

## Queer Theory & Speculative Realism: A Real Foundation for Queer Politics

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### ABSTRACT

Queer theory has emerged over the past two decades as a political theory that questions the necessity of hegemonic, heteronormative political structures and that values the multiplicitous understanding of subjects as limitless in their possible sexual subjectivities. Speculative realist thinkers, such as Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou, have dealt with metaphysical questions about the foundation of being and causality with theories that use mathematical principles as justification. This paper engages with and attempts to take Meillassoux's principle of factiality, which absolutizes contingency, as a queering of natural laws. It also understands Badiou's set theory-as-ontology, and subsequent real ontological multiplicity, as a queering of ontology. The queering of speculative realism is important because it gives queer theory a foundation in the question of what is real, at the fundamental level of being. This paper will then use this foundation to challenge the ideology of previous queer theory and thought, and will present speculative realism as a way to advance beyond the necessity of holding any dominant political idea, such as heteronormativity, to be necessary. Based on the multiplicity and contingency of being, I will argue that political thought must make use of these ideas in order to avoid falling into ideological traps. An engagement with Meillassoux and Badiou allows queer theory and speculative realism to coordinate as theories that reject necessity and affirm multiplicity as the essence of being, giving theoretical power to queer theory as a political movement.

Queer theory, as a political philosophy, does not aim to make claims about metaphysics, or what we understand as the realm of the real. By metaphysics, I am referring to theories about the fundamental essence of the world. Metaphysics is often paired with the idea of ontology, which is defined as the understanding of being, or how things come into being. Queer theory can gain validity and strength from an alignment of its political ideas with a metaphysical theory that justifies them. The recent theory of speculative realism is an important turn for philosophy not only in its movement toward a well-justified, non-dogmatic metaphysics, but also in its ability to provide a theoretical foundation for political thought. This theoretical foundation can lead to practical results in the political realm. The philosophers Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux are two thinkers involved in the movement of speculative re-

alism, and their metaphysical theories provide justification for an ontology based in multiplicity, rather than singular unity. This means the world is not composed of unchanging units, but instead everything that comes into being has an infinite number of potential ways of being throughout its existence<sup>1</sup>. Speculative realism also questions the necessity of causal relationships in the world, claiming that whatever is seen to be necessary in our understanding of the world is actually contingent. Queer theory, as a political theory, assumes the value of multiplicity (an assumption that will be expanded on later in this paper), and it sees structures of society such as the nuclear family and compulsory heterosexuality as contingent. Opponents of queer ideas base their defense of hegemonic social structures in their necessity, like the importance of maintaining heterosexual relationships for biological, reproductive purposes. The ability to critique ostensibly necessary social structures from a metaphysical standpoint gives potency to queer theory, and this is found in speculative realism and its defense of multiplicity at the heart of what is real.

Alain Badiou defines political thinking as thought that “circulates around theoretical hypotheses, statements and singular situations.”<sup>2</sup> In his elaboration on political thinking he describes it as searching “within a situation for a possibility that the dominant state of things does not allow to be seen.”<sup>3</sup> As a speculative realist who offers a metaphysical theory of multiplicity, here he also seems to be describing a theory that would apply as well to queer theory and its political processes. First, one must give a definition of queer theory. As O’Rourke states, “queerness...is about a disintrication from heteronormative and hegemonic regimes.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, queer theory questions the dominant state of things and gives way to new possibilities and new political ideas. The aim of this paper will be to analyze the work of speculative realism, and make clear how it aligns with queer theory’s desire to question hegemonic regimes. Although speculative realism features many different areas of thought, certain concepts put forward by Meillassoux and Badiou will be the focus of this paper. The goal for queer theory is not necessarily to make speculative realist claims itself, but to see how some of these concepts

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1 Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 13.

2 Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 60

3 Ibid, 62.

4 Ibid, 9.

put forth by speculative realism can be seen as clear arguments for the claim that queer theory has a basis in a conception of the real.

