Walking with the Rižana River:
Ethnographic experiments in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In the context of the Anthropocene, the social sciences and humanities are faced with numerous challenges. How to decenter the human in the "Age of Humans"? What ontologies, epistemologies and practices emerge, re-emerge or disappear when faced with new climate and environmental realities? How to include more-than-humans in our participatory research? How to go beyond "human horizons" when we are stuck with the human perspective? In order to touch on these challenging issues the paper brings to the fore ethnographic experiments with the Rižana River in the NE Adriatic region, posing the following question: how should the river be approached ethnographically? The paper first discusses conceptual orientations in academic more-than-human research, highlighting the experimental approaches of walking and writing. In the next step, it presents ethnographic experiments with the Rižana River, using walking and writing as two methods of doing ethnography with the river. The conclusion summarizes some of the findings and considerations related to the initial questions.

KEYWORDS: Northeast Adriatic, more-than-human participant observation, river, walking, experimental ethnographic writing

Introduction

It's like this with the river. What happened above, you will see below, what we do today will be seen tomorrow. Let's say that kerosene spill near Hrastovlje, it went everywhere, also underground, no! And there have been accidents before.

> Once a trailer full of bananas overturned near Rižana, a whole trailer of bananas, the bananas floated down the river, Bonita bananas, and we were catching them! (conversation with a fisherman from the Koper Fishing Family, July 2020)

My ethnographic research in the NE Adriatic area started nearly thirty years ago, when I was studying trade routes, borders and women merchants in Istria (Ledinek & Rogelja, 2000; Rogelja, 2014; Ledinek Lozej, Rogelja & Kanjir, 2018), but rivers were never part of my research focus. When I was invited to join the research project, "Experiencing water environments and environmental changes: An anthropological study of water in Albania, Serbia and Slovenia," I reopened my fieldwork notes and reflected on which Istrian river should become my focus. The decision was rather simple as the Rižana was spilling over the sides of my fieldwork notebooks. Bits like "we washed our clothes in the river … we used to grind in the watermills … we walked by the river … we cooled our bodies…we collected water from the river…we had picnics near the river…" leaked from my ethnography. The Rižana river, only 14 km in length, with its Karstic hinterlands[1] and the drainage basin of 204.5 km[2], inspired many local poems and other artistic endeavors and has since 1935, when a water supply system was built in Istria under the Fascist regime and tunneled through the pipes of a large infrastructure, supplying inhabitants with potable water. After all, the Rižana is still the main source of water for all four Slovene coastal municipalities: Ankaran, Koper, Izola and Piran. When you undertake fieldwork in the NE Adriatic and fill your glass with tap water, what you get is Rižana water.

Recently, while writing this article, the Rižana also became visible in Slovene local and national media, as the summer of 2022 was, according to the Slovene Environmental Agency, one of the driest summers in Istria in the last few decades.[2] In a way, the Rižana became powerful due to her non-appearance or disappearance.[3] And because she was

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[1] "The hinterland of the Rižana River is primarily composed of karst characterised by specific hydrogeological features, which is reflected by the annual hydrographs. The quantity of water feeding the Rižana River depends on the water-level of the groundwater, the precipitation and the capacity of the Rižana River tributaries" (Smolar-Žvanut, Krušnik, Kosi & Vrhovšek, 2004, p. 132).

[2] As stated in the ARSO (Slovenian Environmental Agency) report for July 2022: "At the national level, July 2022 was 2.5 C warmer than normal and the second warmest so far, only 62% of the normal precipitation fell and insolation exceeded the normal by 16%. The average July temperature was above normal everywhere. The vast majority of measuring sites reported a positive anomaly from 2 to 3C above normal … Precipitation was particularly modest in the Primorska region [NE Adriatic region where the Rižana runs], where less than 30 mm of rain fell" (Cegnar, 2022, p. 27). For the Rižana River not only the July temperature is crucial but also the lack of precipitation in the previous months. Preliminary data for the whole of 2022 that can be found on ARSO webpage (https://meteo.arso.gov.si/met/sl/climate/current/climate_season/) state: "At the national level for the period 1981-2010 temperature was 2.7 C warmer than normal, which ranks this summer as the second hottest summer since 1961."

