Event{u}al Disruptions: Postmodern Theory and Alain Badiou

Sebastian Huber

> We write only at the frontiers of our
> knowledge, at the border which separates our
> knowledge from our ignorance and
> transforms the one into the other.
> (Deleuze, *Difference* xx)
> It has happened before, but there is nothing
> to compare it to now. (Pynchon 3)

ABSTRACT: This (rather theoretical) paper juxtaposes three 'postmodern' tendencies (epistemology, monocentrism and its idea of events) with Alain Badiou's ontological approach that implies multiple multiplicities and the singular event. By referring to the work of Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Gilles Deleuze, I seek to offer an insight into postmodern (Literary and Cultural) theory's attachment to certain beliefs that pose problems to movements of resistance, as well as conceptualizations of anything 'new.' By introducing Alain Badiou's thoughts on postmodern theory as well as his divergence from this path, I illuminate his potential for critical analyses in American Studies to come.

KEYWORDS: Alain Badiou; Postmodernism; Ontology; Multiple Multiplicities; Event

0. Postmodern Influence

A curious thing about postmodernism is its inevitability.[1] Like every good narrative, it is difficult to think outside of it. No matter how vigorously one seeks to move beyond it as a historical period,[2] or as a theoretical modus operandi, it always seems to get the better of us. In that sense, one might affiliate a variety of 'new' research areas in American Literary and Cultural studies with the inexorable influence of the various taproots of postmodernism. Be it the spatial turn, ecocriticism, disability studies, the posthumanities, queer theory, or, more

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[1] To be theoretically correct, we obviously have to speak of postmodernisms, which is already symptomatic for the paradoxical nature of the postmodern approach(es): although characterized by a radical disbelief in processes that meticulously order our way of seeing things, it itself could be regarded to entail an all-encompassing mode.

[2] The creativity to come up with a label for the new period is indeed remarkable. *Post-postmodernism* seems to have won the largest consensus (see, for instance, Trimmer, McLaughlin, or Kucharzewski and Schowalter), while there are also other neologisms circulating, which are depicted by Vermeulen and van den Aken: Lipovetsky's or Virilio's hypermodernism, Kirby's pseudomodernism, or altermodernism as conceived by Bourriaud. Vermeulen and van den Aken have their own concept of metamodernism.

recently, animal and age studies, all of these fields of research are, in one way or another, connected to postmodern and/or poststructualist[3] ideas, theories, and/or methodologies. In this paper, I want to consider three key areas that, arguably, constitute the kernel of postmodern theory and consequently show to what extent the French Marxist philosopher[4] Alain Badiou could be said to parenthesize them, thus venturing into different "more than modern" (*Theoretical* xvi) territories. By doing so, I wish to suggest that Alain Badiou's ideas offer challenging insights for American Literary and Cultural Studies. The need for having to introduce Badiou to American Studies at all derives from his problematic reception within academia. While his importance is more and more acknowledged in philosophy,[5] there is little research in American Studies that occupies itself with his ideas.[6] One reason for this might lie in the late translation and consequently dissemination of Badiou's books on an international scale. Yet, I would also maintain that his beliefs are too radically opposed to three key ideas of postmodern discourse for them to be readily adopted within academia.[7] By way of contrast, I seek to elucidate postmodernism's focus on epistemology, monocentrism, and its understanding of the event, and show how Badiou deals differently with these topics. I will eclectically refer to the work of Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Gilles Deleuze, which will establish a certain postmodern orientation (and it is part of the

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[3] Although I would not categorically equate poststructuralism and postmodernism, I think the interconnections between these two discourses are undeniable. And even though not all postmodern discourse is poststructuralist, I would argue that all poststructuralist discourse is postmodern.

[4] 'French,' 'Marxist,' and 'philosopher' are certainly only three characterizations that define Badiou. To this Badiouian 'set,' one might also add 'mathematician,' 'Althusserian' (Žižek 146), 'dramatist,' or 'film-maker.' Peter Hallward, amongst others, provides another interesting, however "meaningless but unavoidable title of 'most important contemporary French philosopher'" (xxi).

[5] Particularly since the English publication of Badiou's major book *Being and Event*, critical reception has started to gain momentum. In his 2003 book *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Peter Hallward still points to the fact that Badiou is not included "in either two of the two most substantial recent English surveys of French philosophy in the twentieth century" (349). Hallward and Slavoj Žižek (*The Ticklish Subject*) were amongst the first to critically engage with Badiou's work. In France, Badiou's key role could, however, already be seen in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of *L'être et L'êvenement* in *What is Philosophy?* (1991). More recently, not only Christopher Norris's *Companion to* Being and Event was published, but also John Mullarkey and Beth Lord's *Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy*, in which Badiou assumes a major role. Moreover, Badiou has published a variety of English and German collections of essays, amongst them *Infinite Thought*, *Theoretical Writings*, or *Lob der Liebe*.

