

# Reshaping critical geopolitics? The materialist challenge

VICKI SQUIRE\*

**Abstract.** How can the ‘materialist turn’ contribute to the reshaping of critical geopolitics? This article draws attention to the limits of an approach that emphasises the representational, cultural, and interpretive dimensions of geopolitics, while acknowledging the difficulties of an ontological shift to materiality for many scholars of critical geopolitics. It draws on the work of Karen Barad and Annemarie Mol in order to advance three arguments for the reshaping of critical geopolitics as a field of research. First, it argues for an approach to the analysis of power that examines *materialdiscursive intra-actions* and that cuts across various ontological, analytical, and disciplinary divides. Second, it argues for an analysis of boundary-production that focuses on the mutual *enactment* or co-constitution of subjects, objects, and environments rather than on performance. Third, it argues for an analytical approach that engages the terrain of geopolitics in terms of a *multiplicity of ‘cuts’* that trouble simplifying geopolitical imaginations along with the clear-cut boundaries that these often imply. In so doing, the article makes the case for a more-than-human approach that does not overstate the efficacy of matter, but rather that engages processes of materialisation and dematerialisation without assuming materiality to be a determinant force.

**Dr Vicki Squire** is Associate Professor of International Security at the Department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS), University of Warwick, UK. Her research cuts across the fields of critical citizenship, migration, border, and security studies. This reflects her interest in the political implications of different practices of governing mobility, as well as the transformative potential of diverse struggles through which such practices are contested, resisted, and/or subverted. Dr. Squire’s is author of *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum* (2009); editor of *The Contested Politics of Mobility* (2011); and Associate Editor of the journal *Citizenship Studies*.

## Introduction: The materialist challenge to critical geopolitics

This article considers how the insights of ‘the materialist turn’ can contribute to the critical reshaping of geopolitics as a field of research. An emphasis on materiality is by no means new to critical geopolitics. Scholars whose work has been integral to the early formation of this field have highlighted the importance of engaging with materialist concerns, such as Simon Dalby’s work on environmental security.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a concern with materiality is reflected in a range of recent works, including those

\* I would like to thank fellow panelists and audiences at the 2013 Association of American Geographers, at the 2013 British International Studies Association, and at the 2014 International Studies Association Annual Convention, who provided helpful comments on this article. Particular thanks are extended to Claudia Aradau, Jason Dittmer, Kyle Grayson, and Joanne Sharp for their insightful comments and suggestions, as well as to three anonymous reviewers for their constructive engagement with the article in its formative stages.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Dalby, *Environmental Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

concerned with the affective dimensions of geopolitics,<sup>2</sup> those concerned with the physical sites of geopolitics,<sup>3</sup> and those concerned with the biophysical or ‘viral’ aspects of geopolitics.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, scholars such as Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp pointed out early in the development of critical geopolitics that such a field of research should be ‘less dominated by representation and more attuned to actual [embodied] practices’.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, and despite the diverse and contested nature of the field,<sup>6</sup> discussions regarding the challenge of the so-called ‘materialist turn’ seem to have been relatively slow to take hold in relation to the broader framing of critical geopolitics. This reflects an understandable caution regarding the potential determinism of a materialist analysis, particularly in light of the formation of critical geopolitics as a critique both of the racial and environmental determinism of classical geopolitics as well as of the Cold War geopolitical emphasis on geography and resources as determinant of politics.<sup>7</sup> Yet while this article starts from a position of appreciation for the ways in which a critical geopolitics that emerged in the 1990s provided a critique of determinism, it nevertheless seeks to draw attention to the limitations of any critical geopolitics that does not fully reflect on the insights of the literatures that might be framed as the ‘new materialisms’.<sup>8</sup> I thus concur with critical scholars who have shown how geopolitical practices do not objectively survey space, and how geopolitical knowledge or practice is implicated in the reproduction of power and in boundary-producing political practices. Yet I also draw attention to the limits of a critical geopolitics that over-invests the representational, cultural, and the interpretive dimensions of geopolitics without paying attention to the important insights that a ‘more-than-human’ approach brings to the fore.

The article engages this argument through two moves. Firstly, it shows that, despite many critical geopolitical analyses moving away from a privileging of the representational over recent years, representation, culture, and interpretation remain key to the framing of the field in more general terms. Indeed, geopolitics is engaged by many scholars of critical geopolitics as ‘an interpretive cultural practice and a discursive construction of ontological claims’.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that such an emphasis reflects the centrality of the representational to the early formation of the field. This appears to render an ‘ontological shift’ to materiality problematic to the framing of critical geopolitics, despite the plethora of materialist analyses across this diverse field.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Pain and Susan J. Smith (eds), *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Alison Mountz, ‘The Enforcement Archipelago: Detention, Haunting and Asylum on Islands’, *Political Geography*, 30 (2011), pp. 118–28.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Ingram, ‘Viral geopolitics: Biosecurity and Global Health Governance’, in Andrew Dobson *et al.* (eds), *Biosecurity: The Socio-politics of Invasive Species and Infectious Diseases* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 137–50.

<sup>5</sup> Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, ‘A feminist Geopolitics?’, *Space and Polity*, 5:3 (2001), pp. 165–76, p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Joanne Sharp, ‘Geopolitics at the Margins? Reconsidering Genealogies of Critical Geopolitics’, *Political Geography* (2013), doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.04.006

<sup>7</sup> Klaus Dodds, Merje Kuus, and Joanne Sharp, ‘Introduction: Critical Geopolitics and its Critics’, in Klaus Dodds *et al.* (eds), *The Ashgate Compendium to Critical Geopolitics* (Abingdon: Ashgate), pp. 1–18.

<sup>8</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Klaus Dodds *et al.*, ‘Introduction: Critical Geopolitics and its Critics’, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Any distinction between the material and the representational is problematic, and overlooks more sophisticated conceptualisations of discourse that refuse such a divide. Indeed, one can say that the critical geopolitics that I seek to critique was to a large part grounded on a more sophisticated conception of discourse that challenges such a divide. However, what I also want to suggest is that the emphasis

Secondly, and related to this, I contribute to an emerging discussion about how ‘the materialist turn’ can critically reshape the field of geopolitics.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, I make the case for a ‘more-than-human’ approach that does not overstate the ‘efficacy of matter’,<sup>12</sup> but that instead engages processes of materialisation and dematerialisation without assuming ‘materiality’ to be a determinant force. Inspired by the work of Karen Barad and Annemarie Mol, the article advances three key suggestions regarding the importance of a more-than-human approach to the critical reshaping of geopolitics as a field of research. First, it argues for an approach to the analysis of power that prioritises neither physical nor social forces, but instead looks at *materialdiscursive intra-actions* that cut across such ontological, analytical, and disciplinary divides. Second the article argues for an analysis of boundary-production that is not so much focused on political performance as it is on the mutual *enactment* or co-constitution of subjects, objects, and environments. Third, it argues for an approach that engages the terrain of geopolitics less in terms of division or even in terms of interpenetration or interconnection, but in terms of an analysis of a *multiplicity of ‘cuts’* that trouble simplifying geopolitical imaginations along with the clear-cut boundaries that these often imply. Before developing these interventions, however, let’s examine the formation of critical geopolitics as a field of research in the 1990s and early 2000s.

