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Geologies of Finitude: The Deep Time of Twenty-First-Century Catastrophe in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century has seen a transformation of twentieth-century narrative and historical discourse. On the one hand, the Cold War national fantasy of mutually assured destruction has multiplied, producing a diverse array of apocalyptic visions. On the other, there has been an increasing sobriety about human finitude, especially considered in the light of emerging discussions about deep time. This essay argues that Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010) and Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008) make strong cases for the novel's continuing ability to complicate and illuminate contemporaneity. Written in the midst of the long and disastrous U.S. incursions in the Middle East, DeLillo and Negarestani raise important political questions about the ecological realities of the War on Terror. Each novel acknowledges that though the catastrophic present cannot be divorced from the inevitable doom at the end of the world, we still desperately need to imagine something else.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; *Cyclonopedia*; deep time; Don DeLillo; geology; *Point Omega*; Reza Negarestani; novel; War on Terror

Someone could invent a fable [...] and yet they would still have not given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature; there were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened. —Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”

The most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world. —Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

The increasing invocation of deep time in a variety of discourses signals one of the more notable transformations of the post–Cold War global disaster imaginary. During the middle of the twentieth century, United States cultural production confronted the potential for human extinction largely through the projection of relatively instantaneous disaster and rupture in the figures of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and different “day after” postapocalyptic scenarios. Such narratives framed human life as eminently fragile while also technologically in control of its own destiny: humans would have a future of some kind if only they could avoid blowing themselves up. Though the twentieth-century nuclear tropes of instantaneous human extinction and postapocalyptic aftermath are certainly still with us—evidenced by the annual parade of Hollywood blockbusters that annihilate large populations in increasingly dramatic ways—the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of considering geologic timescales, and humans’ relatively minuscule stature in the face of such temporalities, as an important mode of thinking in a number of different registers. From the problems future generations might face if nuclear waste is buried beneath Yucca Mountain in Nevada, to Naomi Klein’s striking environmental call to arms in her recent book, *This Changes Everything* (2014), to Wai Chee Dimock’s reading of American literature through the lens of deep

time, to the emphasis on nonhuman temporalities by speculative realists attempting to formulate a non-correlationist philosophy, there has been a surge of emphasis on deep time as an important horizon for thought.¹

Often these invocations of deep time serve principally rhetorical ends. Faced with a seemingly intractable U.S. legislature and a multinational capitalism incapable of confronting global climate change in any significant way, focusing on species finitude, either in the long or short term, seems like an appropriate argumentative gambit for those trying to convince people of the need for drastic changes in their relationship to the environment. Indeed, in the past few years, a number of popular books have appeared that take a very long view of human life and planetary history to support their arguments. Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2007), for instance, speculatively "pictures[s] a world from which we all suddenly vanished. Tomorrow" and asks, "Is it possible that, instead of heaving a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us?" (4, 5). Weisman then goes on to explore how the sudden absence of humans would affect the planet, in both the short and long term, in order to complicate the human/nature divide and to emphasize the need for a more rigorous ecological thinking when confronted by contemporary postnatural environmental realities. Other recent books emphasizing humanity's place in biological and geological histories of the planet include the work of Elizabeth Kolbert, Craig Childs, Jacob Darwin Hamblin, and others.² Taken together, these authors signal a desperate need to reimagine and reconfigure human institutions in the face of observable climate change and what many are calling the "Anthropocene." This widespread emphasis on human finitude in relationship to deep histories of the Earth indicates how truly difficult considered, rational arguments for such changes are in the face of contemporary institutional and economic realities.

Further, the *speculative* nature of many of these nonfiction books should be emphasized. Long the province of novels and dramatic film, at times these authors' imaginative stagings of global risk (especially Weisman's) better resemble the genre of postapocalyptic fiction than they do traditional modes of nonfiction.³ Indeed, deep time appears as if it may be more coherently accessed in works of postnatural history than in literary fiction. Compare such visions of deep time, for instance, to some of the more visible ecological disaster narratives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century science and speculative fiction (SF), which often eschew representations of long temporalities for visions of more immediate disaster. Films such as M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008) and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009), and novels such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy (1993–1996) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013)—just to name a very few texts—all formally rely on rather immediate environmental catastrophe in some form or another, on what Frank Kermode, following Aristotle, calls *peripeteia*: "a disconfirmation followed by a consonance" (18).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the environmental imagination of the twenty-first century has often projected relatively instantaneous human extinction. As Lawrence Buell famously suggests, "apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285), and because it is rather difficult to narrate ecological change, it is understandable if initial responses to climate change resemble the imagination of a previous age, particularly with these texts' continued use of the nuclear trope of instantaneous destruction. (Indeed, a pressing apocalyptic threat in a jeremiad can be a powerful rhetorical figure.) But the realities of living on the earth in the present and future involve different kinds of timescales than the instantaneity, fallout, and aftermath of global thermonuclear war. They also demand different ways of conceiving and organizing time than the *peripeteia* necessary in conventional narrative architecture. Thus one of the clear challenges facing environmental thought in the twenty-first century is how to represent the inevitable disasters all around us, disasters that proceed at different geological paces and that are difficult to coherently capture in terms of traditional narrative conflict.⁴

