# 2 Ontology/Epistemology
## Guarding Against Collapsing (Their) Difference *or* Producing a Dichotomy
## Or: Between and Beyond Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Karen Barad and Dennis Bruining

### Introduction

In 2005 Clare Hemmings published a critique of certain writings related to the "ontological turn" in the journal *Cultural Studies*. According to her, some cultural theorists – such as Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – tend to construct earlier poststructuralist theorizing as overwhelmingly 'negative' and totalizing in its view of power as an all-pervasive constituent of sociality. As a supposed remedy against what they portray as the socially determinist bias of earlier poststructuralisms, these authors according to Hemmings celebrate affect as "'the new cutting edge'" (Hemmings 2005, 548 [Abstract]) in a way that, as she argues, tends to severe affect from sociality. Authors associated with the recent turn to affect "emphasize the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraint" (Hemmings 2005, 550).

What is important for my purposes here is that Hemmings charges the writers I have mentioned with producing almost a duality

between existing poststructuralist theory and what they propose as the way forward – a dichotomy in which 'epistemology' and 'ontology' are polarized against one another. Thus, she writes: "Part of what makes critical theory so uninventive for Sedgwick is its privileging of the epistemological, since a relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge obscures our experience of those structures. She advocates instead a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective, to the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community" (Hemmings 2005, 553). Hemmings polemicizes: "the 'problem of epistemology' only materializes in the moment that it is chronologically and intellectually separated from ontology. Ontology thus resolves the problem its advocates invent" (2005, 557). Further, she argues that "[p]ositing affect as a 'way out' *requires* that poststructuralist epistemology have ignored embodiment, investment and emotion" (2005, 556–557; emphasis in the original). This is not the case, as Hemmings insists, by reference to postcolonial theorists, amongst others (2005, 558). Yet, as she maintains, their work *needs* to be omitted from accounts of the supposedly miserable state of Cultural Studies *in order* for affect studies to be positioned as singular in its attention to the body and the affective. In this way, "affective rewriting flattens out poststructuralist inquiry by ignoring the counter-hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists, only thereby positioning affect as 'the answer' to contemporary problems of cultural theory" (2005, 548 [Abstract]).

While I disagree with Hemmings to the extent that, in my view, affectivity has indeed been neglected in much early poststructuralist theorizing – especially in classical instances of such theorizing, such as Michel Foucault's work – I want to take up Hemmings' critical observations as to a recent tendency to produce a dichotomy between ontology and epistemology. It is thus the ontological turn that I am concerned with in this chapter, to the extent that it can be distinguished from (much as it is related to) the affective turn, which I will address in detail in chapter 3.

One irony of the recent turn from the epistemological emphasis of twentieth-century poststructuralism to the ontological emphasis

associated with the widespread turn to Gilles Deleuze's philosophy within progressive cultural and social analysis is that it risks being oblivious to a critique of Deleuze (along with Foucault) which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulated in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", as early on as in the 1980s. I want to return to this essay, along with further early work by Spivak, as a way of placing in perspective 'the ontological turn' in its neglect of 'epistemology' – as much as any inverse move. Commenting upon a published conversation between Deleuze and Foucault (1980), held in 1972, Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" chided both writers for "an unquestioned valorization of the oppressed as subject" (1988a, 274; see also Spivak 1988a, 278). As one example of what she wished to problematize, she mentioned Foucault's remark that "'the masses *know* perfectly well, clearly' [...] 'they know far better than [the intellectual, G.C.S.] and they certainly say it very well'" (cited in Spivak 1988a, 274; emphasis in the original). She comments: "What happens to the critique of the sovereign subject in these pronouncements?" (Spivak 1988a, 274), adding: "The banality of leftist intellectuals' list of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent" (1988a, 275).

In my reading, Spivak in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" posits that for intellectuals situated in the academies of the global North to make utterances such as the one just cited is to disavow their own role in representing the subaltern. This is to abdicate, as I understand Spivak, a responsibility which she attributes to intellectuals so positioned, of producing discourses that self-consciously attend to global power differentials and to their own positions within global hierarchies (see Spivak 1988a, 279–280). She thus seems to advocate for a strategy of representation whereby intellectuals represent other subjects – especially subaltern subjects – explicitly *in their own name*, thus acknowledging their own mediating role, and their inescapable power of representation, as intellectuals.

The link between these two forms of politics with primarily epistemological vs. primarily ontological concerns is implicitly made by Spivak in the same essay when, critiquing a statement by Deleuze

according to which "[r]eality is what actually happens in a factory, in a school, in baracks, in a prison, in a police station" (cited in Spivak 1988a, 275), she asserts that "[this foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production] has helped positivist empiricism – the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism – to define its own arena as 'concrete experience', 'what actually happens'" (Spivak 1988a, 275). I read Spivak as positing by this statement that an empiricist insistence that we have unmediated access to an ontological 'nature of things' is complicit with (neo-)colonial discourses *in virtue of* its dismissal of the epistemological notion of mediation. I take it that what she means by this amounts to the discourse-theoretical point that proclamations to the effect that 'the facts speak for themselves', rather than being inescapably enmeshed in and, indeed, rendered subject to perception in the first place by discourses – in other words, by their constitution in terms of a normatively loaded (and hence, power-charged) conceptual frame – disavow the inextricable link between knowledge and power. Thus she insists in the same essay that: "Representation has not withered away." (1988a, 308)