[6] Among the few essays, particularly in Literary and Cultural Studies, that deal with Badiou's work are, for instance, Alexander Dunst's "Thinking the Subject Beyond its Death," Simone Pinet's "On the Subject of Fiction: Islands and the Emergence of the Novel," Julian Murphet's "Character and Event," or Gran Farred's "The Event of the Black Body at Rest: Mêlée in Motown."

[7] Peter Hallward explains that Badiou's "proximate targets […] are those who used to be called the nouveaux philosophes, but his argument extends to a confrontation with positions as diverse as those of Levinas and Rawls, along with much of what is called 'cultural studies' in North America. It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that Badiou's work is today almost literally unreadable according to prevailing codes—both political and philosophical—of the Anglo-American academy" (xxiii).

complex heterogeneity of postmodernism that some might argue that Deleuze is already no longer postmodern[8]). Just to be clear: I could be no farther from suggesting any kind of post-postmodernism; what I am interested in is Alain Badiou's potential to part with certain beliefs that could be attested to the many faces of postmodern theory and philosophy.

1. Epistemology and Ontology

My first argument is that postmodern theory[9] is epistemologically oriented. I want to suggest that postmodern discourses contemplate knowledge and knowing, rather than being. This is not to say that it forgets the question of being (Heidegger, *Being* 2), but rather that it addresses this question not from an ontological point of view.[10] Accordingly, it seem to be the case that in a great deal of postmodern discourse, the contemplation of things, of being, is only feasible if we ask ourselves how we can know 'the what'—what I would like to call the epistemologization of ontology.[11] The reason for this skepticism towards ontology might lie, on the one hand, in its connection to metaphysics. Deriving from the field of metaphysics, it is clear to what extent ontology, as the study of being *qua* being, relies on problematic concepts of substances, essences, and universals that opposes postmodern materialism and its belief "that there are only bodies and languages" (Badiou, *Logics* 1). Moreover, inherently connected to this is the universalist assumption that ontology brings along (Heidegger, *Being*

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[8] A reason for this might indeed lie in Deleuze's focus on ontology. See, for instance, his *Difference and Repetition*.

[9] My usage of the term 'postmodern theory' is quite simplistic and homogenizing. However, for the sake of the argument, I want to show that, despite the various, often paradoxical interests of different theories of the late 20th century, there are certain points of overlap. Grossly, I would see theorists (for lack of a better term) such as Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Jameson, Deleuze, Butler, Kristeva, Spivak, Said, Bhabha, etc. as 'postmodern,' although many of them might reject this label.

[10] Badiou even goes as far as diagnosing the "central place accorded to the question of language" (*Infinite Thought* 34) within the three major fields of 20th-century philosophy of hermeneutics, deconstruction, and analytical philosophy. Although a focus on linguistic systems does not coincide entirely with an epistemological orientation, I would still argue that the two are inevitably interconnected, and that language is, arguably, more of a concern for epistemology than for ontology. Christopher Norris also locates Badiou's approach as "ontological in character since [it has] to do directly with the question of being - in its various kinds of modalities - as distinct from the epistemological question with regard to our knowledge thereof or the linguistic question with regard to what we can say, describe, or justifiably assert concerning it" (3).

[11] Someone who might object to my claim that postmodernism is marked by epistemological concerns would certainly be Brian McHale, who claims that there is an epistemological dominant in modernist literature while postmodernist narratives invest in ontological enterprises. I would nevertheless argue that the kind of ontological work postmodernism is eager to reflect upon still functions within epistemological, that is, linguistic and discursive perimeters. Although McHale is mainly concerned with fiction, and I am here more interested in theoretical discourses (although one should not insist too harshly upon a strict distinction between the two), I would still argue that postmodern theory tends to conceive of being in terms of language or discourse, which I superficially conceive of as an epistemological motivation.

3). While there is no such thing as a unified notion of language (and thus of knowledge), but only polyphonic language games, the idea of ontology itself seems to transcend such culture-bound (or rather language-game-related) spaces and reaches for homogeneity and generalization.

We find one example of this epistemological tendency in Jacques Derrida, whose phrase "[t]*here is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (*Grammatology* 158; original emphasis) has become synecdochal for his deconstructionist undertaking and also typifies his textual ontology. It seems symptomatic that Derrida cites Montaigne's "[w]e need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things" at the beginning of his seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (351). In interpreting interpretations themselves and not 'things,' Derrida's bracketing of the actual being of things leads to the inquiry into a second sphere of discourse, a hermeneutics of hermeneutics. Accordingly, when Derrida writes about the history of metaphysics as "the determination of Being as presence," where a variety of placeholders designate "an invariable presence—eidos, archē, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) alētheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" ("Structure" 353), he does not enter the subject from the field of being but from language. It is indeed Derrida's point that this logocentric belief in any kind of metaphysical presence, the center, is always already undermined by motions of linguistic and epistemological deferral and difference:

> it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse [...] that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. ("Structure" 354-55)

By determining the notion of present-being as a sign, or sign-substitutions, Derrida approves of the linguistic invasion, insinuating that through the turn to language, or discourse, it no longer makes sense to search for, let alone find a present form of being other than through language: we cannot do ontology, since being is always already epistemologically mediated.

