

# *Swirling, splashing, slowing: towards gentle volumes*

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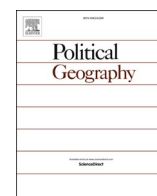
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## Full Length Article

## Swirling, splashing, slowing: Towards gentle volumes

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## ABSTRACT

'Volume' is increasingly mobilised as a conceptual framework through which to engage, embrace and interrogate space in three-rather than two-dimensional terms. This includes attending to heights and depths and acknowledging that social and political lives do not play out across a flat surface. Whilst 'volume' literature is burgeoning, we argue that there is a need to take into account the politics of gentler iterations of the three dimensional. At present, work on volume in political geography is often articulated through the lens of state and military actors, and practices of conflict, control, and violence. Inspired by recent work in geography exploring 'gentleness' as both analytic frameworks and methodological sensibility, this paper complicates existing understandings of volume by foregrounding the gentle. In doing so, it makes two key contributions. First, it brings the analytic and sensibility of gentleness to bear on volume, providing a means to reapproach volume through terms that exceed state-centric accounts. Second, it interrogates the geopolitics of the gentle as it is found, circulates and is comprised in heights and depths, everyday spaces and unexpected practices alike. Through the case studies of Tibetan prayer flags and a rain playground, the article reconsiders the forceful and transformative politics of gentle/gentler volumes.

## 1. Introduction

Geographers, alongside researchers in a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, are increasingly deploying the concept of 'volume' to examine space in three-rather than two-dimensional terms. Within political geography, early interventions foregrounded the ways in which volumes, heights, and depths have been strategically mobilised, managed and mitigated in ways largely underpinned by questions of violence, control and exclusion (Adey, 2010; Bridge, 2013; Campbell, 2019; Childs, 2020; Elden, 2013; Klauser, 2021; Libassi, 2022; Weizman, 2002, 2004). This work has taken place across a range of spatial and geopolitical contexts, from extractive and militarised waters and ice sheets (Bruun, 2020; Childs, 2020; Squire, 2016a), to conflict (legacies) in subterranean tunnels (Slesinger, 2020; Zhang & Crang, 2016), and in aerial realms, through airspace demarcations and aerial warfare (Adey, 2010; Williams, 2011, 2013; Jackman, 2023). As Billé (2017, n.p.) writes, we are 'continually confronted with the textured and voluminous presence' of earthly and airy atmospheres (see Nieuwenhuis, 2015).

The remit of 'volume' within political geography has, however expanded, moving beyond purely state or militarised accounts to

encompass a wider range of voluminous interventions, often drawing on feminist scholarship to articulate how volume is differently sensed, inhabited and experienced, and connected to humanity through emotion and affect. Such approaches, whether they be divers exploring cave system depths (Pérez & Zurita, 2020) or aerocene sculptures floating into the sky (Engelmann, 2021), hint at more gentle, care-full, and even hope-full engagements with volume. Notably, as Finn (2016) and others have highlighted, gentleness and other 'softer' sensibilities are not apolitical. Gentleness can be radical; collective emotions and practices 'do things' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 26) and 'togetherness' can be as geopolitically potent and powerful as states of war and conflict. With this in mind, we argue that political geography as a sub-discipline has somewhat neglected such states, stories and experiences of volume premised on a feminist ethics of gentleness rather than on state power, war, and violence. Our aim here is not to propose another 'extreme' lens through which to understand volume, nor to discount the rich body of work that has informed volumetric scholarship to date, but rather to explore gentleness and gentle volumes as a way to widen and enrich this work.

Following calls for an attentiveness to the complexities of volume (Billé, 2017, n.p.), this position paper calls for an explicit engagement with gentle articulations and practices of volume. In so doing, the paper

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offers two key contributions. First, it brings the analytic and sensibility of gentleness to bear on volume, providing a means to reapproach volume through terms that exceed state-centric accounts. Second, it argues that in thinking through gentleness, the politics associated with territory, control and the state can be subverted, enabling different imaginations and geopolitical futures. After situating our arguments within literatures on volume, feminist geopolitics, and gentleness (see Horton, 2020; Pottinger, 2017, 2020; Saville, 2021), the paper develops these contributions through two case studies, each drawing out different voluminous sensibilities.

The first explores the raising of Tibetan prayer flags as a practice diverting us from established state-centred modes of territorial thinking through their circulation of blessings on the wind. The flags subvert a range of geopolitical practices and considerations typically associated with flags, while providing an opportunity to imagine geopolitical constructs such as borders and territorial volumes otherwise and open us to 'thinking and acting differently' (Katz, 2017, p. 597). This section then points to further avenues of exploration in this area. The second case study turns to a rain playground that acts as a gentle, playful, volumetric response to a rapidly changing climate. We are interested in how gentle volumes might be designed, engendered and architecturally embedded through such places of play and fun. Through attention to play in volume, we assert the need for further attention to thinking and working through gentle practices amidst much wider volumetric violences brought about by the Anthropocene. Again, the sections ends by pointing to areas requiring further attention, particularly centred upon challenging and unsettling norms around able-bodied play, while considering how the complexities of volume can challenge and dismantle the norms of the able-body.

Across these examples we argue that reconsidering volume as gentle and in gentle terms not only enables us to reflect on the very questions, dispositions, and contexts that fill and populate existing work on volume, it also foregrounds a care-full, spiritual and playful understanding of volume spaces, opening up different geopolitical capacities in the process. We conclude this position paper by unpacking further the implications of what it means to think volume gently. In addition to raising questions of both who or what might get to experience or be excluded from gentleness, and how and what it might mean to attune the political to the gentle and vice versa, we point towards some conceptual and methodological next steps as to how this agenda might be expanded by political geographers.