Whether one states that 'reality is what actually happens' or makes a claim to the effect that 'the oppressed know exactly what they are doing and saying' (see Spivak 1988a, 278–279): in either case the enunciating subject *is* in fact producing a particular theoretical rendering of 'reality' and of other subjects, respectively. But the mediating character of the construction concerned risks being obscured through the appeal made by each of these statements to a supposed ontological given. Thus, the very assertion that '[the masses, C.B.] know far better than [the intellectual, G.C.S.]' entails a specific rendering of subjectivity that not only disavows the intellectual's mediating role, but also posits that subjects (or at least 'the masses') are self-transparent (see also Birla 2010, 90–92). As Spivak has indicated elsewhere, the latter assumption is not necessarily a sign of respect. On the contrary, as she points out in an interview:

> "If one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: How subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth. During these same centuries, the Native Informant [...], his stuff was unquestioningly treated as the objective evidence for the founding of so-called sciences like ethnography, ethno-linguistics, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who *knows* has all of the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problematic self" (1990, 66; emphasis in the original).

The risk of neglecting epistemological concerns is, as I read Spivak, that those dimensions of power relations which are entailed in knowledge production – including all academic work – are understated, if not obscured. To be sure, post-Deleuzian ontology or at least Deleuze's own ontology is not epistemologically naïve. As Todd May reconstructs Deleuze's stance on the matter, practicing ontology is self-consciously to *create* the world in novel ways rather than solely to *represent* what there is (2005, 15–23). Yet, the political effect of Deleuzian empiricism – a "transcendental empiricism" (Patton 2000, 40) – may be said to amount to much the same, as is highlighted by Spivak's critique of Deleuze to the effect that statements such as 'reality is what actually happens' write the constituting subject (or, more precisely, the discourses in terms of which the subject is constituted) out of the ontology he or she produces.

This becomes especially problematic in my view when Deleuze, as much as certain followers of his, romanticizes those whom he associates with the category of the minoritarian – from prisoners (see Deleuze in Deleuze/Foucault 1980, *passim*) and migrants (Hardt/Negri, see below) through to animals (critically: Haraway 2008, 27–30) – as spearheads of revolutionary change. At an abstract level, this tendency is exemplified by the following statement, made by Deleuze during the conversation with Foucault which Spivak comments upon in "Can the Subaltern Speak?":

> "This is why the notion of reform is so stupid and hypocritical. Either reforms are designed by people who claim to be representative, who

> make a profession of speaking for others, and they lead to a division of power, to a distribution of this new power which is consequently increased by a double repression; or they arise from the complaints and demands of *those concerned. This latter instance is no longer a reform but revolutionary action that questions (expressing the full force of its partiality) the totality of power and the hierarchy that maintains it*" (in Deleuze/Foucault 1980, 208–209; emphasis added).

The claim that as soon as 'those concerned' speak for themselves, their actions and discourses will necessarily be revolutionary in thrust – rather than potentially 'reformist', as Deleuze implies here, or as we might also put it: rather than potentially reproducing hegemonic discourses at least in part – this claim is extremely generalizing. I, for one, find it patronizing to glorify resisting subjects in this way.

I feel the same way about the manner in which Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt – two current theorists who draw strongly upon Deleuzian philosophy – romanticize the poor and, especially, migrants as subjects of resistance. They assert that the poor, in general, and migrants, in particular – two categories which they treat as superimposable, ignoring the intersectionality of relations of domination – not only form part of the "multitude" but are particularly representative of it in virtue of their "wealth, productivity, and commonality" (Hardt/Negri 2004, 136). The poor as well as migrants come across as an avant-garde of sorts when Hardt and Negri write: "In the inferno of poverty and the odyssey of migration we have already begun to see emerge some of the outlines of the figure of the multitude" (2004, 138); a multitude which their work is bent on calling into being. In this context they assert that: "Migrants may often travel empty-handed in conditions of extreme poverty, but even then they are full of knowledges, languages, skills, and creative capacities: each migrant brings with him or her an entire world" (2004, 133). Who *doesn't* bring with him or her an entire world? Everyone does, and so this statement seems to me to engage in an idealization which romanticizes migrants as a class in a way that is devoid of substantive content. When Hardt and Negri state that "the immigrants invest the entire society with

