

Terrestrial bodies

Nick Clare 

University of Nottingham, UK

Victoria Habermehl

Durham University, UK

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–4

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206241253584

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

As socio-ecological crises deepen, it is increasingly important that analyses of territory consider the other-than-human. Through a detailed engagement with a range of territorial currents, Gonin et al. do just this, introducing the idea of ‘terrestrial territories’ as a way forward, shifting the focus of analysis from the ‘Globe’ to ‘Gaia’. While we welcome the diverse engagement with non-Anglophone understandings of territory, in this commentary, we suggest that decolonial feminist work on *Cuerpo-Territorio* (body territory) may offer a more grounded, praxis-focused way forward. In particular, we argue that this focus on embodiment over the terrestrial is potentially better placed to address powerful feminist critiques of the Gaia hypothesis.

Keywords

Cuerpo-Territorio, decolonial, feminist, Latin America, praxis, territory

One of the main strengths and contributions of Gonin et al.’s (2024) paper is their detailed engagement with Francophone writing on territory, in particular the recent work of Latour. A vibrant current (see Antonsich, 2017; Del Biaggio, 2015), this work has often been overlooked in favour of either the typically dominant Anglophone literature (represented most famously the works of Stuart Elden, see: 2010, 2013b) or, more recently, Latin American readings of territory (see Halvorsen, 2019). Politically pertinent and theoretically generative, this latter work has proven to be a rich seam that, situated against-and-beyond Western/Northern territorial thinking (Clare et al., 2018), pushes back against implicitly statist readings of territory that reproduce a latent attachment to top-down visions of sovereignty, ultimately facilitated by Cartesian understandings of ‘the Globe’ (Gonin et al., 2024).

There are, however, potential concerns when this Latin American work is used simplistically to represent the *non-Anglophone* – or to put it another way: what happens when, rather than being *an* other geography (Oswin, 2020), Latin American territory becomes *the* other? Not only are important other territorial traditions marginalised (e.g. McGiffin, 2021; Ray, 2021) but, through the concomitant homogenisation of ‘Latin America’, important differences are flattened. Some of this engagement with Latin American territories can also cause a number of further issues. It

Corresponding author:

Nick Clare, School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Sir Clive Granger Building, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.

Email: nick.clare@nottingham.ac.uk

can become synonymous with the decolonial in an unthinking and uncritical way. Not only does this fail to recognise the very colonial underpinnings of ‘Latin America’ as a region and render interchangeable a pluriversity of Indigenous territorial action and thought, but it also silences by failing to acknowledge the dominance of non-Indigenous, urban, and overwhelmingly male voices in this diverse canon (Halvorsen and Zaragocin, 2021). Driven by often-superficial conversation with the English-language work (original or translated) in this body of literature, this does a disservice to both the territorial and the decolonial. It is thus important to simultaneously engage more broadly *and* more precisely with territory. By skilfully weaving a narrative from a range of diverse territorial literatures, Gonin et al. manage to do just that. They push against efforts to do *the* history of territory (Elden, 2013a), with the paper highlighting instead the value of multiple histories and futures, moving, as it does, from the Globe to Gaia.

Central, we argue, to the best and most engaged writing on territory is a focus on praxis, for example work that examines the relationships between territory and subjectivity (Schwarz and Streule, 2024). The idea of ‘terrestrial territories’ carries with it this commitment, especially through its critique of work that fails to ‘sufficiently highlight...the role of planetary biogeochemical processes and entities such as climate or biodiversity in the making of territories’ (Gonin et al., 2024), a potentially catastrophic oversight as we navigate the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. The move from ‘Globe’ to ‘Gaia’ provides a neat framing, bringing the other-than-human yet further into discussion with territory (Usher, 2020), with a commendable desire to ‘contribute to a more ecologically grounded political theory with a more theoretically aware earth science’ (Gonin et al., 2024). That said, and returning to the above point, perhaps Gonin et al. could have developed this line of thinking further through more deeply embedding the pre-existing work (from Latin America and beyond) that has a similar purpose. For instance, the work of the late Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves comes to mind (a vast body of thought that, dos Santos (2024) notes, has been criminally overlooked by much of the discipline due to so little of it being translated

into English). While Porto-Gonçalves’s work is mentioned in the paper, a deeper engagement with it may have proved useful, especially given how much thought he gave to the links between territory and the other-than-human.