### The formation of critical geopolitics as a field of research

Jennifer Hyndman has described critical geopolitics as ‘a camp within political geography [that] has undertaken the challenge of questioning, deconstructing, and exposing dominant political scripts’.<sup>13</sup> This is indicative of the broad scope of research that falls under the heading of critical geopolitics, the latter of which is widely conceived as a highly heterogeneous field of research that hangs together loosely in its mutual concern regarding the spatial or geographical dimensions of international politics.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite the diversity of critical geopolitics scholarship, and despite the emerging significance of materialist analyses in fields such as environmental politics and biosecurity, the ‘materialist turn’ does not seem to have been fully engaged in the numerous debates over recent years about the reshaping of critical geopolitics.<sup>15</sup> Jason Dittmer’s recent exploration of assemblage and complexity theory is a welcome intervention in this regard, which helps us to understand the hesitancy of critical geopolitics

on representation, culture, and text/narrative in the early formation of critical geopolitics has risked the interpretation of such a divide being manifest, such as in Müller’s critique of critical geopolitics, which I detail later in the article. For a more detailed discussion of discourse integral to the formation of critical geopolitics, see Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* (London: Pinter, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Jason Dittmer, ‘Geopolitical Assemblages and Complexity’, *Progress in Human Geography* (published online 2013, DOI: 10.1177/0309132513501405). *Progress in Human Geography*, 38:3 (2014), pp. 385–401.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, ‘Feminist Geopolitics Revisited: Body Counts in Iraq’, *The Professional Geographer*, 59:1 (2007), pp. 35–46, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Klaus Dodds *et al.*, ‘Introduction: Critical Geopolitics and its Critics’, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Simon Dalby, ‘Recontextualising Violence, Power and Nature: The Next Twenty Years of Critical Geopolitics?’, *Political Geography*, 29:5 (2010), pp. 280–8; Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray, ‘Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday’, *Geography Compass*, 4:11 (2008), pp. 1664–77; Klaus Dodds, ‘Political Geography III: Critical Geopolitics After 10 years’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 25:3 (2001), pp. 469–84; Marcus Power and David Campbell, ‘The State of Critical Geopolitics’, *Political Geography*, 29:5 (2010), pp. 243–6.

to 'go material'. Dittmer highlights that for 'ardent constructivists' the 'critical realist' emphasis on assemblages provokes an 'ontological shift' of focus from narrative and representation to '(de)territorialisation and (de)coding'.<sup>16</sup> While I do not accept that a materialist analysis need necessarily be defined as 'critical realist', I concur with Dittmer that the 'materialist turn' is challenging for many scholars of critical geopolitics even though it does not do away with the significance of discourse. Before I set out an approach inspired by Barad and Mol as a complementary alternative to Dittmer's emphasis on assemblage and complexity theory, I want to consider further why the 'ontological shift' prompted by the 'materialist turn' appears to be such a challenge for the field of critical geopolitics. In order to do this, I want to insist on the importance of a return to the work of scholars such as Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby in the 1990s and early 2000s, which has been central to the formation of critical geopolitics as a field of research even if it has not exhausted the diversity of this field.

By focusing on the definition of critical geopolitics as it was developed by scholars such as Ó Tuathail and Dalby in the 1990s, I do not seek to fix the field in these terms, nor to suggest that the field was fully cohesive either in the 1990s or now. I neither want to overlook the dynamism or the diverse and contested nature of this field, nor to minimise the importance of understanding how the field has changed over time. However, what also strikes me is the relative durability of an understanding of critical geopolitics as concerned with 'interpretive cultural practice and a discursive construction of ontological claims'.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that a focus on representation, culture, and interpretation may have impeded a more general redefinition of the field of critical geopolitics in relation to 'the materialist turn'. This is despite the fact that concerns with processes of materialisation and dematerialisation have been variously embedded within the field of critical geopolitics, both since its early formation as well as in wide ranging recent scholarship. It is also in spite of the significant body of feminist scholarship that has highlighted the importance of embodied practices over representational practices.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this article is situated within a diverse field of scholarship that has been subject to considerable critique and reshaping over time, as I hope will become apparent through this section of the article. First, I thus highlight some of the main dimensions that defined critical geopolitics as a field of research during the 1990s and early 2000s, as a means to emphasise the critical significance of alternative articulations that have been integral to the contestation of critical geopolitics over time as well as more recently.

### *Critical geopolitics in the 1990s*

During the 1990s, the work of Ó Tuathail and Dalby had critical purchase because it questioned whether the 'big picture' of geopolitics was 'dead' after the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, these authors questioned the simplified understanding of global political space and identity that such a geopolitical vision involved. Challenging the objectivist

<sup>16</sup> Dittmer, 'Geopolitical Assemblages and Complexity'.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Dodds *et al.*, 'Introduction: Critical Geopolitics and its Critics', p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, 'A Feminist Geopolitics?'

<sup>19</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (eds), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 1.

and realist assumptions that had dominated geopolitics as a field of research and practice until that time, Ó Tuathail and Dalby developed a distinctly critical perspective based on a concern with relations of power. Thus they claimed that:

Rather than accepting geopolitics as a neutral and objective practice of surveying global space – the conventional Cold War understanding of the concept – we begin from the premise that geopolitics is itself a form of geography and politics, that it has a con-textuality, and that it is implicated in the ongoing social reproduction of power and political economy.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, critical geopolitics as Ó Tuathail and Dalby defined it in the 1990s was defined as a field of research that took neither politics nor geography for granted. Rather, politics and geography were conceived of as produced through the representational, cultural, and interpretive practices of geopolitics, which in themselves were understood as reproducing hegemonic power relations.<sup>21</sup>

If geopolitics is both a form of geography and politics, then what type of politics and what type of geography does this involve? Ó Tuathail and Dalby define conventional geopolitics as an engagement in representational practices of statecraft, which they suggest to be grounded in cultural mythologies of the state. From their critical perspective, practices of nationhood are conceived of as involving the constitution of a singular identity, which establishes a boundary between inside/outside and which ‘converts diverse places into a unitary internal space’.<sup>22</sup> On this reading, three factors are crucial to what they term the ‘geopolitical imagi-nation’: the projection of an imaginary community, the homogenisation of national space, and the pedagogisation of history (which Ó Tuathail and Dalby define in terms of the forging of heterogeneous histories into a transcendental duration). From the visual reproduction of space through surveys and atlases, to the founding of community and the renegotiation of the boundary between citizenship and belonging, they argue that conventional geopolitics is defined in terms of the state’s ‘foundational myths and national exceptionalist lore’.<sup>23</sup> From a critical perspective, the politics of conventional geopolitics is thus conceived of as reduced to statecraft, while the geography of conventional geopolitics is conceived of as reduced to nationalistic cartographies and identities.

It is here that the work of *critical* geopolitical analysts has emerged as an important field of analysis. As Ó Tuathail and Dalby describe it, critical geopolitics engages in the deconstruction of ‘conceptual spatialisations of identity, nationhood and danger’.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, it is described as focusing on the ways that:

... political, social and physical geographies in turn enframe and incite certain conceptual, moral and/or aesthetic understandings of self and other, security and danger, proximity and distance, indifference and responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

The project of critical geopolitics is, in other words, founded on an understanding of the nation-state as performatively constituted. Thus, foreign policy is conceived of as a ‘boundary-producing political performance’.<sup>26</sup> On this reading, both geography

<sup>20</sup> Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> The early work of Ó Tuathail and Dalby referred to the importance of materiality in terms of the significance of power and political economy to geopolitics, while their recent work refers more to the importance of materiality in terms of the effects of somatic and geological factors for geopolitical practice.

