

Ungrounding *Terroir*

Robert T. Valgenti

Independent Researcher*

ABSTRACT | This essay examines the concept of *terroir*, or “the taste of place,” from a philosophical and broadly hermeneutic standpoint. I argue that *terroir* is a concept that can be reduced neither to its empirical, geological characteristics nor to the various human interventions that use the landscape and geographical region to produce distinct comestibles (such as wine, cheese, etc.); rather, *terroir* is a concept that captures a tension between taste and place that resists representation. My goal is to explain how *terroir*, despite its traditional uses to perpetuate hierarchies of wealth, status, and power, or its more recent deployments as a tool to open or assert economic and political imperatives, can nonetheless operate as a critical concept. I first present a definition of *terroir* that draws upon a number of recent studies to highlight its polysemic nature and its inherent yet productive tension. I then examine analyze this tension – one that can undermine foundations and resist its reduction to either a descriptive or a constructive function – by drawing upon the work of thinkers who have theorized a type of geophilosophy. In the essay’s final section, I suggest that *terroir* operates like a utopia and thus provides an impetus for the critical evaluation of our claims to territorial identity and aesthetic uniqueness.

KEYWORDS | Terroir; Taste of Place; Populism; Local Food; Nietzsche; Deleuze; De-territorialization

* Correspondence: Robert T. Valgenti – 13 Throckmorton Circle Lebanon, PA 17042, USA. Email: valgenti@gmail.com



1 Introduction

The expansion of global food economies has instigated, somewhat paradoxically, an appreciation and demand for food with distinct local character – a by-product of competitive markets and the inexhaustibility of consumer desires. Comestibles that convey the unique physical and cultural features of a local region – that deliver a “taste of place” – are often said to represent that region’s distinct *terroir*: a term that originated within the winemaking practices of France but now transgresses its geographical and gastronomical boundaries to describe an ever-increasing range of local products. Despite the term’s growing popularity and use in recent decades, the very idea of *terroir* is no stranger to criticism from various quarters. Beyond its overtones of Old World traditionalism and gastro-elitism, it has also been criticized as scientifically dubious, politically motivated, or simply another marketing ploy in a hyper-competitive marketplace.

A good deal of recent scholarship documents these trends: alongside those who promote the promise of *terroir* as a means for local producers and small economies to keep up with consumers’ voracious desire to discover new and uncharted tastes of place, there are others who recognize in its appeals to authentic taste and protected foodways the darker voices (and problematic history) of colonialism, exploitation, and even fervent nationalism. Bruno Latour’s passing condemnation of the blind nostalgia for *terroir* (Latour 2018)¹ highlights a justified concern: as the world faces crises brought on by human-induced climate change, mass migrations, increasing wealth disparity, market exploitation, and the proliferation of misinformation through various media channels (all of which make us feel more alienated from each other and our own world than ever before), the tendency to seek value in *terra firma*, in the nostalgia for place and kindred identities, risks slipping into extreme expressions of tribalism and xenophobia which have been on the rise over the past decade across a number of continents. The political expression of these tendencies is populism, “the permanent shadow of representative politics” (Müller 2016, p. 101) which most often arises within democratic contexts as a “crisis of representation.” Populism is not an ideology, per se, “but a political logic” (Judis 2016, p. 14) defined by a conflict between the *populus* who feels their interests are not represented, and the establishment that benefits from the status quo. I want to suggest that analogous forces are at work in the expansion of *terroir* outside of its Old World domain (France and more broadly Western Europe) into new markets and territories where a crisis of representation does not target an intransigent political or social elite (Judis 2016, p. 17), but

¹ His reference occurs in the context of his critique of populist “revolutions” fifty years after the revolts of ‘68.

the relentless homogenization and alienation brought about by global capitalism: when a product's unique cultural, social, and gastronomic value – along with the unique identity and voice of those who produce it – is threatened by a reduction to its infinite exchangeability as a commodity at the mercy of market demand. One need only glance over its relatively short history to find that *terroir* has been deployed as an ideological device to create social hierarchies, to distinguish markets, and even to assert ethnic imperatives. But the goal of this investigation is not equate the growing desire to produce and consume GI wines or single origin coffee with a radical political ideology or rapacious market capitalism; rather, I want to articulate how the concept of *terroir* responds to a crisis of representation in this landscape – namely, how *terroir* reveals the processes by which essential connections are dissolved and identities are formed in an ever-changing relationship between taste and place.