For geological finitude and the specter of slow climate change are not only difficult to narrate in terms of the historical form of apocalyptic narrative. Attempts to represent such time scales are potentially not all that enjoyable to read or watch. (Andy Warhol's *Empire* [1964] springs to mind as

an important confrontation with deep time—even if a relatively brief one—and how problematic such representation is for constructing a compelling narrative.) In the face of deep time, an anthropocentric sense of an ending—based as it is on the length of human lives, or even the longer duration of human societies—breaks down in the face of billions and trillions of years. There are clear forerunners who exemplarily present such narrative *aporias* in their cosmological fiction. For instance, a host of classic SF—texts from Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Olaf Stapledon, H. G. Wells, and many others—confront the unthinkability of such nonhuman timescales.⁵ Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars Trilogy* (1993–1996) and his related novel, *2312* (2012), depict geologic time considered at the relatively swift clip of terraforming Mars and other planets in the solar system, capturing, with such landscapes’ alienness and foreignness, something of what it might be like to think geologically or even in terms of what Jane Bennet calls “vibrant matter.” And Charles Stross’s recent novella, “Palimpsest” (2009), comes the closest I have seen to rigorously thinking and imagining what it would take to extend human civilization over billions of years.⁶ (Hint: it takes time travel and a library at the end of time to accomplish the deep survivance of an always already doomed species.)

But in this essay I am interested in deep time not in terms of cosmological science fiction—however interesting that tradition might be—but in how such timescales are beginning to be represented and invoked in a more experimental vein of contemporary speculative fiction strikingly different from texts such as *2012* or the *Science in the Capital* trilogy. Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* (2010), a realist novel that poses speculative questions, and Iranian writer and philosopher Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), a speculative novel that poses realist questions, share concerns with two seemingly unrelated areas: the conflicts of the twenty-first century, on the one hand, and deep time, on the other. Each book responds to climate change as what Timothy Morton calls a “hyperobject [something] massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). For DeLillo, this is the time of film and the desert, “the force of geologic time, out there somewhere” (19). For Negarestani’s remarkable experimental work of “theory-fiction,” the temporality of contemporaneity has been produced by another hyperobject, “oil,” which powers a “Middle East as a sentient and living entity—*alive* in a very literal sense of the word, apart from all metaphor and allegory” (5).⁷ Each novel explores material emergence considered in terms of large, nonhuman timescales, placing the conflicts of the twenty-first century against a background of ultimate species finitude and rigorous materiality.

Curiously then, it might be said that if the nuclear imagination of the twentieth century involved monolithic, seemingly implacable states engaged in a symmetrical nuclear *détente* on the precipice of instant extinction, the twenty-first century—having begun to adjust to the end(s) of postmodernism, the Cold War, and the national fantasy of MAD—is now beginning to develop an imaginary appropriate for thinking about human finitude within the hyperobject of climate change. Such an imaginary, of course, cannot ignore twenty-first-century wars fought in the Middle East in proximity to significant deposits of finite material resources, the very burning of which is producing climate change in the first place. Rather than attempt to represent deep time or project it into the future, as so many of the SF writers I have mentioned do (which is in no way to disparage such representations), DeLillo and Negarestani suggest that we best understand the *present* against a background of deep time. They contemplate a world in which the asymmetrical, distributed, nomadic war machines of the twenty-first century can best be understood in contrast to monolithic, implacable timescales and materialities. This, to my mind, represents a significant transformation of postmodernism’s sense of an ending. DeLillo and Negarestani’s postnatural eschatologies stage bold encounters with different ways of making meaning ungrounded from modernity’s sense of perpetual crisis and postmodernity’s “end of history.”

Deep Time and the Forever War

Don DeLillo’s most recent and shortest book, *Point Omega*, is a curious object in a variety of ways, and for a text that can be read in a single, relatively brief sitting, it is notably concerned with *time*, particularly extended and deep temporalities. More a novella or long story than it is a proper novel,

Point Omega shares stylistic similarities with DeLillo's recent work since *Underworld* (1997), namely *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), and *Falling Man* (2007). The novel is also evidence of what Peter Boxall convincingly calls the writer's "studiedly spare, late style that displays an extraordinary historical disorientation" (690–91). Boxall further distinguishes DeLillo's temporalities in his twenty-first century novels from the "suspended temporality" of *White Noise* (1985) and earlier work, suggesting that *Point Omega*'s "temporal disorientation [...] is represented [...] as a symptom of the turning of the millennium" (692, 693).⁸ DeLillo himself, in an interview with Kevin Rabalais, says quite straightforwardly, "in *Point Omega*, time again [...]. Time, in that novel, is slowed down" (111). Or in another interview with Thomas DePietro, DeLillo explains one character's thinking through their encounter with "the vast meditative time of the desert, geologic time." In the frame story in which an unnamed, anonymous narrator describes his obsessive viewing of *24 Hour Psycho* (1993),⁹ the stark geological encounter with the desert of the American Southwest by filmmaker Jim Finley, the reflections on species finitude by Richard Elster, and the shifting temporalities of the plot itself, *Point Omega* invokes and attempts to represent a variety of human and nonhuman temporalities.

