



**HAL**  
open science

# This Planet Which Is Not One: On the Notion of Zone

Jeanne Etelain

► **To cite this version:**

Jeanne Etelain. This Planet Which Is Not One: On the Notion of Zone. ZKM/MIT Press. Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth, pp.160-163, 2020. hal-04363031

**HAL Id: hal-04363031**

**<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-04363031>**

Submitted on 6 Jan 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## This Planet Which Is Not One: On the Notion of Zone

Jeanne Etelain

The Earth has long been conceptualized via the figure of the globe. The confrontation between an ahistorical, disinterested eye and an external, inert world seen only from afar seems rather too clearly required by a predatory culture. For the Earth is conceived as a uniform and unified totalizing whole that can be appropriated, divided, and exploited at the risk of endangering life. In these terms, the planet never amounts to anything more than an abstract ball structured with vertical lines, horizontal parallels, and right angles: a homogeneous, continuous, universal space. Yet “where are you residing when you say that you have a ‘global view’ of the universe?,” asks Bruno Latour.<sup>[1]</sup> In the age of human-induced environmental disaster, it is no longer possible to pretend to see the Earth from outside; we cannot deny that we are *on* it and that it responds to us. Isabelle Stengers speaks of the intrusion of Gaia. This Goddess, however, is nothing like Mother Nature, the generous one who continuously provides for us despite how we treat her. Gaia is a set of interconnected entities that function in their own way, with their own goals, yet together create the ideal physicochemical conditions of their existence. Her geography is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, and more subtle than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on oneness. And, above all, Gaia is ticklish.

Thus, a group of scientists are working to rework the concept of Earth with that of the Critical Zones. The term refers to the heterogeneous portions of the planet’s surface, which stretch from the top of the tree canopy to deep underground, encompassing all of the processes that make life possible. Put another way, Critical Zones form the skin of Gaia. But why opt for the term “zone”? Perhaps “land” is too embedded within the nature-talk,<sup>1</sup> “territory” sounds too political, and “area” reads as overly geometrical. Perhaps, too, the term better connotes the sense of the unknown, reminiscent of a mysterious place such as the one visited by the characters in Andrei Tarkovsky’s science fiction movie *Stalker* (1979). In any case, there is no doubt that “zone” emphasizes a different topography, one that challenges and resists established notions of space.

“Zone” comes from the Greek *zōné*, derived from the verb *zonnunai*, “to gird,” which itself is derived from the Sanskrit *junāmi*, “to join, to link.” Although it designates a girdle or belt in Homer, it was mainly a scientific term used in premodern cosmology. Zones appear in an ancient speculative theory and cartographic representations of the world, which became outdated through fifteenth and sixteenth century sea expeditions. Greek astronomers inferred from the sphericity of the Earth and its inclination relative to the Sun the division of the planet’s surface into five latitudinal areas (one torrid, two frigid, and two temperate) according to the length of the shadow cast on a gnomon.<sup>[2]</sup> Put literally, terrestrial zones were conceived of as the belts of the Earth.

But the theory goes further. It led to certain beliefs about the habitability of the planet and the perfect conditions under which life could flourish. Since exposure to the Sun was considered either too long or too short in the torrid and frigid zones, these were considered inhospitable. As for the temperate zone located in the southern hemisphere, the Antipodes, it was regarded as

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “land” as in “landscape” is charged with the idea of an objectified natural world external to human actions and thus participates in the modern heritage that is today challenged by contemporary philosophy and anthropology. See, among many others, Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); *La fabrique des images* (Paris : Musée du Quai Branly, 2010).

habitable yet unknowable because inaccessible due to the deadly heat of the torrid zone that isolates it. That is why, according to historian Jean-Marc Besse, early modern Portuguese austral navigations – which demonstrated to Europeans that the torrid zone could be crossed and even inhabited – invalidated the doctrine of zones and prompted the formation of a new concept of the Earth.[3]

Maps derived from this ancient doctrine stand out from T-O maps and other medieval varieties that depict only the ecumene: the known and inhabited world.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, zonal maps offer an entire view of the planet showing little interest in topography such as relief, hydrography, or settlement. However, they have nothing to do with the imaginary of the globe, which drives the concept of a universal Earth wherein the ecumene fully coincides with the terrestrial orb considered in its totality. If only one part of the world is habitable, then the doctrine of zones entails that space is heterogeneous from the point of view of physics, discontinuous from the point of view of mathematics, and regional from the point of view of human existence.

Locating the ecumene in relation to the rest of the Earth, zonal maps decenter human beings and relativize the size of their world with respect to the extent of the planet. Moreover, the doctrine emerges from a reflection on the relation of the Earth to the Sun within the cosmos. For both these reasons, zone appears as a relational concept while pertaining to a consideration of the whole and its parts. Unlike the globe, which imposes its oneness, zones always express a relation between at least two terms (e.g., the Earth/the Sun, the ecumene/the planet). This is perhaps why the various uses of the word suggest that it connects as much as it divides.[4] Zones, always at least double, come inevitably in the plural.