their subversive desires" (2004, 134), I find it appropriate to juxtapose this assertion with the following observation by bell hooks concerning a certain postmodern, exoticist romanticization and eroticization of 'the primitive' that, in U.S. mainstream culture, had established itself in the late twentieth century. This quotation is from her essay "Eating the Other", first published in 1992: "The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth, are eased when the 'primitive' is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives" (hooks 2006, 369). Hooks in this text identifies as such the notion "that non-white people [have] more life experience" (2006, 368), arguing with reference to hegemonic, white subjects that "[g]etting a bit of the Other" is "considered a ritual of transcendence, a movement out into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage" (2006, 368) with the objective "to be changed in some way by the encounter" (2006, 368). As she explains: "Whereas mournful imperialist nostalgia constitutes the betrayed and abandoned world of the Other as an accumulation of lack and loss, contemporary longing for the 'primitive' is expressed by the projection onto the Other of a sense of plenty, bounty, a field of dreams" (2006, 369). In other words, the notion of immigrants' 'subversive desires' in Hardt's and Negri's text may well be read as a *displacement* of desire for 'the Other' – be it an exhaustively political kind of desire, or a kind that carries additional connotations – invested *by the author-subjects* in 'immigrants', who are thereby reduced to a projection screen. I want to stress, then, the colonizing thrust of Negri's and Hardt's rhetoric, as quoted above. It resonates with Deleuze's idealization of 'those concerned', i.e., of subjects engaged in resisting their own oppression (see above). Hardt's and Negri's rhetoric regarding the 'richness' of migrants, and the "subversive desires" which they attribute to 'immigrants' as a homogenized class, is no less patronizing. It reinscribes racialized discourse – which (as clarified by hooks) is no less problematic when it comes in an idealizing, exoticizing guise than it is when it is overtly devaluing.

Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez aptly phrases the more general point I want to make in regard to Negri and Hardt when she critiques

them, along with some of their followers, for defining the empirical faces of resistance out of existence through the abstract character of their concept of a 'multitude':

> "A *multitude* which does not pose the concrete questions pertaining to material distribution, to the aporias between North and South, the gendered subalterns, the underprivileged queers, fails to recognize [the speakers', C.B.] own possible positions of hegemonic speech, qua intellectuals or academics of the West, as a structural moment in the constitution of the *multitude*" (2007, 137; transl. C.B.; emphasis in the original).

In summary, practicing ontology or a theorization of (social) reality – especially when this occurs without any simultaneous attention to questions of epistemology or the politics of knowledge – bears the risk of facilitating the production of colonialist effects in virtue of purporting to capture a truth or reality 'beyond discourse', which is to disavow (whether explicitly or implicitly) the constitutive role of discourses; including one's own.

## Ontology *versus* epistemology? Onto-epistem-ology?

As can be gleaned from the above statement by Gutiérrez Rodríguez, some *postcolonial* poststructuralisms (in particular) have never been purely about an epistemological or discursive perspective. Among the best-known postcolonial critics of the late twentieth century – Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Spivak – the latter, in particular, has put deconstruction to rather materialist uses: From the 1980s onwards, her work barely, if ever left questions of ontology wholly to the side, implicated as they are in analyses of (global) social relations. After all, Spivak once called herself a "'practical deconstructivist feminist Marxist'" (as cited by her interviewer; see Spivak 1990, 133). Her eclectic way of articulating materialist with deconstructive critique bears out Hemmings' point that it would flatten out poststructuralism to reduce

it to a pursuit of epistemological questions in isolation from ontological ones.

So how can we relate ontological and epistemological concerns to each other in less reductive ways? It is on this question that I want to focus in the remainder of this chapter. My central thesis in doing so – by way of juxtaposing the examples of Negri and Hardt as well as Karen Barad with some theses propounded by Spivak during the early phase of her work – is that the latter situated itself at an equal remove from, on the one hand, dichotomizing epistemology vs. ontology against each other and, on the other hand, from any attempt to reconcile epistemological with ontological concerns in an overarching theoretical framework. Spivak in my reading, at the time at least, treated epistemic and ontic aspects of sociality as being mutually imbricated yet irreducible to one another and, more precisely, as existing in mutual tension. I contrast this view as I reconstruct it favorably with, firstly, Negri's and Hardt's polarization of deconstruction and ontology against each other and, secondly, Barad's project of fusing epistemology with ontology. My basis for reconstructing Spivak's position during the 1980s is the collection of interviews with her that appeared in 1990 under the title *The Post-Colonial Critic*.

Consider how Spivak frames the relationship between textuality and "'fact' or 'life' or even 'practice'" in the following passage (from which I omit some parts) in one of those interviews:

> "As far as I understand it, the notion of textuality should be related to the notion of the worlding of a world […] Textuality in its own way marks the place where the production of discourse […] escapes the person or collectivity that engages in practice […]. From this point of view, what a notion of textuality in general does is to see that what is defined over against 'The Text' as 'fact' or 'life' or even 'practice' is to an extent worlded in a certain way so that practice can take place. […] It allows a check on the inevitable power dispersal within practice because it notices that the privileging of practice is in fact no less dangerous than the vanguardism of theory. When one says 'writing', it means this kind of structuring of the limits of the power of practice,

> knowing that what is beyond practice is always organizing practice" (1990, 1–2).

As I read this passage, it is not possible according to Spivak at the same time to *engage* in a given practice and to fully *comprehend* how it is constituted in specific ways that have a textual dimension – in virtue, for instance, of the practice in question basing itself in certain presuppositions of which the subject concerned, whether individual or collective, is not fully aware. The implicit ontologies entailed in our practices are discursively constituted, then, and Spivak treats the discursive dimension of practices in such a way as to accentuate its fictional and, hence, in a certain sense arbitrary character. Arbitrary, as I would suggest, in the sense that possible alternative renderings of "'fact' or 'life' or even 'practice'" – as formulated by her in the above quotation – are excluded by whichever version of them is singled out, and by the political trajectory that this has in any one instance.