At the end of the first chapter of *Of Grammatology* entitled "The Written Being/The Being Written" Derrida also ascribes to the undertaking "to deconstitute the founding concept-words

of ontology, of being in its privilege" and observes that linguistics and psychoanalysis "are no longer dominated by the questions of a transcendental phenomenology or a fundamental ontology (21; original emphasis). This antimetaphysical "breakthrough" (*Grammatology* 21) is also amplified by Derrida's grammatological endeavor. By substituting a unified and stable idea of being, a grammatology shows first, that the proper, non-logocentric exploration of being is undertaken through the epistemological dimension as written being; second, Derrida insists that the being that raises ontological questions is always already being written, which not only attests the subject's passivity, but also its inexorable immanence within text.

Badiou's approach seems therefore essentially irreconcilable with the main philosophical and theoretical orientations of the 20th century that subscribe to an epistemological critique of metaphysics and ontology. In this respect, Badiou identifies "the end of metaphysics" (*Infinite* 33) as one commonality of the diverse fields of hermeneutics, analytical philosophy, and deconstruction.[12] The discourse of the end (of being, of metaphysical language, of grand narratives) thus substitutes ontological/metaphysical reflections for epistemological ones; hence the passage from "a truth-orientated philosophy to a meaning-orientated" one (*Infinite* 34) that centers on the plurification of meaning, its context-specificity, or even its evanescence.

Incessantly linked to the shared perpetuation of discourses of ends, all three disciplines also share the turn towards language as their principle methodology. Badiou, however, is critical of the linguistic turn. For him, it typifies not "a means of liberation from outworn ideas or misconceived pseudo-dilemmas but rather a means of distracting attention from problems that would otherwise occupy the forefront of any philosophical project" (Norris 3). Badiou parenthesizes the eminence of language and insists that philosophy has to contemplate being in and for itself. This is not to say that language is not also involved in his analysis, or that he omits the fact that language is "the colour of philosophy, its tonality, and its inflexion" (*Infinite* 38). Still, the dominant role that language plays within the other orientations is explicitly discarded, since a key element in Badiou's thought is exactly the limits of language, the realm of the new: "language is not the absolute horizon of thought" (*Infinite* 37). As a

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[12] In "Philosophy and Desire," Badiou specifically calls Derrida and Lyotard's work the "postmodern orientation" (*Infinite* 31), and not deconstruction, although he also uses both terms interchangeably.

direct opposite of Derrida's reference to Montaigne, Badiou contends that he has no interest in "words, but things" (*Infinite* 37).

Thus, we should briefly explicate Badiou's ontological commitments. At the basis of his undertaking, Badiou states that "mathematics is ontology" (*Being* 4; original emphasis). By choosing mathematics, and more precisely set theory, as the appropriate, even ideal discourse to speak and reflect upon being, Badiou does not simply put ontology within a highly formalized and abstract discourse, but rather stresses that mathematics is no "game without object" (*Being* 5). Rather, "[t]he reason behind the choice of set theory is that it shows how all mathematical entities, including relations and operations, can be thought of as pure multiples" (*Being* 91). These pure multiples or multiplicities are the basic and sole 'elements' of set theory.[13] However, Badiou stresses that 'elements' might not be the correct term, because they can themselves subsist of multiples, which may again contain multiples, and so on. While one could regard these respective levels of belonging as a hierarchical ordering of constituent sets, the principle of set theory is, in fact, democratic. With belonging as the sole relational operator, there presents itself an infinite "universe of differently structured and sized multiples" (*Being* 91), in which every multiple can get in contact with others. Badiou's extensional approach, furthermore, guarantees that there are no designative characteristics of sets, but only quantitative ones: Set theory is indifferent to "qualifying attributes or distinctive features" (Norris 52). Christopher Norris explains that with an extensionalist approach "the operative sense of a term is fixed entirely by the range of those objects, whether physical or abstract, to which it applies or extends and not by anything specific about those objects" (90; original emphasis). As a result, mathematical ontology is fundamentally opposed to