The conceptual space in question is one that exists between descriptive concepts (which assume that the world is a factual given readily available to our understanding) and constructive concepts (which views knowledge of the world as a product of human relations and conventions that is always mediated and never direct). At the heart of descriptive accounts of *terroir* is a basic yet powerful essentialism grounded in the necessary connection between a particular product and its geographical location – a sense of place that is defined and cultivated by human actors but that is employed as if it were the natural (and thus undeniable) origin of identity and authenticity for those individuals and the fruits of their labor. Constructive accounts of *terroir* emphasize the human element – a combination of individual artisanship, cultural knowledge, and agricultural practices that actively shape the product and the territory that gives rise to it. Neither explanation, however, fully captures the phenomenon of *terroir* as a living relation between taste and place. Recent scholarship, along with testimony from producers in the field, illustrates how the formation and deployment of *terroir* within a complex global market exposes and undermines the very grounds of *terroir* and its reduction to either a natural description or a social construct, to the point that any sense of a natural territory – an authentic or real ground – is replaced by something more vital, fluid, and contingent.

This essay argues that *terroir* should be understood as a critical concept whose function draws into question purely descriptive claims, on the one hand, and on the other, resists a reduction of a product's value to relative measures of taste or market demand. I will first present a definition of *terroir* that draws upon a number of recent studies to highlight its polysemic nature and its inherent yet productive tension: a tension that results from the incommensurable relation it forges between place and taste. I will then analyze this tension by drawing upon

the work of thinkers who have theorized a type of geophilosophy: Friedrich Nietzsche, who provides the tools for understanding the concept as anti-foundational; and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who provide a conceptual framework to explain the relational nature of a territory and its fluid de- and re-territorialization. In the essay's final section, I suggest that *terroir* operates like a utopia and thus provides an impetus for the critical evaluation of any claims to territorial identity and aesthetic uniqueness that reduce taste to place or vice versa.

2 What is *Terroir*?

A great deal of the literature on *terroir* takes note of the concept's untranslatability – as if the word, like the products it represents, resists the very idea of a transgression beyond its origins on the gentle slopes of Burgundy. Of course, the notion of a wine's taste being connected to its place of origin, let alone the very soil in which it grows, existed long before the cultivation of wine in France; moreover, the power of the idea has, in recent decades, stretched well beyond the “Old World” boundaries of France and its neighbors, firmly rooting itself in the imaginary of global consumers as an indicator of local provenance, gastronomical authenticity, and cultural identity in “New World” contexts around the globe – traits that assert uniqueness in the face of the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Trubek (2008) translates *terroir* as “taste of place,” capturing not only an element of its history in the expression *goût de terroir* (and revealing, as part of its patrimony, a markedly negative connotation), but also an essential – and potentially productive – tension in the term if one considers the double sense of the genitive “of taste”: taste *that belongs to* a place (suggesting an origin within a specific locale) and taste *that is about* a place (suggesting a supplemental or even subjective judgment of taste). A crisis of representation – what the term describes and to whom or what it can be attributed – seems to be built into *terroir*'s undeniably “multivocal and polysemic” nature (Ulin 2013, p. 70).

If the definition of *terroir* reflects a certain multivocality, and at times, even a certain mysticism about the ambiguous relation between taste and place, we should view it not as a problem of translation, but rather as one of interpretation. As with all interpretations, the goal is not solely to carry meaning over from one language to the next, or to describe a certain state of affairs, but to reveal and articulate a meaningful relation between a set of incommensurable or irreducible differences. This type of understanding creates new knowledge through a reciprocal movement of thinking and experience that Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as a hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1989, pp. 190–192). A definition of *terroir*, therefore,

does not look to resolve, once and for all, the tensions that exist among its various elements; rather, its definition strives to articulate how those tensions illustrate the many factors at stake when *terroir* is employed to describe or construct the relation between taste and place. Rather than simply describe a phenomenon or construct a set of normative practices, such a concept functions to disrupt any necessary relation between taste and place and thereby reveals how *terroir* resists a simple reduction to the measurable qualities of a physical place or to a set of guiding principles or cultural practices.