[3] In the Slovene "grammatical" gender, most words that end in -a are "feminine," for Rižana but also for reka (river) I therefore use feminine grammatical form.

absent, the issue of connectivity appeared strongly, unfortunately in a conflicting way. Numerous actors connected to the river became prominent during the 2022 summer—the water supply company, municipalities, fishing societies, local farms, scientific centers, tourist agencies and hotels, as well as individuals linked with these establishments and activities—and gave statements, most of which were quarrelsome, accusing each other for the situation or for (bad) planning. Not only bananas, but also ideas and conflicts flowed down the river. Regardless of the fact that all these actors had a common problem, and all provided more or less reasonable arguments, relations between them were still conflicted. The overflow of actors, statements, and ideas in the context of drought and the River Rižana was interesting *per se.* In the work of Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe in "Acting in an uncertain world" (2009), the relational approach to researching more-than-human subjects is based on observation of "condensed controversies" causing "overflows", bringing to the fore actors "gathered" around certain issues related to more-than-human subjects (e.g., draught or electro smog in their case); one could also approach the Rižana from that angle.

Figure 1: The Rižana orthophoto (Bevc Šekoranja, 2010)

Nevertheless, my concern in this small experiment was how to approach the river ethnographically. I was aware of these "overflows" related to drought (fishermen had their own specific share in the discussion), but I decided to stay closer to the river, reflecting on the issue of how to include more-than-human subjects in participatory research. How to decenter the human in the "Age of Humans"? What ontologies, epistemologies and practices emerge, re-emerge or disappear when faced with new climate and environmental realities? What would an "ontologically curious" kind of research and writing look like, to borrow words from Kathleen Stewart's epilogue to an experimental collection of ethnographic writings entitled "Crumpled paper boat" (2017).

Figure 2: The Rižana (photo by Ana Jelnikar)

Reflecting on these questions, the paper starts from the presupposition that inviting more-than-human subjects into our research is not just a question of theory but also a matter of methodology, since these two are or should be closely interrelated. We will start with theory, including some case studies on water, water bodies and other more-than-human subjects, as different more-than-human subjects call for different methods and different reflections; a river certainly differs from a dog or a tree, for instance. In the following lines, the discussion on conceptual orientations in academic more-than-human research will be presented, highlighting experimental approaches such as walking and writing. In the next step, the ethnographic experiments with the Rižana River will be described, using walking and writing as two methods of doing ethnography with the river. In the concluding discussion, I hope to summarize some of the findings and considerations related to the initial questions and possible directions for future research (e.g., how to organize research with the Rižana following our walking/writing experiments). This article does not, as such, delve into an analysis of empirical, geographical or hydrological data on the Rižana but, rather, offers a meditation on methodological approaches related to rivers in the context of the post-human turn, with an emphasis on walking and writing.

Conceptual orientations in experimental approaches in academic more-than-human research

Speaking about the Anthropocene, about the consequences of modernity, new climate and environmental realities, anthropologists often reflect on existing, new or future ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. Including more-than-human subjects in research is an element of such reflections. Following Amira Mittermaier's striving to make ethnographic space for God, the re-orientation towards more-than-human ethnographic subjects requires consideration and change on several levels: theory and fieldwork, but also a change on the level of ethnographic writing (2021). The extraordinary times in which we live, as Nick Shepherd put it (2022), give us a strong mandate to try out new formats and forms of scholarly and artistic production. In trying to organize ethnographic research with the river we used the experimental approaches of walking and writing to offer a meditation on methodological approaches related to rivers in the context of the post-human turn, but before presenting our experiments, let me first outline the conceptual orientations in academic more-than-human research building on legacies of ecofeminist,[4] biopolitical,[5] and decolonial[6] thought.

Researchers have used different conceptual approaches, leading to various methods. Following Tehseen Noorani and Julian Brigstocku (2018), we could identify (at least) three approaches: the relational approach (developed in the context of science and technology studies, new materialism, and ANT theory); the communicational approach (linked with multi-species ethnography, and the ontological turn), and the experiential approach (related to [post]phenomenological reflections and non-representational theo-

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[4] One of the powerful intellectual traditions that pre-dates discussions within more-than-human research is ecofeminism, combining ecological and feminist perspectives. Ecofeminism reflected on Western thought that associates men with culture (and reason), and women with nature (and emotion), justifying the Western patriarchy. As Noorani and Brigstocke state, ecofeminism made a series of important arguments about the interconnection of all systems of unjustified domination and therefore offered one the most important and innovative insights about the relationship between humans and non-humans (2018, p. 14).