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[13] Deleuze and Guattari reject Badiou's notion of just one form of multiplicity in *What is Philosophy?*: "It seems to us that the theory of multiplicities does not support the hypothesis of any multiplicity whatever [...]. There must be at least two multiplicities, two types, from the outset. This is not because dualism is better than unity but because the multiplicity is precisely what happens between the two. Hence, the two types will certainly not be one above the other but rather one beside the other, against the other, face to face, or back to back. Functions and concepts, actual states of affairs and virtual events, are two types of multiplicities are not distributed on an errant line but related to two vectors that intersect, one according to which states of affairs actualize events and the other according to which events absorb (or rather, adsorb) states of affairs" (152-53). Although they argue for a duality of multiplicities, one might, again, associate this duality as two concepts within a dialectical, yet, monist ontology. Peter Hallward observes that Deleuze's "worldly, qualitative multiplicity excludes Badiou's deductive, mathematical multiplicity; his fold is precisely a qualitative or 'antiextensional concept of the Multiple…, at the opposite extreme from a resolutely set-theoretic understanding'" (175-76).

postmodern discourses of difference, in that it disregards distinctions between various multiples that are determined other than by the number of its multiples.[14]

Objections might arise that a mathematical way of thinking being, let alone political, aesthetic, or cultural issues, returns to a meta-linguistic framework of formalist or structuralist approaches, thus imposing coercive patterns on its objects of analysis. Indeed, set theory itself has attempted to arrive at "a complete and perfectly consistent formalization" (Norris 52). Badiou's usage of the Zermelo-Fraenkel set theoretical system, however, counts Russell's famous paradox among its axioms and thus forbids that there is a set of all sets, which would also contain itself. Norris observes that

> [i]t is precisely this recurrent gesture of containment - this move to control and delimit the scope of enquiry through various techniques of premature 'totalization' - that Badiou regards as having posed a chief obstacle to progress by evading the radical challenge that set theory presents to every existing ontological or, indeed, socio-political order. (53)

Set theory thus rejects the idea that there can be a set that includes all other sets, and would thus be a hierarchical meta-set.[15] However, there are numerical differences between sets that especially concern the relation between a set and its powerset. Powersets can be understood as excessive reduplications of the original set in that they include not only the set and its subsets, but also the relations between its subsets.[16] The infinite nature of both set and powerset also cannot prevent the excess of the powerset over its counted set, since, as Cantorian set theory has shown, there can be differently large 'powers' of infinity. This results in a general state of excess of the powerset, dominating the multiples of the originary set. The discrepancy between the situation (original set) and the state of the situation (powerset) thus leads, not only by means of linguistic analogy, the way into political waters.[17] Such forms of excrescent relations (which are more frequent than 'natural' or 'singular' ones) can be found, for

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[14] In this respect, Badiou has indeed a universalist aspiration that might not be acknowledged by the subgroups of identity politics (see Norris 67).

[15] Oliver Feltham, the translator of Badiou's *Being*, points out that another advantage of set theory is its axiomatic structure, thus lacking a single definition. Although one might object that the mere erection of undefined axioms seems arbitrary, this also implies flexibility, by denying systemic regulations that cannot be altered.

[16] The axiom of the powerset states that "given a set, the subsets of that set can be counted-as-one: they are a set" (*Being* 62).

[17] It is here at the latest that Badiou's political motivation comes to the fore. His nomenclature thus distinguishes set and powerset through the polarity of 'structure' and 'meta-structure,' 'situation' and 'state of the situation,' or simply 'state,' as well as 'presentation' and 'representation,' a choice of language that does not fail to bridge the hiatus between politics and mathematics.

instance, in the relation of a state and its 'ethnic' minorities. Unlike the bourgeoisie, which is "presented economically and socially, and re-presented by the State" (Badiou, *Being* 109), such multiples are merely regarded as an "indifferent figure of unicity" (Badiou, *Being* 107). What becomes interesting then, is ways and practices in which such elements can revert these excessive forms of power and move from presentation to representation, that is, how can they be acknowledged as sovereign 'elements' within a socio-cultural sphere? Or, to put it differently, how can one resist and criticize a state of affairs, without remaining in the realm of this set?

2. Monocentrism and Multiple Multiplicites

This question brings us briefly back to Derrida's deconstruction, since he shares a concern of how to attack a structure (philosophical, social, linguistic) in order to liberate oneself from the grasp of a system. In "the dislocation of the unity of the sense of being" (*Grammatology*22), Derrida's approach is different from both Heidegger's as well as German, Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy in his endeavor to attack metaphysical systems. While the philosophy of language, with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, but also the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circleat the forefront, attempts to dismantle metaphysics through a rigorous formalization of language, Heidegger crosses out being, yet without making it totally illegible (*Grammatology*23).[18] Derrida, however, is plainly aware that one cannot simply destroy metaphysics, logocentrism, or being by abandoning or even destroying the words it uses: "one does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline" (*Grammatology* 12). Rather, he tries to undermine metaphysics by taking away its argumentative basis: "the unity of the word" (*Grammatology* 22). Since a critique of a language always already necessitates the language that is criticized, it becomes one of Derrida's main concerns of how resistance may work. Accordingly, he writes that the "movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside" (*Grammatology* 24). By always having to operate within the constraints of a system, deconstruction, such as a variety of other postmodern theories, always runs into the problem of immanence. Even though one should not underestimate the potential and power of undermining a system from within,[19] one nevertheless can raise the question to what extent immanent criticism can be said to be successful, a concern that is pertinent for a variety of

