Commentary

The power of terrain: The affective materiality of planet Earth in the age of revolution

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Abstract
This commentary analyzes Stuart Elden’s contributions to a theory of terrain and proposes to further politicize them through a bodily, materialist, and non-anthropocentric examination of the severity of the climate crisis and of the ways in which grassroots movements struggling for radical change are empowered by their engagement with terrain. In particular, I argue in dialogue with Elden that this perspective requires an affective and non-Eurocentric examination of ‘the power of terrain’: that is, the irreducible capacity of the terrain of planet Earth, on the one hand, to severely disrupt human places and territories amid global warming and, on the other, to facilitate collective mobilizations for social, climate, gender, and racial justice.

Keywords
climate change, Earth, materiality, revolution, terrain, the body

Why is it relevant to discuss the concept of terrain while the planet is burning and fascism and white supremacy are on the rise? How can we discuss terrain in ways that do justice to the urgency of creating collective alternatives to our unequal and destructive present? In what follows, I argue in conversation with Stuart Elden (2021) that the concept of terrain is crucial to appreciate both the nonhuman materiality of the climate and ecological emergency and the spatially-attuned rebellions brewing worldwide against the racial capitalism that is taking us toward a climate catastrophe. Thinking about the climate crisis and the need for radical change through the question of terrain is an immensely complex task I can only hint at here, and that is the subject of a book in progress (Gordillo, n.d.). But the foundations for such an approach are laid out by Elden’s groundbreaking work on terrain and territory, which in this new article he presents through a thought-provoking review of a wide range of contributions to this subject matter especially in human and physical geography.

In this commentary, I build from Elden’s work and propose that we think about the materiality of terrain through a body-centered, non-anthropocentric, and non-Eurocentric perspective that engages the key contributions from geography while also creating a transdisciplinary effort learning from physics, philosophy, and anthropology (my home discipline) as well as from subaltern, non-
western ontologies of terrain. More importantly, politicizing discussions on terrain entails investigating the bodily and affective spatiality of insurrections and revolutions in world history and in the present, especially those by racialized multitudes (Gordillo, n.d.). Terrain is a key political concept because it is the ultimate ‘weapon of the weak’ (Gordillo, 2018: 60, drawing from James Scott’s famous phrase), not only in violent insurgencies but also in protests and rebellions based on non-violence, organization, and grassroots activism. Toward the end, I briefly return to this question and its relevance amid the climate and ecological emergency.

What is terrain, exactly? Elden’s work provides us with key insights to theorize the ontology of terrain in novel ways, especially through his insistence that terrain is voluminous, processual, dynamic, and that it should not be confined to ‘land’ but include rivers, the ocean, and the atmosphere (see Squire, 2016). The move to understand terrain in this expanded sense, he admits, may be resisted by some, given the common-sense association between terrain and ‘hard’ landforms. But I fully agree that this much broader definition is necessary, given that the materiality of the planet is extremely complex, turbulent, multi-layered, unassailable, and ‘perpetually beyond itself’ (Anderson and Wylie, 2009: 332). The hard, soft, liquid, and gaseous components of the planet’s terrain are, in this regard, inseparable from each other and are permanently folding into each other—like the ocean water vaporized into the atmosphere (Peters and Steinberg, 2019). Yet it is also telling that through much of the essay, Elden writes that terrain is important ‘but insufficient to grasp territory’ (Elden, 2010: 811), a point I certainly agree with. Ten years later, ‘Terrain, Politics, History’ ends on a different note. This time, Elden (2021) highlights in his conclusions ‘the nonhuman agency of the earth’ amid the climate crisis and arrives (if without making this explicit) at the reverse point: that territory is not enough to grasp terrain. Global warming, in this regard, reveals the fragility of human territories as well as the more transcendental power of terrain, embodied in the forest fires, droughts, heatwaves, and floods that are wrecking havoc all over the world, especially among the racialized poor.

Elden presents his concluding thoughts about the materiality and agency of the Earth as a provocation to go further. In that spirit, I’d propose that the next move should therefore be to acknowledge that the climate crisis demands of us a materialist and non-anthropocentric sensibility attuned to what I elsewhere call the primacy of terrain—or, more broadly, the primacy of Earth—in relation to place and territory (Gordillo, 2020). By this, I do not mean that ‘terrain’ is more important than the notions of ‘place’ or ‘territory’. Every node of terrain inhabited by humans is also a place (a concept absent in Elden’s review) experienced through cultural practices and memories and part of territories that are not reducible to their nonhuman materiality (Gordillo, 2018). Further, overcoming a climate catastrophe will necessarily require a radical reconfiguration of places and territories, for revolutions, as Lefebvre (1991) insisted, are emancipatory only if they create radically new places. But for all the importance of places and territories in organizing human life, global warming reminds us that materialism teaches us one simple truth, confirmed by our mortality: that matter always-already exists in excess of our human perception and uses of it. This is what the primacy of terrain names: that the unruly materiality of Earth is ontologically primary in relation to the human experiences of it as places and territories—and certainly much more powerful. One of the symbols of this primacy is the image of human beings falling off steep mountains affected by gravity: the primary way the
planet affects what happens on it, and which con-

