



RECENSÃO

*Voluminous States: Sovereignty, Materiality,
and the Territorial Imagination,*
de Franck Billé (ed.),
por Gabriel Espinoza Rivera

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Voluminous States:

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Sovereignty, Materiality, and Territorial imagination are the three dimensions severing the novel and witty contribution edited by Franck Billé. These dimensions encompass, to some extent, those possibilities to talk about and understand the world in which we are living regarding volume: volume as this three-dimensional magnitude perceived, experienced, and crafted by its immanent presence; barring and/or engaging with human, non-human, and ideological actors. Volume tends to contest the idea of the world and the map relying only on the topographic flat surface of the Earth. Volume introduces itself as the air that trespasses us, the sea waves leaving their tidemarks all along the shores, or the mountains and their daunting heights. Pondering on this idea of volume, archaeologist Christopher Tilley (2004) highlights some important points while discussing Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology:

“[...] grounded in the physicality and material existence of the human body in the world”, volume appeared as the immanence of what lies on the other side of humanity. [...] We experience and perceive the world

because we live in that world and are intertwined within it. We are part of it, and it is part of us. Our bodily Being-in-the-world provides the fundamental ground, or starting point, for our description of it. [p.2]

Thus, when we are talking about volume, we are also addressing the unmentionable presence that defines the space where we can move, jump, make submarine dives, and what allows us to dig into the earth or deploy spelunking activities. However, the approach is not as idle as it has been described above. Actually, the important topic addressed in the book is how this volume is constituting both material substance and navigable space intertwined in a complex web of power designations, which are underpinned in the political constitution of national frontiers, State-actions, and the like.

Voluminous States is a collection edited by Franck Billé, built upon a wide range of in-depth discussions about the relationship between governance and state power encompassing geological and climatological phenomena, the idea of place, and, eventually, the ideological and political powers cast upon the matter:

soil, and air. The latter stresses our very understanding of both the sensible and pragmatic approach to the thingly world. However, during the introduction, Billé asserts that these ideas and ongoing assessments about things are not as novel as they are presented nowadays:

Cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad inferos, or “Whoever’s is the soil, it is theirs all the way to Heaven and all the way to Hell,” as the Latin maxim goes. But if the three-dimensional nature of land was common knowledge among lawyers, it remained largely a theoretical issue until the advent of air travel and the development of effective ground-excavating methods. Of course, subsurface mineral deposits have long been the subject of territorial disputes, while “aerial arts of war,” in the form of painting, land surveys, and later photography, predate modern technologies such as digital imaging. [Billé, 2020, p2]

Billé’s introduction frames the broad spectrum of how narrow the dominant discussion regarding space and land is. Is the topographic nature of the territory the world in itself? What happens with the water, waves, the physical and chemical phenomena shaping our environment, and, furthermore, conveying situations that are translated into political and economic activities? Are they enacting and at some point intervening in the processes of world-making, or is the State’s narrative of power bold

enough to dismiss the very reality that lies outside their legal, symbolic, and military domain?

The book is divided into three sections with contributions made by a broad number of scholars from geographers to anthropologists: sovereignty, materiality, and territorial imagination. Each chapter tries to either introduce or stress the following academic notions: How do we understand the subterranean world and the vertical nature of the territory?; How consistent is the matter that constitutes the soil, geological formations, and geographical accidents that produce the national landscapes?; What are the thinkable alternatives to envision the ongoing present and the unlikely future?

While the two first parts embark on a discussion to bring to the surface places, spaces, and how volumes are being translated into volumetric categories, the last part deepens into a more speculative approach about how States are shaping and negotiating the inconsistent categories of the Euclidean space on which the territorial imagination has been built upon.

The idea of territory is a nodal concept throughout the whole book. Territory is a notion of governance – particularly introduced and reinforced by the Nation State’s power – shaped by the ceaseless action of discourses, cultural devices, and the relationship between knowledge and power, as well as systematic disregard of matter, ecological processes, and human and non-human lives. During the early period of geopolitical science in the XIX century, territories were seen as a living

subject: having a proper order, sensitivity, growth, development, and reproduction, as well as self-regulation in their rapport with both internal and external conditions and subjects. Nowadays, the notion of territory is understood as a performative layer of ideology hurled upon the soil, air, water, and people. Thus, the concept of territory is working as a monolithic block of ideas entailing the ways States define and reinforce a particular experience of place, space, time, matter, and subjectivity.

The concept of territory has helped us frame the very soil beneath our feet as something stable and quantifiable; the measurement of ground and land has delivered to humans the power to lay claim on things and cast what is above and below the earth as someone's turf. Mountains, water, the submarine realm, and the air are rendered visible only to the extent of being conceptualized as stable properties of a particular territory. As though the Modern State grammar and this particular epistemological approach were able, and in the need of, to create the world to its image and likeness: The US forest, the Ukrainian undergrounds, every country's national space air, or the Chinese sand.

Throughout the book, the graspable substance of the State's identity is questioned as something less than solid and, instead, constantly requires operations of fixing, framing, and contentions to be kept alive. The borders define both the lived and imagined frontiers of the Nation-States, but hardly those of their dwellers. In "Sovereignty", States'

presence is discussed as something not completely experienced as consistent by people in their liminality, particularly in both Tina Harris's and Cullen Dunn's contributions. In section two, "Materiality", a non-human agency such as the one from sand or glaciers is presented as a force that contests the assumption of national ground as something fixed and malleable at will, especially in Jerry Zee or Klaus Dodds's contributions. Finally, "Territorial imagination" is a more speculative approach to the fate of the Nation-State's sovereignty and symbolic consistency, as in Debora Battaglia's counterfactual ethnographic approach to the lives of astronauts on an International Space Station.

The book achieves its major and principal goal by stressing and dismantling the very language compounding analysis and imagination regarding sovereignty and territory while delivering a speculative approach to things. It accomplishes this by casting an attentive gaze on the inconsistency of the imagined boundaries.

In many respects, this book is about the political and scientific imagination – to some extent, they happen to be mutually reinforced and act as a monolithic object – about space, matter, and how this entails the environment's sovereignty.

If anything with mass utilizes space, it is matter, thus is undeniable present: How have sand, waves, and the in-between mobilities in the world that we inhabit suffered this radical disregard about their weight in shaping things? Going back to Merchant's classic *The Death of Nature*,

the power of the mechanical and masculine view – crafted through the modern period (1500-1800, also as acknowledged by Habermas) – about both life on earth and earth itself, has blinded us to the extent of narrowing our understanding, sensibility, and capacity to convey life as something that is everywhere. This is not a mere problem of either political sovereignty or nature, which are not mutually exclusive at all, but how the ontological and epistemological burden of how things are experienced and framed have brought contradictions to our understanding of the world we are living in, and our role in world-shaping practices. The latter includes a narrow perspective about the world we inhabit as though it only belonged to the discursive and ideological realm. How is it that this constant process of Gestell, denounced by Heidegger, turned out to be not a mere way to place things in order, but to narrow our

understanding of life as an ongoing process that could not be pinned down to the instrumental relationships with things built by the State grammar, neoliberal policies making a profit out of every single thing in the world, among others?

Voluminous States stands as a bold contribution to human geography, new realism (to some extent), anthropology, geopolitics, urban studies, and more. A Jack-of-all-trades that is worthy to be read.

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