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Going underground: banal nationalism and subterranean elements in Argentina's Falklands/Malvinas claim

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Abstract: This paper calls for consideration of underground elements that have been typically overlooked or unseen in debates about the nation and banal nationalism. The materialities and (re)presentation of elements like earth, sand and rock have the capacity to be affective, contentious, to embody intimate memories of conflict and to reinforce national territorial aspirations. These subterranean elements have been 'nationalised', bathymetrically mapped and deployed by Argentina to make claims over territories in the South Atlantic, including the Falklands/Malvinas. Rather than re-examining these technical procedures undertaken by the state and analysing what they mean for the geopolitics of the South Atlantic, this paper explores how the subterranean is manifest in everyday reproductions of nationalism and national memory in Argentina. It presents insights from research undertaken in a range of different environments in Argentina, encompassing museums, veterans' centres and public monuments, to demonstrate how the presence of the elemental in the everyday can reinforce and also disrupt banal (territorial) nationalism. Furthermore it argues for conceptualisation of the elemental as part of a relational network that links matter, national citizenries and territories together. The conclusion posits that the subterranean elements and their (re)presentation are essential to understanding the materialisation of banal nationalism as part of the everyday reproduction and rejection of claims to 'national' territory.

Introduction

In recent years, political geographers interested in nationalism have turned their attention to the seminal account of *Banal Nationalism* by Michael Billig.¹ A slim book with few detailed examples, it is exemplary of how a concept, banal nationalism, can drive debates many years after its original publication. At its heart, lay the claim that nationalisms are reproduced in everyday contexts, in ways that can and do appear

mundane to citizens. Billig offered language and practice as sources of banal forms of nationalist reproduction ranging from simple linguistic constructs such as ‘the nation’ to practices such as a flag hanging from a public or private building or a daily weather report, which in the context of television broadcasting shows maps of the national territory concerned and forthcoming weather predictions. Notions of the underground have been invoked by scholars of nationalism interested in these banal and unremarked upon reminders of the nation. Such expressions of nationalism, reinforced through the ‘mundane contexts, practices and rhythms of everyday life’ have been framed as laying ‘just beneath the surface’ and, for this reason, often go unnoticed.² This paper considers things laying beneath the surface in a rather more literal sense by focusing attention on subterranean elements and their role in (re)productions of nationalism and the making of claims over ‘national’ territory. Elements like earth, sand and rock can be charted and (re)presented through the bathymetric mapping of continental shelves, but they can also be contained, collected and exhibited as emblematic artefacts that, for instance, embody collective and personal memories of conflict.

More broadly, they are illustrative of how the elemental can be ‘nationalised’ to remind the citizenry of territorial and human loss,³ as well as the state’s geopolitical aspirations.⁴ This paper corrects the lack of attention placed on these materials and their materialities in recent debates concerning banal nationalism, showing how the subterranean has the capacity to affect, to be contentious, to embody intimate memories and to reinforce nationalist territorial aspirations. It argues that the citizenry’s affective and everyday engagements with elemental nationalism are important in fomenting ideas about national territory and identity. As Dodds has posited in relation to Australian Antarctic nationalism, these kinds of elements and the ‘stories’ that are embedded within them become significant in the doing of ‘sovereignty labour’.⁵ They can forge connections with/between territories and have the capacity to affect national citizenries, in ways that can engender emotional associations with territories. The affective registers of the elemental encountered in the everyday, then, can work to generate and sustain popular support for territorial claims stated within national constitutions and complex scientific submissions made

by national governments to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Thus, in this paper, I look to explore ‘how nationhood can be activated “from below”, remaining attentive to the agency that humans *and* the elemental (encompassing those elements found underground) can have in affective (re)productions of nationalism.’⁶

Taking inspiration from Squire, my interest is in how banal nationalism is materialised and (re)made through natural elements like rock, earth, sand and the seabed, objects and matter that have seldom been explored in debates about nationalism.⁷ In the context of Argentina and the contested Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas, I show how the geo-politics of the South Atlantic have been essential elements in instilling banal nationalisms related to territory.⁸ I argue that deployments of these elements, and the memories embedded within them related to the 1982 Malvinas War, are key to understanding why territories in the South Atlantic like the Malvinas can become so emotive for national citizenries. Of course, the kinds of engagements with underground elements cited in this paper are not restricted to reproductions of Argentine territorial nationalism. The commemorative practices and performances of citizens of the Falkland Islands and British veterans who return to the battlefields, regularly encompass the planting of memorial plaques and trees (e.g. in the Memorial Wood in the islands’ capital, Stanley), as well as the burying of objects that belonged to soldiers killed in the 1982 war.⁹ Thus, underground elements, and the things embedded therein, can play a significant role in arousing nationalist sentiment and reinforcing geopolitical agendas in different contexts around the world.

The intervention presented here is structured around the things that have punctuated my research in Argentina, from the rock and soil samples stored away in containers by Malvinas war veterans, to the very public display of turf from the Malvinas in museums and monuments.¹⁰ In the case of this paper, banal nationalism is evident in a range of different substances and locations – some touchable, some visible and some not. The material role of soil, rock and earth is essential to assemblages of banal nationalism and the forms, colours and smells of these components matter too. These items might be conceptualised as part of a wider constellation linking objects, citizens,

sites and environments together. Within these assemblages of banal nationalism, there are material (e.g. rock, water, bodies and soil) and expressive (e.g. maps, monuments and commemorations which are expressive of identity politics and serve as affect-like warnings to others) elements that contribute to the materialising of banal nationalism. These assemblages demonstrate the affective contagion of the subterranean, and shift attention to the encounters between these different objects in ways that move beyond Billig's predominantly discursive theorisation of banal nationalism. The paper concludes with a provocation that considers whether the subterranean-elemental nexus can also generate unexpected encounters that disrupt the predominant discourses of territorial nationalism circulated by the state.