## 2. Towards gentle volumes

The last two decades have seen a 'volumetric turn' within Anglophone social sciences and humanities scholarship. This turn is premised on the notion that space may be better understood in three, rather than two-dimensional terms, with complex heights and depths (Billé, 2017, 2019; Elden, 2013; Steinberg & Peters, 2015; Weizman, 2002, 2004; Jackman & Squire, 2021). Beginning with the notion that we 'all-too-often think of the spaces of geography as areas, not volumes', Elden (2013, p. 35), drawing on the work of Weizman (2002) unpacked how 'thinking about volume might change how we think about the politics of space' itself. Subsequent engagements with volume have both 'challenged the horizontalism inherent in geopolitical discourse' (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 251) and articulated a political geography that is attentive to heights and depths. In doing so 'novel insights into the conduct and practice of geopolitics' have been galvanised as a range of scholars have collectively mobilised volume to 'explore the calculative, material, technical, and atmospheric interventions in, on, through and beneath the earth's surface' (Squire & Dodds (2020, p.4); see also Jackman & Squire, 2021). The 'volumetric turn', then, has explored aerial, subterranean, and watery volumes alike, alongside taking seriously the role of the elemental (earth, air, water, fire) Squire, 2016b.

As Peter Adey (2015, p. 55) wrote in 2015, 'human geography suddenly seems afloat with airs and winds, fogs and aerial fluids, with

volumes, verticals and objects in the air'. This sentiment is echoed in work spanning mountainous heights (Baghel & Nüsser, 2015; Gordillo, 2018), and battles for both airspace (Adey, 2014; Kaplan, 2020; Weizman, 2002, 2007; Williams, 2011) and atmospheric and outer space realms (Smiles, 2020; Squire et al., 2021). Such work has been accompanied by a 'subterranean turn', at once 'drilling down, diving into, travelling through and speculating with underground domains' (Squire & Dodds, 2020, p.4 see also Klinke, 2021; Marston & Himley, 2021). Here scholars have grappled with underground subterranea as 'dense', creating 'convoluted technopolitical problems' (Slesinger, 2020; Zhang & Crang, 2016, p. 431, p.17); as a space that is continually (re)made, (re)imagined and contested (Bridge, 2013; Elden, 2013; Fish & Garrett, 2019; Garrett & Klinke, 2019; Wang, 2021); and as aesthetic (Garrett, 2016; Hawkins, 2020) and elemental (Benwell, 2020). There are, as Squire and Dodds (2020, p.11) assert, 'multiple undergrounds' to understand and explore. Lastly, in recognition that volume both 'exceeds the vertical' and 'allows for dimensions to present themselves as less than vertical' (Bruun, 2020, p. 176), scholars have interrogated watery volumes and depths. Through the lens of three-dimensional oceans, Steinberg and Peters (2015, p. 247) argue that our accounts of volume remain 'too often abstract and dematerialised', calling for further recognition of volumes as 'stubbornly material' and 'undergoing continual reformation' (see also Childs, 2020; Marston & Himley, 2021; Steinberg, 2013; Wang, 2021). After all, the ocean is variously and diversely material, 'not simply liquid' but also 'solid (ice) and air (mist), it generates winds' (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p. 294). In this vein, scholars have turned to water's multiple and shifting states to explore oceans and ice as militarised, 'operable' (Bruun, 2020, p. 168; DeLoughrey, 2019), and 'lively' terrain, with its fissures, 'cracks and giving way' comprising and composing 'icy geopolitics' (Dodds, 2020, pp. 106, 107).

As Benwell (2020, p. 93) argues, a 'rhetoric of volumetry' has emerged (see also Campbell, 2019; Childs, 2016) that foregrounds both 'state and capitalist enterprises' (Pérez & Zurita, 2020, p. 1), and 'battles waged in' and through 'complex volumetric geographies' (Billé, 2017, n. p). Territory and associated territorial strategies of control and enclosure have been key here (Bridge, 2013; Pérez & Zurita, 2020). Narrating volume in such terms can both perpetuate 'vocabularies of enclosure and spatial segmentation' (Campbell, 2019, p. 11), and confine volume to 'a particular kind of state/technocratic gaze that is difficult to escape' (Adey, 2013, p. 53; see also Jackman & Squire, 2021). To counter this, a range of research is reapproaching volume in more-than-state terms. Through the lens of cavers in Venezuela, Cuba and Mexico, Pérez and Zurita (2020, p.8) explore the 'deployment of volumetric strategies' in their passage, attending to the embodied dimensions of 'surveying and mapping underground voids' (see also Zurita, 2019). They consider 'how volumes are lived-in' and 'what they feel like' (Adey, 2013, p. 54; see also Fish & Garrett, 2019). Further, they demonstrate the value of engaging a 'heterogeneity' of 'less state-centred' volumetric projects (Pérez & Zurita, 2020, p. 8).

There is also a rich volume of work in cultural geography and the geohumanities (re)approaching volume in these terms. Hawkins' (2019, 2020) work on the underground, for example, has reorientated scholarship 'within' earthly volumes 'as opposed to' adopting a top down view from above. As Parrott (2021) explores across a range of contexts, including the impressive volume of darkness, embodiment is crucial in this endeavour (see also Parrott & Hawkins, 2021; Zurita, 2019). Moving to aerial volumes, Engelmann's (2021, p.1) work on aerosolar sculptures, ('pneumatic envelopes that float using only the energy of the sun and the convection of air'), explores how such sculptures can be imagined as 'vehicles for questioning the feedbacks between global aeromobility, advanced capitalism, and fossil fuel extraction'. Engelmann (2021, p. 1) argues that the sculptures represent 'fragile temperamental entities that are pushed by winds and levitated by sunlight', prompting and eliciting a range of emotional responses from those watching below. The launches and gentle floating flight of the sculptures

represent a reimagining of airspace whilst also highlighting the profound personal and political relationships between humans and the volumetric atmospheres within which they're enveloped and share.