That such exclusions are constitutive of discourse is one of the central tenets of deconstruction in my understanding – including forms of deconstruction which, as in some of Spivak's early work, are rerouted in the direction of social theory and, as such, of ontology. Social theory cannot avoid producing ontologies, whether explicitly or implicitly, given that any assertion concerning 'society' or 'history' makes for an ontological claim; that is, for a claim that ontolog*izes* as given or 'real' the discursive objects with reference to which it makes its assertions. Practicing social theory and analysis with a deconstructive edge in my view means, first and foremost, attending to the exclusions which are entailed in assertions as to 'fact' or 'truth', whether such assertions feature as part of scholarly work or in other kinds of practice. Deconstruction in the sort of textual analyses of social relations which Spivak has produced from early on in her career, with a focus upon social relations as configured and enacted in other scholarly work (e.g. 1988a; 1988b; 1988c), can serve as a critical corrective and counterpart, then, to other kinds of political practice, including the production of social analysis and theory of more materialist kinds. In line with this view, Spivak has stated:

> "[T]he irreducible but impossible task is to preserve the discontinuities within the discourses of feminism, Marxism and deconstruction. […] If I have learned anything it is that one must not go in the direction of a Unification Church, which is too deeply marked by the colonialist influence, creating global solutions that are coherent. On the other hand, it seems to me that one must also avoid as much as possible, in the interests of practical effectiveness, a sort of continuist definition of the differences, so that all you get is hostility" (1990, 15).

In the interview from which this quotation is taken, Spivak proceeds to give examples of what she means by this, stemming from divergent locations in the theoretical spectrum of left-wing politics of the 1980s, when this interview was held: "[T]he slogan 'Marxist is sexist' bears this hostility, not understanding that it is a method that is used in very different ways" (1990, 15). As another example of a "continuist definition of the differences" between various theories, she parodies the critique according to which "[o]f course deconstruction […] is only textualist, it is only esoteric, concerned with self-aggrandizement, nihilist, etc." (1990, 15). And Spivak concludes her overall observation by stating: "To preserve these discontinuities […] rather than either wanting to look for an elegant coherence or producing a continuist discourse which will then result in hostility. I think that is what I want to do" (1990, 15).

Rather than either play competing approaches against each other, deciding that one must be entirely superior, on the one hand *or*, on the other, seeking to reconcile them in an overarching perspective, Spivak, in accordance with this statement, advocates deploying different theories in such as way that they bring each other to productive crisis (1990, 110–111). That is certainly what she may be said to be doing with a view to Marxism as a primarily ontological perspective and deconstruction as a primarily epistemological one (e.g. Spivak 1988a, esp. 280).

I want to address two cases in point as to what I consider to be unproductive about seeking either entirely to reconcile ontologically and epistemologically accentuated theoretical perspectives or playing

them against each other as mutually exclusive, as Hemmings charges has recently occurred in Cultural Studies. I wish to do so in order to concretize what is at stake in this discussion. Negri and Hardt, too, have polarized both scholarly projects against each other, declaring deconstruction *passé*:

> "[T]he deconstructive phase of critical thought, which from Heidegger and Adorno to Derrida provided a powerful instrument for the exit from modernity, has lost its effectiveness. It is now a closed parenthesis and leaves us faced with a new task: constructing, in the non-place, a new place; constructing ontologically new determinations of the human, of living – a powerful artificiality of being. Donna Haraway's cyborg fable, which resides at the ambiguous boundary between human, animal, and machine, introduces us today, much more effectively than deconstruction, to these new terrains of possibility" (2001, 217–218).

In line with the analysis I presented earlier, I view Negri's and Hardt's dismissal of deconstruction as historically obsolete, and their one-sided commitment to constructing new ontologies in its stead, as being related to what previously I had argued forms a rather un-self-conscious celebration of 'minor' subjects on their part – whose resistance they declare to be substantively autonomous (Hardt/Negri 2001, e.g. xv, 43, 124) in much the way Deleuze, in one of the quotations given earlier, celebrates those who speak on their own behalf as inherently revolutionary in outlook. As I have argued, deconstruction focuses the critic's attention upon the textual and, hence, the 'arbitrary', fictional dimension of all practice and sharpens our awareness of what exclusions are entailed in any one discursive move. Ideally, this should foster self-consciousness on the analyst's part as to the dimensions of power entailed in the relations of representation in which she is herself implicated in virtue of writing and publishing. In contrast, Hardt and Negri would seem to be *ontologizing* the analysis they present of 'Empire' and 'the multitude' wholeheartedly, treating it as *the* one way of conceiving of our global present. This is to cover over, rather than to cultivate awareness of, the critic's own positionality and politics, and

hence, of her own implication in the power relations she analyzes *or* potentially excludes from analysis.