Banal nationalism: volume II

Influenced by scholars engaging with feminist and emotional geopolitics¹¹ and those who have directly critiqued Billig's thesis,¹² studies of nationalism have moved beyond narrow, representation-based readings of mundane signifiers of the nation. This has led to a number of interventions that have shown how seemingly banal exemplars of nationalism can be interpreted in quite different ways by people living in the same nation.¹³ Accompanying the research on nationalism that has emphasised human agency,¹⁴ has been an associated sensitivity placed on, 'how materially produced national representations affect different bodies'.¹⁵ Merriman and Jones have examined national mobility infrastructures in Wales showing how they, 'serve as important materials and media through which many people inhabit, traverse and constitute national space'.¹⁶ Particularly important in this recent work on nationalism has been the emphasis placed on 'encounters' between bodies and objects. These studies have typically been drawn to performances and practices where encounters with the national unfold and include activities as banal as driving along a motorway, to more spectacular ceremonies associated with commemoration and large sporting events. Through their ethnographic work in Azerbaijan, Miltz and Schurr are highly attuned to what they term the 'situational configuration of noises, odours, objects and memories', and their associated 'potential to affect, to unify differently marked bodies, and thus to create something new, such as a feeling of national belonging'.¹⁷

In this paper, I turn attention to ‘national subterranean elements’ that are encountered in various ways by war veterans and citizens more widely in Argentina. These everyday encounters with the subterranean can serve to ‘connect certain individuals and communities with geopolitical ideologies’ that are then (re)produced by the state.¹⁸ In short, the national citizenry needs to be convinced of the state’s territorial claims, particularly as most citizens will never come into direct contact with ‘distant’ territories in the South Atlantic and Antarctica. When, for instance, sediment analysis and bathymetric mapping are deployed to determine the outer limits of Argentina’s continental shelf in the South Atlantic, how are these abstract scientific endeavours and geological features ‘nationalised’?¹⁹ Everyday encounters with the underground elements of these contested territories are, I argue, an instrumental aspect of sovereignty labour that reinforce and work alongside discursive framings of geopolitics in the South Atlantic. This subterranean matter can be made visible, it can be touched and talked about in ways that emphasise its sensorial qualities and the memories of geopolitical conflict imbued within it. Thus, the subterranean elements considered here include earth that contain remnants of war and the remains of the soldiers who died in its fighting, and how that can (be made to) connect with broader geopolitical claims. The omission of these elements in debates about banal nationalism is surprising given the frequency with which they are invoked by states to reassert national claims, to memorialise geopolitical conflict and to frame future security discourses.²⁰ For instance, oil exploration in the disputed marine territories of the South Atlantic by companies awarded licences by the Falkland Islands Government, prompted Argentine politicians to reference the implications of the resource dispute (and the associated denial of state income) for future generations of the nation’s citizens. In 2010, Argentina’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Taiana referred to non-renewable natural resources as the ‘patrimony of *el pueblo*’ and that ‘illegal British authorisation [of oil exploration] affects the patrimony of Argentines and their future generations’.²¹

Korowin’s research on Chile’s pavilion at the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville is a useful referent here and a reminder that Argentina is certainly not unique in seeing nationalism in elemental terms.²² The Chilean delegation decided, at great expense,

to transport a block of ice from Antarctica to the 1992 Expo to generate a 'new' national narrative (after the end of military rule in 1990) and reassert territorial claims in Antarctica. Korowin shows how the ice took on multiple, and sometimes conflicting, meanings that were symbolic of the Chilean nation encompassing political transition, national pride, scientific advancement and polar geopolitical ambitions. In relation to debates about resource nationalism, Childs has questioned the use of 'traditionally rigid assumptions made about nationally bordered geographies in the context of a world where resource frontiers are pushed further afield, offshore and out of sight either underground or over the horizon'.²³ Equally, studies of banal nationalism might move beyond the physical boundaries of the nation-state and the objects or 'encounters' that have traditionally received attention to consider the affective capacities of the offshore and the subterranean. Childs interrogates how, 'narratives of resource nationalism render those resources that are unseen, into something politically visible, perceptible and of 'national' concern'.²⁴ How might scholars of nationalism think more broadly about the elements, matter, organisms and geographical features that can be fundamental in reminding citizens of what constitutes the nation, its territorial limits and natural resource reserves?²⁵ Billig's original thesis encouraged those interested in nationalism to incorporate the unremarked, imperceptible flaggings of the nation that had been previously neglected from academic inquiry.²⁶ This paper extends this call to considerations of how underground/unseen national elements can connect with the overground/seen expressions of nationalism to generate certain affective registers.

And yet, marginalisation of the elemental in debates about nationalism is perhaps understandable given that they are, for the most part, unseen in the banal reproduction of the nation. Instead, they rely on particular assemblages of bodies, objects and performances that work to 'nationalise' and visualise the elemental to the nation's citizenry in ways that can be affective and, sometimes, contentious.²⁷ So, for instance, the use of creative, artistic, technical and scientific mapping by Argentina in the disputed waters of the South Atlantic, has served to remind their audience(s) of national territorial connections (with islands in the South Atlantic and Antarctica)²⁸ and boundaries, resource riches that lie under the seabed and nationally significant

sites of memory that are grounded on the seabed (e.g. the Argentine Navy light cruiser, the *ARA General Belgrano*).²⁹ Materialising banal nationalism and drawing attention to encounters with the material can help identify, 'the agency and force of things in nationalist arguments, nation-formation and national identities'.³⁰ This paper focuses on the intersections between bodies, the elemental and their secondary representation, in order to think through 'the corporeal work those objects and practices do to create a [national] community'.³¹