We need also turn to the work of those calling for the diversification of volumetric knowledges through the inclusion and 'active involvement of Indigenous perspectives' (Smiles, 2020, n.p.; Wang, 2021). Asserting that 'attending to decolonial dimensions can add depth to studies of volume', Bier (2022, p. 672) interrogates volume through the lens of the shipping container, arguing that by bringing volume into conversation with 'Black and Indigenous studies', embodied entanglements between 'efforts to standardize and secure volume' and the politics of 'global injustice' are rendered acutely visible. Further, by 'more fully accounting for the ways that volumes may be produced as striated and uneven spaces' (Bier, 2022, p. 674), such work acts to 'avoid replicating colonial frameworks of occupation and uses of space' (Smiles, 2020, n.p). In this vein, writing in the context of outer space, Smiles (2020, n.p) notes that Indigenous people have long 'engaged with the worlds beyond the Earth, in ways that often stood counter to accepted 'settler' conventions of space exploration', reminding us of the importance of both recognising a range of practices and experiences in volume, and of reflecting critically on the vocabularies commonly deployed to dictate volume. In this vein, the work of Zurita (2019), Theriault (2017), Childs (2020a), and Thomas (2015) are also invaluable in their accounting of indigenous ontologies that at once 'shifts their gaze beyond Anglo-European ways of knowing the world' (Thomas, 2015, p. 874), and call for an 'openness to ontological pluralism and multinatures' (Coombes et al., 2014, p. 849). Collectively, this work demonstrates the 'necessity of increasing dimensionality in academic enquiry' (Dodge, 2018, p. 953; see also Billé, 2019; Jackman & Squire, 2021), while urging further reflection on 'how volume might otherwise be interpreted spatially' within political geography (Peters & Turner, 2018, p. 1037).

### 2.1. Thinking with gentleness

Feminist geopolitics has worked on a number of fronts to radically reorientate geopolitical thinking, drawing attention to spheres that were traditionally deemed to be 'outside' of politics (Hyndman, 2019; Masaro & Williams, 2013; Sharp, 2021). This includes foregrounding both more diverse scales and spaces, from the everyday to the home, as well as experiences and practices, from the emotional to an ethos of care, as they variously shape and make the geopolitical. This has included attention to practices of hospitality (Dowler, 2013), the waging of welcome rather than war, and attending to how relational practices of openness can ground the geopolitical, and, more importantly, open up ways to imagine the world as otherwise. As Jackman et al. (2020) highlight, feminist approaches also have significant potential in reimagining volume as it relates to territory. They enable the re-orientation of understandings to attend to and accommodate a wider and more diverse range of actors and agencies such as animals, birdsong, spirits, and everyday articulations of territory and volume (see also Jackman & Squire, 2021). In doing so, the masculinist logics that underpin state-centric, calculative, articulations of volume can be challenged, unpicked and reimagined.

This position paper argues that thinking with and through gentleness can extend this further. Gentleness has emerged in geographical discourse as part of a wider reframing of academic research and practice. Saville's (2021, p.100) work on humble geographies is a case in point, drawing on 'participative, vulnerable, and experimental approaches', including epistemologies that 'de-centre humans and take other species, places, and material things seriously'. Against this backdrop, gentleness has emerged as both analytic framework and methodological sensibility across a series of geographical interventions (see Finn, 2016). Horton (2020, p. 2) articulates a 'gentle geography' as one at once attentive to modesty, shyness, anxiety and awkwardness, and urging an 'ethics of considerate, generous humility'. Understanding 'gentleness' as 'careful, consciously moderated and strategic', Cinnamon (2020, p. 1) argues

that gentleness can be 'deployed to advance activist goals' (see also Smith, 2020). Here, a 'gentle politics' is one that enables an adjustment of 'views' and perspectives (Crouch, 2010, p. 9). In recognition that 'gentleness' is also commonly associated and entangled with 'slowness, quietness, and tenderness' (Pottinger, 2020, p. 2), this paper recognises that 'political actions need not always be noisy and disruptive' (Hall, 2020, p. 243). For example, writing of fieldwork in a 'befriending scheme' pairing refugees and local residents, Askins (2014, p. 353) examines a 'quiet', 'unassuming', and politics of 'encounter embedded in intimate relationships' (see also Pottinger, 2017). While not articulated specifically in 'gentle' terms, such accounts call for attention to the dimensions of activism that are 'personal, quotidian and proceed with little fanfare' (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p. 14), thus speaking to the wider ethos of work on gentleness. Collectively, such work recognises gentle, quiet dispositions and acts not as passive, but rather as 'purposeful' - at once 'small, everyday, embodied' and 'political in nature' (Pottinger, 2017, pp. 217, 215).

As Horton (2020, p. 2) notes, pursuing 'gentleness' as both frame and act feels 'urgent and subversive precisely because 'gentleness' stands for a range of experiences, capacities, and dispositions' presently 'undervalued and underrepresented within many spaces of contemporary academia' (emphasis added). In writing of 'capacities', Horton's work intersects with Peters and Turner's (2018) account of volume. Peters and Turner (2018, p. 1037) are interested in pursuing 'other ways of interpreting volumetric politics'. They (2018, p.1038) argue that volumetric thinking urges us to 'pay attention to the 'fullness' of space in which politics emerges and functions'. In so doing, they argue that volumetric debates can be enhanced through the lens of 'capacity', namely the amount of "X" (people, objects and so on) that can be contained' and through 'questions of density and mass in relation to subjects and objects in a given area' (Peters & Turner, 2018, p. 1039). If we consider Horton's notion of capacity, one concerned less with 'the maximum amount that can be contained or accommodated' and instead with the ability or 'faculty' to do, act, 'experience, or appreciate' (Miriam-Webster n.d.:n. p), alongside Peters and Turner's (2018, p.1037) assertion that understandings of volume may be extended by foregrounding the 'qualities and characteristics that come to define volume', there is significant scope here to challenge dominant understandings of volume within political geography. Mobilising gentleness, the following two case studies illustrate and work through this potential, whilst also highlighting additional avenues for further exploration and research.

