Where theories of terrain might land: Towards ‘pluriversal’ engagements with terrain

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Abstract
This brief commentary draws on Stuart Elden’s thought provoking article, ‘Terrain, Politics, History’, to make two interventions. The first argues that understandings of terrain and Earth’s materiality would be enriched by engaging with ‘pluriversal’ perspectives where Earth is inherently animated, lively, and heterogeneous. This includes indigenous perspectives and those attending to non-human animal life. The second calls for a more concerted engagement within geography with terrains as voluminous constructs, whether that be in mountains, the air, or increasingly in artificial environments. It concludes by advocating for a further stretching of ‘terrain’ as presented in the paper to see where diverse understandings of terrain might land or indeed, climb, float, sink, or soar.

Keywords
decolonisation, non-human, terrain, volume

One of the questions in Elden’s (2021) rich and thought-provoking article asks whether we can ‘find a way to develop an understanding of terrain which takes its own materiality seriously’ as something that is formed and reformed ‘as a dynamic process rather than by processes’. While undoubtedly a point of semantics, the wording of this question might be productively reframed. Perhaps we should be less concerned with finding a way, and more concerned with proactively engaging with plural, multiple, and diverse ways (see Beban and Work, 2014). A ‘pluriversal’ approach, as Theriault (2017: 125), advocates, would be concerned with ‘different ways of bringing worlds into being’, opening up space for a range of ‘world-making practices’. To realise this, Halvorsen’s (2018) call to decolonise understandings of terrain and territory requires further attention. This is particularly pertinent in relation to terrain, concerned as it is with the agency of a material Earth and how this shapes, and is shaped by, geopolitical processes. There is a need to take seriously ‘alternative understandings and inscriptions’ of these processes (Halvorsen, 2018: 4, see also Jackman et al., 2020) that account for indigenous perspectives and terrains that are inherently lively, heterogeneous, and inhabited.

Jackman et al. (2020) engage with both Taussig (2010) and Carenno’s (2017) explorations of
Andean worlds, and the dynamic, constantly changing but ‘intricately organised unity’ (Taussig, 2010: 155) that exists between humans and Earth to interrogate this further. Indeed, Taussig writes that:

Earth and humans no longer exist as dichotomies, to know is to be associated with everything around one and to enter into and be part of the land (Taussig, 2010: 157).

For some Andean communities, mountains are understood as a human body – and the human body is understood in terms of the culturally perceived configuration of the Earth: ‘The sacredness of the mountain is dependent on this wholeness: of nature, of the social group, of the person, and of all three together’ (Taussig, 2010: 155). As Bastien highlights, ‘this is not about control of earth but exchange – earth is not an instrument of utility but a tautology and an end in itself’ (Bastien in Taussig, 2010: 157). Activities that threaten this whole are described by Carreno in visceral, corporeal terms. Underground mining, for example, ‘mutilates the body of the mountains’, involves the extraction of different body parts, and the processing of the corpses of Earth-beings (Careno, 2017: 151).

We see similar sensibilities at play in Beban and Work’s (2014) study of a Cambodian community in Pursat province whereby spirits of the mountains were believed to have confounded attempts by a corporation to remove trees and take over a piece of land. For Beban and Work (2014: 594), recognising the agency of land spirits in mediating ‘relations between land, villagers’, a corporation, and the state helps to decentre ‘capitalist understandings of land as resource and the attendant discourses that posit the human as the only agentic actor in the landscape’. This is an important endeavour as it opens “interstitial cracks” within an ontology that divides humans from nature with significant implications for thinking through terrain as a material and agential entity. It creates ‘possibilities for new interpretations’ that open the concept up beyond a singular, western world, to an ‘anthropology of worlds’ (de la Cadena, 2010: 358). It is, in other words, a ‘pluriversal’ approach that requires an unlearning of a ‘single ontological politics’ (de la Cadena, 2010: 361).