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[18]See also Heidegger's *The Question of Being*.
[19] Examples for this could be seen in Judith Butler's concept of performativity or Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry in response to the hegemony of Orientalism as depicted by Edward Said.

postcolonial, anti-capitalist, and generally, oppressive practices of domination and exploitation.

A recent example of postmodern immanence, or, what could also be called monocentrism,[20] might be found in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's much-praised *Empire* and *Multitude*, which embark on a more outspokenly political project of resistance. For Hardt and Negri the contemporary hegemonic source of oppression is Empire, the postmodern development of formerly national sovereignty to a global level (*Empire* xii). Although identity construction, colonial exploitation, and geographical demarcations that were controlled and maintained by the nation state in modernity are now more or less passé (or at least not as powerful as before), postmodernity's instability of boundaries and identities, as well as its processes of decolonization do not yield to a democratic worldwide utopia. Hardt and Negri observe that "[a]lthough Empire may have played a role in putting an end to colonialism and imperialism, it nonetheless constructs its own relationships of power based on exploitation that are in many respects more brutal than those it destroyed" (*Empire* 43). Rather than terminating racial constructions of alterity, Empire yields to capitalist exploitation of labor and biopolitical regulations. Without going into the details of the argument, what is interesting for the scope of this essay presents itself in Empire's antagonist, the multitude, since it is a typical case of how postmodern theory formulates resistance from a monocentristic, immanent perspective.

Although Hardt and Negri are eager to deny that their concept of the multitude assumes any status of one-ness, when distinguishing it from "the people," which "is one" (*Empire* xiv), or the "uniform" masses, as well as the proletariat (a term that not only excludes the poor but also seems outdated in postindustrial times), they ultimately fail to escape a monocentristic system. Despite the fact that the multitude has no identity but is only marked by Deleuzian difference for its own sake, there still seems to exist an encompassing univocity of being (*Difference* 44). Accordingly, Hardt and Negri explain that

> a distributed network such as the Internet is a good initial image or model for the multitude because, first, the various nodes remain different but are all connected in the Web, and, second, the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and new relationships can always be added. (*Multitude* xv)

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[20] Although postmodern and poststructuralist theory is eager to dismantle a variety of -centrisms, such as logocentrism, phonocentrism, phallocentrism, etc., it seems as if the notion of monocentrism is still latent in postmodernism's epistemological orientation. Monist ontologies generally assume that being is One, and I would argue that this monism is related to the notion of immanence.

The Internet, as a postindustrial metaphor for the multitude, thus might convey the decentered, smooth-spatial nature of Empire's antithesis. Still, the fact that the multitude is itself interconnected, even if rhizomatically, insinuates a one-ness of its being. As corrupt and unstable as this unity might be, it is still conceived of in an interrelated cosmology of being. The mere fact that the multitude is differential and without a center does not simultaneously mean that it is not one.

Moreover, the relation between Empire and multitude again runs into the same obstacles that Derrida delineates in terms of deconstruction. The undercurrent that a critique of Empire can only function from the pillars it rests upon insinuates itself in passages like these:

> The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges. The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself. (*Empire* xv)

In this holistic notion of Empire and multitude, both are not so much antagonistic opposites but, in a very deconstructive manner, depend on each other. To what extent does the multitude really move beyond Empire? Since the multitude sustains Empire and the construction of the 'real alternative,' counter-Empire is only viable on its very territory, and it is again the question of how far this is really an emancipatory, transcending movement. Hardt and Negri's argument that the multitude includes various minorities "as active subjects of biopolitical production" (*Multitude* 137) thus remains problematic, since such notions as agency and subjecthood are predetermined by the discourse of Empire. The fact that "[t]heir mobility and their commonality is constantly a threat to destabilize the global hierarchies and divisions on which global capitalist power depends," as well as their movement, sliding "across the barriers and burrow connecting tunnels that undermine the walls" (*Multitude* 137), proves to stay within the bounds of Empire. Especially because the war on Empire is still waged on the ground of Empire, using the weapons, technologies and strategies of Empire the conclusion that the multitude is able to transcend Empire is rather questionable.