### 3. Floating through the air/imagining geopolitical volumes otherwise

'I was looking skywards, through the prayer flag's translucent cotton, counting each thread of each piece of cloth, that wove private stories, whispered only to me'

[Excerpt from Sen, 2010, p.36, Prayer Flag poem]

The first case study draws on the material and spiritual meanings of Tibetan prayer flags. Whilst perhaps not obviously geopolitical, we argue that the fluttering flags subvert a number of geopolitical considerations often associated with flags and provide an opportunity to imagine constructs like border and territorial volumes otherwise. Within political geography, flags more broadly conceived have long been objects of intrigue (see Benwell et al., 2021). This work has particularly focussed on the flag's role in the 'marking' of territories, nations, and in the 'claiming of sovereignty' (Dodds, 2010; Medway et al., 2018, p. 690, p.63). The flag has also been understood as a form of banal nationalism, key in the (re)production of the nation (Billig, 1995), and in the generation of certain national affective atmospheres (Medway et al., 2018, p. 689; see also Benwell et al., 2021; Closs Stephens, 2016).

Tibetan prayer flags, whilst sometimes used to mark the boundaries of sacred spaces (Paul, 2003, p.xxi, 141), can also work voluminously to challenge the practices of marking, demarcating, and the making of



territories that are so often associated with the national flag. This works in a number of ways. Firstly, as McConnell (2009) has long highlighted, the sovereign practices of Tibetans are a powerful reminder that the notion of territory and statehood can be imagined beyond the normalised system of borders and territories. Beyond the prayer flag, Tibetans participate in a range of practices that bring the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE) into being. Indeed, practices and infrastructures like archives, elections, and government departments mean that the TGiE is 'widely regarded as one of the most established' exiled structures 'in the world' (McConnell, 2009, p. 343), offering a glimpse into how the Westernised model of 'contained' nation states might be disrupted. Whilst prayer flags perform a very different function to archives and elections, we argue that they offer a three-dimensional means through which to imagine the transcendence of borders through a spiritual practice.

Flying and fluttering over the mountains and rooftops throughout the Himalayas, prayer flags are used by Tibetans to both spread messages through the air and wind, and to connect people 'across time and space' (Militz, 2019, p. 297). In the first instance, prayers and blessings are embodied in the flags. Positioned up high, the flag's height and light materiality provide the means through which its prayers and blessings are 'caught up in the draft of a passing breeze' (Saul & Waterton, 2017, p. 142), spreading unseen but spiritualised messages through the wind and by extension, the surrounding area (Marais et al., 2014, p. 165; see Figs. 1 and 2). The flags should be used to spread compassion, well-wishes, blessings, and prayers for the overcoming of challenges and conflict. They should be underpinned by 'good motivation'; the flag's hoister should 'not have selfish or limiting thoughts' (Tibet Nuns Project, n.d., n.p). Instead, the flags are designed 'to mingle with the energy of the wind ... to bring about happiness and good fortune among all living beings' (Rana, 2019, p. 55). Symbols contained on the flags contribute to this. The Lung-ta, or wind horse, for example, can feature on the centre of the flag. A mythical creature that 'could fly faster than the wind', the Lung-ta is believed to be an uplifting life force (Rana, 2019, p. 55).

Height is also important here. So often associated with strategic advantage and the god's eye view within political geography (Williams, 2013), fluttering prayer flags perform something quite different. While the lofty position of prayer flags raised in windy locations from 'rooftops to maintain passes' is integral to ensuring their 'continual activation' as the wind and breeze passes through them (Paul, 2003, p. 127), in this process, the surrounding area is thought to be covered and enveloped in a powerful and airborne geography of gentleness. This process also



Fig. 2. Prayer flags, Jody McIntyre (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/scjody/4760188864/>) (CC BY-SA 2.0, no permissions required).

continues when the flags are disposed. When they have reached the end of their material life, the flags may be burned 'so that the smoke may carry their blessings to the heavens' (Tibetan Nuns Project, n.d., n.p). In this sense, whilst the flags will be situated in a particular location, this location is chosen to decentre the marker itself and to maximise the movement of the prayers contained within them.

Moreover, for those treading the ground beneath the flags, the height takes on a powerful embodied significance. For poet Wang Ping (in Lantrip, 2016, p. 76), the Tibetan mountains are 'hard to describe'. She goes to say that,

I really think it is a sacred land. It is just so high up, and carries so much weight. It is so barren and yet so rich at the same time. It really forces you to strip everything (Wang Ping in Lantrip, p.76).

The height encompasses multiple affects here. It's 'weight' and embodied force is both intensely personal whilst also serving a wider function in the subversion of geopolitical norms whereby aerial advantage is instead utilised for the peaceful and gentle crossing of space and borders, eradicating the established demarcations that so characterise life on the ground.