Many readers of the novel have observed the titular invocation of French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the "omega point." Teilhard conceives of human evolution as having a progressive, teleological destination, a final point where humans will materially transcend their current situation and achieve a "planetary totalization of human consciousness" (109).¹⁰ Clearly, however, DeLillo intends us to invert the "omega point" into the novel's title (and Teilhard's original French: "*point oméga*"), thereby upending its transcendent optimism and evoking instead a realistic, if still speculative, vision of the *telos* of human evolution: finitude and extinction.

Throughout the text, DeLillo puts speculative projections of human finitude in direct, parallel conversation with reflection on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (conflicts that some suggest are part of what should be called a "Forever War"¹¹). The parallels between deep time and the War on Terror occur in the musings of Richard Elster, an intellectual and one of the architects of the war in Iraq: "He was the outsider, a scholar with an approval rating but no experience in government [...]. He was there to conceptualize" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 19). Having become disillusioned with his role in planning the invasion of Iraq and its disastrous aftermath, Elster has retreated into the desert on a self-professed "spiritual retreat" (though one that he says is different from when "Wolfowitz went to the World Bank. That was exile" [23]). He exchanges his status as a neoconservative intellectual "for space and time" (23). As such, DeLillo situates Elster at the convergence of a variety of significant points. On the one hand, this is a character who cannot help but participate in DeLillo's trenchant critique of the wars of the twenty-first century, U.S. torture, and the policies of the Bush administration. As David Cowart succinctly puts it: "DeLillo presents, in *Point Omega*, an indirect anatomy of Americans' acquiescence to the Iraq War and its spurious rationale" (46). But Elster is also given a rather Deleuzian conception of war and technology similar to Manuel De Landa's account of the development of military technologies in *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (1991) as self-organizing assemblages, war machines emerging from the machinic phylum. Or, as Paul A. Bové writes, Elster is someone who, despite being allied with neoconservatives (and probably because of it), understands that "we best understand U.S. power in terms of flows, spaces, and directions" (150).

Given this, Elster's inverted Teilhardian vision offers a remarkable moment where the conflicts of the early twenty-first century intersect with reflections on species finitude in significant and telling ways:

We're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for self-destruction. One bomb is never enough. The blur of technology, this is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this question.

Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field. (*Point Omega* 52–53)

Having retreated into the desert, withdrawing from any involvement with the world, Elster contemplates a finite, material, inorganic, geologic future as the ultimate horizon of human life (a vision similar to Sigmund Freud's in one of the epigraphs of this essay). He arrives at such a vision of human extinction by generalizing species activity along the lines of how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceive of nomadic war machines in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). No longer, however, is "the war machine [...] of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus" (Deleuze and Guattari 352), a fluid, mobile, heterogeneous force resisting the centralization of the state. Rather, implicit in Elster's conception of armies, crowds, and swarms is a vision of the U.S. state itself as a deterritorializing, nomadic war machine. No longer are distributed networks conceived as the principal modes of resisting the state's hierarchical centralization. The blur of technology assembling and self-organizing into more complex forms has transformed twenty-first-century conflict. In this, Elster shares some of the more crucial insights of recent critical theory. As Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker suggest in *The Exploit* (2007), "the present day is symmetrical again, but this time in the symmetrical form of networks fighting networks" (22). Elster is explicit. He extends his Deleuzian understanding of the War on Terror into a disturbing, nihilistic vision of species finitude. No longer is centralized state power, with its capacity for waging thermonuclear war, necessary for projecting human extinction. When U.S. power decentralizes and adopts the rhizomatic networks of nomadic war machines, Elster is left with a vision of not only armies but the species itself as a swarming crowd carrying "the gene for self-destruction."

In this, Elster shares DeLillo's own somewhat disturbing conceptions for how the conflicts of the early-twenty-first century have transformed the narrative *telos* of contemporary technology and the very concept of the future itself. In his essay on September 11, 2001, DeLillo opens the piece with a somewhat audacious claim: "The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital [...]. All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to the terrorists [...]. It is America that drew their fury. It is the high gloss of our modernity. It is the thrust of our technology" ("In the Ruins of the Future" 33). Elster is not permitted the pre-9/11 utopianism of cyber-capital, the belief in technological salvation and the progress of information toward singularity, toward a transcendent "omega point." Rather, Elster upends (and strongly misreads) Teilhard's prediction of a "superorganism which, woven from the threads of individual men, is preparing [...] not to mechanize and submerge us, but to raise, by way of increasing complexity, to a higher awareness of our own personality" (Teilhard 109–10). Elster's omega point is not a bio-technical transcendence into an evolutionary superorganism; it is an encounter with species finitude, with the impossibility of extending human life beyond its very real material limits. Rather than downloading into a massive artificial intelligence or some other form of material transcendence, the "leap out of biology" that Elster envisions is an exhaustion of consciousness, a desire for geologic inertia, to become stones in a field.