But – to develop Spivak's argument with a view to the relationship between epistemology and ontology – to seek to reconcile both perspectives as if this entailed no loss, as if they were wholeheartedly commensurable is equally unadvisable in my view. I want briefly to address Barad's rather different brand of post-Deleuzian theorizing as a case in point – rather different, that is, from Hardt's and Negri's development of the thought of Deleuze. Barad presents her approach of agential realism (a variant of new materialism) as an "*[o]nto-epistem-ology*" or "*ethico-onto-epistem-ology*" (2007, 185; emphasis in the original; see also Barad 2007, 25–26). According to her posthumanist philosophy, since there is nothing fundamental to distinguish humanity either from other animate life or from inanimate matter, there is no need to differentiate human knowledge from other forms of knowing (Barad 2007, 323, 331–332, 338, 341–342, 419, n. 27, 177–178, 437, n. 81) (see chapter 1 of this book). It is sufficient in her view to circumscribe knowledge by the formula – repeated time and again in her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* – that "part of the world [makes] itself intelligible to another part" (Barad 2007, 185; see also Barad 2007, 176, 140, 342, 379). It does not matter in Barad's view whether the 'subjects' and 'objects', which in such processes are only situationally differentiated into these respective parts, are humans or brittlestars intra-acting (to use her neologism) with and as part of their ocean environment (see Barad 2007, 378–380). While Barad claims that her theory incorporates epistemology, she offers no particular account as to *what* epistemological perspective – what theory of knowledge in particular – her philosophy entails. This is in line with the fact that the latter admits of no fundamental difference between human, animate and inanimate 'matter': Epistemology is effectively replaced by an "*ontology* of knowing" (Barad 2007, 378; emphasis added; see also Barad 2007, 379) – or, more appropriately phrased in my view, of communication – in which divergent *perspectives*, *subjectivities* and *experiences* have no part to play. Thus Barad's account seems not to permit consideration of the 'perspectival' character of knowledge, of the

different *sides* which there are to any one 'story'. As a result, the power relations entailed in the social production, discursive arrangement, and unequal dissemination of *competing* knowledges would seem to be difficult to analyze within the framework of Barad's approach. This is particularly problematic considering that her theorizing is, of course, *an instance* of knowledge production, yielding effects of power of its own, qua major intellectual trend.[1] Thus its partial, 'arbitrary' or contingent, and necessarily exclusionary character qua *specific discursive perspective* remains unmarked as such, and unreflected, in Barad's writing. The following statement by her seems to me to invoke a world that literally *desires* to be known or discovered – a displacement, in my reading, of *the author-subject's desire* for discovery which thus remains unacknowledged, and which I find to resonate uncomfortably with colonial discourses:

> "If we no longer believe that the world is teeming with inherent resemblances whose signatures are inscribed on the face of the world, things already emblazoned with signs, words lying in wait like so many pebbles of sand on a beach *there to be discovered*, but rather that the knowing subject is enmeshed in a thick web of representations such that the mind cannot see its way to objects that are now forever out of reach and all that is visible is the sticky problem of humanity's own captivity within language, then it becomes apparent that representationalism is a prisoner of the problematic metaphysics it postulates" (Barad 2007, 137; emphasis added).

In Barad's theoretical account, then, much as it purports to reconcile epistemology and ontology, her attempt to build a 'Unification Church'

1 To concretize, one such effect of power is that agential realism ultimately tends to render invisible social *differentials* of power, understood in terms of highly divergent degrees to which differently situated subjects, collective as well as individual, succeed or fail to succeed in *making* their knowledges, and actions, 'matter' or 'materialize' as (politically transformed) reality. Put differently, Barad's generalizing assertion of the power of matter covers over the relative powerlessness of the socially excluded and marginalized.

– to use Spivak's expression (see above) – implicitly privileges ontology at the expense of epistemology: anything that may be particular to a human, discursively constituted form of knowledge is subsumed (flattened out, I am tempted to say, echoing Hemmings) under theoretical phrasings that operate at an extremely high level of generality as a direct result of the fact that posthumanism – at least in Barad's version of it – flattens out differences between human and non-human subjects as well as between animate and inanimate matter. Let us remember that Spivak has characterized theoretical moves "in the direction of a Unification Church" such that they are "too deeply marked by the colonialist influence, creating global solutions that are coherent" (see above). This characterization would seem to allude to the identitarian, totalizing thrust of producing a theoretical account that purports to *include everything*. Since, at least according to deconstruction, it is impossible to do so, the effect will be (as argued by Spivak) "colonialist" in trajectory: some elements will be privileged at the expense of others without the resulting unevenness being marked as such.

The privilege which ontology is implicitly assigned vis-à-vis epistemology in Barad's proposal for fusing the two parallels Negri's and Hardt's explicit favoring of ontology over and against the supposedly outdated concerns of deconstruction:[2] In these two

2 It would seem to follow from Hardt's and Negri's commitment to posthumanism, as formulated in the following quotations, that even epistemology, more generally – qua theory of human, discursively constituted knowledge – is not considered by them to form an essential dimension of critical practice:

"There is a strict continuity between the religious thought that accords a power above nature to God and the modern 'secular' thought that accords the same power above nature to Man. The transcendence of God is simply transferred to Man. Like God before it, this Man that stands separate from and above nature has no place in a philosophy of immanence. Like God, too, this transcendent figure of Man leads quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination" (Hardt/Negri 2001, 91).