Interventions from political geographers who have developed volumetric theorisations of territory can be especially useful in these efforts to connect the subterranean elemental with debates about nationalism.³² Such conceptualisations of territory move beyond its framing as a superficial extension across a landscape by considering its three-dimensional nature, prompting deeper examination of the things that lie underneath, within, on and/or above the topographical surface. Indeed, as Childs points out, this way of thinking about territory has seen 'states pronounce newly discovered resource wealth in a rhetoric of volumetry: 'barrels of oil' are produced; calculations of 'cubic feet' are used as the basis for revenue sharing negotiations'.³³ Such interrogations of volumetric territory, however, can leave out or overlook human experience related to how these volumes are inhabited, as Adey has cautioned.³⁴ In a cogent response to Elden's account of vertical geopolitics, Adey writes of his desire to know 'more about how these volumes are lived-in or not, what they feel like and how they might be reclaimed or made anew'.³⁵ Squire, while not directly engaging debates about banal nationalism, has similarly shown the value of re-materialising our understandings of geopolitics through a 'deeper engagement with the things that 'fill' the volume'.³⁶ As she persuasively suggests through her research on the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar, elements 'are not merely background substances in the contested territorial volume but, at least in some instances are agential in both challenges to and assertions of Gibraltarian sovereignty'.³⁷ These elements can intersect and come into contact with the human body encouraging broader theorisation of the ways that 'the elemental can permeate geopolitical discourse and lived experience at multiple scales'.³⁸

My explicit focus in this paper is the matter that lies 'below the surface' and how it can inform understandings of Argentine territorial nationalism at intersecting geographical scales.³⁹ How might an investigation of the materialities of subterranean matter assist in explaining the persistent 'emotional' connection that Argentina and its citizenry are said to have with the Malvinas?⁴⁰ Weizman's work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is useful here, as he identifies the significance of the underground to the ongoing conflict and, in particular, the archaeological practices that have looked to reinforce historical claims to territory.⁴¹ He shows how for Israel, 'subterranean strata was...perceived as a parallel geography akin to a national monument, producing an alibi for new colonization that could be argued as a return to sacred patrimony'.⁴² Leshem has extended this work on the geopolitical sensitivities of unearthing and excavating in Jerusalem through his investigation of, 'the role of cemeteries in the struggle over vertical superiority, or more precisely, the political contest over subterranean space'.⁴³ As he points out, despite its invisibility, the subterranean strata constitutive of cemeteries is significant geopolitical matter that can establish political-historical claims. It is also illustrative of how the afterlives and memories of (subterranean) geopolitics can be 'folded into the textures of an everyday urban fabric' in ways that have the capacity to move and affect citizens individually and collectively.⁴⁴ In his book *Suffering for territory* the anthropologist Donald Moore explores how soil can reveal traces of 'historically sedimented processes' linked to territorial struggles during colonial rule that can then inform claims to postcolonial land rights in Zimbabwe.⁴⁵ Gordillo's (2004, p. 15; Gordillo, 2014) research in the Chaco region of Argentina develops the idea of material and matter having an afterlife by showing how places, 'are marked by the spatial sediment left on them by past geographies and...how these marks foster memories of landscape transformations'.⁴⁶ This body of work is a reminder of the potent (geo)political memories that can be imbued in elements found on the surface and underground and how they can be mobilised to remember, reclaim and animate collective (national) identification and/or resistance.

Conceptualisations of volumetric territory and the afterlives of subterranean elements can be usefully applied to reflect on the things that 'fill' national territory

and their role in the everyday reproduction of the nation. The sections that follow are, nevertheless, attentive to the interconnections and interplay between the three- and two-dimensional framings of national territory. Two-dimensional maps of territory continue to play an important role in how nations go about representing offshore, out of sight places to the national populace. These 'make visible' distance/proximity, continental connection and the elemental in ways that can reinforce national territorial claims (whilst challenging the claims of other states), propagate resource nationalism⁴⁷ and serve as a reminder of lives lost in past geopolitical conflicts. Indeed, this work also opens up possibilities to think further about the role of the elemental in the memorialisation of geopolitical conflict. Much of the literature on memory from political geographers has been drawn to the commemoration of national blood on paper (through, for example, text books),⁴⁸ in stone⁴⁹ and through performances such as commemorative parades and ceremonies.⁵⁰ But how, we might ask, can memory affectively register through things like sand, rock, earth, water and the seabed in conjunction with these kinds of objects, practices and performances?

Returning veterans and the geo-politics of the elemental

Since embarking on research exploring the geopolitics of the Malvinas in Argentina, the sense of forced estrangement, of being so close and yet so far, from what is perceived as national sovereign territory, has pervaded my research encounters with politicians, teachers, veterans and Argentine citizens more broadly. And yet, at the same time, the matter that constitutes the territory of the islands has never been very far away in a material sense. The earth, stone and turf of the islands have been dug up, transported and privately stored, exhibited in personal displays and public museums, as well as embedded in memorials commemorating the 649 Argentines killed in the 1982 war. In March 2016, Pope Francis (from Argentina) received Argentina's President Mauricio Macri and the provincial governor of Tierra del Fuego, who presented their host with soil and pebbles brought from the Malvinas (the Malvinas and other South Atlantic islands are considered part of Tierra del Fuego according to the Argentine Constitution and so the gift carried considerable geopolitical significance).⁵¹ Veterans from Argentina have also repeated similar gestures through the giving of elemental matter from the Malvinas to Pope Francis. In

this way, the subterranean elements have become part of what Billig might see as the 'ideological habits' (albeit not necessarily always state-sponsored), that facilitate the reproduction of the nation and, more specifically, its territorial extent in the South Atlantic.⁵²

These international, high-profile and public exchanges of elements are clearly one way that sovereignty labour is enacted by Argentine politicians and citizens. However, for many people in Argentina, the assemblage of veterans' bodies and the elemental goes further and is evocative of the experiences and memories of young men who went to fight in the 1982 war. Veterans of the Malvinas War regularly visit schools throughout Argentina to present their personal, experientially-rich accounts to young people and for land-based soldiers the elements (in this case, the elements alludes to the harsh climatic conditions faced by the men, as well as their embedded, dug-in positions) are frequently referenced. More popularly, films (e.g. *Iluminados por el fuego*)⁵³ and novels (e.g. *Los pichiciegos*)⁵⁴ represent the challenging conditions faced by Argentine conscripts dug into the muddy, damp landscapes of the islands and these are regularly engaged by young people in Argentine classrooms. For veterans of the 1982 Malvinas War, the materialities of elements like earth and turf take on particularly heightened sensory significance, evoking memories of the experiences lived within the territorial volume of the islands:⁵⁵

Esteban: I have mementos, framed photos of the position where we were [in the islands]. This year the teacher of a school in Santa Fe travelled to the Malvinas and brought me soil and turf from there. He gave me these as a gift in a bottle, really beautiful no? A little bottle...