There are a variety of ways to interpret Elster's desires here. Certainly one is encouraged to read the character ironically and unsympathetically as someone whose thinking is divorced from reality. Here is a man semi-responsible for the suffering of thousands upon thousands of people and for a war that has only perpetuated more violence in the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces, and he is grandiosely (and perhaps ridiculously) bemoaning the ultimate fate of human consciousness in the universe. His feelings about his own involvement in the war are also relatively unclear. Jim Finley, the narrator of the central section of the novel, tells us that Elster had written an essay that opens and closes with fairly blatant critiques of the criminality of the Bush administration: "A government is a criminal enterprise [...]. In future years [...] men and women [...] will be listening to the secret tapes of the administration's crimes" (*Point Omega* 33). But the rest of the essay is largely an etymological

study of the word “rendition,” and it had “no specific mention of black sites, third-party states or international treaties and conventions” (34). When Elster is pressed on the issue of the opening and closing of the essay and how these moments seem out of place, he waves the issue away, saying that these sections were “meant to be” incongruous with the rest of the essay, “flat-out ironic” (34). And perhaps most damning of all, the disastrous war effort seems to have not changed Elster’s mind on the need for the invasion of Iraq in the first place and the empty justifications given for it at the time:

I still want a war. A great power has to act. We were struck hard. We need to retake the future. The force of will, the sheer visceral need. We can’t let others shape our world, our minds. All they have are old despotic traditions. We have a living history and I thought I would be in the middle of it. But in those rooms, with those men, it was all priorities, statistics, evaluations, rationalizations. (*Point Omega* 30)

Elster, despite his criticisms of the neoconservative hawks, is unrepentant. Though disillusioned with the technocratic wartime policies of the United States, he retains an orientalist view of the Middle East, reproducing vacuous political discourse about “retaking the future,”¹² and he seems incapable of assessing his own culpability for the war. But I do not believe he simply functions as someone to condemn, and DeLillo’s own conceptions of the character appear to reinforce a slightly more sympathetic reading. In the interview with DePietro, DeLillo says that “Elster shows no signs of regretting his political feelings but the novel itself is not at all political.” I am inclined to agree with David Cowart that we should take DeLillo relatively at his word here.¹³ Elster is not simply an object, an easy target intended only for venting rage, frustration, and ire over the criminality of U.S. actions. Nor is he a figure who simply exposes U.S. citizens’ complicity with the violence perpetuated in their name (though he certainly does this). He serves as a narrative, political, and ontological quilting point for confronting and reassessing the legacies of the early twenty-first century while rethinking the shape of futurity itself.

In his 9/11 essay, DeLillo wrote the following:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don’t have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think.

But whatever great skeins of technology lie ahead, ever more complex, connective, precise, micro-fractional, the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cutthroat religion. (“In the Ruins of the Future” 37)

In the figure of Elster, DeLillo is radically reassessing and revising this previous conception of time.¹⁴ Nine years after 9/11, no longer can such bald, progressive, and orientalist periodization be applied to the contemporary world, nor can we any longer have any faith in the techno-utopian dreams of various strains of late twentieth-century thinking. Technology is no longer the “fate” or “truth” of the United States or the West. In the wake of 9/11, the United States has seen increased neoliberalization resulting in unprecedented inequality and financial meltdown, an inability to respond—technologically, politically, or otherwise—to impending and catastrophic climate change, a failure to account for the criminality of its actions, and a Middle East whose political complexity far exceeds “medieval expedience.” DeLillo’s 9/11 vision of history as a conflict between a future-oriented West and a “medieval” Middle East is wholly incompatible with these realities. Consequently, *Point Omega* clearly revises his previous contrast between a future-oriented, technological U.S. and an archaic fundamentalism.

Through the complex, difficult, and problematic figure of Richard Elster, Don DeLillo suggests that the twenty-first century, in the wake of the War on Terror, has necessarily reconfigured futurity itself. No longer can we afford a primarily technological vision of the future of human life. Certainly the catastrophic, apocalyptic visions of the Cold War no longer resonate in the same way. But neither should the liberatory dreams of the early Internet or the idea that we can “fix” climate change, global political realities, or much else with more and more technology, more and more war.

Throughout *Point Omega*, DeLillo subtly and quietly revises his projection of the future as one dominated by technological change into a future confined by the implacability of geology and deep time. If this is the response of an old man, disillusioned though unrepentant about his own mistakes and crimes, it should also be understood as an appropriate, if rather dark and hopeless, *species* response. No longer young, but old and condemned to live with the mistakes of a catastrophically misspent youth and middle age, no longer capable of projecting dramatic apocalypse or a transcendent omega point, DeLillo suggests humanity desperately needs to confront its own finitude and cosmological inconsequentiality in order to understand its disastrous present.