"[H]uman nature is in no way separate from nature as a whole, [...] there are no fixed and necessary boundaries between the human and the animal, the

instances at least, whether the two perspectives are played against each other or are supposedly reconciled, one of them – specifically: a focus on the politics of knowledge – tends to be subordinated, if not occluded. In scholarly work which partakes in what might be termed the knowledge industry – a significant force in hegemonic struggle – this has a depolicitizing effect. Namely, in that progressively intended contributions to this struggle tend not to be reflexive about their own effects of power; including the relations which they set up between the representing subject (as an author as well as institutionally speaking) and what or who is being represented.

Any attempt to invert the discursive arrangements described above, such that *epistemology* will be privileged one-sidedly over and against *ontology* – as it often was during the early, twentieth-century phase of poststructuralist writing – would obviously be no more satisfactory. To seek to limit questions of power to epistemological concerns and thus, to the politics of *knowledge*, in particular, would be to erase from view the economic, political, and social dimensions of relations of domination to the extent that these exceed the purely discursive – a point to which I shall return at the end of this chapter.

## Towards a third alternative

How, then, *are* we to envision the relationship between epistemological and ontological dimensions of analyzing, and critiquing, power relations in less reductive ways? It seems to me that it is impossible to do equal justice at the same time to epistemological and ontological concerns. For, on the one hand, in order to focus upon the textual level of how any given object of discourse is constituted so as to examine how its 'reality effect' (Barthes 2006b) is generated, we must necessarily bracket our own sense of reality and strive to suspend any truth claims we would otherwise be making. When, on the other hand, we place

human and the machine, the male and the female, and so forth" (Hardt/Negri 2001, 215).

our focus upon the ontological features of a given object of inquiry, we inevitably throw in our lot *with a given version* of what is 'the case'. Both perspectives are, as I see it, incommensurable.

We should therefore abstain from declaring any single theoretical perspective superior; a move which would arrogate something akin to omniscience to that perspective. Since no one theory can avoid producing exclusions that will underwrite the particularity, and the political merits, of the perspective which it establishes, no one theory can justifiably make a claim to being autonomous and wholly adequate or politically satisfactory in the 'take' upon power relations which it offers. All theorizing then – Spivakean deconstruction as much as ontologies such as those produced by Barad and by Negri/Hardt, respectively – in principle is in need of being supplemented by alternative, complementary perspectives.

For the above reasons, it seems necessary to me in any one research effort to prioritize self-consciously: Do the questions and the theoretical perspective in terms of which it is framed accentuate primarily epistemological or ontological concerns? Whichever dimensions of power relations are *not* in focus should, all the same, be de-prioritized consciously, without being ignored entirely. Working epistemological and ontological features of social research and cultural analysis against each other such that they might bring one another 'to productive crisis' could mean producing, on the one hand, ontologies that strive for maximal reflexivity with a view to their own discursive character, about the contingencies entailed in any one manner of constituting 'reality', and about the inescapable exclusions attendant upon doing so. Vigilance as to one's own role as part of the power-implicative and always situated institutional production of knowledge should help forestall rhetorics such as the un-self-conscious one Spivak has criticized in Deleuze and Foucault on the specific occasion of their conversation, as much as a colonizing rhetoric such as I have problematized in Barad along with Negri and Hardt. For instance, if Negri and Hardt didn't dismiss deconstruction as historically obsolete quite so readily, they might be more cognizant of discursive critiques of exoticism – modern and postmodern – such as the one formulated

by hooks, as discussed above, in which I have argued they themselves engage.

When pursuing scholarly research that is primarily epistemologically focused, on the other hand, we need to keep in mind the fact that (as argued earlier) social inquiry in the widest sense, even when it proceeds by deconstructive methodologies or poststructuralist discourse analysis, cannot steer clear entirely of being complicit with ontologizing gestures and statements of 'fact'. "[O]ne cannot not be an essentialist", as Spivak too has argued (1990, 45). As she elaborates, deconstruction is "an examination, over and over again, of the fact that we are obliged to produce truths, positive things" (1990, 46). "That's the thing that deconstruction gives us; an awareness that what we are obliged to do, and must do scrupulously, in the long run is not OK" (Spivak 1990, 45). In other words, since we cannot wholly abstain from making truth claims as to 'empirical reality' or 'facts' – at least as part of producing social research, as I would add – it is all the more necessary to be cognizant of the ontologizing character of such claims. As a poststructuralist, epistemologically sensitive analytic methodology, deconstruction is helpful in reminding us that we need to mark at the metalevel the fact that all ontology is ultimately more appropriately referred to as *ontologization*.