The paper also provoked in us some interesting scalar reflections. One notable absence in this paper is a discussion of *Cuerpo-Territorio* (body territory), an important decolonial feminist intervention and methodology from the ‘Latin American’ tradition (Zaragocin and Caretta, 2021) which connects the scale of the individual with the earth and politics of territorial reproduction. Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer (2021: 293) relates the idea to the political slogan *Territorio Cuerpo-Tierra* (Territory Body-Earth) used most famously by Indigenous *Maya Q’eqchi’-Xinka* activist Lorena Cabnal, showing how *Cuerpo-Tierra* (and thus *Cuerpo-Territorio*) ‘represents an ontological continuum between earth and bodies’. Sátizabal and Melo Zurita (2021: 268) develop these ideas further to ‘emphasise the relationality between territories, bodies and the Earth’ noting ‘the impossibility of separating territory, body and Earth/land struggles’. They ultimately use the idea of *Territorio-Cuerpo-Tierra* to critique ‘Masculine and Western imaginaries of territory [which] foreground the separation between territory and the experiences of being and living with and in dynamic and complex places’ (Sátizabal and Melo Zurita (2021: 271). *Cuerpo-Territorio* therefore provides an explicitly praxis-focused counterpoint to terrestrial territories that considers how territories are made by, and relationally embedded in, the other-than-human. We therefore ask here how the terrestrial and the embodied relate to each other. Put simply, what do we gain by scaling up rather than down, and what might we lose? Might a movement towards a humbler (Saville, 2021), more minor (Katz, 1996, 2017) theorising benefit territorial praxis? Again, while impossible to engage with the extant body of literature in its entirety, this is a notable absence in Gonin et al.’s piece and does speak to an underappreciated richness to the ‘Latin American’ work.

Feminist approaches like *Cuerpo-Territorio* connect to wider critiques of the concept of Gaia itself. While the paper does acknowledge the colonial underpinnings of Gaia, this part of the argument

could have been developed more fully (the emphasis on retaining the specificity of different cosmologies is, however, important and well made). Similarly, although it is good to see the paper acknowledging the contribution of Lynn Margulis (all too often she is overlooked in favour of her more (in)famous male co-author James Lovelock), there is a need to consider the many, long-standing feminist critiques of Gaia in general (e.g. Rose, 1991), and Latour's use of it in particular (see Sagan, 2023; Sands, 2020). While this feminist work explicitly engages with the big questions that motivate Gonin et al., such as ontology (Pohl, 2020), agency (Müller, 2021) and sovereignty (Sands, 2015), there is also an explicit focus on praxis through discussion of things like care (van den Heuvel, 2023). Returning to the decolonial feminist ideas of *Cuerpo-Territorio*, we urge the authors to consider them in relation to their theorisation of Gaia, or else their construction of the other-than-human risks falling foul of the above feminist critiques.

This brings us back to the question of (territorial) praxis and how this is best served, a question we have typically answered through a focus on the everyday (Habermehl, 2021) and at the scale of the neighbourhood (Mason-Deese et al., 2019). But as the Earth becomes less habitable it is increasingly vital to consider the other-than-human. The idea of terrestrial territories provides tools to do just that and thus offers new perspectives in an increasingly crowded 'territory of territory' (Delaney, 2005). That said, we feel it is important to ask what intellectual and political work terrestrial territory does which *Cuerpo-Territorio* does not, and how do these concepts and practices overlap? We do wonder if a focus on *Cuerpo-Territorio* might, quite literally, offer a more grounded way into such debates and important struggles.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Nick Clare  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5425-4012>