Deep Time and Oil

Though the maximalist difficulty and speculative exuberance of Reza Negarestani's genre-defying "novel" *Cyclonopedia* could not be more different from *Point Omega's* spare, minimalist form, it shares DeLillo's concerns with the War on Terror, geologic finitude, nomadology, and deep temporalities (if little else), and it is further evidence of how thinking about time is transforming in the twenty-first century in explicit relationship to climate change and the conflicts in the Middle East. Having received considerable attention from a variety of important contemporary thinkers,¹⁵ Negarestani's challenging hybrid work is *sui generis*. The novel begins with a frame story: a diary written by Kristen Alvanson. In real life, Alvanson is an American artist working in the Middle East, who seems to be in collaboration with Negarestani.¹⁶ Alvanson the character, however, finds a manuscript, authored by a fictional Negarestani, under a bed in a hotel room in Istanbul while waiting to meet someone who never arrives. *Cyclonopedia* is then presented as a long—at times, convoluted—body of writing, which claims to elucidate the work of "archaeologist and researcher of Mesopotamian occultural meltdowns, Middle East and ancient mathematics, Dr. Hamid Parsani," author of "*Defacing the Ancient Persia: 9500 years call for destruction*" (*Cyclonopedia* 9). Self-described as "at once horror fiction, a work of speculative theology, an atlas of demonology, a political samizdat and a philosophic grimoire" (back cover), the book's prose resembles what would happen if Deleuze and Guattari collaborated with H. P. Lovecraft, and, indeed, there is some speculation that Negarestani is himself the fabrication of a collaboration.¹⁷

Regardless of who wrote it, however, *Cyclonopedia* is a significant artistic and intellectual achievement, marrying together some of the more exciting and controversial current trends in continental philosophy with a wild conceptual, historical, and poetic inventiveness. Though I imagine that the book's riches will continue to encourage and reward critical and theoretical attention for years to come, it has been rather striking how relatively little attention has been paid to Negarestani's book so far *as literature*, as a work that is doing complex poetic and narrative work. For instance, there has been significant resistance to calling *Cyclonopedia* a novel. China Miéville, in his brief introduction to an excerpt of Negarestani's work, is clear in the scare quotes he puts around "novel" that *Cyclonopedia* resists such classification (12). Kate Marshall, who has given one of the most perceptive readings of *Cyclonopedia's* literary qualities to date, also resists calling the book a novel, suggesting that although

Cyclonopedia has all the trappings of a postmodern novel: a self-subverting metafiction that destroys its own grounds even as it enacts them [...]. To taxonomize, or to assign even broad periodizing or genre labels such as 'postmodern' and 'novel' seems quite the opposite of the demands made by 'Hidden Writing,' which is the kind of book *Cyclonopedia* claims to be. (Keller, Masciandaro, and Thacker 148)

Despite such classificatory resistance, however, one of *Cyclonopedia's* clearest and most striking accomplishments lies in its attempts to capture and represent nonhuman ontologies and temporalities in literary form. The text constantly decenters the human by spending considerable energy engaging with emergent and vital materialities, frequently ascribing weird and strange forms of

sentience to objects and ideas, and the book experiments with surprising and playful ways of capturing non-anthropocentric temporality.

Cyclonopedia's literary aspirations are made clear in the opening pages when Alvanson reports that the manuscript she has understands its activity as "xenopoetics [...] something to do with composing out of distorted materials [...] with a range of distortions from inauthenticity and corrupted authorship to structural holes (configurative bugs) and subterranean structures of hidden writing" (xviii–xix). The novel's description of xenopoetics is also an excellent description of its own structure. Enacting a poetics of assemblage and emergence, *Cyclonopedia*, like novels have been doing for centuries, gathers together a variety of other discourses in order to construct its hybrid form. That these discourses are ironically archaeological, philosophical, historical, theoretical, theological, heretical, and fabricated rather than deriving from the more familiar lyric, epic, and epistle of novels past should not discourage us from calling this work a novel, even if it does not resemble the classic conventions of this bourgeois form. Further, *Cyclonopedia* has a clearly stated and important relationship to narrative. Early on in the text, the narrator tells us that

Parsani personifies the Cross of Akht as an inorganic demon, a sentient relic with the ability to numerically grasp all the undercurrents and inconsistent events of the Earth as modes of narration [...] the Cross of Akht delineates the activities and ontogenesis of global dynamics according to the lubricating chemistry of oil or petroleum, i.e. it grasps all narrations of the Earth through oil. (13)

Cyclonopedia presents its engagement with deep time, geology, war, the Middle East, oil, and a variety of other nonhuman entities in explicitly *literary* terms, in terms of poetics and narrative. Both poetry and narrative, however, are, in Negarestani's own terms, *twisted*. Poetics, in the novel's tortuous terminology, becomes xenopoetics, a combinatorial method of composing out of materials that resist understanding but are nonetheless "complicit" with one another. And narrative is significantly "corrupted," becoming, quite paradoxically, a mode uniquely and explicitly suited for doing, of all things, speculative philosophy.

In a brief essay, "All of a Twist" (2011), Negarestani is uncharacteristically upfront about his understanding of narrative and how it functions:

In order to think narration in a world that is devoid of any narrative necessity [...] first we must redeploy the hierarchy of thought in nature as the view point or locus of speculation and narration. The very hierarchy of thought that was supposed to bring the possibility of reflection on the object or event X is turned upside down and inside out, the space of reflection itself becomes a playground for the exteriority and contingency of object X.