[5] Michel Foucault's discussion of the emergent interest in governing life processes in Western thought from the 18th century, also known as the biopolitical constitution of modernity, importantly informs some of the recent studies related to more-than-human subjects. Foucault's lecture, *Society Must Be Defended*, from 1976 (2003) often serves as an important reference, bringing to the fore fundamental political questions of modern times related to more-than-human perspectives such as what counts as life and what does not (Noorani & Brigstocke, 2018). Within the context of bio-political schema, numerous authors developed further discussions related to more-than-human subjects. Writing about violence in Gaza, Joseph Pugliese (2020), for example, discusses how law plays a foundational role in determining where diverse subjects, victims of military violence (human, donkey, fig tree), are placed along the life–death continuum and also reflects on the possible enlargement of the biopolitical concept.

[6] Postcolonial and decolonial studies, similar to ecofeminism, reflected on colonialism as a system of violence justified through simplistic dualisms such as nature-culture or uncivilized–civilized and recognized, epistemic, and ontological violence in addition to material and symbolic violence. In the context of anthropology, authors such as Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Kohn and others drew attention to different (ecological) ontologies of the studied communities, one that opens up space for different epistemologies and practices such as "communicating with trees" (Kohn, 2013).

ry). Within the relational approach, everything (human and more-than-human) exists through its relations with others. Following this "flattened and human decentered world" all relations become equally important and equally meaningful (human—human; human—more-than-human, more-than-human—human; more-than-human—more-than-human). In one of the best known and most influential relational theories, the Actor-Network Theory (e.g., Latour, 2005), non-humans have a constitutive role in social life while agency is not merely a human capacity, but is an outcome of the relations between different material, social, and other entities. In other words, only actor-networks have the capacity to do something. Agency in this view becomes relational and distributed. As Tehseen Noorani and Julian Brigstocku further stressed in discussing different conceptual approaches to more-than-human participatory research, such a view leaves open a series of questions, the most important of which relate to power and responsibility: "What happens to our notion of responsibility and accountability when an agency is distributed so widely?" (2018, p. 18). In the context of the relational approach, researchers such as Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe (2009, p. 28) wrote about controversies that create socio-technical overflows (e.g., debates and effects around electromagnetic fields, genetically modified organisms) revealing hidden actors, events, and processes, those involved with certain overflow:

> Controversies make possible the exploration of what we propose to call overflows engendered by the development of science and techniques. Overflows are inseparably technical and social, and they give rise to unexpected problems by giving prominence to unforeseen effects. All, specialists included, think they have clearly defined the parameters of the proposed solutions, reckon they have established sound knowledge and know-how, and are convinced they have clearly identified the groups concerned and their expectations. And then disconcerting events occur.

As an example, they take the installation of a high-voltage line in a small rural commune where, according to its inhabitants, strange phenomena have been occurring (from the siren of the commune's fire truck that goes off on its own to concerns related to insomnia and increased leukemia). In our case we could speak about the shell dune at the mouth of the Rižana River, created as a by-product of dredging works in the port of Koper which triggered a series of environmental protection debates and municipality management issues, but also everyday leisure practices (walking, sitting, observing). Donna Haraway in "When species meet" (2008) offers concrete examples of a relational approach involving more-than-human actors. In research focused on agility training, she

examines the interaction between dogs and humans and the contact zones where both actors are forced to think together. The question of who trains and who is trained becomes irrelevant.

The communicational approach uses mostly participant observation, resulting in dense and detailed ethnographic descriptions of field situations; a central consideration revolves around the question of how humans and more-than-humans can establish communication. Usually, studies are focused on communities that have multiple kinship relationships with animals, trees, rivers, and mountains, with which they perform certain kinds of communication. Important authors informing this approach, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), Philippe Descola (2009), and Eduardo Kohn (2013), analyze forms of sociability related to the more-than-human world. This kind of research relativizes the divide between nature and culture, introduces new reflections on multi-naturalism (as opposed to multiple cultures and one nature) and questions the exclusivity of human communication. Eduard Kohn's work, "How forests think" (2013), opens up issues of biosemiotics and questions non-symbolic types of language (the shape of a leaf, a trail in the snow, a piece of bark). Behind such an approach there is an important idea that semiotics is inherent in both human and more-than-human life. Such an "anthropology of life" (Kohn, 2007) places man deep in the living matrix of the world, in a "complex web of living thoughts" (Kohn, 2013, p. 99) and poses new questions in connection with new (and old) borders, also bringing to the fore different kinds of languages.