<sup>22</sup> Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Richard Ashley, cited in Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 4.

and politics are understood as constructed in statist and nationalist terms, through various actors and performances. The scope of analysis for these critical scholars of geopolitics is therefore not reduced to a focus on the way that state leaders and foreign policy bureaucrats create geopolitical maps of the world and geopolitical imaginations that assume the nation and the state. So also is it to look at the ways that these maps and imaginations are made through an interweaving of such practical performances of geopolitics with popular and formal performances of geopolitics. Practical performances are analysed in their relationship to popular performances such as mass media representations, films, novels and cartoons, and to the formal performances of geopolitics by academics, strategic institutes, and think tanks. Critical geopolitics as a field of research shaped by a concern with performed geopolitical imaginaries, therefore, primarily undertakes an analysis of geopolitics as ‘a set of representational practices’.<sup>27</sup> This involves a social conceptualisation of power or hegemony, a conception of boundaries as performed rather than given, and a conception of the statist geopolitical imaginary as homogenising and divisive.

### *Moving beyond representational practices?*

Representational practices are central to the articulation of critical geopolitics in the 1990s and early 2000s, as we have seen. This emphasis is in part informed by Gearóid Ó Tuathail’s concern with deconstructing the ‘geopolitical gaze’. His influential text, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Space*, opens with an analysis of variations of the geopolitical gaze that are described as resting on a ‘depoliticization of geographical and political processes’.<sup>28</sup> Ó Tuathail identifies two dimensions of this depoliticisation as significant in legitimising state violence. First, he argues that historical and geographical struggles over the definition of nationhood and the legitimacy of state borders are effaced by the representation of the state as an organism.<sup>29</sup> Second, he argues that political processes such as imperialism, expansionism, and militarism are naturalised through their representation as inevitable and eternal. The geopolitical gaze, he thus concludes, is geopolitical in the sense that it seeks to ‘enforce the vision of space and power of a certain metropolitan spatial and political order over those marginalised groups . . . who would contest that order’.<sup>30</sup> In order to create distance from and undertake a critique of the geopolitical gaze, Ó Tuathail describes geopolitics as ‘the politics of spatializing global politics’.<sup>31</sup> He therefore advocates a critical analysis of both text and context as a means to deconstruct particular congealments of geopolitics,<sup>32</sup> and to develop an anti-geopolitical imaginary.<sup>33</sup> Ó Tuathail’s emphasis on text and context resonates with Simon Dalby’s emphasis on investigating how ‘the categorisations and cultural creations through which we come to

<sup>27</sup> Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> The significance of assemblage theory for a critical geopolitics, Dittmer (2013) suggests, is that it emphasises relations of exteriority rather than assuming an enclosed entity such as is evident in the ‘state as organism’ metaphor of classical geopolitics.

<sup>30</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–74.

<sup>33</sup> Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, ‘A Feminist Geopolitics?’

understand and write in turn shape our political existence'.<sup>34</sup> Questions regarding the representation of space and the production of geopolitical meaning are integral here, and are conceived of as having a direct effect on political existence.

That Ó Tuathail and Dalby strive for a geopolitical analysis that does not repress its own politics and geography was critical in the 1990s, and remains critical today. Specifically, such an approach remains important in questioning the relations of power involved in geopolitical 'gaze'. Indeed, a wide range of scholars have been involved in the project of critical geopolitics as envisaged by Ó Tuathail and Dalby. Such scholars have explored various representational practices through which political struggles are effaced and dominant political processes are naturalised. This includes those examining formal and practical representational practices<sup>35</sup> as well as those examining popular representational practices.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on the insights of feminist scholars of critical geopolitics in particular, situated, contextual, and embodied critiques of statist, nationalist, and imperialist cartographies and imaginaries have been developed as a means to problematise simplifying geopolitical imaginations and the divisive borderlines that these often involve.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, critical geopolitics has been incredibly fruitful in its examination of the political effects of wide-ranging representational practices. Importantly for my argument here, critical geopolitical scholarship has also pushed beyond the representational in order to examine everyday practices alongside representations.<sup>38</sup>

While concerns regarding the political effects of representational practices have been important to a range of scholars in the field of critical geopolitics, many of those emphasising the significance of a representational analysis have also highlighted the importance of pushing beyond representation. For example, in an article signalling the importance of affect to the Iraq invasion post-9/11 in 2003, Ó Tuathail draws on the work of William Connolly to suggest the importance of approaching thought not merely as representational, but as 'enactive' of meaning. This, he suggests, is made possible through 'cultural-corporeal' encounters that create inter-subjective structures of affect and memory defined as 'somatic markers'.<sup>39</sup> In the case of America post-9/11, he suggests, these markers are defined as characterised by resentment and desire.<sup>40</sup> By adopting a performative conception of meaning that involves the physical/somatic as well as the social/cultural dimensions of affect, Ó Tuathail here indicates the importance of processes of materialisation and dematerialisation to the operations of geopolitical practice. Along slightly different

<sup>34</sup> Simon Dalby, cited in Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, David Campbell, *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Klaus Dodds, 'Geopolitics in the Foreign Office: British Representations of Argentina 1945–1961', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 19 (1994), pp. 273–90.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Jason Dittmer, 'NATO, the EU and Central Europe: Differing Symbolic Shapes in Newspaper Accounts of Enlargement', *Geopolitics*, 10 (2005), pp. 76–98; Jason Dittmer and Klaus Dodds, 'Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences', *Geopolitics*, 13 (2008), pp. 437–57.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Hyndman, 'Feminist Geopolitics Revisited: Body Counts in Iraq', *The Professional Geographer*, 59:1 (2007), pp. 35–46; Jennifer Hyndman, 'The Question of the Political in Critical Geopolitics: Querying the "Child Soldier" in the "War on Terror"', *Political Geography*, 29 (2010), pp. 247–55.

<sup>38</sup> Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, 'A Feminist Geopolitics?'

<sup>39</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "'Just Out Looking for a Fight": American Affect and the Invasion of Iraq', *Antipode*, 35:5 (2003), pp. 856–70, 857–8.

<sup>40</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "'Just Out Looking for a Fight"', p. 859.

lines, Dalby's recent work also pushes beyond representation in ways that are indicative of the reformation of critical politics as a field of research that is heavily implicated in the 'materialist turn'. Dalby suggests that we need to rethink our relations of living within an external environment, in light of the claims by earth scientists that we live in a new geological age, the Anthropocene.<sup>41</sup> Questions surrounding the significance of materiality are thus increasingly important across the field of critical geopolitics, despite the centrality of representation to its early formation.