Of course, ‘terrain’ is not necessarily a landed phenomenon (Squire, 2016), and Childs (2019) highlights the purchase of a pluriversal approach in his exploration of plans for deep sea mining off Papua New Guinea. For local residents, resisting deep sea mining is a deeply spiritual matter. As a clan chief asserted in Child’s research, ‘When they start mining the seabed, they’ll start mining part of me . . .’. ‘For the people of the Duke of York Islands’, Childs (2019) continues, ‘deep sea mining disturbs a sense of who they are, including the spirits that inhabit their culture and beliefs. It cuts through the very fabric of their spiritual world and its sacred links to the sea and land’. The body, spirit, and Earth are intimately connected in each of these examples and each presents a moment of ‘epistemic rupture’ (de la Cadena, 2010: 340) through which to reconsider how Western scholarship engages with Earth’s materiality.

Elden (2017: 4) suggests that ‘we need to push further into the geophysical’ to develop a political theory of terrain, which takes into account legal questions alongside economic, strategic, technical, and scientific ones. This toolkit (see Jackman et al., 2020) is insufficient to account for non-Western and Indigenous perspectives where Earth, landscape, seascape, and body are intertwined in ways that exceed Western comprehensions. Indeed, Theriault (2017: 114) highlights how the ‘category of “supernatural” has remained largely intact’ in wider moves in political geography to foreground and critically engage with the non-human. ver Beek (2000) and Beban and Work (2014: 597) push further here, arguing that such knowledges have been excluded, rationalised, suppressed, and ‘systematically avoided’. Accounting for these approaches can form part of a response to Elden’s (2017: 145) challenge of developing understandings of ‘terrain which take materiality seriously’ and translations of other worlds where mountains, rocks, or rivers emerge as other-than-inanimate. To do otherwise has, in the words of Theriault (2017: 115), ‘profound theoretical and practical implications’ for our understandings of terrain and the material agency of the world around us. This also has, as Jackman et al. (2020: 2) highlight, as much to do with the bodies of work and networks of
knowledge that are drawn upon to frame these discussions as it does with the content of such discussions with ‘broader disciplinary questions about the academic voices who are enabled to, and disabled from, shaping conversations’ about this concept.

We might also ask, as Gibbs (2018) has, how neglected, less ethereal, non-humans are accounted for here? Terrains are, before any human intervention, always already inhabited. As Butler (2002) highlights, animals can have a significant impact on Earth’s terrains and vice versa. They trample, feed, burrow, mound, dam (changing flows of water), dig, excavate, and strip surfaces of vegetative cover – activities that can lead to accelerated run off and erosion. Similarly, habitats can burn, flood, or be willingly destroyed, phenomenon that can prove fatal to non-human life or force new patterns of mobility. As Jackman et al. (2020) highlight, there is a need to account for these non-human practices in shaping and extending understandings of terrain and its appropriation by military and non-military actors.

While avoiding environmental determinisms (Klinke and Bassin, 2018), Butler’s (2002) work is a useful entry point here, the idea of ‘zoogeomorphology’ pointing toward the impact that animals such as the grizzly bear might have in the creation of ‘new caverns, paths, and displacements of the earth’s surfaces’ (Jackman et al., 2020: 6). My exploration of the role of animals in enabling, confounding, and challenging the US Navy’s interactions with the undersea terrain during the Sealab experiments sought to engage with some of these questions (Squire, 2020). In this context, animals actively shaped how the undersea terrain was understood with life ranging from a dolphin to sea urchins playing a role in this process. This stems from a wide range of work exploring issues such as biomimetics and animal-inspired technologies designed to remove humans from battlefield terrains altogether (Johnson, 2015; Johnson and Goldstein, 2015). Thinking afresh about the non-human inhabitants of Earth’s terrains can destabilise the assumptions that ‘underlie and privilege certain forms of thought, life, and politics’ over others (Bosworth, 2017: 33–34), and prompt an ethic of care that may otherwise be absent if this life is unaccounted for.