Matt: What does the turf mean to you? Because it's something that I see a lot, for example, in the monuments...

Esteban: I touched it. There aren't many who had the fortune to be able to set foot on the Malvinas. There are many who didn't arrive, here [in the veterans centre] there are many who didn't arrive in the Malvinas. They saw it from outside and also there are lots of us who set foot on the Malvinas, those of us who got dirty, those that washed themselves by hand with a little bit of the turf,

this smell, the smell that we could sense, we lived with it. Our shelters were within the soil. The turf helped us...to burn it and to give us some warmth. A little bit of turf is a lot. My son says, 'What's this?' 'This is turf.' 'And what purpose did it serve?' 'This is what we burnt and it offered us warmth, we were able to take off our socks at night and dry them... We smelt it, we smelt it.'

Matt: And does it still have the smell?

Esteban: In the box [of mementos] I can sense the smell... I can sense the smell.

(Extract from an interview with Esteban, 2 August 2016, Santa Fe)

Although beyond the scope of this paper, the experiences, memories and commemorative objects and practices of Malvinas veterans are extremely diverse, shaped by their identity as conscripts or professional members of the army, navy or air force respectively. So, for instance, the affective and sensorial capacities of earth from the Malvinas are quite different for those men who set foot on the islands during the war, and those who did not; those who were professional soldiers and those who were conscripts (explored below). Argentine soldiers (many of them conscripts) who arrived in the Malvinas had these intimate connections with the underground elements precisely because they were tasked with digging positions to watch for, and defend against, British forces (in many cases this was distinctive to the experiences and mobility of British servicemen who famously 'yomped' across the islands to liberate Stanley). These underground spaces and the elements therein became critical to their survival and shelter from the hostile South Atlantic conditions. For Esteban, a paratrooper and professional soldier who was part of the invasion force stationed on the islands, the territorial volume filled with soil and turf were intimately connected to his body and military routines during the war. His body was marked, cleaned and kept warm by it and the smells given off by burning the soil acted as a powerful mnemonic trigger.

Like many Argentine veterans (although by no means all), Esteban did not want to return to the Malvinas while he had to show his passport to enter what he considered to be Argentine territory, and so the soil was given to him as a present by a teacher who visited the islands on a cruise. For those veterans who had made the decision to

avoid returning to the islands while they remained under British administration (as most politicians have done as well, although one notable exception is Julio Cobos, the ex-vice President of Argentina who visited after he had left office) the soil took on an almost sacred quality that embodied intimate personal memories and outstanding geopolitical ‘injustices’ in the South Atlantic. During my research a naval conscript from Santa Fe even stated his desire to have his ashes scattered in the Malvinas by his wife and children, in ways that meant he could return to the islands without having to show his passport to British authorities. For Daniel, an army conscript from Santa Fe, the act of showing a passport in order to return to the islands was not only anathema to his geopolitical belief that they constituted part of Argentine sovereign territory:

Daniel: I would like to return to the Malvinas but...I’m not going to take a passport to go to my land [Daniel used the word *tierra* here which can translate to land and/or soil], to the land where my dead comrades are because for me that would give a very small justification that the Malvinas are under the control of... [Daniel does not finish the sentence but seems to be referring to the UK]. I hope that this life offers me the chance to return to the place where I was [in the islands], if I am able to find the place where I slept, if... to see my comrades who are there, it’s not easy but I have the hope.

(Extract from an interview with Daniel, 16 July 2016, Santa Fe)

In this extract, (imagination of) the materialities of land and soil are connected to the ‘presence’ of Daniel’s comrades killed in the Malvinas during the war. Rather than talking of his hypothetical return as a way of remembering his comrades or to pay his respects, in Daniel’s imaginary these men continue to inhabit the places where they stood guard and fought. Gordillo’s reference to the afterlife of rubble as, ‘textured, affectively charged matter that is intrinsic to all living places’, is particularly instructive here.⁵⁶ Far from seeing the terrain of the islands, and the elements embedded therein, as somehow inert, for Daniel they continue to have affective capacities even if he had decided not to return. Indeed, his principled decision did not seem to be guided by geopolitical arguments alone, but by the affective afterlives embedded within the terrain of the Malvinas.

In the post-war era the islands have become a key site for commemoration with the inauguration of official, state-sanctioned monuments for both the British and Argentine dead throughout the territories,⁵⁷ as well as more informal and semi-permanent memorials.⁵⁸ These 'landscapes of remembrance' encompassing, amongst others,⁵⁹ the Liberation Monument for the British war dead in Port Stanley, the Argentine cemetery in Darwin and memorials scattered across the various battlefields of the war, are critical markers of national identity and belonging in the Falkland Islands and Argentina.⁶⁰ The subterranean and the elemental aspects of these commemorations have been influential in arousing national and geopolitical sensitivities. These have included tensions over the actions of returning Argentine veterans and pertain to the removal of items from the 1982 battlefields (that are often embedded in the ground given the time that has elapsed since the war), as well as the controversial penetration of soil with commemorative plaques that have not been approved by the Falkland Islands Government.⁶¹ Given the geopolitically-contested nature of the islands it is perhaps unsurprising that (the regulation of) commemorative rituals and symbols that implicate, (re)move, pierce, mark and/or disturb the elemental can affect people very differently.⁶² And yet, warming relations between Argentina and the UK have now meant that the remains of 121 unknown Argentine soldiers buried at Darwin cemetery, are set to be exhumed and identified by a Red Cross humanitarian mission.⁶³ Changing diplomatic relations enabled by President Macri's more moderate stance on the Malvinas question have seen underground matter become a source of sombre cooperation, in contrast to the previous twelve years that were characterised by bitter geopolitical dispute.