Indeed, there are various developments that indicate critical geopolitics as a field has been moving away from a conception of representational practices as a privileged methodological and conceptual locus of power relations and political struggle. In his assessment of critical geopolitics scholarship in 2000, Klaus Dodds called for a focus on both textual and bodily practices associated with geopower.<sup>42</sup> Rather than focus simply on representation, he called for a greater emphasis on everyday practices. This reflects ongoing concerns with the everyday across the field of critical geopolitics. Moreover, the limitations of a representational focus were raised by Nigel Thrift in his call to focus on the workings of geopower by attending to objects, to the human body, and to matters of affect, as opposed to the privileging of texts and images.<sup>43</sup> Such a strong distinction between texts/images and objects/bodies has not gone uncriticised, however. As Marcus Power and David Campbell suggest, it is important to remember that discourse does not simply refer to textual representation.<sup>44</sup> Martin Müller has argued that the notion of discourse has been undertheorised in the field of critical geopolitics, making the case for an approach that views both language and practice as discursive dimensions of geopolitical activity.<sup>45</sup> While this seems to overlook some of the more sophisticated conceptualisations of discourse that have been integral to the formation of critical geopolitics as a field of research from the 1990s, it nevertheless highlights the importance of moving beyond a representational/non-representational divide. Developing a performative conception of discourse in this regard is seen by scholars such as Power and Campbell as important in facilitating an understanding of materiality and affect as intimately intertwined with representational practices. This problematises the precognitive emphasis of nonrepresentation theory, while at the same time as drawing attention to the limitations of a representationalist approach.<sup>46</sup>

This article is thus situated in relation to ongoing and emergent debates regarding the limitations of a critical geopolitical emphasis on representation, culture, and interpretation. I take as a starting point the critical insight that geopolitics does not objectively survey space, but is rather implicated in the reproduction of power and in boundary-producing political performance.<sup>47</sup> However, I also reflect on what may be missed if critical geopolitics privileges the representational while overlooking

<sup>41</sup> Simon Dalby 'Recontextualising Violence, Power and Nature'; Simon Dalby 'Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalisation, Empire, Environment and Critique', *Geography Compass*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 103–18.

<sup>42</sup> Klaus Dodds, 'Political Geography III'.

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Thrift, 'It's the little things', in Kenneth Dodds and David Atkinson (eds), *Geopolitical Traditions: Critical Histories of a Century in Geopolitical Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 380–7.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus Power and David Campbell, 'The State of Critical Geopolitics', *Political Geography*, 29:5 (2010), pp. 243–6.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Müller, 'Reconsidering the Concept of Discourse for the Field of Critical Geopolitics: Towards Discourse as Language and Practice', *Political Geography*, 27 (2008), pp. 322–38.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*; Richard K. Ashley, 'Foreign policy as political performance', *International Studies Notes*, 13 (1987), pp. 51–4.

questions raised by the ‘materialist turn’. My interest in questions of materiality is not so much orientated to questions of embodiment and affect, as it is to questions regarding the role that geophysical forces and inanimate things can play in the formation of political practices.<sup>48</sup> I do not assume that these dimensions are separable, but rather note that the two have led to different lines of research and analysis. This article seeks to take seriously Dalby’s insight that ‘the divisions between physical and human geography are once again also in question’,<sup>49</sup> acknowledging that this also means the very division between the social and natural sciences is at stake. I thus seek to develop an intervention that reflects on how critical geopolitics might reconfigure the analytical tools with which it operates, in order to engage with the challenge raised by the ‘materialist turn’ that has emerged over recent years. In order to do this, I turn to recent accounts of the ‘new materialisms’ as a means to further set out the challenge at hand in conceptual terms, while developing a more-than-human approach as a means to highlight some of the key changes that such a challenge potentially prompts.

### The challenge of ‘new materialisms’

So what precisely is the challenge of the ‘new materialisms’ to critical geopolitics? Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue that a recent scholarly emphasis on the vitality of matter and on processes of materialisation involve the engagement of a new ontology of becoming, which works against substantialist Cartesian or mechanistic Newtonian accounts of matter.<sup>50</sup> They suggest that, for analysts engaging these new materialisms, ‘... materiality is always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’.<sup>51</sup> In other words, ‘materiality for new materialists implies that those things ...’ or elements that we have presumed to be inanimate may be more animated than we originally assumed.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Coole and Frost claim that this is ‘... a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognise that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency’.<sup>53</sup> What the new materialisms literature brings to the analytical frame of critical geopolitics, in other words, is an emphasis on the emergent or generative powers of ‘matter’ and the complex yet intertwined formation of ‘objects’, ‘bodies’, and ‘subjectivities’ that this involves.<sup>54</sup>

Although Coole and Frost rightly indicate that the new materialisms are questionably new, what is important here is that such scholarship poses a series of challenges to any critical geopolitics that privileges an analysis of the representational, cultural, and interpretive dimensions of geopolitical practices. While critical geopolitics

<sup>48</sup> Vicki Squire, ‘Desert “trash”’: Posthumanism, border struggles, and humanitarian politics, *Political Geography*, 38 (2014), pp. 11–21.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Dalby, ‘Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalisation, Empire, Environment and Critique’, p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms*, pp. 7–15.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> See Juanita Sundberg (paper under review).

<sup>53</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

has both historically and contemporaneously focused on the practical, popular, and formal performance of geopolitics, the new materialisms literatures would appear to prompt an examination of the changing enactment of bodies, things, and contexts that constitute the ‘landscape’ of geopolitics. A critical geopolitics that focuses on the representational, cultural and interpretive dimensions of performative practices, these literatures imply, may need to refocus instead on the dynamic materiality of physical systems.<sup>55</sup> Rather than deconstructing the nationalist and statist framing of geographical imaginaries and the divisive boundaries or borderlines that these invoke, many new materialists suggest it may be more appropriate to examine the fundamental interpenetration of ‘open, complex systems with porous boundaries’.<sup>56</sup> This is a direction toward which Dalby seems to move, for example, where he suggests ‘... we need to rethink our identities as agents of geological change, and in the process understand humanity’s role in the larger order of things in new ways’.<sup>57</sup> An appreciation of ‘the efficacy of matter’ is therefore critical, yet conceived as beyond the grasp of established ways of thinking.<sup>58</sup> From the perspective of new materialists, an analysis that focuses on representational, cultural, and interpretive practices thus misses the challenge that materiality poses to ‘our most basic ideas about humanity and agency, and thus ... politics and society’.<sup>59</sup>

The ‘materialist turn’ involves a range of different approaches that I cannot fully review here. The conception of the posthuman is a key concept, which is often used to refer to the fusion of humans and technology.<sup>60</sup> This draws reference from Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg manifesto’ and related critique of the analytical separation of culture and nature, the latter of which is arguably the defining insight of posthumanist scholarship.<sup>61</sup> In this article, I seek to develop a ‘more-than-human’ approach, which signals appreciation that humans are not simply human. By contrast to an approach that privileges ‘the efficacy of matter’, this more-than-human approach is ‘based on the idea that we, as human beings, are individual and collective creatures that are “always already” tied to, and reliant on, broader contexts beyond ourselves’.<sup>62</sup> I conceive this as an approach that: (a) does not assume ‘the human’ as a pre-given category on which to base analysis; (b) that does not extract ‘subjects’ (whether ‘human’ or not) from the ‘environments’ that both constitutes them and that they are involved in constituting; and (c) that rejects a pre-existing separation of ‘subject’ from ‘object’ and thus challenges the very assumptions by which we think in terms of contained ‘its’ or ‘us’ in the first place. This approach draws directly on the work of Karen Barad and Annemarie Mol. As scholars influenced both by feminism and the ‘materialist turn’, Barad and Mol facilitate an analysis that is concerned to ‘avoid a humanist commitment to prefigured subjects and normative positions’ while arguably at the same time being attuned to ‘the human body’s vulnerability [or susceptibility] to violence’.<sup>63</sup> By developing an intervention into critical geopolitics on the basis of

<sup>55</sup> Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, ‘Complexity, Ecologism and Posthuman Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 643–64.

<sup>56</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms*, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics* (see fn. 22 above), p. 112.