Considering water, stones, mountains, air, and other very specific more-than-humans, we are faced with additional considerations already stressed by Kohn. Namely, in building his general claim—that living beings are the loci of selfhood—Kohn in a way excluded, or better, differentiated these peculiar more-than-humans such as stones:

> I recognize of course that those we call animists may well attribute animacy to all sorts of entities, such as stones, that I would not, according to the framework laid out here, consider living selves…. To recognize living thoughts, and the ecology of selves to which they give rise, underscores that there is something unique to life: life thinks; stones don't. (2013, p. 94, 100)

Kohn's general claim about the loci of selfhood is not exactly an ethnographic one (as he himself states), in the sense that it is not circumscribed by an ethnographic context, even though it is suggested, explored, and defended, in part, ethnographically (2013, p. 94). By differentiating stones, rivers, trees, and dogs on the basis of selfhood one might suggest that we are walking on thin ice that potentially leads to a new dualism but, as Kohn

argued, his goal was to understand some of the special properties of lives and thoughts which are obscured when we theorize humans and nonhumans, and their interactions, in terms of materiality or in terms of our assumptions (often hidden) about symbolically based linguistic relationality (2013, p. 100).[7]

In her current project involving the ethnography of God, Amira Mittermaier also stresses that creating ethnographic space for dogs, mushrooms or trees is one thing, but making space for God (or spirits and ghosts) is quite another as we are faced with additional "troubling lines" (2020, p. 29), challenging our own academic ontologies and epistemologies. Apart from the living-nonliving, selfhood-non-selfhood, and nature-culture divides, in the ethnography of God, we are faced with an additional line dividing naturalcultural and supernatural. Mayanthi Fernando (2018), an anthropologist working on Islam and secularism in the context of posthumanism also agrees that not all more-than-humans are treated equally. In her lecture, *SuperNatureCulture: Human/Nonhuman Entanglements beyond the Secular* (2018), she stresses that the line between "natureculture" and supernatural has been far more troubling than the line between nature and culture, asking whether we might rethink natureculture as "supernatureculture." What Fernando and other authors taking part in the working paper series, *A Non-secular Anthropocene: Spirits, Specters and Other Nonhumans in a Time of Environmental Change* (Bubandt, 2018), are arguing is that recent trends in post-humanist scholarship might offer epistemological horizons beyond those of secular materialism.

At this point, we might ask ourselves, where does water, closely related to our body of water, the Rižana River, stand (or flow) in this debate? One of the arguments that Fernando made for including "others" in our ethnographies is that our attachment to the visible and material (as the site of the real) defines how we treat "the other". In that sense water can even be compared to the supernatural from certain angles, as a considerable part of water is hidden from our eyes (remaining underground, contained in the air, circulating in animal and floral bodies…), and is sometimes reachable only through technology (Ballestero, 2019a) or becomes tangible only after we imagine water in the form of water bodies. Moreover, water has been present throughout human history in religious rituals as well as in various myths and legends describing water beings and spirits (Strang, 2017), thus linking it with the supernatural. We could also say that water, like air and God, shares the characteristic of omnipresence—of being everywhere and

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[7] Although Kohn's work is a comprehensive and innovative ethnographic study, some authors think that it is "all too human (still)" (Descola, 2014, p. 272). Descola for example suggests that it would be beneficial to reflect on his findings through the eyes of the new generation of young scientists who straddle the frontier between human ethnology and animal ethology (2014).

nowhere. Still, water has its materiality and as such, it is different from other omnipresent others such as spirits, ghosts and gods. Here I would like to return to the point made by Fernando and others that not all more-than-humans are treated equally, but would add: nor should they be. This is specifically important from the methodological point of view, as every other brings to the fore different methodological challenges.