A closer look at the wide array of definitions and deployments of the concept not only reveals a contentious discourse within and outside of its academic study, but also a set of basic tensions or dichotomies that provide a basis for the concept's critical potential. In fact, if one were to sketch out a loose topography of *terroir* and its many definitions, one could trace a continuum of meaning that, at one end, employs it as a descriptive concept that aims to identify and even quantify the various natural features (soil composition, geological formations, climate patterns, etc.) responsible for a product's inimitable taste, and at the other end, as a constructive concept that highlights the role of human intervention, inventiveness, and aesthetic sensibilities in the expression of *terroir*. Thus, earlier examples of the term, particularly in the sense codified into French law and carried forward into the 1990s, focus on the particular characteristics of the land and the unique characteristics it imparts to its products. Here, a *terroir* is typically defined as "...an existing (often still unknown) relationship/interaction between the natural environmental factors viz., climate, topography and soil which have the potential (also often unknown) to induce a specific character into an agricultural product (not necessarily wine)" (Bohmrich 1996, p. 33).² More concisely, it is "an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products" (Barham 2003, p. 131). In recent decades, however, there has been an increased focus on the human element involved in the production of a *terroir*'s unique products: "Broadly defined ... as the fortuitous result of the relative influences of geology, climate, biology, cultural preference, technological developments, emerging markets, and evolving consumer tastes... *terroir* has come to designate a stable set of geo-spatial conditions and human practices whose ultimate products express those unique factors" (Whalen 2010, p. 117).

If, however, there is a trend in the scholarship that provides a path to follow in this inquiry, it can best be expressed, to invoke a chapter heading from James Wilson's study of *terroir*, as the contentious issue regarding "The Part that Man

²Bohmrich attributes the definition to D. Saayman's lecture "Soils and Climate of the Western Cape" (Saayman 1995).

Played" (Wilson 1998, pp. 50–54) in the development of the taste of place. And while there are extreme expressions that focus solely on the empirical analysis of geological features and their impact on taste, or on purely human expressions of *terroir* (an idea taken to its extreme in French chef Thierry Marx's claim that geography is not crucial, and that "my *terroir* is inside me" (Druckman 2008, p. 14), the majority of accounts dwell in vast middle regions and broker between the natural and human contributions to the taste of place. This negotiation reflects a certain tension that cannot simply be represented by a description of either the natural or the human element in isolation.

More traditionalist accounts note that *terroir* embodies a *patrimoine naturel* that consists not only in air, land, water, and geographies of the French countryside held within certain boundaries, but includes along with "nature" the presupposition that human agents have an interest in such goods: "more than just material in the world to be encountered, cared for, and exploited, the natural heritage is a *socially meaningful affair* ... [that] ... connotes the local spaces and soils, and also symbolic relations of goods and services production ..." (Douguet and O'Connor 2003, p. 238). Others provide a slightly more balanced definition, noting that *terroir* captures "the correspondence between the physical features of a place – the soil and slope of a vineyard, the local climate, and the blend of grapes – and the character of its final products, often mediated by human experience accumulated over centuries ..." (Fourcade 2012, pp. 525–526). Refinements of the human element note that the intersection of physical environment, agricultural technique, economics behind production, and symbolic representations capture "the tension between the physical properties of a given location and the human efforts to coax certain aspects of *terroir* out of the land and into the bottle" (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2013, p. 53). Sarah Daynes' ethnographic work on Bordeaux winemakers reveals that wine producers tend to disrupt the opposition between the physical ensemble of geological features and the effects of human knowledge and intervention, interpreting *terroir* as "the human 'reading' of a given natural milieu" (Daynes 2013, p. 16). Thus, one can deduce from her work that while both physical nature and human intervention are necessary aspects of *terroir*, neither one alone is sufficient.

More human-centered accounts tend to emphasize the cultural, if not spiritual elements of *terroir*, "the customs and ceremonies that sanctified it and put it, so to speak, in communion with the drinker" (Scruton 2010, p. 135), or "a way of being alert" (Kramer 2016) that cannot be reduced to a scientific analysis of a *terroir*'s geological and chemical components. Wilson, whose work also provides a scientific basis for *terroir*, nonetheless notes that it also and more importantly invokes a "reverence for the land which is a critical, invisible element of the term. The true

concept is not easily grasped but includes physical elements of the vineyard habitat – the vine, subsoil, siting, drainage, and microclimate. Beyond the measurable ecosystem, there is an additional dimension – the spiritual aspect that recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustrations of its history” (Wilson 1998, pp. 55–56).³