Much of the critique of queer theory, or queerness in general, relies on arguments that it does not represent “reality”, and therefore a metaphysical theory that could ground queer theory would be a powerful response to those arguments. I will argue that when speculative realism puts forward a principle or ontology that speaks of the real as multiplicity, or puts forward an absolute of openness, which is therefore a rejection of closed, necessary systems, these principles are “queered” insofar as they reject normative and hegemonic dogma. On another level of analysis, it is also equally important to examine these speculative realist principles, as they will allow queer theory and commentary on it to align with the real on the political level. As a political movement, queer theory can gain from an understanding of what contemporary thinkers are taking to be claims of the real, and supporters of queer theory can reject unfounded criticisms.

One way speculative realism aligns with queer theory is in queer theory’s rejection of a rigid normativity, replaced instead by a stance encouraging multiplicity and openness to the unknown and queer aspects of life.<sup>5</sup> As Michael O’Rourke argues, “perhaps the power and virtue of both queer theory and speculative realism, what makes them so compatible...is their very undefinability, their provisionality, and, most importantly, their openness.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, queer theory can take the insights of speculative realism and push conceptions of queerness, and its political intervention, in new directions. I claim that political philosophies such as queer theory should become more conversant with philosophies of the real, and allow their political work to be based on an understanding of the nature of the real that underlies political systems.

An important concept in Quentin Meillassoux’s work is the principle of factuality. Meillassoux takes the notion of contingency, or chance, and absolutizes it based on mathematical laws. Contingency refers to the notion that whatever exists comes to exist by chance, meaning there is no necessary cause which leads to the existence of anything.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael O’Rourke, “The Afterlives of Queer Theory”, in *Continent* 1.2 (2011), 1.

<sup>6</sup> O’Rourke, “Girls Welcome!!!”, 1.

Meillassoux argues that by absolutizing facticity itself, “it is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist.”<sup>7</sup> This notion allows for a principle that can lay some groundwork for questions of multiplicity in realism, as well as make room for inconsistency within questions of the real.

Meillassoux argues the absoluteness of facticity by rejecting any belief in a principle of sufficient reason. This principle makes it necessary that there is a cause for every thing existing in the universe. Meillassoux instead gives an argument for the principle of unreason, based on the argument that any cause can have hundreds of potential outcomes, and therefore causes do not have the linear expression philosophers like Kant would argue for. Meillassoux’s principle of unreason states “there is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is.”<sup>8</sup> . The principle of unreason, however, amounts to what appears to be a purely negative stance, and Meillassoux desires to go even further in outlining his principle. Therefore, the principle of factuality is what he uses to describe facticity as an absolute. Meillassoux, when describing the principle of factuality, states, “only the contingency of what is, is not itself contingent.”<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux’s uses several arguments based on the logical laws to prove his theory.

It is in this way that Meillassoux presents his speculative realism, in that the only thing that can be said to be necessary is the fact that nothing that exists is necessary. This, for Meillassoux, is an absolute principle. To put this idea in more basic terms, his theory argues that something does not come to be the way it is based on there being a direct causal sequence that can be traced through its past. Instead, he proves that any cause can have an infinite number of effects, and therefore the fact that the world exists the way it does today is not based on a necessary historical progress. The world exists as it does today because these are the effects that have happened to occur, and the elements of our world will continue to unfold in a contingent, infinite number of ways. Factuality, then, can be defined as the queering of natural laws, or the rejection of necessity within the realm of mathemat-

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7 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, Continuum, London (2008), 60.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid, 80.

ical discourse, as a queering of natural law would imply. Although he claims to avoid the metaphysical, I claim that Meillassoux's work still has an impact on the way we understand causality and the way our world operates, which should influence our view of necessity within politics.

One aspect of speculative realism has been to go beyond issues of identity politics, since this kind of political thought promotes an understanding of difference that rejects any idea of the real that goes beyond local levels. O'Rourke argues, "if we insist on beginning queering speculative realism by labeling ourselves as 'gay' or 'queer', then we are very much on the wrong track."<sup>10</sup> Here the political aspect of speculative realism makes its impact, as the rejection of identity-based politics challenges queer theory to go beyond questions of identity as well. As identity politics is seen as a consequence of post-modern theories that reject all metaphysical claims, the speculative realist political project is based on a willingness to question the fundamental nature of the world. Queerness must present itself alongside ideas of ontological truth. It can make use of the universalized, formalized multiplicity that is posited by speculative realism in its task to disassemble hegemonic ideology from society. Rather than present queerness as necessary, it can instead be seen as one aspect of coordinating with an ontological position that allows for a fully formalized, open system of multiplicity. This open system can be found within Alain Badiou's use of set theory as ontology, and his operation of the "count-for-One", as further speculative realist ground for queer theory's political project.