In the second instance, prayer flags are understood to be important modes of connection, both between people, spirits and earth more broadly. These connections are multifaceted and cut across both space



Fig. 1. Prayer flags, Cotaro70s (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/cotaro70s/3083999503/>) (CC BY-SA 2.0, no permissions required).

and time. On the one hand, Buddhist communities are woven together in the material of the flag – this is through the three flaming jewels on the back of the Lung-ta, symbolising the Buddha, Buddhist teachings, and the Buddhist community. On the other, the flags represent both a deep connection to earth and the wider universe. Paul (2003, p. 160), for example, writes of how the raising of flags can be determined by the ‘movements of the stars, planets, and other subtle forces’. Closer to the ground, the colours of the flags represent the five earthly elements of earth (yellow), sky (blue), fire (red), water (green) and air (white). Within this, Rana (2019, p.59) writes that blue further signifies ‘loving kindness’ and ‘peace’; yellow ‘denotes the middle path, avoiding extremes and emptiness’; red represents wisdom, whilst white speaks of purity. In Tibetan traditions, health and harmony are produced in and through the balance of these elements. Flying above the surface of the earth, the Tibetan tradition of the prayer flag enacts a connection between the wider airy, watery, earthy heights and depths, and the people, animals, and spiritual non-human life that resides within. In a world increasingly and violently fractured, divided and bordered, the practice of prayer flag flight provides a means of seeing a world that is both untethered as it floats in the wind but at the same time, is inherently rooted in the messiness of everyday life.

To conclude this section, Tibetan prayer flags point to a gentler political intervention in and through volume. Peace, compassion, and kindness are vital geopolitical and counter-geopolitical affects (Koopman, 2011; Megoran, 2011; Williams & McConnell, 2011). The flags, and the (in)visible relationships they bring into being, urge us to conceive of ‘struggles over territory and resources as multiple’ (Jackman et al., 2020, p. 8), while further reminding us that there are different ways of ‘bringing’ volumetric worlds ‘into being’ (Theriault, 2017, p. 125; see also Smiles, 2020). Here, attention to the spiritual act of raising prayer flags to conjure and create worlds and atmospheres in and through volume, recognises presences, capacities and spatialities of ‘invisible beings’ (Theriault, 2017, p. 118). As geographers interested in gentleness have noted, gentleness ‘accounts’ for diverse forms of ‘reciprocity’ (Pottinger, 2020, p. 2). Here, prayer flags urge us to consider more multiple reciprocities between human and more-than or non-human – those which both exceed the state, the human, and the calculative-violent. Such a reading of volume also acts to foreground non-western, indigenous and marginalised practices, or as Sundberg (2014, p. 34) writes, works to ‘expose the ontological violence authorized by Eurocentric epistemologies both in scholarship and everyday life’.

This enactment and reading of gentleness is, of course, not without tension. Sulek (2017, p. 125), for example recalls how they were told on their travels that some monasteries in Lhasa (China) considered banning the sale of prayer flags. The thick covering of mountain spaces in prayer flags meant that some flags were falling to the ground and being trodden on, both undermining and violently grounding their purpose. We might also consider the wider circulation and commodification of prayer flags within this framework (see for example Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, 2017). Yet, despite these tensions, prayer flags fluttering in the wind point to a way of thinking more gently about the geopolitics of volume. Zee’s (2017) exploration of the term ‘downwind’ is useful here. Through the example of ‘dust events’ in Beijing, Zee (2017) highlights the ‘mobilization of state resources and expertise’ through the administrative separation of up- and downwind spatial zones. Zee (2017, n.p) continues that ‘every downwind is upwind of elsewhere’, arguing that ‘to be in the path of the same storm demands shared work for mutual protection’. As such, Zee (2017, n.p) turns to a ‘proposition’ of ‘friendship’ as ‘an ethics of downwind-ness’. While Zee (2017) foregrounds particular and ‘peculiar atmospheric nationalisms’, the piece reminds us of the opportunity to rethink volumetric vocabularies and the relations animating them.

Both the prayer flag fluttering in the wind, and Zee’s (2017) thinking otherwise about dust volumes, thus invite us to develop other, nuanced avenues of volumetric enquiry within political geography. One such

potential avenue to do so, we argue, is colour. Whilst colour in political geography might usually be associated with race, terror alerts, national flags, and the branding of particular countries on a world map (for example, the ‘red’ axis of evil), we argue that it warrants further attention through the framework of gentleness. How, for example, do colour, feminist geopolitics, and volume intersect? How might colour prompt spiritual, joyful and lively social and political interactions? As shown in Fig. 3, the Hindu festival of Holi is an entry point here. Clouds of colourful dust float and swirl in the air, coming to land on the bodies in their midst. While originating in India, Holi is an annual festival celebrated globally, marking the ‘arrival of spring’ and a ‘period of renewal’ (Mattoo, 2014, n.p.). In its ‘affirmation of life in all its colours’, Holi sees the throwing, embracing, and being in and with colourful powders (Mattoo, 2014, n.p.; Okita, 2015). As Nieuwenhuis and Nassar (2018, p. 502) write of dust, such powder is ‘fragmentary’ and mobile, it ‘engulfs, settles, swirls, and is airborne again’. Here, Holi’s spreading of ‘soft messages’ through colourful powders in the wind (Bi India Bureau, 2021, n.p.) again raises questions of how and in what terms we come to think about, narrate, and ‘know’ volumetric space (Hawkins, 2020, p. 215), in this case through colour (see Fig. 3).

#### 4. ‘More satisfyingly splashy’/interacting with political volumes otherwise

‘How can we use the fact that it rains quite a lot in Gothenburg in a creative way? What if we can turn the rain into an asset for the city?’ (Ivarsson, in Orange, 2021, n.p.)

The second example moves to a different location to further illustrate how we might think about gentle volumes in geopolitical terms. The example centres upon a particular ‘rain playground’ in Gothenburg, Sweden, that is designed to be more fun when it rains. We draw on this example, and its puddles, dams and pools of water, to think through gentle and playful relationships in volume in the context of a changing climate.