The experiential approach tackles the problem a bit differently. Just as the network is key to the relational approach, experience is essential to the experiential approach. Immersion in an experience in all its sensory and affective complexity seems crucial for this approach, although we must first get rid of the assumption that experiences are purely personal, closed, impassable, and subjective. A shift from private experience to an experience that is part of the world (postphenomenology) seems essential for such a step. In the methodological sense, this approach requires creative and speculative methods that also "embrace" contradictions (Noorani, & Brigstocke 2018, p. 20), such as walking (and writing) with the river.

Walking and more general movement as a key activity of human experience with the world is undoubtedly one of the popular methods within this approach (Springgay, & Truman, 2013). As Rebeca Solnit wrote, walking is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord (2000, p. 17). However, walking in the social sciences and humanities is not new; rather, it has been revisited in the context of the mobility turn, non-representational theories and anthropology and sociology of the body and the senses. Researchers have used descriptions of walking as a way of presenting fieldwork sites (Rogelja, & Spreizer, 2017; Selwyn, 2012), while others have devoted their research interests to walking as a human practice (Mauss, 1979; de Certeau, 1984; Vergunst & Ingold, 2006; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Ingold, 2011; Lorimer, 2011) or used walking as a research technique (Ledinek & Rogelja 2000; Anderson 2004; Vergunst & Ingold 2006; Pink 2007; Ingold & Vergunst 2008; Edensor, 2010; Buscher, Urry & Witchger, 2011; Ledinek Lozej, Rogelja & Kanjir 2018; Shepherd, Ernsten & Visser 2018; Bajič & Abram 2019). My focus here is on walking as a method; more specifically, walking in the context of experimental approaches related to more-than-human subjects. Although walking has been used in different ways (e.g., walking interviews, Evans & Jones, 2011; go-along method, Kusenbac, 2003), in our experiment with the Rižana we used more complex methodologies following the walking seminar ideas developed by Shepherd, Ernsten, & Visser (2018) and considerations developed by Springgay and Truman in the book, "Walking methodologies in a more-than-human world: Walking-

Lab" (2019). As Truman and Springgay wrote, more-than-human theories rub frictionally against the history of walking scholarship and offer crucial insights into the potential of walking as a qualitative research methodology in a more-than-human world (ibid.). They organize their work in "research-creation" events that can be thought of as complex intersections of art, theory and research (Truman & Springgay, 2015, p. 152; 2019, p. 3). In researching more-than-human subjects the authors privilege relations and intra-action following Barad's ideas of the world as composed of intra-acting phenomena (2003). In that view, objects do not exist as discrete entities that come together through interactions but are produced through entanglement.

As we will see in the following lines, experimental approaches can help us adopt a different perspective, they can contribute to the understanding of entanglements, of sharing our own experience with phenomena, but we might be left with the problem that we cannot really disagree. In that sense, the experimental approach contributes most by making things "visible," revealing self-evident perspectives. Direct contact with a specific river can also develop further our reflections not just on different more-than-human subjects but also on the ethnography of different rivers, as different rivers might demand different methods.

Ethnographic experiments

When we finally got our feet wet and waded across the Rižana River, I had not yet decided on a specific approach. Our experiment was an introduction to the research project, an exercise informed by my previous fieldwork in Istria (a peninsula in the NE Adriatic area), building on ideas from various articles and books that we had read in the course of several projects related to experiencing environmental changes, ethnographies of water and land routes and other issues.[8] It was also a result of my intuition related to the future study that, in my view, should go well beyond interdisciplinary goals to push the edges of our understanding further, in a more complex and interrelated way, and also include art-based research. Some of the texts that we have read or produced have been closely related to the anthropology of water in the broadest sense, while others have been closer to the ontological turn, paying attention not only to different views of the world but also to different worlds (Orlove & Caton, 2010; Salmond, 2014; Kanjir & Gregorič Bon, 2016; Krause & Strang, 2016; Petrović-Šteger, 2016; Ballestero, 2019a, 2019b; Bowles & Kaaristo & Rogelja Caf, 2019; Strang 2020a, 2020b; Toso, Spooner-Lock-

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[8] Specifically projects led by Nataša Gregorič Bon: "Ethnographies of land and water routes: A comparative approach to (im)mobility" (2014-2017) and "Experiencing water environments and environmental changes: An anthropological study of water in Albania, Serbia and Slovenia" (2019-2022).