(Un)expected encounters with the elemental

The variegated interactions of veterans with the underground elements of the Malvinas demonstrate their powerful affective capacities in relation to personal experiences of war, and yet, they also show how they can be geopolitically infused within broader discourses of territorial nationalism. Indeed, subterranean elements from the Malvinas are frequently exhibited in museums and veterans' centres, as well as embedded in public monuments throughout Argentina, serving to remind citizens

that the Malvinas are indubitably *tierra nuestra* or our land.⁶⁴ When asked about what it meant to have a collection of soil and rocks in the entrance lobby of the veterans' centre/museum (Fig. 1) in Santa Fe, Juan Carlos, a naval conscript, responded, 'It means that the land in the Malvinas is ours and its land that the [Argentine] people don't know first-hand' (extract from an interview with Juan Carlos, 11 July 2016, Santa Fe). The elements displayed here reiterate the expected geopolitical arguments in relation to Argentine sovereignty claims, but they also play an important role in enabling citizens to engage with an integral part of Argentine territory that many will never visit. Although this engagement is limited to the visual given that the soil and rocks are encased, its display does something more than, for instance, the simple mapping of 'usurped' territories in the South Atlantic. Their exhibition in this display is, on the one hand, symbolic of the islands' (physical and geopolitical) estrangement from Argentina (i.e. a reminder of the fact that most citizens will not set foot on the soil on display), and yet, on the other, is illustrative of the connection felt by many Argentine citizens to the Malvinas.⁶⁵ Critical here is the display of these underground elements underneath an aerial photograph of the Darwin cemetery in the islands, a highly poignant landscape that was declared a 'national historical site' by the Argentine Congress in 2009.⁶⁶ The juxtaposition of elements and image remind the viewer that Argentine lives were lost in the battle for this territory and, furthermore, that the blood and remains of the dead soldiers are constitutive parts of the soil on display in the museum. The assemblage of objects, then, emphasise 'the links between necrogeographies [such as cemeteries and the elemental material found within] and more explicit geopolitical struggles over sovereignty, borders and territorial possession'.⁶⁷

[Insert Figure 1: Soil and rocks from the Malvinas displayed at the museum run by veterans of the Malvinas in Santa Fe (source: author)]

Geographers have drawn attention to the spatialities and materialities of commemorative monuments 'cast in stone', examining them 'as a source for understanding the emergence and articulation of a nationalist political discourse'.⁶⁸

More recently, their theorisation has extended to the examination of connections between, ‘the material and immaterial, the representational and sensory’ in commemorative settings.⁶⁹ The monuments I have encountered during my research in cities and towns across Argentina encompass elements in ways that have not received significant attention, like the example shown below located in San Carlos Centro (Figs. 2 and 3). What affective work is undertaken by embedding underground elements within these stones of remembrance and how might it intersect with national and geopolitical discourses? During a walking interview that took in commemorative sites related to the Malvinas around his home town, Mario, a naval conscript, explained what was inside the case:

Mario: This is turf from the Malvinas... turf, stones, the daughter of a fallen soldier from here went [to the islands] and brought it... she brought it in a box to put here.

(Extract from an interview with Mario, 19 July 2016, San Carlos Centro)

The plaque on the monument underneath the turf reads, ‘In honour of the heroes of the Malvinas who, with courage and patriotism, defended our homeland, today we deposit this *‘tierra malvinense’*. The elemental is placed here as a very public reminder (the monument is situated at the main entrance to the town) of the ‘sacrifice’ made by many young men (several of whom were from San Carlos Centro) in the attempt to ‘reclaim’ Argentine sovereignty over the Malvinas. Overlooking the case and plaque is a statue of a dead or badly wounded soldier resting on the lap of a woman, evoking the figure of *la madre patria*, a protective and strong mother who suffers for her (national) offspring. This kind of assemblage of underground elements, words and stone figures, can, I argue, help to understand the reason why the Malvinas are such an emotive and significant part of the Argentine national psyche. The deployment of the elemental, alongside memorialisation of the war dead, is one of the myriad ways that Argentine citizens are affectively reminded of territorial nationalism in their everyday geographies. Its display also serves to produce a sense of territorial connection between the ‘interior’ provinces of Argentina, such as Santa Fe, and the rather more distant territories in the South Atlantic, that also constitute the

'homeland'. Not insignificant here, is the fact that many Argentine soldiers, and especially conscripts, came from towns and cities of provinces in Argentina's interior, giving such commemorative spaces added poignancy.

[Insert Figures 2 and 3: The Malvinas monument in San Carlos Centro, Santa Fe Province (source: author)]

The kinds of public deployments of subterranean elements described here are in some ways 'expected' in that they connect with dominant geopolitical discourses circulated by veterans and the Argentine state. But, in this final section I'd like to suggest that the subterranean-elemental nexus might not always be so neatly 'nationalised' in ways that reproduce the state's territorial claims. These materials can also generate unexpected encounters, (re)actions and forms of commemoration. The debate about the identification of soldier's remains at the Darwin cemetery is illustrative of the potentially contentious nature of subterranean matter. While most families have signed a document asking for the identification process to be carried out, Dala Abd, the mother of one dead Argentine soldier stated, 'They are resting and for me it seems inopportune to bring up all this now after 35 years. Both for them, who are buried there, and for us, the parents, the brothers and sisters who are still bearing the burden of this great pain.'⁷⁰ The Red Cross identification mission, facilitated by diplomatic engagement between Argentina and the UK, has not received the full support of all families of missing soldiers then. Those expressing reservations about the exhumation of the remains of loved ones at Darwin highlight the sensitivity and contestation connected to (inter-)nationally sponsored attempts to disturb these kinds of necrogeographies. There are also broader concerns about how this unearthing might be used to disturb the longstanding sovereignty claims of Argentina over the Malvinas if, for example, the remains were moved to Argentina's mainland permanently (even if the Red Cross have stated that the remains will be reburied in new coffins at Darwin).⁷¹ There is, then, huge geo-political significance associated with the excavation, analysis, mobility and siting of subterranean elements, something that states and families of dead soldiers are highly attentive to.