Studies of *terroir* that examine the concept’s life outside of its Old World confines in France (or perhaps Europe as a whole) seem to rely more heavily on the human element and its contributions to the taste of place. Robert Swinburn’s study of winemaking *terroir* in Australia argues that the concept of *terroir* retains a certain integrity (Swinburn 2013, p. 38) and that the truth of “deep *terroir*” that lies in the reverence of place “relates not to achievement as it is generally understood, but to difference, to process, to humility, and to emotion” (Swinburn 2013, p. 49) – to the things “that count.” J. A. Halvaksz’s examination of *terroir* in Papua New Guinea relies on a descriptive account of *terroir* as a local characteristic that resists national consciousness and global hegemony, but also notes that *terroir* is not just in the soil but also the result of skills and practices (Halvaksz 2013, p. 149). And even at the level of language across cultures, Sarah Cappeliez’s analysis (Cappeliez 2017) illustrates that despite the difficulty of *terroir*’s translatability, all versions of it retain the core aspect of human skill and intervention in the natural process.

When this human element of *terroir* takes on a distinctly more cognitive or even ideological role, the concept reveals its constructive limit. The concept of *terroir* in such cases trains its focus more intently on extrinsic goals – whether those are goals of cultural identity, marketing, political power, or even simply knowledge for its own sake. Amy Trubek explains how she grew to understand that “...*terroir* was not simply a word but a category for knowing and discerning wine” (Trubek 2008, Trubek 2008, p. 2; Nicolas Sternsdorff-Cisterna echoes this idea, employing *terroir* not “as that which needs explaining, but rather as the lens through which to explain” (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2013, Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2013, p. 54). Robert Feagan notes that *terroir* involves a conscious and active involvement of the imagination whose “valorization of place through food (as well as language, crafts, landscapes, etc.) in the culture economy is tightly coupled to spatial ideas of the local community, economy, and territory” (Feagan 2007, p. 27). In a more

³ Wilson goes on to quote a number of wine experts, whose definitions emphasize various notes of the concept, such as its “mental aspect” that allows the wine grower to produce wine that captures the “natural” taste the land is supposed to produce (Kramer); the aptness of certain grapes for certain locales (Johnson); the literal and metaphorical deep-rootedness of the vines that captures an “unknown something” that makes a wine what it is (Querre); and even its ability to link the consumer to the producer, and in a number of ways, undo the fetishizing of wine as a commodity.

critical vein, the work of Bohmrich (1996), Barham (2003), and Demossier (2011) and others demonstrates how *terroir* within the cultural and economic sphere is never just simply a celebration of place, but an effective strategy serving ends that have nothing to do with the supposed grounds of *terroir* in itself: “The discourse on *terroir* has over the years become omnipresent, but the politics of *terroir* refers also to a process in which a wide range of actors have become involved in the social construction of the present, which, in turn, provides a platform for self-identification...” (Demossier 2011, p. 687).⁴ Heather Paxson’s arguments (Paxson 2010) regarding the “reverse engineering of *terroir*” by local, artisanal producers in the United States is perhaps the most revealing analysis of the process through which place is constructed and deployed not as a reflection of an inherited tradition or an intrinsic authenticity, but as an instrumental relation between food and place that asserts political, social, aesthetic and/or economic ideals.

These analyses – in their diversity, but more importantly, in their ability to exploit the term’s semantic ambiguity – suggest that a crisis of representation occurs when *terroir* articulates a set of practices, a way of life, and a relationship with the natural world that asserts its identity within a market. The attempt to represent a product’s unique value and identity brings the concept’s critical function to light – here allowing the concept of *terroir* to articulate the tension between taste and place in varying degrees, exposing and even undermining any exclusive claim to description or to construction. The crisis of representation is therefore more than just a by-product of *terroir*’s seeming untranslatability: beyond the limits of a cultural and linguistic particularity, *terroir* points to a radical incommensurability that centers upon the taste of place (once again taken in the double sense of the genitive). It is the taste that belongs to the inimitable particularities of a locale, which includes those tasters who inhabit the space and cultivate its products; but, it is also the taste (the physiological experience, and the cultural norms) that always remains removed from what is being tasted, the common measure, however subjective, that is the condition of possibility for the experience of *terroir* as a taste of place. These two orientations – one that represents the more objective situatedness of place, and the other that navigates the more subjective vicissitudes of taste – comprise a tension inherent in *terroir* examined by some of the more recent scholarship on the topic. This tension is exposed, but not necessarily resolved, through an analysis of its productive and potentially problematic aspects. But if there is some degree of promise in the use of *terroir* as a critical concept, it rests in its ability to reveal the possibility for an anti-foundational and pluralistic representation of the taste of place that resists essentialist claims and

⁴ See also (Bohmrich 1996, p. 33)

its dissolution into merely relative value.