For queer theory to be useful in conjunction with speculative realism it must avoid falling into Meillassoux's definition of ideology. Politically, to be accused of being merely ideological involves taking social norms as necessary rather than as contingent.<sup>11</sup> Badiou argues "philosophy is ill, it might be dying,"<sup>12</sup> because of the course it has taken since Kant. This may also appear true for queer theory, but as Badiou claims of philosophy in general, there is optimism for queer theory in a return to questions of metaphysics, and to the speculative nature of this new

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10 O'Rourke, "Girls Welcome!!!", 9.

11 Slavoj Zizek, "Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today", in *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne: re-press, 2011), 208.

12 Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 42.

form of realism. Badiou's ontology as set theory is one that formalizes multiplicity, and this is the second aspect of speculative realist ontology that can give queer theory a theoretical foundation in the real. Set theory, at its basic level, is what allows for a fundamental understanding of multiplicity as underlying the way things come into being. A set of numbers, "a, b, c" has a first, second and third number. When the first number, "a", is considered, it is simply counted as "a" itself, first in its set, and not as the principle of "oneness", like one might expect when observing the first number in a set of numbers. Sets are then made to include other sets of numbers, to infinite possibilities. Set theory does not allow for one set that encompasses all other sets. For this to be the case, a set "would have to include itself, which is expressly forbidden."<sup>13</sup> This set that counted all other sets would itself be counted as one, which would result in the formation of a brand new set beyond all others, ad infinitum. No set can be understood to encompass all others without renewing this process of set formation. This mathematical theory shows that multiplicity exists as a mathematical law, and proves that, ontologically, there can be no removal of multiplicity by subsuming all sets into an all-consuming set. There is a "great flexibility of set theory,"<sup>14</sup> in that multiplicity will exist even when identity is removed from any set. Badiou's ontology is not one that seeks to address what he calls meta-ontology, or the nature of any particular type of being. As a radicalized ontology, it does not ensure that any cause or substance will exist in the world. It is, solely, a claim "saying there is a multiplicity of multiplicities."<sup>15</sup> Since this has validity as a mathematical and logical truth, it translates to a necessary truth about the underlying essence of being.

Badiou's conception of set theory as ontology is aligned with speculative realism, as both go beyond the idea that we have no access to the realm of the real. Badiou's philosophy is based on mathematics' ability to exist independent of being as it is presented to us, as truth that needs no actual empirical evidence. His ontology suggests, "There is no basic or primordial unity to these multiplicities."<sup>16</sup> However, he

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid, 13.

15 Ibid, 17.

16 Ibid, 8.

does recognize that in the presentation of being, there is a certain semblance of unity, which he explains in his conception of the count-for-one. O'Rourke discusses this operation in its relation to queer theory, stating, "the count-as-one is...an operation that transforms an inconsistent multiplicity into a consistent multiplicity."<sup>17</sup> Like in the previous example of "a" being nothing but the first number in its particular set, the use of the count-for-one imagines the presentation of multiple multiplicities as an operation that consistently occurs. This differs from a process that is the presentation of something that has already existed. This operation is useful in explaining the way new entities can be produced, rather than seeing entities as the reproduction of previously existing entities. Each entity is counted as one, and the oneness of each entity is helpful in explaining the way new entities are capable of being counted as they occur.<sup>18</sup> This is part of the foundation of Badiou's real ontological multiplicity, rooted in mathematics, as a metaphysical account of multiplicity.

Badiou believes that ontology can say nothing about the identity of any concrete situation, except to say that if you take such ontology seriously, you can question the necessity of any one political system. Badiou's ontology removes identity as an important aspect of a political theory. In a political alignment with this account of ontology, moving away from identity politics is perhaps what will allow queer theory to question the necessity of hegemonic political systems. As with factiality, queer theory can see set theory and the count-for-one as the queering of ontology in its ability to define the real as formalizable multiplicity.