Strictly speaking, moreover, even an *epistemological* perspective as such is capable of being ontologized as a matter of truth devoid of discursive mediation: If, by 'epistemology', we understand (as I have done in this chapter) a metaperspective upon discourses which brackets the question as to whether their objects are 'real', so as to bring into view discourses' constitutive exclusions and the effects of power generated in virtue of such exclusion, it is certainly possible – yet problematic, too – to render absolute this metaperspective, naturalizing it in turn by losing sight of its 'perspectival' character. That would mean, in turn, naturalizing *this* particular perspective (the 'discursive' perspective), its constitutive exclusions, and hence, its effects of power. If, by 'ontology', we understand (as I have done in this chapter) a perspective which takes as given or 'real' the objects of its own discourse, then it is possible and, indeed, seems necessary to me to conceive of ontology and

epistemology as *each others'* respective constitutive outsides. As such, each of these perspectives is necessary as a critique of the reductions or 'biases' entailed in (that is, a critique of the partial character of) the other one, and only when their character as competing perspectives is kept in mind can their respective effects of power come into view. For instance, 'class' as understood in Marxist theory can be treated, alternatively, as a given of social reality to be analyzed for its *material* effects of power *or* as an object of discourse, the specific construction of which produces *discursive* effects of power – e.g. when 'class' is analytically privileged over and against race and gender as a constituent of social relations of domination. A rigorous critique of relations of domination in their different dimensions makes it necessary to refrain from 'opting' for either an epistemological or an ontological perspective to the exclusion of its counterpart as a matter of principle. For, to stay with my example, it would be as problematic to ontologize a Marxist frame for understanding social relations as self-sufficient (i.e. not in need, for instance, of the supplement of an intersectional analysis of social inequality) as it would be to treat a (deconstructive-) discursive perspective as self-sufficient. For, in the latter case, power would be reduced to its discursive dimensions to the detriment of its material (e.g. economic) aspects.

It is because *all* discourses necessarily produce exclusions – rendering invisible features of 'reality' that are perceivable only from an *alternative* perspective – that deconstructive analysis in Spivak's hands has meant shuttling between alternative perspectives. However, much as the theoretico-political need for an awareness of the specificity of any one perspective makes it necessary to *distinguish* such perspectives – as I have argued with a view to the difference between epistemology and ontology – bringing to bear deconstructive analysis and critique upon social relations means that neither 'epistemology' nor 'ontology' can be practiced 'purely', without becoming entangled in a complicity of sorts with its respective counterpart. (Which is not to say that the two perspectives are commensurable, let alone 'essentially the same'.) For, after all, such practice asserts the fictional status of any given discursive construction or positivity as much as its 'real' effects of

power. To the extent that this is the case, deconstructive social analysis will to some degree oscillate between making epistemological *and* making ontological claims, and will always be at risk of essentializing (naturalizing) *both*. We should be worried less about the contradictory character of doing so, and more about the very tendency to essentialize either perspective. Inescapable as it may be to do so – "one cannot not be an essentialist" (Spivak, as quoted above) – it is as a way of self-critically marking this tendency at the metalevel that deconstruction teaches us to be vigilant.

I would like to clarify what is at stake here by reference to Dennis Bruining's recent treatment (2016) of the debate on new materialism (see also chapter 1 of this book). In particular, I wish to exemplify, based on his article, the fact that discourse theory – much as it takes an epistemological perspective, as such – is not immune to ontologizing *itself*. It therefore is not immune to falling into the trap which above I have argued is entailed in privileging ontology over and against epistemology (whether explicitly, as in Hardt's and Negri's work, or implicitly, as in Barad's): the trap of failing to reflect the discursive (constitutive or performative) status of one's own theoretical intervention, and hence, the fact that one thereby inescapably effects constitutive exclusions, since there can be no discourse without a constitutive outside (Butler 2003, 131; 1993, 3, 8, 22).

Bruining agrees with Sara Ahmed (2008) that the criticism, articulated by some new materialists, to the effect that poststrucuralists seek to proscribe engagement with 'material' dimensions of the world, mistakenly posits that poststructuralists 'reduce everything to language or discourse'. Bruining rightly points out that some writers identified with new materialism in turn operate with a notion of materiality that posits 'matter', including the human body, to be knowable *as if such knowledge were extricable from discourse*. As Bruining notes (in line with Ahmed's earlier argument), this view reinscribes the very dualism between discourse and materiality, or mind and matter (see chapter 1), that new materialism seeks to move beyond, and which some of its proponents charge *poststructuralists* with maintaining.

However, where (as argued above) Barad purports to fuse epistemology and ontology as if the two could be fully reconciled without any attendant loss or exclusion, to the effect of privileging ontology over and against epistemology (albeit implicitly rather than explicitly), I would argue that Bruining makes an analogous move, only with a bias of the opposite kind: In his account, *the discursive perspective* is treated as if adopting it did not *in turn produce constitutive exclusions*, i.e. as if it were no perspective at all but rather, simply 'the truth' in an unmediated sense. Ontological perspectives upon matter are constructed by Bruining as theoretically mistaken and illegitimate to the extent that they conflict with the former (discursive) perspective. This is, likewise, depoliticizing in that it is to naturalize the discursive, epistemological point of view in virtue of foreclosing alternative perspectives incommensurable with it. It is, in other words, *to ontologize the epistemological perspective*.