3 Overcoming “Soil Addiction”

While Immanuel Kant is considered the father of critical philosophy, it is Friedrich Nietzsche who provides the conceptual tools for a more radical overturning of foundations. In order to decouple *terroir* from the idea of a stable foundation it is then perhaps appropriate that we follow the path of a philosopher who was obsessed with the effects of foods on the mind and body, and who considered thinking a kind of “digestion.”⁵ Nietzsche’s infamous proclamation that “God is dead!” heralds a way of thinking (if not an age) where the idea of one singular and absolute origin, principle, or ground has run its course, and thus, the world appears only as a contest among competing claims to origin. The only “truth” it provides is a validation of the idea that an absolute or dogmatic truth claim reveals whose narrative has been victorious, whose “will to power” prescribes the normative worldview. More than a century later, Nietzsche’s ideas resonate in our current age of culture wars, fake news, and the reduction of social life to pure politics. But Nietzsche’s aim is not simply to devalue all value and leave us adrift in a world of relative truth, or to provide an accurate description of what would now call a postmodern condition; for Nietzsche, the “revaluation of all values”⁶ illustrates a process necessary to life, signaling not only the contingency of values and changing worldviews throughout history, but also an existence that actively promotes that process. If he provides an ethics, of sorts, it represents a reversal of traditional philosophical method: it supplants foundations and prioritizes the vitality of experience, rejecting dogmatic claims to origin and seeking in the concrete and specific experiences of human life practices that embrace and promote difference – a pluralism that does not slip into mere relativism, but understands those truths within the contingent contexts that produce them.

For Nietzsche, our notions of geographical place are not immune from this revaluation. In the chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled “Peoples and Fatherlands,” Nietzsche (2006) undertakes a geographical (and not just genealogical) critique of morality by coining the term “soil addiction” to describe the dogmatic and over-zealous nationalism he sees developing in Europe of the 19th Century. His analysis is not, however, a flat out critique of fervent nationalism in favor of an Enlightenment ideal of universal cosmopolitanism (Morgan 2006, pp. 458–459).

⁵ I refer the reader to my study of Nietzsche’s use of gastronomical language in his philosophy: (Valgenti 2014).

⁶ Nietzsche undertakes a “genealogy” of the history of moral concepts in order to expose their historical contingency and transformation over time. Cf. (Nietzsche 1998).

His goal is rather to find a way to capture the movement, vitality, and force of national cultures in the active process of growth, ones that strike a balance between the rich soil of tradition and the creative direction of open possibility and self-actualization. Nietzsche critiques the German people's lack of vitality, for while they "are from the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow, – *they still have no today*" (Nietzsche 2006, p. 132). In other terms, caught between the fixed traditions of the past and the empty conceptual abstractions of possible futures, the Germans represent a static existence incapable of *living* in the fluid and vital sense so commonly emphasized in Nietzsche's work. Yet, even nations with a more vibrant sense of identity (Nietzsche cites France as an example) fall victim to his more general critique of nations as immature constructs: "what gets called a 'nation' in Europe today (and is really more a *res facta* than *nata* – every once in a while a *res ficta et picta* will look exactly the same –) is, in any case, something young, easily changed, and in a state of becoming ..." (p. 141) Any connection between nation, people, and place is at best a compelling fiction (*res facta*) that is made by humans rather than an integral union born spontaneously and unavoidably from the soil. Nietzsche's point is not, however, that we should hope for a nation born from the soil, but rather that we should question and view with suspicion any such claims about an essential connection to place.