Can we posit queer theory as a challenge to the necessity of hegemony, and to the necessity of heteronormativity? Does queer theory, as Badiou asks, go beyond the dominant way things are seen? The problem with many queer political movements is that they become defined by ideology, and in their questioning of norms inevitably develop new norms that become a new standard of "queerness". In this way, their language becomes empty rhetoric rather than a consistent push for new possibilities within a dominant state of affairs. These cultural or political ideologies become un-queer, and part of a new hegemonic (but supposedly queer-friendly) system of necessity. For O'Rourke, queer

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<sup>17</sup> O'Rourke, "Girls Welcome!!!", 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



theory had succumbed to its own hegemony, in that “it had become, contrary to its own antiassimilationist rhetoric, fashionable, very much included, rather than being the outlaw, it wanted to be.”<sup>19</sup> Contrary to this notion, queer theory must align itself with the radicalization of difference, and continually question ideologies that threaten to arise as semblances of necessity, or the real.

Previously open queer cultural movements have become subsumed within political and capitalist systems, helping to develop new standards for what being “gay” or “lesbian” amounts to. Marketing has become attuned to these specific communities, and difference has come simply to be seen as a new plateau on which already existing queer cultures become accepted into a more tolerant, accepting world. Instead of embracing new worlds that observe something aligned with Badiou’s real ontological multiplicity, this ideology simply institutes new norms for specific queer behaviour and existence. The increasing awareness of difference within the queer front, and the attempt to apply all identities under a queer banner, has been a very important step in understanding the intersection of difference between individuals, and the possibilities for new ways of being. However, identification with a movement is always limiting, and is in opposition to the real radical difference and constant push for new possibilities of being for which queer theory should allow. The difference presented among queerness, from transfolk, to two-spirited folks, to heterosexual allies, constitutes a politics of identity that creates so many possible identities that it seems unnecessary and almost farcical to have a specific acronym that subsumes them all. If difference is truly multiplicitous in an open system with no shortage of possibility, there will be no realm in which all that is different can be coined under an all-consuming queer acronym. Some conceptions of the queer acronym have come to include “LGBTQQ”, “FABGLITTER” and “QUILTBAG”,<sup>20</sup> making the recognition of identity seem almost more important than the recognition of difference itself. Using the work of speculative realism, and by embracing a real ontological multiplicity, queerness has a ground according to which identity need not be defined. Identity could no longer be the sole ground used for political projects,

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19 O’Rourke, “The Afterlives”, 104.

20 Keith W. Swain, “Gay pride needs new direction”, in *Denver Post*, (June 24, 2006)

[[http://www.denverpost.com/ci\\_6198394](http://www.denverpost.com/ci_6198394)], Date accessed: December 12, 2011.



and the inclusion of difference as a principle could be the uniting force as an ontological real. Just as no set can subsume all other sets, there is no nameable “queer” acronym that can subsume difference. The queering of speculative realism inspires political imagination, and can provide these new horizons for queer thought.

In a recent article in *The Globe and Mail*, research presents lesbian parents as “highly effective” as a whole, with statistics that state that there has been zero instances, or zero reports, of child abuse so far in lesbian families, and claims that some “lesbian” habits have been found to be excellent parenting tactics.<sup>21</sup> Although the presentation of queer parenting as effective rather than harmful (as has been the norm until recently) is useful in fighting homophobic conceptions of queer reproduction, the use of research to imply that all lesbians are good mothers risk instituting a norm of lesbian parenting as a necessary ideal. To put one form of queer childbearing on a pedestal, as if the identity of two mothers is what is required for ideal parenting, eliminates the amount of difference and multiplicity not just among queer parents in general, but even among lesbians, and so constitutes ideology. Searching for a new identity of ideal parenthood is something queer theory must reject because it does little to dispose of hegemonic structures, and instead merely repositions these structures in new ways.