The rain playground provides fertile ground to think through questions at the intersection of gentleness, volume and play. Gothenburg is one of the rainiest cities in Europe, experiencing around ‘150 rainy days a year’ (Gothenburg European Office, 2021, n.p.). Rainfall is expected to get worse as the Climate Emergency gains momentum and intensifies. This backdrop has prompted a range of imaginative architectural responses that attempt to ‘adapt and create solutions for how to handle all this water’ (Gothenburg European Office, 2021, n.p.). Within this drizzly context, one such adaptation strategy has been the Regnlekplatsen, or ‘rain playground’. Designed by artist and designer Jens Thoms Ivarsson, the playground was created to become more fun and



Fig. 3. Abhijit Kar Gupta, Holi celebration, Nandgaon temple (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/kgabhi/25384488433/>) (no permission required, CC BY 2.0).



engaging when it rains. 'Taking rain as its starting point' (Goteborgs Stad, n.d.), the playground features both 'dips in the ground to make the puddles deeper and *more satisfyingly splashy*' - and lilypad-shaped rain shelters equipped with channels from which 'water gushes down ... into a sandpit where children can make pools, rivers and dams' (Orange, 2021, n.p., emphasis added) (see Figs. 4 and 5).

The playground forms part of the wider 'Rain Gothenburg' project, designed to make the city 'the best in the world when it's raining' (Orange, 2021, n.p.). By creatively engaging rain into its design, the rain playground seeks to make 'new experiences possible' (The Rain Playground, n.d.). This design ethos is similarly found in projects like the 'rain chain', a form of drainage originating in Japan that 'guides water off the sides of buildings without the use of pipes' (Kohlstedt, 2020, n.p.). As Kohlstedt (2020, n.p.) continues, the rain chain's interlinking chains 'turn drainage into a visual and auditory experience while also slowing' the water, to 'reduce erosion below'. In such designs, gentleness, play and volume meet. The rain playground channels and funnels water in fun and creative ways, capturing and celebrating watery volumes. In doing so, it intersects in interesting ways with wider work within geography that has sought to counter the association of 'critical thinking with scepticism and negativity' (Mann, 2015, p. 66) by '(re) enchanting' geography through, for example, the sensibility of play (Woodyer & Geoghegan, 2013; see also Geoghegan & Woodyer, 2014). In this vein, Woodyer (2012) unpacks contrasting conceptualisations of play as both that in opposition to seriousness and work, and that enabling development and growth. In so doing, Woodyer (2012) demonstrates that while play is typically associated with, and confined to, children, this limitation overlooks play as a geopolitical concern more widely (see also Woodyer & Carter, 2020). In widening its conceptualisation, play encompasses a 'critical and ethical potential', and a 'way to be otherwise' (Woodyer, 2012, p. 313). Furthermore, it can add 'depth to our experience of the world', prompting 'generosity or openness' (Woodyer, 2012, p.322 emphasis added).

The rain playground similarly engages the entanglement of playful 'sensibilities' with 'the natural and nonhuman' (Geoghegan & Woodyer, 2014, p. 219). As geographers have long explored, water - and our relations with it - encompass 'complex interactions' that both 'form place and comprise a more-than-human world' (Gibbs, 2009, p. 361; see also Yates et al., 2017). In seeking to counter the Eurocentric 'valuation' of nature and its 'marginalising of other ways of knowing nature and thinking about value', scholars have recognised and engaged more 'multiple knowledges' of water (Gibbs, 2010, p. 363). For example, writing in the context of Lake Eyre Basin, Australia, Gibbs (2010, p.368) demonstrates the limitations of valuations of rainfall and river flow in 'social, environmental or economic' terms. In doing so, Gibbs (2010, p. 369) describes a family watching a flood approach, 'water flowing between the cracks' and children 'jumping from one section of the dry,



Fig. 4. Play in the rain Renströmsparken Gothenburg, Ulf Celander (<http://annikaoskarsson.com/play-in-the-rain/>) (permission granted).



Fig. 5. Play in the rain Renströmsparken Gothenburg, Annika Oskarsson (<http://annikaoskarsson.com/>) (permission granted).

cracked riverbed to another'. Here, patterns created by the water's variability 'shape experiences of place' (Gibbs, 2010, p. 369). As such, the term 'water places' is mobilised to describe the 'sites and paths where water flows, sits, sinks, falls, emerges, passes through, and evaporates from'- those which, through their entanglement of human and non-human, 'form places' (Gibbs, 2009, p. 361).

This also takes place in the rain playground. Here there is a playful 'being-with-water', demonstrative of a different kind of 'water world' (Yates et al., 2017, p. 798) than is arguably currently accounted for within explorations of watery volumes. The rain playground recognises the importance of spaces where children 'play, day dream, interact, construct, imagine, talk, and create', while seeking to reimagine 'barren, hard or unimaginative' play spaces (Dymont & O'Connell, 2013, p.264). In its attention to the things that 'fill' volume Adey (2013, p.52), the rain playground is demonstrative of an alternative enactment and vocabulary of volume, one at once attentive to watery volumes, and the playful, creative, and gentle dimensions and dispositions therein. Volume is still 'grappled' with, but not fought against nor struggled with, rather instead gently, care-fully, and playfully worked with, in an effort to be apprehended and understood.