Nietzsche's depiction of the "good European" as a "moderate" and "free - spirited" vanguard of a new age therefore relies neither on essentialist claims to nationalistic origin, nor to an empty universal idea of world citizens without distinct identity – as each side represents a reductive position analogous to the tension at the heart of *terroir*: one direction would create a hyper-Europeanism that pits a unified Europe against other nations and continents, or, more broadly, reasserts the hegemonic norms of the West as "natural" or necessary; and the other direction would merely exchange the nation for ever-tinier regional identities – such as the move to *climats* in Burgundy (Whalen 2010) or micro-*terroirs*. In response to these logical extremes, Nietzsche's moderate position suggests that we consider any essentialist claim of *terroir* as, at best, a contingent claim to identity – an organizing principle that is not an absolute ground, or the mark of authenticity, but instead a means of representing the emergence of a new identity and the productive tension between geographical description and cultural construction.

Recent studies of *terroir* – particularly in a global context – develop this critical trajectory to reveal how it both represents and problematizes the inherent tension in the idea of the taste of place. Tamara Whited's work on cheese in the French Pyrenees expresses the general spirit of this critical orientation, which strives to "reclaim the materiality of *terroir* without essentializing it and to demonstrate the causal role of food choices in its evolution" (Whited 2018, p. 826). The contingency

of these locales is thus the driver, with place denoting not just a physical space, but “a way of thinking about the contingent ways in which spaces are imagined and acted upon and how they constrain and condition the choices for their users” (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2013, p. 65). This occurs in several ways, but primarily in *terroir*’s placement as a mediator between the local and the global. Within the original context of French winemaking, Marion Fourcade demonstrates that *terroir* is never simply a representation of the soil or place, but “the geographic entrenchment” or active attribution of value to a territory by actors and processes that are “deeply historical, as well as economic and sociological” (Fourcade 2012, p. 534). Thus, diverse and competing practices, such as the fixed boundaries in Burgundy and the moveable boundaries of Bordeaux (Fourcade 2012, p. 531; Daynes 2013, pp. 24–25) problematize the very notion of *terroir* as a singular descriptor.

Some studies of *terroir* also reveal how differences between Old and New World *terroir* reject any notion of a singular definition for the concept. As Demossier and others have pointed out, the conceptual deployment of *terroir* for economic, political, and social advantage is nothing new, and the emergence of New World *terroir* merely brings these grounds to light for open examination and shows them in their fluid, rather than static, form. This revelation occurs most markedly in the ways that *terroir* has been marketed to American consumers. Rather than represent the features of a cultic mysticism of place, they expose how the tension between “...the local and the global feed upon and reinforce each other rather than being mutually exclusive, and the production of locality relies on imagination mediated by local agency, but articulated differently by individuals depending on their social positioning at local and global levels” (Demossier 2011, p. 287). Robert Ulin works in a similar vein, arguing that *terroir*’s construction – rather than reflection or idealization – of place “offers a partial but nonetheless important corrective to the ubiquity of separating commodities totally from the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption” (Ulin 2013, pp. 67–68). Some degree of grounding (however contingent) is crucial, as the promotion of local provenance contributes to “a more general process that allows us to challenge mass-produced commodities divorced from the social and historical conditions of their production” (Ulin 2013, p. 82). The grounding leverages the “taste of place” in the objective sense of the genitive, positioning a product through the force of its unique point of origin.

This practice both reveals and participates in the tension between Old and New World versions of *terroir*: those who wish to identify and protect *terroir* call for the preservation and identification of a rich, pluralistic tradition of gastronomic particularity and diversity; yet, this diversity often serves (in the worst possible way) the ends of potent essentialisms: the protection of regional and

national identity (Old World *terroir*) on the one hand, and on the other, the infinite exchangeability of commodities in a free market economy (New World *terroir*) – what Fourcade describes as a persistent tension between “a liberal political logic rooted in democratic rights, inventiveness, and self-promotion” and a “corporatist-conservative logic rooted in privilege, experience, and tradition” (Fourcade 2012, p. 539). And while these two sides are often presented as alternatives, both strategies rely on a problematic understanding of a given product’s origin and uniqueness as natural, authentic, and inimitable. Both logics of *terroir*, in response to a crisis of representation brought about by the pressures of a global economy, rely upon and exploit a (seemingly) essential connection between food and place while thriving upon a conceptual malleability that allows *terroir* to be deployed in ever-changing social, political, and economic dynamics.