Veterans also had diverse intimate encounters with underground elements that could challenge and, in rare instances, entirely contradict territorial nationalism propagated by the state. My field diary reflects on a visit to Marcelo's house, an army conscript:

Marcelo begins to shows me his 'mini museum' that exhibits things he's collected and brought back from his various trips to the Malvinas. 'I've returned twice and I've brought things each time, mementos which were still there, yes, I have a lot of things in my house, reminders.' I tentatively enter what seems to be an extremely personal space but Marcelo dispels my anxieties and ushers me closer. I look more intently at the various shelves and spot glass containers that have earth, sand and rocks inside. Marcelo explains that when he returned to the islands in 2009 he collected earth from Mount Longdon, as well as sand from the beaches nearby Stanley. Other muddied and ageing objects collected from the battlefields are carefully arranged on the shelves. 'These things have incredible personal value that I want to show those who are most important in my life...eventually they will be passed on to my children.'

(Field notes, 27 March 2012, La Plata)

Initially, then, this extract appears to echo the kinds of relations veterans had with the elemental described elsewhere in this paper. For Marcelo, however, this was a space of personal commemoration where he could remember and display things related to the Malvinas War without the politicisation or interference of the state. Marcelo was particularly disillusioned with the ways that he thought commemoration of the war and those who took part were being 'used' by the Argentine government (and some veterans' associations) and decided, as a consequence, to create his own space(s) of memory (that also included a monument he designed and inaugurated in his local neighbourhood). Having visited the islands several times after the war he was adamant the islands belonged to the Falkland Islanders (and not the UK) and dispelled Argentina's sovereignty claim (although this view may have been influenced by Marcelo's dislike of the Kirchner governments that governed from 2003-2015). The exhibiting of subterranean elements here was focused on remembering very personal

experiences related to 1982 in ways that conflicted with dominant tropes of Argentine territorial nationalism. Although unusual in the context of my research, it serves as a reminder that subterranean elements should not be accorded undue stability. These elements do not inevitably reinforce national territorial claims, even if they are often deployed and displayed with such intentions. Indeed, for Argentine conscripts who suffered human rights abuses at the hands of the military *junta* during the 1982 Malvinas War, these subterranean elements may have very different affective properties that complicate the normative discourses of Argentine territorial nationalism.⁷²

Conclusions

This paper has underlined how the materiality of subterranean elements, and their exhibition in a range of different spaces, can affectively embody ‘sacrifice’ and suffering for national territory, in ways that other state-sponsored activities and declarations cannot (e.g. Argentina’s CLCS submission and the assertion of its territorial rights in the National Constitution).⁷³ At the same time, the kinds of affective, everyday encounters with the elemental discussed here can (but may not) intersect with, and reinforce, the scientific labour undertaken by the state to reaffirm territorial sovereignty. Many veterans of the Malvinas War had intimate connections with sand, soil and rocks from the islands that varied depending on their individual service histories and (geo)politically and/or personally informed decisions about whether to return to the 1982 battlefields. For some, the sensorial qualities of the elemental brought back powerful memories of being embedded in the dirt of the islands during the war, while for others the soil had an afterlife that was evocative of comrades they had served alongside. The experiences of Malvinas veterans (and especially army conscripts) in positions dug into the landscape of the islands, and retold through films, novels, classroom presentations and museum exhibitions, provide broader popular representations of these personal and national connections to the elemental in Argentina. The public display of soil and rocks from the Malvinas within museum cabinets and monuments dedicated to the war dead, are a reminder that the blood and remains of Argentine soldiers are part of the elemental make-up of the islands. Very often, the elemental is part of a broader assemblage of objects

and representations that reinforce affective connections to national territory that are encountered through things like commemorative monuments, maps, plaques, photographs of the Argentine cemetery on the islands and museum exhibitions.

More broadly, the material and affective properties of subterranean elements have been largely overlooked (or simply unseen) in debates about banal nationalism. Although this paper has focused on the case of Argentina, it is important that underground elements and their role in sustaining banal (territorial) nationalism are not seen as peripheral, or occurring elsewhere, as Billig warned in his original thesis. Margaret Thatcher's controversial decision to sink the *Belgrano* in the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war, is a cogent reminder of how objects that are forced underground (or underwater and resting upon the seabed in this case), can reinforce British nationalistic fervour and associated geopolitical agendas. The research presented in this paper, then, calls for more sustained scholarly interest to be focused on underground elements, in order to highlight the various ways they can be nationalised, memorialised, made visible and mapped for different reasons, geopolitical or otherwise. It also cautions against deterministic or stable framings of subterranean elements, even if commemorative spaces of the nation encourage simplified and uniform readings that reinforce specific territorial nationalisms. The proliferation of offshore geopolitical conflicts throughout the world (e.g. in the Arctic and South China Sea), provides an opportune and important moment to explore how states throughout the world are deploying underground and underwater matter to pursue national and geopolitical interests. These elements need to be considered as part of the everyday repertoire of objects, reminders and rituals that have typically received attention in social science research on banal nationalism. The elemental is part of the relational network that links matter, memory, scientific endeavour, national territories and citizenries together in affective ways that are deserving of greater attention from researchers engaging with nationalism and critical geopolitics.

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Notes

¹ M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage 1995).

² J. E. Fox, ‘The Edges of the Nation: A Research Agenda for Uncovering the Taken-for-granted Foundations of Everyday Nationhood’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 23 (2017) p. 28.

³ C. Escudé, ‘Argentine Territorial Nationalism’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 20 (1988) pp. 139-165.

⁴ R. Squire, ‘Rock, Water, Air and Fire: Foregrounding the Elements in the Gibraltar-Spain Dispute’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (2016) pp. 545-563.

⁵ K. Dodds, ‘Awkward Antarctic Nationalism’: Bodies, Ice Cores and Gateways In and Beyond Australian Antarctic Territory/East Antarctica’, *Polar Record*, 53 (2017) pp. 16-30.

⁶ M. Antonsich, ‘The ‘Everyday’ of Banal Nationalism – Ordinary People’s Views on Italy and Italian’, *Political Geography*, 54 (2016) p. 33.

⁷ Squire (note 4).

⁸ Dodds (note 5).

⁹ M.C. Benwell, ‘Encountering geopolitical pasts in the present: Young people’s everyday engagements with memory in the Falkland Islands’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (2016) pp. 121–133. For instance, an episode of the BBC documentary, ‘An Island Parish: Falklands’ broadcast in December 2015, followed a number of Cub Scouts on a commemorative trek up Mount Tumbledown where they buried a beret of a Scots Guard killed in 1982.