yer & Hetherington, 2020; Mittermaier, 2021). Following anthropological research on rivers and water more generally, Wagner at al. stressed that pre-1950 publications were most often folkloristic in nature, focused on water beings and water symbolism (Wagner et al., 2018). Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, anthropological research focused on the value of water as a political and economic resource (e.g., Wittfogel, 1957), while in the context of globalization water was not theorized just as a "resource" but as a scarce resource (Wagner et al., 2018, p. 2). In the following decades, a lot of research on water was done by political ecologists from interdisciplinary research perspectives, while some of the *old* themes, such as myth and symbolism, attracted interest with a more epistemological and ontological focus (e.g., Krause, 2010; Helmreich, 2011; Strang, 2017, 2004; Hastrup & Hastrup, 2016). In the last decades ethnographies that focus on rivers are increasing; we can highlight Krause's research on the Kemi River in Finland (2010) organized around the river itself rather than around the community, the compilation volume, "Island rivers: Fresh water and place in Oceania," edited by Wagner and Jacka (2018), Krause and Harris (2021) and Andrew Johnson (2020).

Informed by these various ideas, our walking-writing experiments came closest to experiential approaches, experimenting with creative and speculative methods: walking and writing with the river. From the methodological point of view, we were trying to participate in the river's activities, trying to river-centre our research, following the (mobile) practices of the river interlinked with human activities and with our own experience. After all, rivers run and gurgle, but as we noticed later with our writing experiment, some also ooze.

Walking[9]

We started our walk by the spring called Zvorček near Hrastovlje village, but first, we looked at various maps prepared by one of our colleagues, and compared our ideas of the Rižana with the maps spread out under our feet, with the line drawn on these maps and later also with our experiences of walking with the river. On most of the early maps, the river was drawn larger than on contemporary maps (on the map from 1562 it reaches the lower Carniola), and much larger than we experienced it ourselves or than I dared to imagine. Even the more recent maps, which drew the Rižana according to today's ideas of reality, did not correspond to my (summer as well as autumn) experience of walking with the river. In his book, "The perception of the environment" (2000), anthro-

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pologist Tim Ingold talks about such a "cartographic illusion" and describes the power of the methodology of walking through space, which (can) erase and reflect cartographic illusions from another point of view, from the point of view of the bodily experience. The size of the drawn river on the older maps probably also spoke about the spatial ideas of cartographers, the techniques of transferring the world into the form of a two-dimensional map and about the social importance of this river, which seemed to us insignificant and exhausted. These impressions that we hold later lead me to rethink our own perceptions and expectations of *what a river is or should be*. Also important, rivers look alike only on the map.

To start by the spring and end by the river outflow to the sea (in the case of the Rižana River this is a 14-kilometer path) seemed logical to me, although later, listening to a lecture by our geographer colleague and having a debate with him, my perspective changed. He showed us the whole river basin and groundwater connections of the River Rižana and I realized that we had started in the middle or not even in the middle but merely *somewhere*; actually, we started at the point where the river became visible in the form of surface running water. Issues of (non)visibility came out strongly, along with those of form. We noticed that our starting point was human-centered as it was linked with the water body: water in the form of the visible water flow that we call a river. Later, our geographer colleague directed our attention to the underground limestone base and limestone permeability which only allowed (the Rižana) water to drip through it slowly. Ideas about *visibility*, *underground*, *above ground, on ground, size, floability, permeability* and also *connectivity* and *transdisciplinarity* were later important key nodes in our debates and research essays. I wrote further notes in my fieldwork diary referring to our experience and discussion along the walk: "We are what we are in a dialogue with each other. Where one ends the other begins? Is limestone part of the Rižana? Is water part of karst limestone? Someone asked, is there something in between?"