<sup>58</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms*, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Metzger, ‘We are Not Alone in the Universe’, available at: {<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-02-08-metzger-en.html>} 10 June 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, ‘The Question of the Political in Critical Geopolitics’, p. 254.

some of the insights of these scholars, I hope to open up some important differences between a more-than-human analysis and a position that overinvests the efficacy of matter. My aim is thus to develop such an analysis, without falling into the trap of object fetishism and/or what might be called a ‘raw’ empiricism.<sup>64</sup>

So in what ways can a more-than-human approach contribute to the reshaping of the field of critical geopolitics? There are three suggestions that I want to draw out here, in order to develop an alternative both to a critical geopolitics concerned with representation as well as to an approach that risks over-investing the efficacy of matter. These interventions speak back to the critical geopolitical focus on power as social rather than physical, as well as to the critical geopolitical focus on boundary production as both performative and divisive. It does so, firstly, through emphasising the significance of *materialdiscursive intra-actions*. This is a term that I take from Barad as a means to problematise any division between the social and the physical by exploring the relationality of different elements and the impossibility of separating out the material from the discursive. Secondly, I draw on the work of Mol in order to emphasise the analytical significance of *enactment* as an ontological category that moves away from performance as a representational concept. I conceive this not so much as a shift to an ontological register wholly beyond representation, as I do conceive it as an onto-epistemological move of political significance, which implies a shift away from the epistemological concern with perspective in terms that allow an appreciation of boundary formations in terms of the co-constitution of ‘subjects’, ‘objects’ and ‘environments’. Combining insights from both Barad and Mol I suggest, thirdly, the importance of an analysis of boundary formations that does not so much focus on the interpenetration of complex systems nor on the relative hegemony of divisive statist and nationalist borderlines, as it does examine a diversity of ‘cuts’ through which subjects, objects and environments are mutually constituted in their *multiplicity*. This, I suggest, troubles simplifying geopolitical imaginations along with the clear-cut boundaries that these so often imply. Crucially, it shifts the focus of a critical geopolitics that is attuned to questions of boundary formation *away* from representation, culture and interpretation, without falling into a materialist determinism (against which critical geopolitics has historically been defined).

### *Materialdiscursive intra-actions*

An emphasis on representational practices can be understood as a product of critical social science scholarship at a particular point in time; a point at which the focus on materiality was challenged by an emphasis on cultural or interpretive factors.<sup>65</sup> However, a turn to the ‘generative powers’ of matter by new materialists raises questions about the limitations of a critical geopolitical analysis focused on representational practices, such as those pioneered in the early days of critical geopolitics. To be clear from the start, I do not seek to take one side in the discourse/materiality debate here. This is a divide that has long been rejected by feminist and poststructuralist

<sup>64</sup> Ben Anderson and John Wylie, ‘On Geography and Materiality’, *Environment and Planning A*, 41 (2009), pp. 318–35.

<sup>65</sup> Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Poststructuralist Rejoinder’, presented at the ‘Matter Matters’ conference, University of Lund, 15–16 October 2012.

scholars.<sup>66</sup> Rather, I approach the different positions in such a debate in contextual terms, while also reflecting on how it may be possible to reject and thus navigate more subtly the material-discursive divide. Just as the ‘discursive turn’ risked over-investing the importance of representation, I conceive the ‘materialist turn’ as risking an overinvestment in the ‘efficacy of matter’. While questioning the critical geopolitical emphasis on representation, culture and interpretation, this article thus does not seek to prioritise ‘matter’ or materiality, nor does it question the critical import and political significance of the insights of a critical geopolitics influenced by the ‘discursive turn’. Rather, I seek to draw on and develop the field of critical geopolitics by asking: how can insights regarding the inseparability of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ be developed in terms that usefully contribute to the reshaping of critical geopolitics as a field of research and practice?

It is here that I find the work of Karen Barad instructive in closing the perceived gap between discourse and materiality, without privileging one over the other. Barad develops what she calls a form of ‘agential realism’.<sup>67</sup> This is based on a relational ontology, which rejects the assumption that bodies and things are already-existing entities, and instead looks at their production through processes of materialisation and ‘thingification’.<sup>68</sup> The neologism ‘intra-action’ is introduced here in terms that reconfigure the concept of interaction, and can be understood as a play of forces that emerge through the relations between different elements. Barad discusses these elements in terms of both discursive processes and material phenomena, suggesting that the relationships between these various elements produce particular material-discursive configurations of the world.<sup>69</sup> Importantly, the emphasis on *intra*-action over *inter*-action is indicative of the ways in which these different elements are effectively inseparable. While Barad’s position has been criticised for invoking a divide between the material and the discursive in the very joining of the two,<sup>70</sup> I conceive the emphasis on *intra*-action as indicative of Barad’s understanding of the *mutual imbrication* of the material and the discursive. In this respect, Barad continues a longer trajectory of research that involves a more sophisticated conception of discourse, while arguably going further by highlighting processes of *de*/materialisation as integral to our very categories of analysis.

Drawing on the insights of quantum physicist, Niels Bohr, Barad claims that concepts are in effect material arrangements, which do not have determinate boundaries.<sup>71</sup> The relevance of Bohr’s work from the perspective of quantum physics is beyond the remit of this article, but what is significant here is that he points to the ways that instruments of observation have a direct effect on that which is observed. This might be conceived in relation to the Foucauldian notion of the apparatus or the *dispositif*, understood as a ‘heterogenous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical and philanthropic propositions’ – or what Foucault described as the ‘said as much as

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, ‘A Feminist Geopolitics?’

<sup>67</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Towards an understanding of how matter comes to matter’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28:3 (2003), pp. 801–31; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, pp. 812–14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, ‘New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations’.

<sup>71</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, p. 819.

the unsaid'.<sup>72</sup> For Foucault, the *dispositif* is crucial in understanding the circulation of power. By drawing on the work of Bohr, Barad firmly refuses any distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, while emphasising much more explicitly the significance of processes of materialisation to the formation of knowledge.<sup>73</sup> In focusing on mechanisms of observation as implicated in the very becoming of those elements under investigation (and thus on those elements under investigation as implicated in the becoming of mechanisms of observation), Barad's analysis collapses the conceptual boundaries between materiality and discourse while also challenging assumptions regarding the separation of the object and act of analysis.<sup>74</sup> On my reading, Barad's 'agential realism' in this regard is not objectivist, nor does it qualify as a 'critical realist' form of analysis. Rather, it allows for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the act of analysis and the constitution of diverse 'realities' or emergent ways of becoming, while reminding us that the act of analysis is always more-than-human. In other words, she prompts an analysis of social and physical (or cultural and natural) forces as inextricably co-constituted.

I thus want to insist that Barad's conceptualisation of materialdiscursive practices, based upon her conceptualisation of intra-acting elements, allows for an approach that sides neither with the materialist nor with the discursive side of that discourse/materiality debate. I suggest that a Baradian approach in this regard lies in contrast to perspectives that emphasise the vitality of matter, the latter of which risk over-investing the efficacy of things to the detriment of a consideration of the importance of people.<sup>75</sup> In emphasising the dynamic relationality of various materialdiscursive elements, a Baradian analysis focuses on processes of materialisation as a means to guard against processes of 'thingification', whereby objects are presumed as pre-existing entities. Such an analysis might also be understood as a means of guarding against processes of 'humanisation', whereby the distinction between human and nonhuman is assumed as given rather than emerging as part of the open-ended and contested becoming of the world.<sup>76</sup> This also lies in contrast to a critical geopolitics that emphasises representation, culture, and interpretation against materiality. Barad's relational ontology problematises the representationalist distinction between words and things, which she suggests does away with a full appreciation of materialdiscursive intra-actions. Indeed, her approach fosters appreciation of the dynamic relationality of socialphysical forces, without assuming that either the physical or the social can be properly enacted as such.<sup>77</sup> She thus suggests the importance of understanding the significance of processes of materialisation and dematerialisation over a prioritisation of matter or materiality.