References

- Antonsich M (2017) Territory and territoriality. In: Richardson D (ed) *International encyclopedia of geography*. Oxford: Wiley, 1–9.
- Clare N, Habermehl V, and Mason-Deese L (2018) Territories in contestation: Relational power in Latin America. *Territory, Politics, Governance, Routledge* 6(3): 302–321.
- Delaney D (2005) *Territory: A Short Introduction. Short Introductions to Geography*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Del Biaggio C (2015) Territory beyond the anglophone tradition. In: Agnew J, Mamadouh V and Secor A (eds) *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*. Oxford: Wiley, 35–47.
- dos Santos R (2024) Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves: The Decolonial Geography of an Intellectual from Abya Yala. Antipode Online. Available at: <https://antipodeonline.org/2024/02/09/carlos-walter-porto-goncalves/> (accessed 2 April 2024).
- Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer R (2021) Travelling Cuerpo-Territorios: A decolonial feminist geographical methodology to conduct research with migrant women. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 6(4–6): 290–319.
- Elden S (2010) Land, terrain, territory. *Progress in Human Geography* 34(6): 799–817.
- Elden S (2013a) How should we do the history of territory? *Territory, Politics, Governance, Routledge* 1(1): 5–20.
- Elden S (2013b) *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gonin A, Etelain J, Maniglier P, et al. (2024) Terrestrial territories: From the Globe to Gaia, a new ground for territory. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. Online first. DOI: 10.1177/20438206241240213.
- Habermehl V (2021) Everyday antagonisms: Organising economic practices in Mercado Bonpland, Buenos Aires. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 39(3): 536–554.
- Halvorsen S (2019) Decolonising territory: Dialogues with Latin American knowledges and grassroots strategies. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(5): 790–814.

- Halvorsen S and Zaragocin S (2021) Territory and decolonisation: Debates from the global souths. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 6(4–6): 123–139.
- Katz C (1996) Towards Minor theory. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14(4): 487–499.
- Katz C (2017) Revisiting minor theory. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(4): 596–599.
- Mason-Deese L, Habermehl V, and Clare N (2019) Producing territory: Territorial organizing of movements in Buenos Aires. *Geographica Helvetica* 74(2): 153–161.
- McGiffin E (2021) Conflicted colonialisms: Multi-dimensional violence in the western Sahel. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 6(4–6): 320–336.
- Müller F (2021) Agency in more-than-human, queerfeminist and decolonial perspectives. In: Chandler D, Müller F and Rothe D (eds) *International Relations in the Anthropocene*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 251–269.
- Oswin N (2020) An other geography. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10(1): 9–18.
- Pohl L (2020) Ruins of Gaia: Towards a feminine ontology of the anthropocene. *Theory, Culture & Society* 37(6): 67–86.
- Ray R (2021) Spatial adhocism of the urban territory: Sketches from a squatter settlement in Kolkata. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 6(4–6): 159–178.
- Rose EC (1991) The good mother: From Gaia to Gilead. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12(1): 77.
- Sagan C (2023) Gaia is a tough bitch. *Technophany, A Journal for Philosophy and Technology* 1(2): 124–156.
- Sands D (2015) Gaia, gender, and sovereignty in the anthropocene. *philoSOPHIA* 5(2): 287–307.
- Sands D (2020) Gaia politics, critique, and the “planetary imaginary”. *SubStance* 49(3): 104–121.
- Satizábal P and Melo Zurita MdL (2021) Bodies-holding-bodies: The trembling of women’s Territorio-Cuerpo-Tierra and the feminist responses to the earthquakes in Mexico city. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 6(4–6): 267–289.
- Saville SM (2021) Towards humble geographies. *Area* 53(1): 97–105.
- Schwarz A and Streule M (2024) Territorial subjectivities. The missing link between political subjectivity and territorialization. *Progress in Human Geography*. Online first. DOI: 10.1177/03091325241228600.
- Usher M (2020) Territory incognita. *Progress in Human Geography* 44(6): 1019–1046.
- van den Heuvel N (2023) Feminism after Gaia: Care and the posthuman. *Krisis / Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 43(1): 152–154.
- Zaragocin S and Caretta MA (2021) Cuerpo-Territorio: A decolonial feminist geographical method for the study of embodiment. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111(5): 1503–1518.