**Grappling with three dimensional worlds**

As Thornton (2015), Squire (2016), and Gordillo (2018) have highlighted, terrain, like territory, is a multidimensional, immersive, and affective construct. It exists in volume and not simply along the Earth’s surfaces. This raises further spatial questions about how we grapple with terrain as it is inhabited and experienced in multiple spatial contexts. Baghel and Nusser’s (2015) work is formative here, exploring the embodied consequences for soldiers inhabiting the mountainous terrain of the Siachen Glacier. The heights and depths of the mountains interact with the body in very specific ways, the contours wrapping themselves around, in, and through the inner workings of the soldiers involved. How can this be pushed further to account for the moments where the Earth’s materiality is thrown into three dimensions and left hanging in the atmosphere? Sandstorms, ‘flying sand, dust, and grit’ (Thornton, 2015: 572) such as those in Forsyth’s (2014) and Thornton’s work, where the surface upon which militaries moved was lifted, literally encompassing in all dimensions; white out’s in Arctic environments; dust clouds, of the like explored by Adey et al. (2011) that saw ‘vast tonnes of earth’ moved into a ‘billowing cloud’ that drifted across borders, grounding thousands of flights in the space of a week. How do we understand Earth as it ‘hangs’ in volume? Simultaneously, drawing on the previous section, how might voluminous terrains be understood from a range of perspectives that draw in the people and contexts being left out of the story (see Fall, 2014)?

Finally, can theories of terrain be agile enough to account for the complexities of engineering new voluminous terrains on Earth? As Latour (2018: 8) states, ‘when the rug is pulled out from under your feet, you understand at once that you are going to have to be concerned with the floor’. There is a feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way. Elden’s paper highlights some of the implications of this – changing coastlines, sea level rise,
reclamation projects, shrinking glaciers – but there are other significant consequences too.

Arizona is a useful space here to think this through. As reported recently (Milman, 2018), Arizona is currently in the grips of climate change and climate gentrification. The ground literally melts in the heat, at times, preventing planes from landing. Those from lower lying Phoenix and Tuscon are moving to higher and cooler terrains of Flagstaff. Those who are able to retreat from heatwaves and wildfires shift to safer areas, bringing soaring property and rental values with them. Meanwhile, on the same low-lying, heating desert landscape stands Biosphere 2 – a 3.14 acre facility containing a number of diverse and thriving ecosystems – an ocean coral reef, mangrove wetlands, a tropical rainforest, savanna grassland, and fog desert contained under 7,200,000 cubic feet of climate controlled, sealed glass. It is, in essence, a vivarium, writ large – an enclosure, container, or structure designed to keep and preserve life under semi-natural conditions. As Elden, quoting Latour (2018, back cover) highlights, learning new ‘ways to inhabit the Earth is our biggest challenge’ and we need ‘to find a way to bring us down to earth’ to land, or ‘ground ourselves’ – yet increasingly, this landing can see components of Earth transported, controlled, and cultivated in enclosed spaces (Squire et al., 2019). Such practices are accompanied by new divisions in nature, and new social, political, and cultural boundaries and borders delineating habitable and uninhabitable. In finding new ways to land, subsequent questions arise about who gets to land where, who endures the Earth’s hostile terrains and who does not? One side of the glass is very different from the other and these engineered terrains, along with the many geographical complexities that come with them, are worthy of further attention.

Landing?

Terrain, as Elden suggests, ‘has the potential to be a more material way of thinking about territory, or more generally earth, land, and ground, and their limits’. Perhaps some of the things in this response exceed the limits of this and represent something entirely different. One concept can only do so much work, after all. Working to stretch it to its limits, however, is a worthwhile exercise. In pushing at the edges of the concept, there may be more scope to see where multiple and diverse theories of terrain might land, or indeed climb, float, sink, or soar.

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