By the spring there was a church, a labyrinth (built by a local environmental group), and the infrastructure of a public water supply company, both protecting the spring and also blocking us to reach it. The area was full of landmarks. We read the note by the spring, two words that later found their way into our research essays: *access forbidden*. As we could not reach the spring, we started to walk towards the sea, following the river path where possible. The question "Where is the Rižana?" accompanied us all the way to the outflow of the river into the sea and also later in our reflections. The Rižana River was weak in summer; it was visible only here and there, squished between railways and roads. One of the interlocutors that we met on the way, living in one of the mills on the

river, told us, "we are sliced like mortadella," describing her life with the river, roads and railway as the river in many parts runs parallel with the rail tracks and motor-roads. Or maybe the rail tracks run parallel to the river? Also, as we later learned, 90% of the Rižana's current is regulated due to the transport infrastructure. Later, we reflected on ideas such as *regulated, tired, crowded, exhausted, milked, smelly, weak, hidden,* and even *nonexistent.* I also asked myself how close we came to romanticized representations of nature, present also in ecofeminism. These were our ideas but they were enmeshed with the river, not just with our experience of the river. But when I opened my fieldwork diary from years ago, doing ethnographic research in Istria, my notes were full of happy memories, people describing, remembering and imagining the Rižana. "We cooled our bodies in the Rižana, we washed our clothes in the Rižana…"

Figure 3: Labyrinth by the spring (photo by Ana Jelnikar)

So, we continue…

Our conversations during the walk often wandered away from the river (as the Rižana was not visible), but we were still with the river, walking along it, experiencing the smell, the infrastructure and her weak sound. Here and there we saw a tiny current under a bridge, and the infrastructural objects of water supply companies, some new, some older, built in the previous century under Italian rule. Later on, I went through the maps

of the water company managing the Rižana River. Those plans and charts of computer systems reminded me of science fiction movies. Technology and infrastructure came to the fore. In newspaper articles in the summer of 2002, representatives of the water company frequently mentioned the *scarcity* of water in the summer, the inability to pump enough as Rižana water drips in so slowly. Moreover, not seeing the Rižana, we *experienced the absence* and that made us speak or think about *conservation*. As Toso et al. wrote, the uncanny presence of a ghost is one in which absence is experienced; that is, a presence emerges as a specter of its absence (2020). Corristine and Adams find power in the specter for conservation action, that the hauntings manifest "troubling presents through memories, materials, and landscapes" (2020, p. 104). Conservation for whom, I asked myself later in the research essays, trying to re-centre my own view back to the river.

Figure 4: Infrastructural traces (photo by Nataša Rogelja Caf)

We stopped for a drink near Rižana village and also got a glass of Rižana water. I was thirsty and grateful for it. Moreover, I felt *related* in a physical sense, dependent and connected. Our physical needs made us humble and there was not much romanticism in it. It was a hot summer day so we were happy to reach the middle course of the river which was fresh and lively, with more shade, more trees and more water. Not only people, but trees, birds, insects and dogs were attracted to the river. We soaked our bodies in the river even though the water at the riverside beach was very shallow and it felt odd. Regardless, I was able to observe and experience joy at the beach, the voices of dogs and children. One of my interlocutors living near the beach told me that this is a "place filled with youthful memories," also a "social place" for her, "a meeting place"

where she usually chats with a friend. She also remembered that a *child drowned in the river*. Later, when I talked with one of the local fishermen, he told me several things that resonated in my head for some time: "To protect the Rižana it would be best if we all kept our hands away." A kind of optimism and trust (in the river) was invested in his thought. He also said: "What happens above, you will see below," and brought to the fore the kerosene spill near Hrastovlje but also other funnier accidents, such as bananas floating down the river because of a truck accident. These were intimate stories that underlined the issue of connectivity, full of details, happy and sad peculiarities, more like wisdom than knowledge. Further, reflecting on conservation from a fisherman's perspective, I noticed how conservation discourse excised the active role of the river, while his perspective took "our hands away." In his view, the river was not a victim, and humans were not saviors. The river was just the river.

Figure 5: A river beach (photo by Nataša Gregorič Bon)

The lower course of the river was very difficult to trace, as it sinks into canals, under roads and between the piers of the port of Koper. This is a place of former marshland, where the river was nowhere and everywhere. The *form* was lacking, again. It was physically unpleasant in the afternoon summer heat, but no less informative. Here the river