Learning from physics about the nonhuman power of the planet’s terrain does not mean embrac-
ing a positivist, Eurocentric objectivism. But

avoiding this objectivism requires placing the body

terthen at the very center of any theorization of terrain and engaging conceptions of terrain and radical change generated outside of the Euro-North American academy. Even though Elden writes that the body needs to be ‘taken more seriously’ to account for terrain, his analysis remains for the most part disembodied, detached from sensing, mobile bodies. This has been noted among others by Peter Adey (2013: 54), who writes that the body is ‘quite absent’ in Elden’s work on volume. But Elden does make an important point about ‘the relation between human bodies and built and physical landscapes’: namely, that it is key ‘not to separate the human and the built from the natural and the physical only to look at their interaction, but rather to stress that they are always already intertwined and related in complicated ways’. This point could be explored in more depth, for the idea that the body is ‘always already intertwined’ and ‘related’ to the physical world still evokes a certain separation from terrain.

A philosophical tradition that is in my mind indis-

pensable to help us with this question is phenomen-

ology and its emphasis (by authors from Heidegger to

Merleau-Ponty, Casey and Ingold) on the experien-

tial, embodied nature of place: that is, that the body
does not act ‘in’ places but is ‘of’ places, for ‘to be’ is
to be place-grounded’. ‘Places ... are in us’ (Casey,
2001: 688). Likewise, terrain is in us. All living bod-

ies are porous and in breathing and ingesting water
and nutrients permanently engage in physical

exchanges with terrain. As Astrida Neimanis (2017)
argues, bodies are largely made up of water that has
been on Earth for billions of years. In short, human
bodies and all living forms (trees, animals, bacteria)
are intrinsic parts of terrain, and relate to other bod-

dies (affecting them and being affected by them) from
within terrain. Drawing from feminist traditions of

embodiment, Jackman et al. (2020) capture this indis-
solubility when they argue that bodies ‘are’ terrain.

Bodies are constitutive elements of terrain; but it is
also important to note that they are not identical with

it, for after a living body dies terrain remains. This
non-identity (we are part of terrain, but terrain is
more than us) unsettles anthropocentrism for it shows
that terrain does not need humans for its existence.
Hence the need to redefine phenomenology’s under-

standing of embodiment through an affective-

materialist lens that looks at how bodies in motion
are affected by, and affect, terrain (Gordillo, 2018,
2020; see Ash and Simpson, 2016).

The idea of the power of terrain is fruitful to think
of these questions across the diversity of human

experiences because it resonates with the non-
western conceptions of terrain examined by Indigen-
ous scholars and anthropologists: that a significant
portion of humanity does not experience mountains,
rivers, or glaciers as objective, detached materialities
but rather as sentient, powerful beings or constellation
of beings with the capacity to feel and act and









192
Dialogues in Human Geography 11(2)
of power as the capacity to affect. Spinoza (1982) argued that every object or body, alive or not, has power because it has the capacity to affect other objects (see Viljanen, 2011). The perception by Indigenous peoples worldwide that mountains or rivers are powerful in and of themselves, in this regard, is not the result of a “primitive irrationality” but, rather, reveals an affective sensibility toward the non-human power of terrain: that a mountain’s power can be best appreciated in its capacity to affect human beings (generating its own weather, creating landslides, etc.) and that, for this reason, this power should be respected and should elicit an attitude of care toward the physical integrity of the world.

The power of terrain to affect human action also includes its capacity to empower multitudes confronting the state. This involves not only guerrilla warfare (Gordillo, 2018) but also the non-violent protests and rebellions that engage streets, squares, bridges, barricades, roads, pipelines, homes, atmospheres, or the sentiency of lagoons or hills to demand for change, protest oppression, or stop environmental destruction. References to ‘the power of the streets’ in political struggles, in this regard, names more generally the power of terrain: or to be more precise, the capacity of the forms, rhythms, and atmospheres of terrain to empower the main subject of radical change: organized multitudes. While Elden does not frame his analysis around radical politics, his work helps us appreciate how the creation of more egalitarian and less destructive territories requires a new sensibility toward the forms, flows, and volumes of Earth. But we also need to acknowledge that terrain is so vast and removed from our capacity to apprehend its multiplicity that it ‘withdraws’ from full human control (Boyce, 2016; Gordillo, 2018). As an anthropologist working in the Chaco region of Argentina (Gordillo, 2004, 2014), my main teachers on the politics of terrain have been the activists of the Campesino and Indigenous National Movement (MNCI), who have been influenced by the territorial, grassroots radicalism of the Zapatistas rebellion in Mexico and the movement of landless workers (MST) in Brazil. These men and women are finely attuned to the forests they defend from destruction and to the terrain through which they oppose agribusiness and fumigations via road blockades, marches, land occupations, and the creation of places devoted to celebrating life and the commons. These people are severely impacted by droughts and heatwaves created by the combined effect of global warming and deforestation; yet they are tirelessly organizing to stop corporate encroachment, cultivate radical solidarity, and grow food without agrichemicals and GMOs. Grassroots initiatives like these exist all over the world. Most may seem localized and contained. But they inspire us to resist the pull toward despair created by global warming and to imagine a horizon in which the Anthropocene could become the age of revolution.

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