The state of water

Rachael Squire
Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Abstract
This brief response to Riding and Dahlman’s compelling paper offers two reflections that seek to build on their rich analysis of the complex geographies and geopolitics of Liberland. Firstly, it explores how the ‘restless river’ might be further enlivened as an actor within this intriguing context. It then digs further into the non-human complexities of the project by suggesting that the animals of Liberland warrant further attention. In doing so, it seeks to add additional complexity to the challenge of rethinking ‘traditional ways’ of writing about disputed territories and to shed further light on the violence associated with ascriptions of ‘terra nullius’.

Keywords
River, sovereignty, state, territory, water

The squelchy, marshy, flowing, eroding, riverscape, meandering around, and flowing through Liberland is, as Riding and Dahlman (2022) highlight, an intriguing setting through which to take on the challenging of rethinking ‘traditional ways’ of writing about disputed territories. As is demonstrated in the article, the flood prone waterscape speaks to a whole range of geopolitical questions. Sitting ‘barely above the Danube in a floodplain’, the authors articulate how ‘statehood’ was violently imposed onto a space deemed to be an empty and characterless terra nullius. It also explores the ways that such liminal water-scapes speak to wider concerns of bordering, bridging, mobilities and becoming.

The ‘restless river’
In an incredibly rich case study, I was drawn to the character of the ‘restless river’. Whilst the river might be situated within the geopolitical concerns outlined above, it is also clear that the river simply is. It’s capacity to confound the imperatives of Liberland are profound as is its capacity to undermine the idea that the transient space exists as a ‘fantasyland of emptiness’. Far from being empty and characterless, the river flows, floods, disrupts, enables. In many ways the land upon which Liberland sits belongs to the water. Within this framework the river unleashes great potential in the reimagining of territory and the idea of the state in this contested, fluvial context. Perhaps we do not need to wholly remove ourselves from ‘seeing like a state’ but rather to think through different states of being and doing (see Lehman, 2013). What would happen, for example, if the river were the protagonist in the story of Liberland? How might we go about reimagining...
the state, sovereignty and territory through and with the river?

As the paper highlights, the geographical imagination is always a view from somewhere and this somewhere is, more often than not, situated on land. For Liberland libertarians, this imagination is situated at the intersection of complex histories and cultural narratives that work together to produce Gornja Siga as a ‘blank space’ upon which the right of property can be extended. As a reviewer in Jackman et al.’s. (2020) paper highlighted, reorienting the geographical imagination to the non-human has great potential in deconstructing understandings of territory. This reviewer asked the authors to consider what would happen if analysis of territory began with birdsong rather than human-centric activities and practices. A similar logic courses through this case study and other contexts seeking to grapple with the non-human in a world undergoing rapid change and facing unprecedented challenges. We might, for example, turn to the increasing range of examples whereby rivers and other natural systems have been granted legal personhood. As Kothari and Bajpai (2017) highlights, there are a number of examples that could be drawn upon here, including the Rivers Ganga and Yamuna in India that were granted rights as a juristic/legal person/living entity in 2017. ‘A week earlier’ New Zealand passed the Te Awa Tupua Bill which grants the ‘Whanganui river and ecosystem legal personality and standing in its own right, guaranteeing its health and well being’ (Kothari and Bajpai, 2017: 103). Whilst these contexts are radically different from that of Liberland, and each was a result of specific geographical contexts and place bound considerations (Kinkaid, 2019), they raise some important questions.