Cyclonopedia, then, may be understood as a text that explicitly, if ironically, positions itself as capable of addressing, in literary terms, the challenges of what Quentin Meillassoux calls "correlationism"—that is, the historical philosophical difficulty of thought to divorce itself from the correlation between an object and the human mind encountering that object. For Negarestani, the twist of narrative is

the force of the realist speculation [and it] approximates the function of the philosophy of Speculative Realism in which speculation is not driven by our grounded experience or reflection but by the exteriority and contingency of a universe that always antedates and postdates us [...]. Ironically, philosophy seems to have strived this long only to become, belatedly, a crime fiction, a conspiracy thriller. ("All of a Twist")

Rather than a text that attempts, through language, to mimetically present objects, events, or people, a mode of thought reproducing phenomenology's hermeneutic encounter with the objective world, narrative, in Negarestani's terms, "turns from *being a reflection on the world and objects* to *being an inflection of the world and objects themselves in their exteriority and contingency*" ("All of a Twist," emphasis in original). As such, *Cyclonopedia* does not have anything resembling a "traditional" narrator. As Marshall tells us, the book is narrated from a "blobjective" point of view, "it is not narrated 'by' any one thing. Or if it is, this science fiction of the earth is narrated by the point of view itself" (153–54). And it is precisely *oil* that, rather than being "represented" in the text or defining a

stable point of narration, inflects the world and objects in their contingency and allows the book to approach the realities of the twenty-first century, human finitude, nonhuman temporalities, and philosophical speculation. The book is, quite simply, a non-anthropocentric “playground for the exteriority and contingency” of oil, and it explores the implications of this, particularly in terms of the War on Terror and climate change, at considerable length.

Along these lines, the blobjective narrator spends significant time discussing Parsani’s thinking on oil and frames it in narratological terms: “Oil is the undercurrent of all narrations, not only the political but also that of the ethics of life on earth [...]. To grasp oil as a lube is to grasp earth as body of different narrations being moved forward by oil. In a nutshell, oil is a lube for the divergent lines of terrestrial narration” (*Cyclonopedia* 19). The War on Terror, the Middle East, late capitalism, life in the twenty-first century, the very historicity of the Earth itself, all of these depend on the hyperobject of oil to be narrated, and thus to be understood or thought. Rather than narrative serving as a mode of eliding or obfuscating the geologic and temporal realities of life in the midst of climate change, dependent, as narrative architecture so often is, on crisis and peripeteia, *Cyclonopedia* brilliantly turns narrative on its head through its engagement with oil. Everything in the novel is inflected by the sentience, agency, and power of oil. “The answer is oil: War on Terror cannot be radically and technically grasped as a machine without consideration of the oil that greases its parts and recomposes its flows; such consideration must begin with the twilight of hydrocarbon and the very dawn of the Earth” (*Cyclonopedia* 17). Oil is not the object of narrative; it *is* the narrative; oil is the very thing that allows narrative to happen; oil is a lube for narrating the earth and the geologic timescales of its existence.

This radically upsets narrative’s usual dependence on anthropic temporalities. As Eugene Thacker puts it, “instead of human beings making use of the planet for their own ends, the planet is revealed to be making use of human beings for its own ends. Humans are simply a way for the planet to produce and reproduce itself” (Thacker, “Black Infinity” 176).¹⁸ *Cyclonopedia* is not interested in representing or narrating the planet as an object. Nor is it interested in understanding climate change in terms of something that can be coherently “represented.” Instead, among Negarestani’s many important accomplishments, he invents a narrative form that can allow nonhuman temporalities to open themselves to narrative expression. He takes the challenge of thinking time in the era of climate change and, rather than jettisoning or evacuating narrative, finds that narrating through something *else*—that is, attempting to narrate a hyperobject, oil, rather than some human story situated amid a background of climate change—can produce a fiction appropriate for the realities of the Anthropocene.¹⁹ I find this remarkable. Further, *Cyclonopedia* calls forth different kinds of reading. Rather than invite more traditional hermeneutic or interpretive encounters with the text, Negarestani tells us explicitly that “to interact with Hidden Writings, one must persistently continue and contribute to the writing process of the book. In Hidden Writing the act of reading and writing is conducted through those plot holes rejected by most interpreters as misleading obscurities” (*Cyclonopedia* 62). *Cyclonopedia*’s hidden writing is, at times, nothing but “misleading obscurities.” This is not a problem. Negarestani emphasizes how it is precisely *literature*—and experimental, difficult, and complex literature at that—that can open important, radical, twisted perspectives on life in the age of hyperobjects. In this way, Negarestani productively addresses the perennial conflict between poetry and philosophy, making clear throughout his text that speculative theorization and poetic narration are not separate activities and, indeed, that it is precisely *writing*, here “Hidden Writing,” which gives access to a mode of collectively continuing and co-creating the text of the present.

Deep Time and the Novel

The disconnection between the observable realities of global climate change and the continued failure to significantly act in response to them, either through legislative gridlock or ideological denial, is one of the most baffling and pressing political concerns of our time. Wendy Hui Kyong

Chun recently asked, “So, why has this scientific consensus [on climate change] not spurred greater certainty among the public?” (680). To ask a related (and implied) question to Chun’s: Why have the panoply of disaster narratives in cinema, television, literature, and videogames not spurred greater anxiety and activism among the public? It seems powerfully apparent today that neither scientific facts, environmental doom and gloom, national security concerns, the market, cinematic disaster porn, nor the often powerful emerging global genre of climate fiction (cli-fi) can generate an appropriately widespread, necessary, and, most importantly, *immediate* response to the specter of global warming. The hypothesis underlying much of this essay is simple: narrative as a vehicle for presenting a crisis that is resolvable in terms of human timescales can be insufficient for thinking about the realities of contemporaneity, including but not limited to climate change. We should consequently not be surprised if forms that previously excelled at representing history may be incoherent for asking humans to think about such nonhuman temporalities.