Such reflections chime with wider work interested in re-approaching volume through (watery) everyday encounters. While cognisant that the Anthropocene is characterised by a reliance upon instruments and 'techno-fixes' to mitigate against a voluminous earth in revolt, we have previously argued for greater attention to more diverse 'instruments and alternative forms of instrumentalisation' in volume (Jackman & Squire, 2021, p.496; see also Brace & Geoghegan, 2010). In recognition that a 'new oceanic imaginary' is emerging in the context of 'anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise' (DeLoughrey, 2017, p. 32), the rain playground embeds climate change futures into 'the way the city is run' (Rain Gothenburg project artist in Orange, 2021, n.p.). It actively prepares 'the city for future downfalls' while making 'use of the rain's potential to create unique experiences' (The Rain Playground, n.d., n.p.). In this 'continual confronting of the textured and voluminous presence' of the city (Billé, 2017, n.p.), play is foregrounded. Play, in the rain playground, is about 'experimenting with how relations, selves and geopolitics might be otherwise' (Woodyer & Carter, 2020, p. 1069). Foregrounding gentle, playful and reciprocal relations with water in the rain playground thus both enables 'other ways of thinking volume' (Adey, 2013, p. 52) and the recognition of alternative experiences of 'how volumes are' and may be 'inhabited' (Benwell, 2020, p. 93).

To conclude this section, the rain playground demonstrates the need for thinking and working through gentle practices amidst much wider violent contexts. The climate crisis is (unevenly) violent in so many



ways, from insidious forms of 'slow violence' to the ruptures of flash floods, and heat waves (Nixon, 2011; Sultana, 2022). Thinking 'gently' within these contexts is not to diminish this violence. Instead it speaks to the need, as Phillips (2021, p. 41) argues, to think through adaptation and to find ways to live *with*, where possible, increasingly watery, voluminous worlds. This is a particular challenge in Western societies where a historic dichotomy exists between land and water, and where water is often reduced to an abstraction, something outside of society (Dicks, 2014). As Dicks (2014) explores, there is a need to re-orientate our relationship with water, to facilitate experiences *with* it rather than against it. Here, turning to certain forms of kinship – or 'hydro-social' relations – that is the ways in which people live with, on and by water is beneficial (Krause, 2017, p. 404). As Gibbs (2010, p. 367) highlights, people develop 'understandings of and attachments to specific waters and water places', and therein we find complex relational sensibilities of interconnection, with water, rather than of separation, disconnection, or a water/land dichotomy. These kinds of relations, between amphibious actors, lives and experiences are, as Krause (2019, p. 99) suggests, underexplored and worthy of further interrogation.

This is particularly important in light of the intensification of water-human relationships brought about by the Anthropocene. All too often decisions are premised on the principle that beyond a certain threshold, 'water will lead to evacuation' (Wakefield, 2020, p. 93), but given the high cost and low social acceptance of relocation (Dottori et al., 2020), other solutions are being sought that enable people to maintain social relationships and to stay where they love and have formed a place-based attachment (Wakefield, 2020). In this vein, we might understand the rain playground as similarly pushing back against what has been described as a 'crisis of the imagination' whereby Western societies 'have failed to get to grips with the changing nature of our environmental relations' (Hawkins, 2020, p. 3). Through its alternative design in response to shifting watery volumes, the rain playground opens a space and moment to bring us into more gentle and playful contact with a changing world. Through its engagements with and in watery volume, the rain playground pursues an alternative way of being and interacting with the world, opening up 'new ways of understanding nature and human relations' (Hawkins, 2020, p. 3). Such an approach at once 'values the messiness and wonder of the world, abandoning the aim to 'conquer' through the expansion of knowledge and power' (Saville, 2021, p. 101) instead valuing and attending to the 'intimate encounters with earth' (Pérez, 2021, p. 1).

Finally, experiencing the rain playground and similar such environments designed to enable particular forms of interaction with the environment, rely however on particular bodily comportments and capacities. Acts associated with playing might look very different depending on differing bodily needs and sensory capacities. While differently abled bodies have featured within geopolitical work, with Snyder and Mitchell (2010, p. 113), for example, exploring how national ideologies are conflated with able-ism, political geography has remained slow to consider the geopolitics of differently abled bodies (see Imrie & Edwards, 2007). As Hall and Wilton (2017, p. 728) write, however, 'bodies (both impaired and non-impaired), objects and spaces' together engage 'in shifting relations that have the capacity to produce both exclusionary and/or enabling arrangements'. Thinking with and through volume could be useful here in both further understanding these 'shifting relations', but also in challenging and unsettling prevailing ableism within accounts of volume and within the sub-discipline more widely. For example, drawing on the world of Goodley, Hall and Wilton (2017, p.735) write of how there are certain characteristics that are deemed to 'make' the able body. This might include being 'cognitively, socially, and emotionally able', self-sufficient, hearing, seeing, and walking. In addition to considering how the playful watery volumes of the rain playground might be differently experienced by differently abled bodies that can't hear the splashing or feel the puddles underfoot, thinking with voluminous space also invites us to take pause to consider how volume itself can challenge and dismantle the norms of the

able-body. For example, no body, 'able' or otherwise is able to stay underwater, hang in the sky, or be immersed in subterranean volume indefinitely (see for example Parkhurst & Jeevendrampillai, 2020; Veal, 2021). For those who can see and hear, their vision and hearing will change. Approaching and unpacking spaces volumetrically can thus enable a confrontation of the 'beliefs, values and practices through which the 'normal' able self is imagined and enacted, and the relations and environments through which it becomes' (Hall & Wilton, 2017, p. 736).