Firstly, whilst such examples necessarily remain mediated through the human imagination and human legal infrastructures, they do offer an opportunity to radically re-orientate the geographical imagination in ways that Riding and Dahlman speak to. For Kothari and Bajpai (2017: 104), in these examples ‘the river has a right to exist, right to maintain its identity and integrity’. This involves pushing for a healthy relationship that ‘maintains the essential conditions of a river’ – it’s right to flow, flood, its catchment, its relationship with wider ecological systems and non-human entities. Whilst Liberland in its current form may not disrupt these functions as such, a ‘biocentric’ approach (see Clark et al., 2018: 789) and the sensibilities of personhood might help to re-imagine the river and disrupt some of the logics of the project. Far from being a canvas on which to project certain ideological performances and practices, the river emerges as a lively pre-existing entity. To borrow Lehman’s (2013: 497) words about the sea, it ‘is an actor with agency that shapes reality…it acts behaving in a myriad ways that are highly influential and not entirely predictable’. Within this framework Liberland may be an ‘act of world making’ but it is one taking place on a world that already exists, that already has its own flows, rhythms, trickles, and character. Whilst legal personhood initiatives are often framed in environmental terms, they also have the capacity to disrupt the logics that tie western thinking so resolutely to land, and to shed further light on the ‘colonial spatial imaginary’ that co-opts the river for the purposes of state making.

A second intervention along these lines relates to the relationship between Liberland and climate change, and the capacity of the river to erode a period of ‘cartographical stasis’, revealing orders and state boundaries that ‘may not hold’. Cognisant of the sheer power of water to destroy and disrupt with catastrophic consequences, increasing attention is paid to other visions of watery futures. As McEwan et al. (2017: 15) highlight, ‘watery senses of place’ that cultivate awareness of the capacity to live with water, rather than opposition to it are extremely important. Often, such discussions might centre around the natural sciences, catchment planning, watercourse management, and other initiatives designed to ‘manage food risk’ (McEwen et al., 2014: 328), but other imaginaries are also beginning to emerge (see Phillips, 2021). As Dicks (2014) explores, there is a need to re-orientate our relationship with water, to facilitate experience with it rather than against it. Clearly this is not possible in all circumstances, but it raises interesting questions about how Liberland would look if the water surrounding it was taken more
seriously as something other than an inconvenience. Perhaps the boundaries of Liberland do not need to hold when reimagined through water. What if the boundaries of Liberland were imagined *with* water, as boundaries that are fluid, transformational, and ever changing. Perhaps this offers a more liberatory and transformational approach to reimagining territory and to radically uproot ideas around boundaries, borders, and some of the libertarian politics espoused by Liberland.

In a very different context, but one where the state is being challenged and resisted, being like ‘water’ is a pivotal strategy. In Hong Kong, protestors have appropriated Bruce’s Lee’s catchphrase ‘Be water my friend’. For Ming Kow et al. (2020: 6), water ‘provided an imaginary of acting within the leaderless movement’. It enabled the protestors to take the shape of any given context, to flow and run to avoid arrest. The ‘waves’ of protests, known, according to Ting (2020: 362) as the ‘Water Revolution’, denoted a way of resisting the state by embodying the characteristics of running, flowing, constantly moving, and changing water. Whilst clearly a very different example from Liberland, the potential for thinking through, and most importantly, *with* and alongside water to disrupt, undermine, and challenge state norms and systems is made apparent.

**Woodpeckers and waterlilies**

As Riding and Dahlman highlight, it is not just water that runs through and fills this living space, otherwise imagined as empty by Liberland protagonists. The wetland ecosystem is filled with life including woodpeckers, pike, red deer, wild cats, water lilies, and an array of other flora and fauna. This is not to mention the ‘life and space that are hidden’ in and around the ‘voluminous materialities’ of Liberland (Bear, 2017: 332). I was struck by how alive this ‘empty’ space is and think it is an aliveness that warrants further attention. This is particularly important as whilst there has been a rich range of scholarship grappling with animal and non-human life at sea, rivers, and other blue spaces have attracted far less attention but are nonetheless incredibly significant in rethinking territory and the state in this context and others. The roots of this ecosystem, quite literally in some instances, run much deeper than those of Liberland. In the heights, depths, and living volumes of this ecosystem, birds soar, feed, and nest, life runs through the river, trees communicate – rooting themselves in the soil whilst rising into the skies. This is space created and cultivated by non-human actors (see Bear, 2017). As Bear (2017: 29) writes non-human actants – whether plants or animals (or others) have the capacity in ‘their actions and forces’ to shape, disrupt, (de)territorialise), and confound understandings of neatly bounded space and human sovereignty.