An example of the use of speculative realism in queer theory is the way it rejects necessity in examples of heteronormative so-called reals, in favour of the queer nature of factuality. This is noticeable in the realm of reproduction. In this way I agree with O’Rourke, who quotes from a conference discussing speculative realism, that speculative realism’s “appearance on the scene is an invitation, or a dare even, to queer theory to go beyond itself.”<sup>22</sup> The necessity of heteronormativity in notions of reproduction and birth are wiped away by the capacity for a multiplicity of ways of reproducing. During a speech at said conference, it is noted, “we now have technical-biological capabilities to generate new organisms without heteronormativity, in ways that queer theory

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21 Denise Balkissoon, “The seven habits of highly effective lesbian families” in *The Globe and Mail* (Nov, 2011), 1.

22 O’Rourke, “Girls Welcome!!!”, 7.

has never dreamed of.”<sup>23</sup> This is a way in which new operations (like a material example of the count-for-one) are occurring, while contradicting the notion of the necessity of heterosexuality in reproduction. In the article describing highly effective lesbian parents, one of the children interviewed mentions the excellent name children of queers have adopted, “queer spawn”, which illustrates that children of queer parents come to exist in a multiplicitous way, yet still have a place in the queer movement.<sup>24</sup> This term represents recognition of their place within the queer, but focuses on the queerness of the child as result of a multitude of possible reproductive practices, without focus on how one is biologically born as necessity. More and more, the new is occurring in a contingent way, with previous ideas of causation, such as heterosexual intercourse, becoming queered. Once again, the queering of natural laws (or factuality) gives an ontological basis with which queer theory can politically align itself.

One critical response to the alignment of speculative realism with the political (and the queer) may question why the real, as understood by speculative realism, has any implications for issues like queer theory that can only be understood on subjective levels. It is true that queer theory will remain a movement that prioritizes one’s experience as a queer person, and the effects of political systems on subjects. However, much of what occurs in the political realm aligns with ideology, with little care for the real. Truth is not the necessary underlying desire on which systems are based, and instead pragmatism in a Machiavellian sense becomes the order for political systems. As long as whatever is represented politically appears to work for the good of those who exist within a political system, alignment with realist ontology is of little necessity to the political realm, and therefore might not take precedence in imagining new political philosophies.

To change this, queer theory must seek to change what is subjective reality for people into an alignment with the real. We should be basing our political structure on what we know is the structure of the real. Speculative realism gives us a way to gain knowledge of the

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23 Ibid.

24 Balkissoon, “The seven habits”, 3.

fundamental aspects of being, beyond subjective experience. While all political questions will necessarily be based in subjective experience, the insights of speculative realism can allow for political structures to be based on the observance of what is real. Therefore, if the real implies an ontological multiplicity and a fundamental inconsistency and difference, political structure must align with this ontological difference. Badiou uses his ontological real to question capitalism, which presents itself as if it aligns with natural human law. Indeed, many arguments for the value of capitalism are based on how it is a natural representation of our human nature, or our “real”. Capitalism is an example of an ideology, as it is a contingent system that presents itself as necessary, and this is what gives it so much power as a dominant ideology. Speculative realism gives queer theory a justified, non-ideological power as an ontological reality of multiplicity and contingency, and with this it can allow the hegemonic, heteronormative political system to change and align with what we know as the multiplicitous real.

In conclusion, as insights of speculative realism, Meillassoux’s principle of factuality and Badiou’s set theory as ontology can be queered as queer theory connects itself with these contemporary philosophical concepts. The political nature of queer theory may not go beyond our subjective experience, which speculative realism aims to go beyond in its thought, but in many ways the work of queer theory can be seen as a political alignment of the open, multiplicitous ontological system argued for by much of speculative realism. Speculative realism has dared queer theory to go beyond its post-modern roots, and its interest in identity politics. The formalization of multiplicity and the necessity of contingency are foundational philosophical moves that queer theory can embrace as its work becomes more universal, and as it engages with speculative realism’s quest for the real. As two relatively young movements in thought, both with openness to broad philosophical speculation, queer theory and speculative theory can come together to question ideology, and envision a political system that coordinates with the real of multiplicity in contemporary speculative realist discourse.

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