## 5. Concluding thoughts and future avenues

Over the past decade there has been a 'veritable efflorescence of publications on the topic of volume' (Billé, 2019, n.p). This position piece builds on this rich work to point towards more gentle approaches to and articulations of volume. The two vignettes in the paper explore volume as it encountered, practiced and experienced in care-full, spiritual, and playful terms. The examples of prayer flags and the rain playground each pick up on different sensibilities within this framework, speaking to ideas of relations between and togetherness with others and environments. Whilst not to diminish or belittle unfolding volumetric violences, it seeks to highlight that volumes can simultaneously be otherwise – hopeful, slow, creative, playful, spiritual – and even fun. As the two examples have illustrated, gentleness can be forceful and powerful. Gentleness provides a means to decentre the state, territory, and borders by thinking instead with whispers, wishes, blessing, laughter and splashing. This endeavour is, of course, not without limitations. Who gets to be a recipient of gentleness? How might gentle acts become violent (such as a prayer flag being trampled)? Who is excluded from gentle practices?

Further work is needed to answer these questions, to both attune the political to the gentle and vice versa, and to reflect methodologically on how to do this work in political geography. While in each of our vignettes we have aimed to provide some avenues for further exploration of gentle volumes, one additional route might also be to the intersections between gentleness and non-human life. Drawing on plans to install wind turbines in the seas of Taiwan, Wang and Chien (2020, p.6) highlight that in thinking about 'animal soundscapes which are increasingly subject to anthropocentric activities and volumetric power', more gentle ways of being and behaving in the world might be generated. In the case of wind turbines, Taiwan looked to German projects that operationalised an 'air bubble curtain' around the infrastructure in the water. As Wang and Chien (2020, p. 8) write, the collision of two earthly elements, water and air, creates a barrier, or a state of disturbance, due to density mismatch and concomitant absorption and reflection of sound waves'. While wind turbines might be considered a comparatively gentle form of energy infrastructure, they nonetheless introduce sonic complexities and harm for non-human life such as dolphins – and thus, thinking with and through volume remains key here to reduce harm and to better accommodate those that inhabit earthly volumes differently than humans do on land.

Alongside identifying conceptual avenues for further work attentive to the geopolitics of gentle volumes, so too does such an agenda push us to reflect further on the methods political geographies of volume (might) mobilise. As we have explored elsewhere, work on volume that has foregrounded state and military-led approaches to, navigations and negotiations of volume across diverse territories and terrain has 'resulted in a limited methodological toolkit through which to explore voluminous complexities ... Often reliant on elite interviews, archives, and cartographies, there has been little critical discussion of both methodological practice and the "flatness" of research outputs articulating three-dimensional worlds' (Jackman and Squire, 2021, p.493; see also Jackman et al., 2020). What does it mean to gently methodologically approach, grapple with, and communicate gentle volumes? As a number of the examples we have drawn upon in this article come from across geography to engage and draw upon art, aesthetics, and the

multi-sensory, we might, as political geographers, reflect further on the scope and suitability of our mainstay methods to attune to gentle volumes, and their affective and emotional dimensions. While political geographers are of course interrogating the embodied dimensions of volume (see for example Pérez & Zurita, 2020; Jackman et al., 2020; Jackman & Squire, 2021), in articulating the geopolitics of gentle volumes, further attention could be afforded to both methods and modes of communicating.

Here, we might turn to gentle methodologies for inspiration. In articulating a gentle methodology, Pottinger (2020, p. 2) defines ‘gentleness’ as ‘an embodied relation to the self and others’. Pottinger (2021, p. 2) argues a gentle methodology is to adopt ‘an approach for designing research that is sensitive, collaborative, and careful, and which can attune to small-scale, mundane and non-verbal detail’. Pottinger (2020, p. 1) continues that to adopt a ‘gentle methodological approach’ recognising the ‘mundane moments of taking care’ enables both ‘exposing and theorising under-acknowledged forms of care-full, political and environmental action’, and enables ‘transformative’ opportunities, relations, and potentialities (Pottinger, 2021, p. 3; see also Hocknell, 2019). We might also consider work on ‘slowness’ within this context. In Engelmann’s (2021) collaborations with atmosphere and environment, the ‘results’ are not necessarily a quick, consistent, or reliable process. Aerial sculptures may ‘fail’ to launch and if they do begin to rise from the ground, a ‘significant amount of wating’ will have occurred beforehand as the sculpture ‘absorbs enough solar energy to create a temperature differential between the air inside the envelope and the ambient air outside it’ (Engelmann, 2021, p. 3). This process cannot be rushed and is entirely reliant on a relationship between sculpture, wind and aerial atmosphere. The floating sculpture is gentle in the sense that it is unhurried, premised on non-human relations and collaborations, while flying in the face of neoliberal pressures dictating fast turnarounds. Such interventions implicitly speak to (and against) the ways the academy can ‘devalue gentleness’, and the range of emotional, embodied and relational experiences that are ‘commonplace’ and yet often ‘silenced’ as a result (Horton, 2020, p. 1). Further work is thus needed to consider both how we might approach volume gently, and sit with, learn, feel, attune to and communicate gentle volumes.

There are no doubt many other avenues through which gentle volumes might be explored in greater depth, diversity, and detail. The purpose of this position piece is not to provide a comprehensive overview of such avenues, but rather to point to trajectories through which manifestations of volume might be both more gently explored, and explored in ways that exceed the state, conflict and calculative (see Pérez & Zurita, 2020; Jackman & Brickell, 2022). While not diminishing the violence of the world, we call for further research and attention to be paid to ‘other’ volumes – those that are gentle, care-full, spiritual, playful, and which open the door to consider alternative (re)scriptings of the geopolitical world. In doing so, we argue that understandings and vocabularies of volume can be broadened and extended, that volumes can further be grounded in everyday experiences and practices of gentleness which unfold in heights and depths, and that agendas to diversify and decolonise volume thinking may be furthered. In the face of a rapidly changing and increasingly violent global context playing out in and through volume, such an agenda is more important than ever.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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