ferris Wheel #1: Neomaterialist Feminism

This wheel would contain texts by various thinkers associated with (a mostly Deleuzian) neomaterialist or neovitalist feminism which has been sensitive to the nonhuman, the inorganic and the vibrancy of matter. This would include theorists such as Stengers,90 Elizabeth Grosz,91 Rosi Braidotti,92 Manuel de Landa,93 Myra Hird94 and Claire Colebrook.95 It

89 Harman, Circus Philosophicus, 1.
90 Isabelle Stengers, Cosmopolitics 1, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
95 Claire Colebrook, “How Queer Can You Go? Theory, Normality and Normativity” in Giffney and Hird, Queering the Non/Human, 17-34. Colebrook’s
Michael O’Rourke – ‘Girls Welcome!!!’

would also hold Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* which rethinks the partition of the sensible (in Rancière’s terms) where matter is seen as inert and human beings are understood as vibrant. She turns the “figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange… [and] in the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* [of thunder storms, stem cells, fish oils, metal, trash, electricity] can start to take shape.” 96

_Ferris Wheel #2: THE SEX APPEAL OF THE INORGANIC_

This wheel takes its name from Mario Perniola’s book *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* which strangely hasn’t exerted much of an influence on speculative realism. 97 In it we would discover figures and texts desiring a re-cycling of the world, a world re-encountered in which each singular being is exposed to an existence they share with other beings (from shells, to hammers, to clouds, to crystals, to storms). The wonder involved in this encounter which shakes all our anthropocentric certainties, is we might say, after Sara Ahmed, a ‘queer phenomenology.’ In Ahmed’s terms, a reorientation toward the world and its objects (tables and pebbles are among her gorgeous examples), such a making strange, is what “allows the familiar to dance with life again.” 98 Among the other texts housed here would be those which return an agential dynamism to the non-living, the inanimate and the inert: Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time* which queers the distinction between man

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and animal by mining the paradox between the human invention of the technical and the technical invention of the human;⁹⁹ Nikki Sullivan and Sam Murray’s Somatechnics which plasticizes, intertwines and en-folds man and animal, human and object;¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Stories of Stone,” a geochoreographesis in which he explores the life of stone, allowing it to breathe and speak as it “confounds the boundary between organic and inorganic, art and nature, human and mineral.”¹⁰¹ It would also include Shannon Bell’s Fast Feminism, a philo-porno-political machine in which she fucks Stelarc’s six-legged walking robot and tissue-engineers a male phallus, a female phallus and a Bataillean big toe in a “bioreactor where they formed into a neo-organ.”¹⁰² Also here we would discover Dinesh Wadiwel’s essay “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic” where in the fisting scene a whole range of “nonhuman material objects are also important entities within networks of erotic production. A sling, a piece of lingerie, a whip or a vibrator may all play significant if not indispensable roles in enabling an erotic scene to happen.”¹⁰³

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¹⁰⁰ Nikki Sullivan and Sam Murray (eds), Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2009). In my preface to the book, “Originary Somatechnicity,” (xiii) I wrote that they “disclose that there is not just an originary technicity but also an originary somaticisation of the technical object. Their queer intervention, the space they open for us in a deft disoriginating move, is to begin to think an originary somatechnicity.”

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Stories of Stone,” postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies ½ (2010): 56-63. Medieval Studies has proved to be a particularly fertile site for speculative realist thinking. Two other essays in the inaugural issue of postmedieval by Michael Witmore (“We have Never not Been Inhuman”) and Julian Yates (“It’s (for) You; or, the Tele-t-r/opical Post-Human”) engage with Meillassoux and Harman. In her response essay the feminist N. Katherine Hayles picks up on this and also references both Harman and Bogost when she writes that “alien phenomenologists gather information about tools to understand them not as accessories to human culture but as subjects that perceive and act in the world,” Hayles, “Posthuman Ambivalence,” 266.

¹⁰² Shannon Bell, Fast Feminism (New York: Autonomedia, 2010), 183.

¹⁰³ Dinesh Wadiwel, “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic” in Noreen Giffney
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Ferris Wheel #3: PERSONS AND THINGS

This wheel gets its name from Barbara Johnson’s Persons and Things which isn’t often remembered when speculative realists and object oriented ontologists are reconfiguring relations between subjects and objects.\(^{104}\) Bracha Ettinger’s post-Lacanian work on the matrixial belongs here too.\(^{105}\) It shares much on the level of style with Negarestani’s psychoanalytic territopic materialisms;\(^{106}\) her matrixiality may have affinities with Iain Hamilton Grant’s dark chemistry of ur-slime;\(^{107}\) and she makes it clear how Meillassoux’s hyperchaos also refers to the absolute contingency of gender.

Ferris Wheel #4: OBJECT ORIENTED MATERNITY

Ettinger could also take her place in this wheel alongside Lisa Baraitser’s Maternal Encounters where she theorizes maternal ‘stuff,’ the many objects which encumber the mother’s body. These ‘maternal objects’ are variously figured by Baraitser as Latourian ‘actants’ or Harmanian ‘tool-beings.’ And these tool-beings include clothes, blankets, quilts, bottles, teats, milk powder, sterilizers, breast pumps, feeding spoons and bowls, juice bottles and bibs, pacifiers, mobiles, rattles, nappies, wipes, changing mats, creams, powders, cribs, cots, baskets, baby monitors, mobiles, prams, buggies, carry cots, slings, back packs, car seats and so ever infinitely on.\(^{108}\)

and Michael O’Rourke (eds) The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2009), 492.


\(^{105}\) Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, The Matrixial Borderspace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).


\(^{108}\) Lisa Baraitser, Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption (London:
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Ferris Wheel #5: *Here Comes Everything!*

The ferris wheels of speculative realism, object oriented ontology and queer theory have been shown to be interlocking or each perhaps as tiny wheels imagined inside each other. If Bryant hopes that speculative realism and OOO will create projects for others then what we need to ensure is that the wheels keep spinning and that we never try to pin things down. If we refuse to spell out a programmatic content for speculative thought then it will always retain the power to wrench frames and whenever and wherever queer theory (or better queer theories) and speculative realism (or better speculative realisms) meet that “fantastic explosion”109 promises an irreducible openness to everything.