The differential ontology that underpins zones has not escaped the attention of feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* she rejects the monist Freudian theory of sexuality, one which undermines (sexual) difference in favor of the primacy of the male sexual organ in the constitution of the human psyche.[5] Instead, she explores a pluralist theory of sexuality using as an alternative paradigm the female genitals, conceived not as being composed of one, but of at least two organs: the vulva's touching lips. She progressively pluralizes sexuality further by referring to the very multiplicity of women's – but arguably of all humans' – erogenous zones, ranging from the tips of the nipples to the core of the clitoral hood. The concept of erogenous zone was first coined by Sigmund Freud. It is precisely the observation that "certain regions of the body" (*Körperstellen*), other than the genitals, are experienced as pleasurable that leads him to elaborate a non-reproductive theory of sexuality.[6] It is telling that Freud substitutes the word "zone" for *Stelle*, meaning "place" or "position," but also "point" or "digit." Whereas *Stelle* designates pre-given units that can be gathered into a

---

<sup>2</sup> A T-O map is a type of European medieval world map that represents the three known continents (Asia, Europe, and Africa) divided by the "T" formed by the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile River, and encircled by the "O" of the Ocean beyond which the Earth ends. Unlike zonal maps, T-O maps were a projection of Christian history onto a geographical framework: it combines many Christian symbols such as the cross, the origin of nations according to Noah's genealogy, Jerusalem as the center of the world, as well as the power of Christ over the 4th cardinal directions (Woodward & Lewis, 1987, 335). The idea found in zonal maps that the temperate zone in the southern hemisphere, albeit inaccessible, could be inhabited, even just *in theory*, "caused an embarrassment for the Church" (Woodward, 1985, 517) since it suggested that there could be a race of people who was not descended from the sons of Adam. See David Woodward, "Medieval *Mappaemundi*," in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, ed. David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), and David Woodward, "Reality, Symbolism, Time, and Space in Medieval World Maps," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75, no. 4 (1985): 510-521.

whole, such as a straight line or a set of numbers, zones are always partial, to use Mélanie Klein's words, meaning untotalizable.[7] Thus, the erogenous body differs equally from the organism – the organized functional body found in biology – and the phenomenal body – an unequivocal lived, occupied place. Although one zone always calls for another – the mouth sucks, the hand caresses, the arms embrace – connecting zones together will never yield a well-rounded body.

We should be careful therefore not to allow the theory of erogenous zones to become too easily associated with the psychosexual stages. Freud paved the way when he imagined a progressive integration of the erogenous zones into a harmonious whole. Each stage – the oral, the anal, the phallic, the latent, and the genital – is matched to a different erogenous zone as the primary source of pleasure. Ordered in a temporal sequence, transitioning from early childhood to adulthood, and intertwined with complex psychic mechanisms, zones become instrumental in the libidinal organization of the body unified under the rule of the phallus. This teleological development is exactly what Irigaray rejects, for it reduces difference to oneness. In her text, she revives instead the anarchic multiplicity found at the core of erogenous zones.

Using the notion of “drive,” psychoanalysis resorts to a conceptual framework borrowed from modern physics and sees the body as an energetic field rather than an extended surface (*res extensa*). In this understanding, subdivisions of space that we normally envision as static and unchanged locations imply the idea of mobile areas activated by a stream of energy. Accordingly, space would be indeterminate in terms of its divisions and fundamentally dynamic in character, moving us well beyond conceptions of space as some kind of empty, homogeneous container. The sense of swarming indetermination is further supported when Freud argues that the skin, and by extension the whole surface of the body, is the erogenous zone “*par excellence*.”[8]

Is it stretching it too far to bring the planet together with the erogenous body? Despite the almost two millennia separating psychoanalysis from ancient cosmology, it seems clear that both notions of zone depart from an imaginary centered around oneness. Both envision another kind of totality, one that is neither atomist nor holist, since the part is always richer than the whole and the whole is nothing but partial. That is why talking about the zones of Gaia might change our conception of her, imagining her less like a superorganism. Furthermore, the zone paradigm invokes in both theories a surface – be it the Earth or the body – that is heterogeneous, relational, multiple, indeterminate, and dynamic. Thus, zones would correspond to differentiated spaces – hence the need to qualify them with the use of adjectives such as “temperate” or “torrid.”[9] Thinking of the Earth as we think of a lover might not be such an odd idea. Ecosexual activists led by performance artists Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens consider, for example, that the lover archetype is more ethical insofar as a lover must care for their romantic partner or they will likely lose them. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advocates a similar analogy when she imagines the planet as the “home” of all living beings, a generative source akin to the female womb, which is as uncanny (*unheimlich*).[10] Her argument acquires a special resonance in the Anthropocene: as landscapes, seasons, and species undergo radical changes, our surroundings become increasingly unfamiliar, even threatening. And many are aware of an ambient feeling, reflected in apocalyptic discourses, that we may no longer be welcome at home. To conclude, I would simply add that if Stengers is right to describe Gaia as ticklish, then the Critical Zone might be especially so. Perhaps our task, as Earthbounds, is to caress them.[11]

## References

[1] Here Bruno Latour paraphrases Peter Sloterdijk in *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 123. First published in French as *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015).

[2] There has been some confusion between zone and climate. Although both express the inclination of the Earth in relation to the Sun, climate (from the Greek “to slant”) translates the length of the days while zone translates the length of the shadow. See Jean-Marc Besse, *Les grandeurs de la Terre* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2003), 50–3.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See Jeanne Etelain, “Qu’appelle-t-on zone? A la recherche d’un concept manqué,” *Les Temps modernes*, no. 692 (2017): 113–35.

[5] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985). First published in French as *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

[6] Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” [1905] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), 123–243. First published in German as *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig: Franz Deuticke, 1905).

[7] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Viking Press, 1977), especially 43–60, for an extensive analysis. First published in French as *L’Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972).

[8] Sigmund Freud, “Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” 169.

[9] This principle of differentiation is also found in land-use planning: zoning consists in dividing a city or a territory according to specific purposes alongside permitted uses and exceptional regulations. See Etelain, “Qu’appelle-t-on zone?”

[10] First developed in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Imperative zue Neuerfindung des Planeten. Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 1999); then reworked in Chapter 3: Planetarity in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71–102.

[11] See Jeanne Etelain, “La caresse philosophe,” *La Deleuziana*, no. 6 (2017): 40–9.