<sup>72</sup> Michel Foucault, in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 184.

<sup>73</sup> This is not in tension with a Foucauldian frame of analysis but hones attention more on what might be conventionally understood as physical rather than institutional processes of materialisation.

<sup>74</sup> This is reflected in my use of the concept materialdiscursive throughout this article. While a Baradian approach can be criticised for maintaining dualistic concepts even while collapsing their boundaries (material/discursive; natural/cultural; physical/social), this can also be seen as an important step in the process of a deconstructive un-thinking and creative re-thinking such categories. I do not pretend to transcend once and for all such dualisms here, but nor do I think it fair to say that a Baradian approach invites their reinscription.

<sup>75</sup> Vicki Squire, 'Desert "trash"':

<sup>76</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 821.

<sup>77</sup> On the impossibility of thinking matter as such, see Anderson and Wylie, 'On Geography and Materiality'.

*From performance to enactment*

Barad engages a ‘posthumanist performativity’ to undertake an ontological or onto-epistemological shift from the correspondence theory of representation and reality that she conceives as integral to a representationalist epistemology. She writes:

The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g. do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions. I would argue that these approaches also bring to the forefront important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency, while social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen.<sup>78</sup>

So how does this contribute to the reshaping of critical geopolitical scholarship and analysis? Clearly the critical geopolitical scholarship discussed in the first part of this article is sophisticated and does not support a correspondence theory of language. Yet if critical geopolitics is primarily defined in terms of representation, culture and interpretative meaning-making (whether with regard to security discourse and processes of othering or with regard to processes of ‘governmental mapping’ and the ‘scripting’ of geopolitical space), then it would seem to risk doing little more than undertaking an epistemological shift from representationalism to constructivism (that is, an epistemology that looks at mental constructs yet remains based on a separation of nature/culture or discourse/materiality). An emphasis on representation thus implies a privileging of text, context, and cultural or ‘categorical creations’. That said, the concept of representation has been developed in more sophisticated ways over recent years with reference to the concept of performativity. Representation has been conceptualised not simply as a mode of re-presenting subjects, but as bringing subjects into being.<sup>79</sup> This emphasis mirrors broader debates regarding performativity, in particular as this has been developed through the work of Judith Butler.<sup>80</sup> Performativity on Butler’s reading is a concept that rejects the assumption of a pre-existing subject and instead emphasises the performance of identity. Luiza Bialesciwicz *et al.* note that performance nevertheless presumes ‘the appearance of a subject and the idea of agency’, albeit one that emerges through ‘the infrastructure of performativity’.<sup>81</sup> By contrast, the non-representationalist concern with performance as an ‘embodied flow of practice’ that emerges through everyday encounters has been invoked as a means to emphasise the distribution of human and non-human agency, over the significance of representation.<sup>82</sup> The concept of performance, in other words, has been subject to diverse and sophisticated reconceptualisations over recent years. Aspects of each of these approaches have resonances as well as dissonances with the approach developed here.

There is not scope here to review the detailed intricacies of different conceptions of performance or performativity in this article. Rather, I want to highlight how a more-than-human approach problematises a constructivist epistemology, while also

<sup>78</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, pp. 802–3.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>80</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>81</sup> Bialesciwicz *et al.* in Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray (eds), ‘Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday’, *Geography Compass*, 4:11 (2008), pp. 1664–77, p. 1668.

<sup>82</sup> Thrift and Dewsbury, in Dittmer and Gray (eds), ‘Popular Geopolitics 2.0’, p. 1668.

moving away from representation and performance in terms that may render an alternative concept more appropriate. It is here that I find the work of Annemarie Mol helpful. The critique of a representationalist approach is one that Mol shares with Barad, with Mol directly bringing the concept of *enactment* to her analysis.<sup>83</sup> I want to suggest here that the concept of enactment might be strategically invoked as a means to distinguish constructivist analyses that focus on meaning construction and representational practices from a materialdiscursive analysis that focuses on the co-constitution of ‘subjects’, ‘objects’, and ‘environments’. The concept of enactment does not necessarily imply a clear analytical difference from performativity, nor is the term enactment one that scholars such as Barad or Mol use as an alternative to this. Indeed, Mol herself uses the language and conceptual tools of performativity in the very text where she introduces that the concept of enactment.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, the deployment of ‘enactment’ may be a helpful move in order to guard against superficial misunderstandings regarding the artificial nature of the concept of performance, as well as more significant misunderstandings regarding the assumption that such a term implies a pre-given performing subject (such as ‘the human’). Indeed, I want to suggest that a shift toward the notion of enactment may be an important conceptual move, which can push critical geopolitics in a range of exciting directions beyond an anthropocentric conception of performance. I suggest that this is because such a concept opens up important distinctions between the concepts of perspective and ‘reality’, construction, and constitution, as well as pluralism and multiplicity.

Annemarie Mol introduces the notion of enactment in her book entitled *The Body Multiple*. Mol’s particular interest here is in how ‘diseased’ bodies are made, shaped, and enacted. This entails a move away from an epistemological emphasis on how bodies are known and toward an emphasis on ontology, similarly to the way in which Barad suggests in the quote at the beginning of this subsection. Thus, Mol explains:

The move, then, is away from epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with reference: it asks whether representations of reality are accurate. But what becomes important if we attend to the way objects are enacted in practices is quite different. Since enactments come in the plural the crucial question to ask about them is how they are coordinated. In practice the body and its diseases are more than one, but this does not mean that they are fragmented into being many.<sup>85</sup>

For Mol, an epistemological approach invokes an emphasis on representation, perspective, and the gaze. By contrast, she seeks to consider how diseased bodies are made as such through a series of practices that do not hold together in any singularly coherent way. The ‘neither one nor many’ that Mol refers to here thus moves toward an ontological emphasis on how particular bodies are ‘done’, which she conceives of as implying a concern with coordination, practice, and processes of manipulation.<sup>86</sup> For Mol, a perspectivist emphasis on meaning and interpretation is problematic because, while it multiplies observers, it leaves the object untouched.<sup>87</sup> In other words, an epistemological focus means that while the body can be viewed differently according to a constructivist perspective, it ultimately remains the same regardless of the practices of enactment that it involves.