Despite the undeniably positive aspects of their concepts of Empire and multitude[21] Hardt and Negri's endeavor seems to struggle with its monist ontology. One reason that might explain

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[21] Accordingly, I think the general attempt to delineate a postmodern global order, point to its hierarchical relationships, and invest in efforts to undermine it, as well as the idea that the multitude

their reliance on a monist notion of being could be seen in their deep alliance with Deleuze (and Guattari). Since Hardt and Negri's concepts of Empire and multitude rely on categories of smooth and striated space[22] that undergo processes of "deterritorialization and reterritorialization" (*Empire* xiii), as well as the body without organs,[23] it seems understandable that they also borrow Deleuze's ontological univocity.[24]

Badiou's ontology is not monist, but multiple. I have already talked about set theory's multiple multiplicities without spelling out its defiance of any idea of monocentrism that is crucial, in my opinion, for movements of resistance that do not wish to remain within a holistic sphere of immanence. Badiou's defiance of any kind of Oneness becomes evident in, at least, two respects: the nothing of the void and the event, which will be discussed in the following part of this essay, although it is also pertinent for and connected to the idea of multiple multiplicities. Already in the first chapter to *Being and Event* entitled "Being: Multiple and Void. Plato/Cantor," Badiou axiomatically argues that "the one is not" (23; original emphasis), since there are no perceptible or demonstrable criteria for its existence (Hallward 62). Unlike philosophers such as Plato, Leibniz, or Deleuze, who think being to be One, Badiou maintains that every form of oneness has already undergone a process of structuring that makes a one out of a multiple. In other words, any insistence on the univocal form of being is, in fact, talking about consistent, and not inconsistent, pure multiples. What comes before any action of unification is nothing, the void, which serves as the foundation of the infinite varieties of multiples.[25] With this move, Badiou not only dodges a problematic return to a logocentric origin to ground his ontology; it also allows his ideas to legitimate

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produces biopolitically, is particularly valuable in order to acknowledge diverse cultural and artistic niches. However, there are also other perspectives towards immaterial, post-industrial labor that are not as benevolent. See, for instance, Andrew Ross's essay "The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?"

[22] See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, especially plateau 12 "1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine," and plateau 14 "1440: The Smooth and the Striated." In employing Deleuze and Guattari's dialectical smooth and striated space, the former has substituted the latter: "The striated space of modernity constructed places that were continually engaged in and founded on a dialectical play with their outsides. The space of imperial sovereignty, in contrast, is smooth. […] In this smooth space of Empire, there is no place of power—it is both everywhere and nowhere. Empire is an ou-topia, or really a non-place" (*Empire* 190).

[23] See Plateau 6 "November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?" Hardt and Negri adopt the conceptual metaphor of the body without organs to characterize the multitude's "global social body" (*Multitude* 159).

[24] For a more thorough analysis of Deleuze's ontological commitments, see Badiou's *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*.

[25] Due to the axiom of the void and the axiom of the powerset set theory can indeed evolve something out of nothing (see *Being*, Meditation Five).

movements beyond any given situation. By attending to arguments that could be, and were, launched from ontological monists, such as "'inconsistency is nothing'" (*Being* 54), Badiou takes these statements literally in that 'nothing' does not simply express a negative statement, but that it becomes the object of identity for inconsistency. What follows is that, while the one is not, "[t]he nothing is; it is not mere nonbeing" (Hallward 65; original emphasis). It is, precisely, from the perspective of consistency that there is nothing outside of its count, because the language of set theory as ontology cannot account for this nothing in its language, even though its sets are based on this void.

Badiou's multiple multiplicities thus present a way of thinking being as an infinitely expanding and thus uncontainable form, which engenders the possibility to think resistance and change that transcends a given situation, a structured oneness, without remaining stuck within this realm. Nevertheless, what is necessary to surpass the grasp of Empire, or generally that of every powerful metanarrative, is a total rupture, an event that only entails the momentum to change a status quo. Before illuminating how Badiou's notion of the event exemplifies such breaks, I will outline how postmodern notions of the event, as conceptualized in the work of Gilles Deleuze, adhere to a monist ontology and thus lose their singular disruptive potential.