¹⁰ This paper draws on research conducted in various parts of Argentina (Buenos Aires, La Plata, Río Gallegos and Santa Fe) from 2012-2016. The research, most of which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust, explored ‘the making of the geopolitical citizen’ by investigating the ways, and spaces through which, young people learn about and engage the Falklands/Malvinas question. It initially involved teachers, education officials, politicians and young people but it soon became clear that veterans of the Malvinas War play a central role in how young people and Argentine citizens, more broadly, come into contact with the Malvinas question. They participate in school visits and have considerable

visibility in Argentine public life, taking part in national and local parades/events. Consequently, subsequent research visits focused on interviewing and undertaking participant observation with veterans, investigating the practices, spaces and objects through which they presented their memories of the Malvinas War. The most extensive period of research with veterans was carried out in the Malvinas Veterans Centre in Santa Fe in July-August of 2016 when 18 veterans were interviewed. Prior to this 12 Argentine veterans were interviewed in Buenos Aires, La Plata and Río Gallegos from 2012-2015.

¹¹ J. Christian, L. Dowler and D. Cuomo, 'Fear, Feminist Geopolitics and the Hot and Banal', *Political Geography*, 54 (2016) pp. 64-72; R. Pain, Globalised Fear? Towards an Emotional Geopolitics', *Progress in Human Geography*, 33 (2009) pp. 466-486.

¹² M. Skey, 'The National in Everyday Life: a Critical Engagement with Michael Billig's Thesis of Banal Nationalism', *The Sociological Review*, 57 (2009) pp. 331-346.

¹³ e.g. Antonsich (note 6); M.C. Benwell and K. Dodds, 'Argentine territorial nationalism revisited: The Malvinas/Falklands dispute and geographies of everyday nationalism', *Political Geography* 30 (2011) pp. 441-49; R. Jones and P. Merriman, 'Hot, Banal and Everyday Nationalism: Bilingual Road Signs in Wales', *Political Geography*, 28 (2009) pp. 164-173; E. Miltz and C. Schurr, 'Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan', *Political Geography*, 54 (2016) pp. 54-63; A. Paasi, 'Dancing on the Graves: Independence, Hot/Banal Nationalism and the Mobilisation of Memory', *Political Geography*, 54 (2016) pp. 21-31.

¹⁴ Antonsich (note 6).

¹⁵ Miltz and Schurr (note 13) p. 55.

¹⁶ P. Merriman and R. Jones, 'Nations, Materialities and Affects', *Progress in Human Geography*, doi: 10.1177/0309132516649453 p. 13.

¹⁷ Miltz and Schurr (note 13) p. 55.

¹⁸ Dodds (note 5) p. 7.

¹⁹ 'Commission on Limits of Continental Shelf Concludes Fortieth Session'. *The UN*, 28 March 2016, available at <<http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sea2030.doc.htm>>, accessed 13 January 2017.

²⁰ Although see R. Jones and A. Ross, 'National Sustainabilities', *Political Geography*, 51 (2016) pp. 53-62. This paper shows how the quality of soil can be used as a barometer of national health and progress in relation to sustainable development targets in Wales and Scotland.

²¹ 'Malvinas: Argentina pide a Secretario General mediar en disputa por soberanía', *Centro de Noticias ONU* 24 February 2010, available at <<http://www.un.org/spanish/News/story.asp?NewsID=17739#.WH0IxYdXVaQ>> accessed 16 January 2017.

²² E. Korowin, 'Iceberg! Right Ahead!' (Re)discovering Chile at the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville, Spain', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 28 (2010) pp. 48-63.

²³ J. Childs, 'Geography and Resource Nationalism: a Critical Review and Reframing', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 3 (2016) p. 540.

²⁴ *Ibid* p. 543.

²⁵ For example, in the Malvinas Museum in Buenos Aires, the migratory patterns of animals, birds and mammals circulating in the skies, waters and coastal areas of the South Atlantic, have been scientifically charted in ways that are not geopolitically innocent. The maps all emphasise the 'natural' and elementary connections between the Argentine mainland and different territories in the South Atlantic, including the Malvinas. These include the regular underwater migrations of elephant seals between the Malvinas and the *Islas Georgias del Sur* or South Georgia. In particular, it is the natural interdependency (e.g. birds nesting in both the continent and the South Atlantic) and the regularity of movement between the territories that is used to somehow suggest their inherent and collective designation as sovereign Argentine territory. The similarities between the ecosystems of these austral regions and the migratory patterns of many species found therein, are used as evidence of the strength of Argentina's territorial claim.

²⁶ Billig (note 1).

²⁷ J. Dittmer, 'Everyday Diplomacy: UKUSA Intelligence Cooperation and Geopolitical Assemblages', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 105 (2015) pp. 604-619.

²⁸ J. Child, *Miniature messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps* (Durham: Duke University Press 2008).

²⁹ K. Dodds, 'Our Seabed? Argentina, the Falklands and the Wider South Atlantic', *Polar Record*, 52 (2016) pp. 535-540. In early 2017 a small sailing vessel from Argentina navigated the treacherous waters of the South Atlantic to the site of the sinking of the Belgrano. In a poignant tribute, cut short by the difficult conditions, the Argentine crew threw an impregnable box overboard containing letters from the families of those sailors who perished, that would sink to the seabed and rest alongside the projected location of the wreck. 'Arrojarán cartas de familiares en donde se hundió el Crucero General Belgrano', *La Nación*, 27 January 2017, available at <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1979520-arrojaran-cartas-de-familiares-en-donde-se-hundio-el-crucero-general-belgrano>>, accessed 3 March 2017.

³⁰ Merriman and Jones (note 16) p. 3.

³¹ Miltz and Schurr (note 13) p. 61.

³² S. Elden, 'Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power', *Political Geography*, 34 (2013) pp. 35-51; P. Steinberg and K. Peters, 'Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33 (2015) pp. 247-264; E. Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso 2007); A. Williams, 'Reconceptualising Spaces of the Air: Performing the Multiple Spatialities of UK Military Airspace', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36 (2011) pp. 253-267.