But contrary to claims about the “death of the novel” or the cultural eclipse of the literary by other media, this essay has attempted to roughly sketch how contemporary novels might still play a role in helping us grasp our world and its future. Jonathan Arac has recently argued that the novel may now be what Raymond Williams called a “residual form.” This does not mean, however, that “its continued force as residual need [...] be trivial, but it would require recognizing that the novel generally no longer does what it used to” (Arac 194). The novel has always been malleable and absorptive, which has made it excel at doing all kinds of things. But it would not be radical to say that other media have largely taken over for the novel in many ways, perhaps especially its ability, as Oedipa Maas once famously put it, to “project a world” (Pynchon 64). Television shows serialized for multiple seasons, major film franchises spinning off innumerable sequels, and videogames running to hundreds of hours indicate that narrative is still powerfully capable of portraying large and complex worlds. But as the novel has similarly expanded to confront the increasingly difficult task of representing contemporaneity—for example, Mark Z. Danielewski’s twenty-seven-volume serial-novel-in-progress, *The Familiar* (2015–)—even the emerging megatexts of the twenty-first century do not necessarily make our present any clearer.²⁰ Like Fredric Jameson once said of conspiracy theory, such massive narratives could be seen as “degraded attempt[s]—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (*Postmodernism* 38). This is not to suggest that short novels such as *Point Omega* or *Cyclonopedia* achieve totalization or allow us to “cognitively map” our present. But it is to suggest that they concisely help us begin trying to represent the wildly differing scales of temporality necessary for placing the present within the now *geologic history* of the Anthropocene.

By framing the political terrain of U.S. conflicts in the Middle East in terms of geologic finitude, DeLillo and Negarestani, in quite different modes, emphasize the inextricable relationship between the War on Terror, global climate change, the distributed, rhizomatic digital networks of contemporaneity, and deep, material temporalities. Unlike other, more rhetorical invocations of deep time, however, DeLillo and Negarestani’s novels are hardly calls to arms. Neither novel can be characterized as a jeremiad imploring its audience to change their activities in the face of either twenty-first-century realities or impending, imminent doom. Rather, each work displays a rigorous nihilism, projecting a horizon of geologic human finitude that tempers whatever rhetorical force these novels might have with brutal, unthinkable timescales. This sense of an ending signals—despite claims to the contrary—the inklings of an emergent imaginary commensurate with contemporary global realities. Breaking from the apocalyptic imagination of instantaneous, millennial, messianic thermonuclear destruction that the twentieth- and twenty-first-century disaster imagination mobilized to such great and often effective lengths, *Point Omega* and *Cyclonopedia* indicate a vital and necessary shift not only toward an anti-eschatological imaginary but also toward a sense of time divorced from apocalyptic structures altogether.²¹ When disaster becomes spread out over geologic timescales, modernity’s sense of perpetual crisis, the Cold War’s national fantasy of MAD, and the environmental imagination’s mobilization of an imminent global crisis become insufficient for thinking about human life on the planet in the twenty-first century. As some have been