4 Deterritorializing Taste

If we follow Nietzsche’s lead, the distinctiveness of a *terroir* can no longer be found in its essential connection to a given locality. How then does one avoid a notion of the “taste of place” that provides little more than a relative measure, namely, a representation of *terroir* that has no remarkable quality other than its distinction from other tastes. The crisis of representation here emerges from the subjective sense of the genitive where it risks a universal, and thus empty, exchangeability that concedes *terroir* to the whims of market economies. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offer some insight into a more substantial measure through their notion of “geophilosophy” and the use of concepts that are “syntagmatic” – connective and relational – rather than merely “paradigmatic” or merely reflective of a general way of being. For the purposes of this investigation, one might consider the exclusivity of the *connection* between taste and place captured in the concept of *terroir* as “syntagmatic” one, that is, a living and irreducible interpretation (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 91).⁷ The authors argue that “Geography is not confined to providing historical form with a substance and variable places. It is not merely physical and human but mental, like the landscape. Geography wrests history from the cult of necessity in order to stress the irreducibility of contingency” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 96). This irreducibility of contingent places, coupled with the fluidity of its connections to cultural forms, gives a more distinct shape to Nietzsche’s anti-foundationalism and critique of nationalism and

⁷ They argue, moreover, that the creation of a concept means “to connect internal, inseparable components to the point of closure or saturation so that we can no longer add or withdraw a component without changing the nature of the concept...” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 91).

fatherlandishness. Beyond the simple critique of claims about an essential origin or to a necessary connection between taste and place, the relation between place and taste remains fluid and open because geography is considered to be an active participant in the process.

Once freed from necessity, the challenge is to capture and articulate this contingent and evolving movement. What for Nietzsche was the living, creative force and energy of the present moment, Deleuze and Guattari fashion as a movement and reorganization of relations through the idea of a territory: a *milieu* or set of social relations that are formed and re-formed through acts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. As they state in *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), “thinking, or the construction of concepts, takes place in the relationship of territory and earth,” two zones of indiscernibility that are often understood as unchanging geographical markers of particularity and totality (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 85), respectively, but that in fact record how we map out relational spaces, orient ourselves within a terrain, and establish tentative grounds for our own identities. The movement between these zones occurs in two directions: *deterritorialization* moves from a specific territory or set of relations to the more general totality of earth, signaling acts that undo and reformulate those relations (such as a connection between a particular people and the place they inhabit); *reterritorialization* moves from earth to territory, re-establishing the connection between certain conceptual forms and a particular territory or place, re-inscribing particularities within the more general totality of lived experience. If we think of these terms in relation to *terroir* as a constructive concept, the former entails a recognition of a founding condition that is not absolute but both conditional and conditioning (a first step already achieved in a more general way with Nietzsche); the latter builds upon and through that contingency, emphasizing the particularity of new forms and relations but always in relation to the ones that preceded them – underscoring a certain contingent process within lived history.

This strategy suggests that *terroir* need not be committed to existing hierarchies or to perpetuating the alienation of the commodity form. In a study of wine-making in Spain, the authors Gonzalez and Dans refer to an example of this type of resistance as “The Spanish Exception” – the rejection of territorial distinctions that allows Spanish wine makers to reflect “new social movements, novel trends in consumer desire, and populist origins” (González and Dans 2018). But the broader trend has been to cultivate and express the unique contributions that place can make to wine and to other food products, in effect, rescuing products from their complete commodification and re-connecting them, in a meaningful way, to place. This is a definite challenge, as the construction of *terroir* often obscures the relationships between a locality and the humans who toil to make it productive. Sarah

Besky's study of the Geographical Indication for Darjeeling Tea illustrates for the "immaterial labor" of building "authenticity" and a sense of the "natural" actively misrepresents the history of the region and the conditions under which the tea is produced (Besky 2014, p. 86) – an obscuring of human labor that, as Besky notes, can also be seen in more traditional *terroirs* (Guy 2010). But localities can also be sites of resistance to the imposition of national identity and the demands of the global consumer (Halvaksz 2013, p. 146); moreover, it would be correct to say that the source of the resistance is "the result of skill and practices" (Halvaksz 2013, p. 149) rather than just the locality itself. And as Szilvia Gyimóthy argues, new Nordic cuisine represents a reinvention of *terroir* that develops an ontology of place by constructing a relation to the external world through the use of narrative and a culinary imaginary that resonates with global market demands (Gyimóthy 2017).