³³ Childs (note 23) p. 544.

³⁴ P. Adey, 'Securing the Volume/Volumen: Comments on Stuart Elden's Plenary Paper 'Secure the Volume'', *Political Geography*, 34 (2013) pp. 52-54.

³⁵ *Ibid* p. 54.

³⁶ Squire p. 547.

³⁷ *Ibid* p. 549.

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 553.

³⁹ Elden (note 32) p. 40.

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- ⁴⁰ 'Susana Malcorra: 'Malvinas es un tema con gran contenido emocional'', *La Nación*, 4 October 2016, available at <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1943898-susana-malcorra-malvinas-es-un-tema-con-gran-contenido-emocional>>, accessed 6 October 2016.
- ⁴¹ Weizman (note 32).
- ⁴² *Ibid.* p. 39.
- ⁴³ N. Leshem, 'Over Our Dead Bodies': Placing Necropolitical Activism, *Political Geography*, 45 (2015) p. 37.
- ⁴⁴ J. Sidaway, 'Shadows on the Path: Negotiating Geopolitics on an Urban Section of Britain's South West Coast Path', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27 (2009) p. 1092.
- ⁴⁵ D. Moore, *Suffering for Territory: Race, Place and Power in Zimbabwe* (Durham NC: Duke University Press 2005) p. 2.
- ⁴⁶ G. R. Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco* (Durham NC: Duke University Press 2004) p. 15; G. R. Gordillo, *Rubble: the Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham NC: Duke University Press 2014).
- ⁴⁷ Childs (note 23).
- ⁴⁸ E.g. M.C. Benwell, 'Reframing memory in the school classroom: Remembering the Malvinas War', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 48 (2016) pp. 273–300.
- ⁴⁹ E.g. N. Johnson, 'Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13 (1995) pp. 51-65.
- ⁵⁰ E.g. Militz and Schurr (note 13); S. Sumartojo, 'Commemorative Atmospheres: Memorial Sites, Collective Events and the Experience of National Identity', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (2016) pp. 541-553.
- ⁵¹ 'Falklands soil and pebbles were received by the Pope from Argentine governor', *Mercopress*, 2 March 2016, available at <<http://en.mercopress.com/2016/03/02/falklands-soil-and-pebbles-were-received-by-the-pope-from-argentine-governor>>, accessed 13 January 2017.
- ⁵² Billig (note 1) p. 6.
- ⁵³ Directed by Bauer (2005). The English translation was entitled *Blessed by Fire*.
- ⁵⁴ Written by Fogwill (1982). The English translation was entitled *Malvinas Requiem*.
- ⁵⁵ P. Adey p. 52.
- ⁵⁶ Gordillo (2014) (note 46) p. 5.
- ⁵⁷ K. Dodds, 'Enframing the Falklands: Identity, Landscape, and the 1982 South Atlantic War', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16 (1998) pp. 733-756.
- ⁵⁸ J. D. Sidaway and P. Mayell, 'Monumental Geographies: Re-Situating the State', *Cultural Geographies*, 14 (2007) pp. 148-155.
- ⁵⁹ Dodds (note 57) p. 751.
- ⁶⁰ R. Woodward, 'Military Landscapes: Agendas and Approaches for Future Research', *Progress in Human Geography*, 38 (2014) p. 42.
- ⁶¹ A leaflet (printed in Spanish and English) handed to visitors arriving in the Falklands/Malvinas Islands on the weekly flight from the south of Chile in 2013, are illustrative of these commemorative sensitivities. It stated that, 'The Argentine military cemetery at Darwin is maintained by the Argentine Families Commission. Personal plaques or memorials should be of an approved type and may only be left with their prior approval. The removal of items from battlefields

relating to the war of 1982 is not permitted and such items may be confiscated at point of departure from the Falkland Islands.'

⁶² See Leshem (note 43).

⁶³ 'Falklands' identification of Argentine soldiers will be done in strict confidentiality', *Mercopress*, 6 January 2017, available at <<http://en.mercopress.com/2017/01/06/falklands-identification-of-argentine-soldiers-will-be-done-in-strict-confidentiality>>, accessed 13 Jan. 2017.

⁶⁴ An illustrative example of this elemental exhibition can be found in the national Malvinas museum in Buenos Aires. In the cabinets displaying artefacts from the battlefields are a pair of weathered military boots with soil scattered around the soles. Although the visitor is not explicitly told, the implication is that these boots have touched and endured the 74 days of war in the Malvinas, and brought back the remnants of what is considered to be Argentine soil.

⁶⁵ Benwell and Dodds (note 13); Escudé (note 3).

⁶⁶ National law 26.498 of the 4 June 2009 declared the Darwin cemetery *lugar histórico nacional*.

⁶⁷ Leshem (note 43) p. 35.

⁶⁸ N. Johnson, 'Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13 (1995) p. 62).

⁶⁹ Sumartojo (note 50) p. 550.

⁷⁰ 'Fallen Argentine troops' relatives wait for identification', *Mail Online*, 28 February 2017, available at <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-4266252/Fallen-Argentine-troops-relatives-wait-identification.html>>, accessed 28 February 2017.

⁷¹ 'Falklands: Red Cross advance team collects information for forensic team', *MercoPress*, 13 February 2017, available at <<http://en.mercopress.com/2017/02/13/falklands-red-cross-advance-team-collects-information-for-forensic-team>>, accessed 3 March 2017.

⁷² N. Niebieskikwiat, *Lágrimas de Hielo: torturas y violaciones a los derechos humanos en la guerra de Malvinas* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma 2012). The abuses suffered by conscripts in the Malvinas War are now well documented and range from exposure due to the provision of inadequate equipment and clothing, to infamous cases of conscripts being staked to the ground by officers of the military *junta*.

⁷³ Moore (note 45). Since 1994 the Argentine Constitution has declared the Malvinas and neighbouring territories in the south Atlantic and Antarctica integral parts of the nation; categorisations that are unsurprisingly rejected by the Falkland Islands and British governments.