loudly proclaiming, the impossibility of imagining any other way of being in the era of late capitalism leaves only (a somewhat paradoxical and anachronistic) millennial hope in apocalypse.²² DeLillo and Negarestani articulate an imagination whose very despair exceeds the horror at the heart of contemporary crises, and neither offer a millennial vision as a way of helping the species to survive or respond to the realities of the twenty-first century. Rather, both novels indicate something more modest: to understand and confront life in the age of hyperobjects, thinking about deep time is an absolute necessity. Confronting the present does not require the projection of (or hope for) imminent catastrophe and doom, but rather leads toward a nihilistic vision of human extinction, the decoherence of matter in trillions of years, the vital materiality of geology, and other forms of emergent, nonhuman ontologies. The lens of deep time provided by these novels demonstrates that acquiring such a perspective might begin to remedy our present incapacity for imagining alternatives to contemporaneity and signals the ongoing importance of literature for understanding life in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. See D'Agata, Klein, and Dimock. On the turn toward deep time in the recent philosophy of speculative realism, see Meillassoux's notion of the "arche-fossil," Brassier's engagement with extinction, and Thacker's thoughts on the unthinkable in *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011). Also, for a discussion of what he calls a "new cultural geology," see McGurl.
2. Kolbert's book, *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), draws attention to the extinction event now taking place. Childs's *Apocalyptic Planet* (2012) explores a variety of historical aspects of catastrophic global transformation. He emphasizes both the cyclicity of climate change considered on geological and cosmological timescales and the need to respond to present crises. And Jacob Darwin Hamblin's *Arming Mother Nature* (2013) traces a Cold War history of U.S. attempts to weaponize the environment, stressing that consciousness of catastrophic environmental change should not be limited to only a post-*Silent Spring* (1962) era.
3. On the importance of "staging" and "risk projection" for understanding contemporary risks, see Beck.
4. On disasters proceeding at longer timescales, see Nixon.
5. See, for example, Asimov's *Foundation* (1951); Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) and *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973); Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937); and Wells's *Time Machine* (1895).
6. For my discussion of "Palimpsest," see Fest, "Apocalypse Networks."
7. Timothy Morton also illustrates his concept of the hyperobject by referring to oil in Negarestani's text, writing: "Negarestani imagines oil under our feet to be what I here call a hyperobject, 'an omnipresent planetary entity': a vastly distributed agent with dark designs of its own, co-responsible for turning the surface into a desert, as if it were a prophet of some sinister mystical version of Islam [...]. Negarestani's text is a demonic parody of Nature writing, taking quite literally the idea that nonhumans are dictating the script" (53).
8. For another discussion of temporality in *Point Omega*, see Gourley, especially 85–94; on filmic time in the novel, see Osteen; for further commentary on *Point Omega* as particularly exemplary of DeLillo's late style, see James; and for a recent consideration of DeLillo's long career, with particular attention to the late novels, see Veggian.
9. *24 Hour Psycho* is an installation by Douglas Gordon that slows down Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to run over a whole day at approximately two frames per second, which DeLillo encountered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2006.
10. Liliana M. Naydan has suggested that "Teilhard certainly speaks to DeLillo's peculiar fascination with apocalypse as a mystery of faith" (103). For further discussion of DeLillo, disaster, and 9/11, see Conte.
11. See Filkins and Robbins.
12. DeLillo's "retake the future" anticipates President Barack Obama's phrase "win the future" from his State of the Union Address on January 25, 2011.
13. On DeLillo's remark that *Point Omega* is "not at all political," Cowart writes: "The remark signals a literary aspiration largely at odds with the scoring of cheap shots at the expense of the Bush administration and those who kept it in place for eight years. DeLillo seeks in this novel to represent the anguish of one whose error—ethical, epistemological, *linguistic*—takes on a moral gravity that verges on the tragic" (42).
14. Indeed, Cowart suggested that "in *Point Omega* [...] one discerns traces of self-critique [...]. [T]he author may see something of himself, seventy-three on the eve of this novel's publication, in the seventy-three-year-old Richard Elster" (41).

15. The blurbs in the book include praise from such writers as Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Nick Land, China Miéville, Steven Shaviro, Eugene Thacker, and others. Also see Keller, Masciandaro, and Thacker; and Apter. The book was named among the best of 2009 by *Artforum International*; see Rosenkranz.
16. See, for example, Alvanson and Negarestani, “Re-nomad” (2008).
17. For instance, *Cyclonopedia* immediately raises the question of Negarestani’s existence, suggesting that he “must be a fictional invention of Hyperstition, a term loosely defined as fictional quantities that make themselves real” (xiv). Elsewhere, the book tells us that “shifting voices, veering authorial perspectives, inconsistent punctuations and rhetorical divergences bespeak a crowd at work, one author multiplied into many” (61). Robin Mackay opens the essays originally presented at a 2011 symposium on *Cyclonopedia* and collected in *Leper Creativity* with the transcript of a video that says if Negarestani “didn’t exist, he would have to be invented” (Keller, Masciandaro, and Thacker 3). (Also see Mackay’s film, *A Brief History of Geotrauma or: The Invention of Negarestani*.) Mackenzie Wark writes that he “doubt[s] the existence of an author named Reza Negarastani [sic]” (Keller, Masciandaro, and Thacker 41). Melanie Doherty suggests the novel may be a “mythmeme run amok” (Keller, Masciandaro, and Thacker 121). And Emily Apter has suggested that “Negarestani is quite possibly the pseudonym of a collective (which probably includes Mackay himself)” (137). In recent years, there have been a number of public appearances by Negarestani, but this does not necessarily mean he is any less a fabrication (for instance, see a video of Negarestani presenting a paper at the Speculation on Anonymous Materials Symposium at the Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, January 2014, and his website, *Deracinating Effect: Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind with Reason*). As Mackay suggests about actual appearances of the invented figure of Negarestani: “personal appearances made and cancelled. Visa problems, poor health, whatever it takes. If it gets to the stage where he does have to appear, it has to be done well—no expenses spared” (6).
18. It should be noted that Thacker is discussing Fritz Leiber’s short story, “Black Gondolier” (1969) in this essay, though clearly his comments equally bear on *Cyclonopedia*.
19. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Claire L. Evans calls for a new “form of science fiction that tackles the radical changes of our pressing and strange reality. We need an Anthropocene fiction.” *Cyclonopedia* is such a fiction.
20. On the many very long novels published in 2015, see Kachka. I define “megatext” as a text that is *unreadably massive*. See Fest, “Toward a Theory of the Megatext.”
21. For my discussion of an anti-eschatological mode of thinking as a necessary response to the end of the Cold War, see Fest, “The Inverted Nuke in the Garden.”
22. Here I am thinking about various recent responses to Fredric Jameson’s now quite famous quip that “it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (*The Seeds of Time* xi). I am perhaps especially thinking of Slavoj Žižek’s recent embrace of apocalypticism in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) and *Living in the End Times* (2010).

Notes on Contributor

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