Daniel Monterescu's study of border wines gives us what is perhaps the most detailed account of this strategy of de- and re-territorialization. Through an examination of how *terroir* is defined in politically contested areas and, to a certain extent, how *terroir* is "denaturalized" in politically contested regions and reconstituted through a "territory effect" (Monterescu 2017, p. 128), one sees the possibilities for *terroir* beyond the reification of natural geology or the heartless promotion of a marketable commodity. The active constitution of *terroir* in contested regions provides an opportunity to give voice to traditions and populations often obscured by the commodity itself. Monterescu examines three contested regions (the Tokaj region between Hungary and Slovakia, the Judean Hills/South Mount Hebron in Israel and Palestine, and the cold war buffer zone between Bulgaria and Greece) and in them identifies three strategies for *terroir*-making in contested regions: the territorialization of *terroir*, in which a region is actively divided to draw new political boundaries; the terroirization of territory, through which a border-zone is actively branded; and *terroir* expansion, through which *terroir* is reverse engineered to occupy new zones. These modalities of border configuration reveal that the human element in *terroir*, "ridiculed by Latour as a provincial form of strategic essentialism," is more than custodial or blindly nostalgic: "the *terroir effect* actualizes in practice a yearning for value, meaning, and identity" (Monterescu 2017, p. 137).

In this conceptual schema, one finds a formulation for representation that rejects any claim to an authentic or absolute origin. There is no "territory" in the original sense, but only ever a retroactive constitution of an absent origin as de- and re-territorialization. Any original or authentic notion of territory is illusory and filtered through the contingencies of history, and all attempts to find an original ground or foundation take the form, as I have argued elsewhere, of a *de jure* rather than a *de facto* argument about the right to possess and use such con-

cepts freely and openly as a foundations or grounds.⁸ One cannot merely point to tradition, or possession, as the origin of the rule because every description of place is always already the formation and deployment of place – its de- and re-territorialization through the filters of individual and cultural identities looking to find representation.

Even though the claim to a specific *terroir* rejects the homogenizing tendencies of a global market, it nonetheless partakes in an aspect of its anti-essentialistic logic: by exposing its own groundlessness and engaging in the self-aware process of *terroir* formation, the concept can be activated as a critical principle with significant disruptive potential. *Terroir* is meaningful because, in the end, no one can lay an absolute claim to its boundaries – it undermines all factual claims to possession and counters “the taste of place” with “the place of taste” – an arena for *de jure* arguments about its significance.

5 *Terroir* as a No-Place

Terroir, when removed from its purely descriptive or constructive claims about the value of its products, reveals that it is, in a certain sense, a “no-place” – a utopia that represents the incommensurable tensions between place and taste, material and artisan, geography and identity that continually seek recognition and validation in a global marketplace that threatens to reduce them to commodities whose value is determined by the vicissitudes of supply and demand. It marks a way of life that seeks, and actively constructs, its expression. When *terroir* embraces its contingency and deterritorializes the relation between taste and place, the concept of place is strangely nowhere, but as seems to be the case today, everywhere: it marks a deterritorialization of *terroir* itself, in that it has become a constructive concept, a category for thinking about taste and existing in a locale rather than just the brute fact of a geographical location or ideological framework.

The terror of “*terroirism*” – in its past, present, and future forms – exists when *terroir* is deployed as an undeniable point of origin tied to a physical territory, or as a malleable instrument of ideology, in order to maintain the political and economic status quo. And yet, it is in these expressions of the uniqueness of place, and in the very submission to market valuation and the relative measure of taste, that the critical function of *terroir* emerges: the invocation of *terroir* in the gastronomic marketplace and, more broadly, in the attempt by cultural entities to express their unique identities in the face of indifferent economic and political systems, is a response to an ongoing crisis of representation. For those whose

⁸ Ref. to author's earlier work (Valgenti 2009).

voices are not heard, whose plight is at the mercy of others, or who simply crave aesthetic difference, *terroir* is not a solution, but an expression of a certain hope that power – in all of its forms – is neither simply a fact of nature nor the result of a determined will. We might, in the end, simply refer to *terroir* as a utopian concept – a “no-place” whose narrative, like the many great utopian narratives of our shared traditions, performs a critical function that ultimately asks us to turn our gaze inward and evaluate the grounds that support our actions.

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