3. event and Event

Although Deleuze might distance himself from a purely epistemological orientation, his indebtedness to a monist ontology pervails in his conception of the event and thus links him to a general discourse of postmodern theory. Following from this, one could also be skeptical about Deleuze's philosophy of virtuality, lines of flight, or rhizomatic deterritorializations and their immaculate positivity. Despite his impetus for practices of resistance in diverse fields of production, Deleuze's monism always only allows fluctuations between opposites.[26]

Particularly because his philosophy of difference is epitomized by a modality of "pure becoming" (*Logic* 1), the concept of the event cannot be regarded as disruptive instance within Deleuze's system. In this sense, Deleuze argues that the "category of very special things" (*Logic* 1), the events that mark Lewis Caroll's *Alice* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, one might admit, are not really that special. Since the idea of an event seems to presuppose a

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[26]An example of this would be the dialectic relationship between smooth and striated spaces, perpetually de- and reterritorializing without end.

notion of change, Deleuze's "simultaneity of a becoming that eludes the present," blurs causal relations between "before and after" (*Logic* 1). As a result, Deleuze's notion of events is inherently connected to the way things are: the event "is inseparable from the state of affairs" and vice versa (*Philosophy* 159). Again, the immanent relationship between event and state of affairs (or virtuality and actuality) as two sides of the same coin determines an idea of event that leaves a radical rupture unvoiced. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari stress that "[t]he event might seem to be transcendent because it surveys the state of affairs, but it is pure immanence that gives it the capacity to survey itself by itself and on the plane" (156). In a monist ontology, the event always has to remain on the same axis of being, since there is nothing outside of that realm that could be communicated and thus does not exist. Since the event is moreover characterized as "a set of singularities" in which "each singularity is the source of a series extending in a determined direction up to the vicinity of another singularity" (*Logic* 52-53), there is nothing entirely 'new' that events bring about, since their impetus can always be traced back to prior singularities (Hallward 175). Peter Hallward observes that "Deleuze thinks that what happens is always a fold in the unique ontological continuum. He wants to conceive the event—the very form of discontinuity—as 'thinkable within the interiority of the continuous'" (176). Hallward goes on to argue that Deleuze "presents the world itself as 'a pure emission of singularities,' as a continuous stream of events, each of which is an affirmation or expression of the one Event of life" (176). It is a life in which nothing happens, since for something to happen, one would have to resort to a polarity of before and after, which is obviously untenable for any philosophy of essential becoming. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari write:

> Nothing happens there [at the event], but everything becomes, so that the event has the privilege of beginning again when time is past. Nothing happens, and yet everything changes, because becoming continues to pass through its components again and to restore the event that is actualized elsewhere, at a different moment. (*Philosophy* 158)

The ubiquity of the event, happening there and elsewhere, raises the question why we need the concept of an event at all. If everything is connected, everything exists in a state, or non-state, of becoming, how is one to assess, demarcate, and acknowledge change? This is precisely the point where Badiou's theory might prove to elucidate spheres that remain problematic for postmodern discourse. Although I do not intend to patronizingly assess postmodernism's focus on epistemology, monocentrism and its understanding of the event from any (superior) point of view, thus creating rigid oppositions between and value judgments on postmodern discourse and Alain Badiou's philosophy, I still think that his

approach offers new potential. Without calling this a movement 'beyond' postmodern intellectual tools or techniques, it certainly is a different, and highly valuable, change of perspective that might not only help to think the event, but also challenges of the state of affairs, and, in the last resort, contains a subject. Badiou's multiple multiplicities that foreground "'immanent unification'" (Badiou qtd. in Hallward 63), the unity of being, accordingly invite movements of change that are made possible through a notion of processuality. Unlike Deleuze's idea of perpetual becoming that hinders demarcation lines between before and after, Badiou is able to account for developments of structured multiples, that is, situations. Simultaneously, the idea of a being of the void, as well as the infinite potential of multiples to be related to each other, denies a teleological finish line. Thus, Badiou is extremely skeptical towards narratives of the end, be it the aforementioned end of metaphysics, the end of history, the end of the subject, etc.[27] Through the endless combinational capacity between multiples, set theory ontology is able to show how there can be 'new' multiples within the world, without there being neither a distant but inevitable end of these combinations, nor an inexorably intertwined dialectic that raises doubts to what extent the 'new' was not already present in the prior situation. Whereas Deleuze insist that such forms of innovation are already

> folded within the infinite complexity of what is 'already there,' […] Badiou argues, the whole effort of this scanning [of the fold] is to demonstrate how the new or the not yet can emerge, in all its apparent aberration, in the cruel violence of its eruption, in fundamental continuity from the already there. (Hallward 175; original emphasis)

However, such changes do no occur on a daily basis. In this sense, the multitude cannot just transgress the oppressive structure of Empire by simply deciding to do so. For Badiou, the key to change is a radical discontinuity in relation to being, and this is what he calls the event. In contrast to Deleuze, Badiou conceives of the event as an entirely unique, unprecedented, disruptive moment. Peter Hallward observes that "[a]s far as Badiou is concerned, then, Deleuze's philosophy proceeds as a misappropriation of the event. Deleuze collapses the difference between the place and the taking-place. His 'event is simultaneously omnipresent and creative, structural and unprecedented'" (176). Deleuze's ubiquity of the event aligns