I’d be intrigued to understand this aquatic liveliness in the case study of the paper. As it stands, whilst various species peek their head above the page briefly, they are largely silent, rendering them ‘distant strangers’ (Oliver, 2020: 1) and perhaps an opportunity is missed to further decentre the human and rethink the conditions of territory making in this intriguing context. Perhaps there is more to learn here about the ‘conditions of mutual flourishing’ and the role that animals and plant life might play ‘in constructing the world around us – often in unexpected ways’ (Bear, 2017: 30). This is also an important endeavour in the context of Liberland to challenge understandings of terra nullius and to explore the violent effects of the coloniser on the life being colonised and the consequences of a state implanting itself on an indeterminate environment. Clearly, giving voice to such life is a difficult challenge, as is engaging with the ‘actions and forces of non-humans’ (Bear, 2017: 30). Work grappling with the different forms this might take includes exploring ‘animal soundscapes’ (Wang and Chien, 2020), and calls to find the ‘silences’. As Oliver (2020: 2) highlights, to ‘listen for silence is to orientate in and from a position of openness to unknown otherness’. Likewise, to listen to birdsong, to locate interspecies entanglements, and to shift our geographical imaginations away from the human, can do much to deepen understandings of Liberland in different ways, to shift the territorial imaginary, and to further enliven an already incredibly vibrant and lively geopolitical context.
Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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

ORCID iD
Rachael Squire https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9496-2769

References
Bear C (2017) Assembling ocean life: More-than-human entanglements in the blue economy. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7(1): 27–31.

Clark C, Emmanouil N, Page J, et al. (2018) Can you hear the rivers sing: Legal personhood, ontology, and the nitty-gritty of governance. *Ecology LQ* 45: 787.

Dicks H (2014) A phenomenological approach to water in the city: Towards a policy of letting water appear. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(3): 417–432.

Jackman A, Squire R, Bruun J, et al. (2020) Unearthing feminist territories and terrains. *Political Geography* 80: 102180.

Kinkaid E (2019) ‘Rights of nature’ in translation: Assemblage geographies, boundary objects, and trans-local social movements. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44(3): 555–570.

Kothari A and Bajpai S (2017) We are the river, the river is us. *Economic and Political Weekly* 52(37): 103.

Kow YM, Nardi B and Cheng WK (2020) Be water: Technologies in the leaderless Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong. *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–12.

Lehman JS (2013) Relating to the sea: Enlivening the ocean as an actor in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31(3): 485–501.

McEwen L, Garde-Hansen J, Holmes A, et al. (2017) Sustainable flood memories, lay knowledges and the development of community resilience to future flood risk. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42(1): 14–28.

McEwen L, Jones O and Robertson I (2014) ‘A glorious time?’ Some reflections on flooding in the somerset levels. *The Geographical Journal* 180(4): 326–337.

Oliver C (2020) Beyond-human research: Negotiating silence, anger and failure in multispecies worlds. *Emotion, Space and Society* 35: 100686.

Phillips M (2021) *Great Adaptations*. Glasgow: Arkbound Foundation.

Riding J and Dahlman C (2022) Montage space: Borderlands, micronations, terra nullius, and the imperialism of the geographical imagination. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12(2): 278–301.

Ting TY (2020) From ‘be water’ to ‘be fire’: Nascent smart mob and networked protests in Hong Kong. *Social Movement Studies* 19(3): 362–368.

Wang CM and Chien KH (2020) Mapping the subaquatic animals in the aquatocene: Offshore wind power, the materialities of the sea and animal soundscapes. *Political Geography* 83: 102285.