<sup>83</sup> Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

So what does this mean for the analysis of contemporary geopolitical practice? Importantly, it implies that a critical emphasis on the ‘geopolitical gaze’ neither gets to the crux of how different practices shape space politically, nor to the ways in which the physical environment implicates power relations. Let’s consider the significance of the Sahel desert to the situation in the north of Mali, where French and other international forces intervened during 2013 in the context of conflict between different groups in the North of the country.<sup>88</sup> Drawing on Mol’s approach, the emphasis on the geopolitical gaze invokes an epistemological reading of the desert as a site of warfare implicated in colonial relations with a long history. Such an analysis of the construction of the desert might emphasis plural perspectives, but it would not conceive the desert as an object, body, or environment that is *multiple in its practical enactment*. Thus, the geopolitical gaze might be invoked to offer pluralistic perspectives on the desert from the perspective of the ‘intervening forces’, from the perspective of the ‘combatant’, and from the perspective of the ‘civilian’. It might show, for example, how from the perspective of the intervening forces the desert might be viewed as a strategic location crucial to the formation of order yet unmanageable on various grounds; how, from the perspective of an opposition fighter it might be viewed as a potentially liberating space that facilitates autonomy or independence; how, from the perspective of those involved in illicit trade the desert might be viewed as a site by which to capitalise on practical knowledge;<sup>89</sup> while, from the perspective of those making a journey for refuge, it might be viewed as a life-threatening environment thwarting the quest for future safety. This suggests that the concept of performance as implied by the critical emphasis on the ‘geopolitical gaze’ refers to representational practices that operate at the epistemological level of perspective and meaning. Indeed, this reflects very well the emphasis of Ó Tuathail and Dalby on the potential for *counter-narratives* of the nation to highlight the ‘irredeemable plurality of space and the multiplicity of possible political constructions of space’.<sup>90</sup> Plurality here, it would appear, remains wedded to the concepts of construction and perspective, with the critical task being to develop these in terms that counter hegemonic constructions of space. I want to suggest that Mol’s alternative focus on multiplicity as an ontological category is an important shift from plural perspectives in this regard. I conceive it as such, because it allows consideration of how relations of power are enacted in terms that are inscribed in bodies, things, and places – often in ways that are more ‘messy’ than a critique of hegemony implies.

Ó Tuathail and Dalby’s approach may be critical in the sense of fostering alternative narratives of sites such as the desert to those invoked by a hegemonic ‘geopolitical gaze’. However, Mol’s analysis suggests that the critical task is different if a richer conception of enactment is adopted in terms that pay attention to the *ontological* constitute environments. This may be something to which Ó Tuathail and Dalby seek to point in their emphasis on the *irredeemable* plurality of space. Yet Mol suggests that the task is not of exposing different perspectives on the desert as a site of warfare, but of showing how the desert itself is, in effect, differently ‘done’.

<sup>88</sup> According to Simon Dalby, this counts as an appropriate site of analysis if we take it as implicated in the ‘geographical reasoning used in legitimisations of contemporary warfare’. See Simon Dalby, ‘Re-contextualising Violence, Power and Nature: The Next Twenty Years of Critical Geopolitics?’, *Political Geography*, 29:5 (2010).

<sup>89</sup> Adam Sandor, ‘Camels, 4 x 4s, and White Powdered Substances: The Global and Local Politics of Securing Sahelian Borders’, paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Toronto, 25–9 March 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Ó Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p. 3.

This emphasis on the constitution of ‘reality’ rather than the construction of meaning is one that is nicely expressed in Mol’s use of the term enactment. Such an emphasis invites an analysis that does not slip back into representation or meaning-making as privileged dimensions of analysis. Nor does it reduce the multiplicity of ‘realities’ to epistemological pluralism. Mol’s approach implies that the desert would remain *untouched* if we focus on representational practices and meaning-making alone. I thus want to argue that what a more-than-human approach can offer to critical geopolitics is an analysis that considers how a geophysical ‘environment’ such as the desert as a site of geopolitical investment and activity is effectively *constituted in multiple ways* through differing configurations of socialphysical forces. To highlight enactment over performance is in this regard a pragmatic means to distinguish between analyses that focus on meaning construction and representational practices from those that focus on the effective constitution of diverse enactments of objects, subjects, and environments. As we will see, this is not to ditch epistemology or to do away with representation (which I conceive as analytically and practically impossible). Rather, it is to highlight the importance of questioning the privilege of epistemology and reinvigorating methodological interest in questions of the ontological.

To clarify, the point here is not simply that those passing through the desert experience it in different ways. Nor is it straightforwardly that different experiences lead to different perspectives on the desert. Mol’s intervention suggests that representations alone do not directly shape the desert, even if we conceive such representations as conditioning, reflecting, or both conditioning and reflecting different experiences and perspectives of the desert. Rather, an approach informed by the work of Mol suggests that the desert is effectively constituted or enacted in multiple ways through various materialising practices (the latter of which might involve representational practices and might be understood through different perspectives, but are not reducible to these). Taking enactment as an analytical frame, I want to argue, provides a different way of critically engaging geophysical ‘environments’ such as the desert as sites of geopolitical significance in terms that acknowledge their material significance without assuming a determining materiality. This critical engagement is not one that implies a move to ontology necessarily brings to bear a different politics, but rather it allows for a more subtle analysis of how different political interventions emerge through different practical enactments that are always more-than-human in their very constitution. This means that an approach inspired by Barad and Mol is concerned with the way that socialphysical forces constitute the desert ‘environment’ along with various ‘subjects’ and ‘objects, in multiple ways. This occurs through diverse practices that enact what we might rather clumsily call multiple ‘realities’, the analysis of which implies an act of observation that is not only more-than-human in its constitution but also constitutive of these realities and their ‘environments’, ‘subjects’, and ‘objects’ in ways that are neither fully determined nor determining.

### *A multiplicity of ‘cuts’*

While both Barad and Mol may appear to privilege ontology over epistemology, I want to suggest that their work might be read as a decisive reorientation away from epistemological representationalism more than a rejection of the significance or necessity of epistemology *per se*. It is here that I want to turn again to Barad, and in particular to her emphasis on observational ‘cuts’. This arguably implies an onto-epistemological

move that facilitates an appreciation of the way that knowledge or observation plays a role in the production of different ‘realities’, but that neither assumes a sovereign ‘knower’ who can represent the ‘known’ nor that underplays the ‘unexpected’ effects that more-than-human forces necessarily entail.<sup>91</sup> Barad suggests that it is through the act of observation that a ‘cut’ is made whereby knowledge is produced about ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ (and ‘environments’, I would add). That is, ‘subjects’, ‘objects’, and ‘environments’ are co-constituted through an observational ‘cut’, according to a Baradian analysis. Any given ‘cut’ involves a relation of power and an epistemological manoeuvre through the production of knowledge, but is always also more than this. Reminding ourselves of Mol’s ontological theorisation of enactment, and drawing on Barad’s ‘onto-epistemology’, we might also say that it is through particular material-discursive ‘cuts’ that particular ‘realities’ come into being as such. These cuts might be enacted in multiple arenas, including the academic arena within which this article is operative. Drawing on the insights of Barad’s approach, one might argue that any analysis of different configurations of subjects, objects, and environments does not simply *interpret* the different realities of the Sahel desert. So also do such analyses play an active role in generating or *enacting* these, yet in terms that emerge through various types of dynamic and relational engagements with-of socialphysical elements that make such ‘realities’ and that inevitably exceed the act of observation. This appreciation of the significance of onto-epistemological interventions is helpful in developing a notion of coenactment, without presuming that the act of analysis can master ‘volatile worlds’<sup>92</sup> or that academic knowledge ‘trumps’ or is separable from practical knowledge.

Going further, then, a more-than-human analysis suggests that the desert ‘environment’ can also be understood as significant in and of itself in struggles such as those related to contemporary militarised interventions across and beyond Mali. The desert neither serves as a blank canvas upon which geopolitics is played out, nor does it act as a natural boundary that prescribes a given geopolitical formation. Rather, the desert environment plays a constitutive role in geopolitical practices of warfare, without determining the outcome of these as a conventional geopolitical analysis might suggest. For example, sand storms can be crucial to the outcome of a localised struggle, effecting processes such as the dematerialisation of equipment in ways that reconfigure relations of power and that effect the formation of subjects in particular ways. These environmental dimensions do not act in isolation, however, but are better understood in terms of a play of socialphysical forces that render the Sahel desert as an environment that is integral to geopolitical practices of militarised intervention. This is not to say that the Sahel desert is simply constituted as a site of warfare, nor is it necessarily effectively mobilised as such. The latter assumes a sense of mastery that a more-than-human approach rejects, while the former implies a singularity that the principle of multiplicity refutes.