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[27] In "Ontology and Politics," an interview with Isabelle Vodoz, Geoff Boucher, Justin Clemens, Ralph Humphries, Oliver Feltham, Andrew Lewis, Louis Magee and Dan Ross, Badiou states: "I don't believe in the discourse of the end, the end of philosophy and so on. Because I prefer affirmation to negation, I prefer to talk of trying to make a step rather than always saying philosophy is bad, or impossible, and as such paralysing philosophy" (*Infinite* 143).

itself in his philosophy of becoming and thereby renders the idea of an event as rupture superfluous (Hallward 177).[28]

While for Deleuze the event is to be situated within the realm of being, Badiou is eager to show that the event, in very much the same sense as the void, is not. He thus axiomatically declares: "$e^x = \{x \square X, e^x\}$" (*Being* 179). The event e^x, according to this axiomatization, is a multiple that has as its 'elements' singular multiples x, what he calls the evental site, as well as itself e^x. While the multiples of the evental site guarantee that the event contains multiples that are not counted by the state of the situation (one might, for instance, think of African-Americans prior to Emancipation as such a multiple), which implies that it contains something that does not belong to the situation, the event also contains itself. One might object that the axiom of the powerset does not allow the existence of a multiple in a set that is not in its powerset. Yet the differentiation between belonging and inclusion (see *Being and Event* Meditations 3, 5, and 7) does exactly that, so that there can exist multiples within a multiple that do not themselves form a coherent, counted multiple. Since African-Americans were not regarded as sovereign citizens of America, they were elements of the situation "citizens of the Unites States," although they were not being acknowledged as a constitutive element by the government. From this follows that such singular multiples can be part of a situation without being included in the state of the situation.

Returning to the definition of the event, the problem of e^x presents itself. As we have seen before, the proposition that a multiple contains itself is paradoxical and thus unacceptable within set-theoretical ontology. By disobeying one of set theory's fundamental axioms it follows that the event cannot be integrated within ontology: "[t]here is no acceptable ontological matrix of the event. […] Ontology has nothing to say about the event" (*Being* 190). However, the result that the event has to be excluded from ontology, from the study of being *qua* being, is not detrimental. Rather, it safeguards Badiou's conception of the event as something entirely singular, something that cannot be conceived in the language of being, since there is no acceptable or even available language for it. This simultaneously implies that happenings that do not eminently shake our conception of the world (and Badiou would be on

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[28] For a detailed juxtaposition of Deleuze and Badiou, see Hallward (174-80). Badiou himself has not only offered his opinions on Deleuze in his Review of Deleuze's *The Fold*; he, moreover, dedicates the whole book *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* to his "highly esteemed antagonist" (Norris 43).

Jean Baudrillard's side here concerning 9/11) must not be regarded as unique events, which runs in the same vein as postmodernism's critique of mass-mediated events. In Hallward's words, Badiou "pinpoints every location of the new in an evental break and thereby ensures the radical discontinuity between truth and the situation in which it comes to pass" (175). It is Badiou's denial of a monist ontology that makes it possible to think of the event and the new multiples it brings into circulation as something utterly new, and not always already prefigured by the current state of affairs. In contrast to Deleuze, the event is not merely an interlinked actualization of virtuality; on the contrary, Badiou's event disrupts actuality in itself.

While for Hardt and Negri, the revolt against the metastructure can thus only function from within Empire's own architecture, Badiou proposes a different angle from which political activism can be executed.

> Rather than a warrior beneath the walls of the State, a political activist is a patient watchman of the void instructed by the event, for it is only when grappling with the event […] that the State blinds itself to its own mastery. There the activist constructs the means to sound, if only for an instant, the site of the unpresentable, and the means to be thenceforth faithful to the proper name that, afterwards, he or she will have been able to give to⸺or hear, one cannot decide⸺this non-place of place, the void. (*Being* 111)

This brings us to the last aspect (that was more or less omitted from this essay) in which Badiou differs vehemently from other postmodern ideas. Next to his turn to being, his celebration of multiple multiplicities, and his singular conception of the event, Badiou thinks a subject. Rather than tuning in with post-subjective tendencies of the late 20th century, his philosophical undertaking tries to safeguard a subject that is able to (re)act, decide and live beyond the constraints of Power, Capital, or the Other. Whereas Hardt and Negri's subject are subjects whose autonomy can only mimick Empire's production, Badiou's unusual approach seeks to have an individual subject that comes into existence through its acceptance and execution of the event. Without returning to humanist and idealist notions of an autonomous subject, Badiou's "New Philosophy of the Subject" (Hallward xxi) presupposes a dialectic between Subject and Event that parts with most of postmodern approaches to this concept. Particularly through his leaving behind of epistemological concerns, of a monocentric worldview, as well his radical understanding of the event, American Studies might be able to accept the event that Badiou's thoughts themselves present to our discipline, which would make us, in a sense, into subjects.

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