To an extent, it is surprising that Bruining should do so. For, in his article he defends a performative (in particular, a Butlerian) view of discourse, according to which to seek to *know* is performatively to affect – to reconstitute or reshape *in its ontology* – what is known. By way of this understanding of the relationship between the epistemic and the ontic, of knowing and being, Bruining articulates what I have been calling 'epistemology' and 'ontology' with each other as strongly interrelated. However, not entirely unlike Barad (albeit in the way of an inverted mirror image of her position), he so closely identifies the two with each other that the tension between them comes to be suppressed. In Bruining's version of the relationship between knowing and being, or what I refer to as the epistemological and the ontological, performativity or the constitution of what *is* by what is *known* is rendered as absolute, leaving no remainder. Thus, commenting upon a text by Samantha Frost (2014), he writes: "Frost posits the existence of things she calls hormonal and steroidal floods, nervous-system adjustments, and so on, instead of seeing them as performative effects. If Butler applied this same logic, this would mean positing selves before their performance, which, of course, she does not." (Bruining 2016, 33)

By *reducing* biological processes to performative effects as if they could be wholly analogized with purely discursive phenomena such as the notion of a 'self', Bruining subsumes what *is* under what is *known*, thereby subordinating ontology to epistemology in a move that is the inverse of the privilege which Barad as well as Negri and Hardt assign ontology vis-à-vis epistemology. While such subsumption as operated by Bruining is convincing in the case of phenomena which are exhaustively discursive in the sense that they would not exist in the absence of being discursively posited and constructed – such as the phenomenon of a 'self' – to treat biological processes as analogously purely performative (and hence, discursive) effects is to abnegate material processes that take shape *whether or not they are known* (and hence reconstituted, i.e. shaped) as part of human, discursive practices.

In turn, this means rendering the discursive perspective as 'true, unmediated knowledge', thereby failing to apply the notion of performativity at the metalevel, i.e. to one's own discourse. If Bruining were to treat the theoretical (Butlerian, discursive-performative) stance which he defends as *itself* performative, he would have to relativize it as a *specific perspective producing effects of power*, partially in virtue of the constitutive exclusions it is premised upon and enabled by. Instead, Bruining only heeds the exclusionary, power-charged character *of perspectives that engage in ontological speculation* about the shape of what *is* to the extent that 'what is' is not reducible to what we *know*, and how we know it. He thereby undertakes a move of reducing all there is to be 'legitimately' explored in theoretical terms to an examination of the world *as we know it*. I perceive this as, indeed, amounting to a proscribing gesture (of the kind some new materialists have argued is engaged in by poststructuralists [see Ahmed 2008; Bruining 2016]) that styles the perspective from which it proceeds as existing outside power. Were Bruining to grant the discursive status of the theoretical perspective from which his own argument proceeds, he could not dismiss ontological speculation (as to 'being' beyond 'knowing') as theoretically mistaken, *as if the discursive (epistemological) perspective which he adopts were devoid of exclusionary, power-charged foreclosures*.

While Bruining's article discusses only new materialist work that takes an interest in *bodily* materiality, one constitutive outside to his discussion consists in the material – that is to say, the more-than-purely-discursive – dimensions of power as a more encompassing *social* phenomenon. As argued further above, unegalitarian effects of power can be most fully critiqued when a number of complementary perspectives on its operations are adopted. Power is not exhausted by its discursive aspects. Environmental racism (Tuana 2008) would be one example of how social inequality and the biopolitical abjection of certain subjects' lives are impacted by factors not *reducible* to discourses. *Pace* Bruining, such impact – for instance, the manufacture of plastic and the increased incidence of cancer among workers in this industry, which radically reduces some subjects' life span (Tuana 2008) – may take shape even *when no human subject is aware of it*. The fact that saying so is already a discursive statement, and that there can be no knowledge of this causal link that would not already be discursive, does not obviate the political importance of research that proceeds *as if* such links could be known in 'non-discursive' ways – that is, as if producing knowledge about this subject did not in turn affect the matter under investigation performatively at an ontological level.

Precisely if knowledge is not treated purely as an end in itself but, instead, as political and oriented to the goal of contributing to the achievement of more egalitarian social relations, we cannot afford to declare any one theoretical perspective self-sufficient. Since critiquing social relations of domination and effects of power requires in part the adoption of ontologizing perspectives that proceed in such an 'as if' mode as just described, and hence with a certain theoretical naïvety, it is not only legitimate but politically necessary to leave behind a stance that privileges a discursive, epistemologically accentuated perspective as somehow superior and fully 'right'. The latter stance would amount to a thoroughly un-performative view of one's own discursive practice, which would itself exhibit theoretical naïvety precisely in virtue of disavowing *its own (exclusionary) effects of power*. If Bruining ends his article by invoking Jacques Derrida's statement "that 'whoever believes that one tracks down some *thing;* one tracks down tracks'" (Bruining

2016, 37, citing Derrida; emphasis in the original) and reminds us that "despite the fact that we may expect matter, nature and/or substance to precede its trace, we can only ever find its trace" (Bruining 2016, 37), I would encourage us to become theoretically less 'purist', in scrupulous complicity with alternative, *mutually complementary* forms of naïvety – based upon the realization that we cannot refrain entirely from such theoretical naïvety or reductiveness. (A realization that should come with the poststructuralist conviction that, to paraphrase Butler [2003, 131; 1993, 3, 8, 22], there is no discourse without a constitutive outside.) Let us "[track] down tracks" with full awareness of the fact that tracks or traces is what we are dealing with when we engage in ontological speculation, in theoretically impure speculation about what there is 'beyond' – not reducible to – discourse. It is impossible to engage in discursive practices without being reductive in one way or the other. It is in this spirit that I shall proceed in the chapters that follow.