An analysis influenced by Mol might challenge the assumption of the desert as a singular entity by means of the demonstration of how the desert is variously ‘done’ as an environment of indigenous habitation, as an environment of humanitarian protection, as an environment of agricultural production, as an environment of border

<sup>91</sup> Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>92</sup> Nick Clark, ‘Volatile Worlds, Vulnerable Bodies: Confronting Abrupt Climate Change’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 27:2–3 (2010), pp. 31–53.

governance, and so on and so forth. Yet a more-than-human approach would also point to the incomplete and interrupted constitution of such 'realities', in light of the processes of materialisation and dematerialisation that exceed practices or acts of observation involved in such messy enactments. Thus, the Sahel desert is engaged here as an 'environment' that implies the enactment of 'multiple realities', not so much in terms of the many states that the Sahel traverses, but more in terms of the diverse practices and forces through which it is constituted as such. Going further, a more-than-human emphasis on coenactment or co-constitution rejects the assumption that people can fully master geophysical 'environments' or the 'objects' and 'subjects' that traverse and make them. What are conventionally understood as natural or physical forces in this regard are understood as having a life of their own, which implicate 'environments', 'objects', and 'subjects' in ways that necessarily involve people or sociocultural forces, but that do not entirely revolve around the latter.

I therefore want to suggest that a more-than-human approach inspired by both Barad and Mol does not involve geophysical determinism, nor does it simply highlight the active role that the geophysical 'environment' plays in geopolitical practices. It neither reduces the geophysical environment to a passive backdrop for politics, nor does it simply focus on the multiple enactment of the environment through diverse practices. Rather, a critical geopolitics informed by a more-than-human approach is concerned with the mutual constitution of subjects, objects, and environments and seeks to consider how socialphysical forces both come together and fall apart through observational cuts that always fail to fully capture the dynamic relationalities at stake. This involves a shift of focus away from an emphasis on the 'geopolitical gaze' and the divisive boundaries that this implies, toward diverse and shifting configurations of boundaries. It also involves a shift of concern from hegemonic homogenising powers to a concern with more messy relations of power that nevertheless often involve violence and attempts at domination. While I have focused in this article on the significance of the desert environment and its multiple constitution, one might similarly develop a more-than-human approach focused on particular 'objects' without fetishising things. For example, water or sand might become concrete sites of analysis for developing an understanding of how different 'realities' come into being, and how multiple ways of being come into conflict.<sup>93</sup> Resource wars have become a growing area of interest in the field of International Relations over recent years as a means to consider how borders can divide and sometimes connect. However, water from a more-than-human perspective might move beyond these metaphors of division and connection to expose multiplicity as a more appropriate principle of analysis for engaging diverse enactments of geopolitical space. For example, water might be analysed as bound up with humanitarian, military, and agrarian constitutions of the desert, and thus as an active force through which the desert becomes a contested site of geopolitical significance. An emphasis on multiple 'cuts' in this regard does not simply emphasise the hegemony of statist or nationalist borderlines, nor does it simply emphasise the interpenetration of complex systems. Rather, it explores sites of multiple realities, whereby different materialdiscursive configurations of subjects-objects-environments are enacted in diverse ways through the complex intra-actions of socialphysical forces.

<sup>93</sup> Mark B. Salter (ed.), *Making Things International* (2015).

**Conclusion: Reshaping critical geopolitics?**

This article has attempted to develop a ‘more-than-human’ analysis of the desert environment as a means to highlight the significance of the ‘materialist turn’ to the reshaping of critical geopolitics as a field of scholarship. The first part of the article suggested that a concern with challenging the determinism of conventional geopolitics led to an overinvestment in representation, culture, and interpretation in the emergence of critical geopolitics during the 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing attention to both long-standing and more recent contestations of this articulation of critical geopolitics, I have emphasised the importance of more sophisticated conceptualisations of discourse while at the same time emphasising the need for a shift of vocabulary in the general framing of critical geopolitics. Focusing on the importance of the ‘new materialisms’ literature in particular, the article has drawn on the work of Karen Barad and Annemarie Mol specifically in order to highlight the potentiality of a more-than-human analysis that moves beyond a representational frame without overstating the efficacy of matter. This has led to three key interventions, which I conceive as important in shifting away from a constructivist epistemology while reconceptualising power and boundary formations within the broad and diverse field of critical geopolitics. Specifically, I have argued for an analysis that rejects the distinction between discourse and materiality in favour of a conceptualisation of power that appreciates the significance of messy relationalities of socialphysical forces. I have also argued for an analysis that shifts from a language of performance or even performativity in favour of enactment, as a means to highlight the constitutive role that practices and acts of observation play in the formation of different environments, subjects, and objects – even while such practices and acts are always exceeded by the processes of materialisation and dematerialisation that they involve. Finally, I have argued for an understanding of boundary formations as both multiple and messy as well as often violent and potentially dominating. This lies in contrast to those approaches that focus on geopolitical boundaries either as divisive or as connective processes through diverse onto-epistemological frames of analysis.

Taken in combination, these interventions seek to contribute to the reshaping critical of geopolitics neither by providing an alternative programme of analysis nor by transcending the limitations of existing approaches (many of which already do significant work in challenging the broad framing of critical geopolitics as a matter of representation, culture, and/or interpretation). Rather, these interventions are designed – albeit imperfectly – to engage in existing debates regarding the analysis and practice of critical geopolitics while taking a particular stance within the debate regarding ‘materiality’. Specifically, my aim has been do to this by making a concerted effort to take on board the challenge of ‘new materialist’ analyses that reject the binary of culture and nature, along with the various related dualisms that are so difficult to shake off from our language and practice of analysis and politics. In answering the question of how a more-than-human approach contributes to the critical reshaping of geopolitics as a field of research and practice, I thus want to conclude by addressing two key questions. First, does such an approach provide a non-anthropocentric analysis? In this article I have emphasised the significance of socialphysical forces without doing away with, or reducing the importance of, ‘people’. This involves an interrogation of the category of ‘the human’ as both a

contingent and politically significant category,<sup>94</sup> while also acknowledging the significance of different people to geopolitical practices and acts of observation. Second, does an emphasis on the desert environment and on physical as well as social forces imply a return to the determining role of geographical factors? In other words, does this indicate an appreciation of the desert as a 'natural border' or set of qualities along which geopolitical struggles inevitably emerge or that shape such struggles in predetermined ways? The answer to this question is a definitive 'no'. An emphasis on the active role of the desert in contemporary militarised struggles implies a reinvigorated understanding of the role of geographical features for political analysis. However, it does not suggest that the desert is a force of its own in isolation from such practices. Nor does it suggest that the outcome of these can be understood as determined by the desert environment. Rather than conceptualising the desert as a 'materiality' and determinant force, I thus engage this as an element (or a coordination of elements) that plays a role in socialphysical processes of materialisation and dematerialisation, as well as an 'environment' which is both multiple as well as contested in its very formation. Focusing on a *multiplicity of 'cuts'* in this regard is of political significance, because it troubles simplifying geopolitical imaginations along with the clear-cut boundaries that these often imply, while also engaging processes of materialisation and dematerialisation without assuming 'materiality' to be a determinant force.

<sup>94</sup> Vicki Squire, 'Desert "trash"':