(again) appeared as one that leaves hints of its long co-existence with humans and non-humans: a delta interspersed with infrastructural interventions that have a long history and above us was Sermin, a prehistoric and early Roman settlement once encircled by the Rižana.
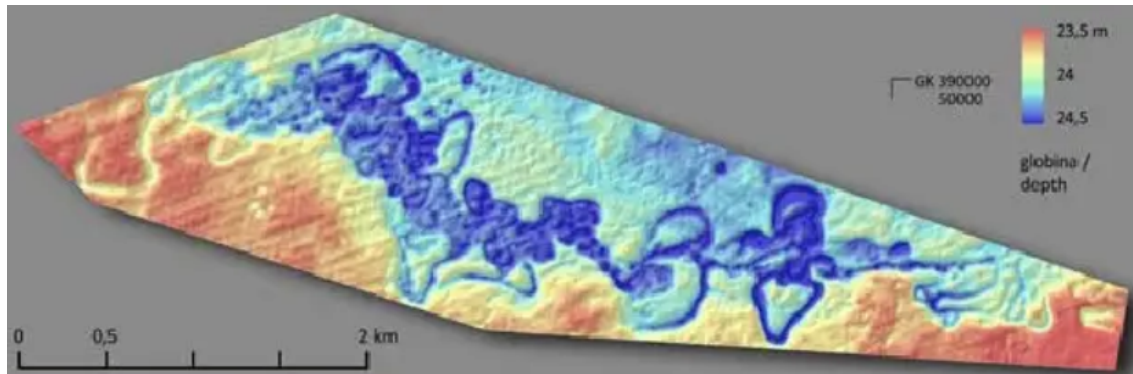

Figure 6: Bathymetric model showing the visible meandering negative anomalies, most probably representing the remains of a paleochannel of the River Rižana (Poglajen & Slavec, 2012, p. 87).

At the end of our walk we reached one of the Rižana's outflows into the sea (there are several but this one is accessible, while the others flow directly into the port). By the outflow one can encounter a shell dune, also named "the cemetery of shells". It came into existence when the port was being dredged but the location was later proclaimed a point of interest by the Slovene ecological movement, "Zelena narava" (Green Nature), with the protection of the Rižana River high on the agenda. They proposed that the shell dune should be maintained as a protected ecological site and also as a kind of buffer enabling a soft transition from the industrial complex of the port of Koper to the (tourist) settlement of Ankaran. The recently resurrected shell dune, together with the Rižana outflow, also served as an argument against extending the port and partly triggered the establishment of a new administrative unit, the Municipality of Ankaran (previously the town of Ankaran was part of the Municipality of Koper). Although the Rižana outflows merged (almost coincidently) with the recently deposited shell dune, they became interlinked through the human debate but also due to the place coincidence. How to think about more-than-human—more-than-human relations? Shells, now joined in dune form, visible and above the sea level, became part of the Rižana River. It could also be said that dune and river in a way protect each other by cohabiting on different levels (within the human debate and by "using" the same place).

The end felt sad to us, the shells shattered under our feet, the sun was going down and I looked up towards Sermin's prehistoric hill and wondered what this delta looked like, felt like, to people living around here long ago. Delta full of mosquitos? Majestic delta?

Just a delta? What will it be like in a thousand years? One of the researchers later mentioned that the Rižana riverbed is still visible on the bottom of the North Adriatic Sea, according to archaeological research (Poglajen & Slavec, 2012), as once the Rižana was a much longer and bigger river. In our research essays words like change, living with/without water, uncertainty and time appeared, and—like the shell dune—merged with the river.

Figure 7: The Rižana and shell dune in Ankaran (photo by Ana Jelnikar)

Writing

There is a persistent belief that writing is the end of a process, following the logic of the read-research-write steps (Cresswell, 2019). We wanted to change this perspective and use writing as a method and as an "art of knowing." As Gibbs noted, writing in the humanities and increasingly in the social sciences does not comprise an after-effect of research, but forms its very fabric (2007, p. 1). Although writing as an integral part of anthropological and ethnological research is not new—field notes and diaries are fundamental tools of the discipline, and writing is inherent in every textual presentation of results—using it as an experimental and dynamic research technique (e.g., in the form of a research essay) is less common. As the work of some researchers, including my own, has

shown (Gibbs, 2007; Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Rogelja, 2021), an essay can be effectively used as a mid-step between field notes/diaries and publications; it can enable self-reflection, mediation in a group discussion and can be a tool for thinking-through-writing. This also is not new, as there are numerous recent works revisiting the writing culture moment in the '80s that resulted in creative non-fiction anthropological work, but my point here is that such unanchored, unsettled writing or thinking-through-writing exercise might be specifically helpful in researching more-than-human subjects, in a situation where stepping aside, the sideways glance and the use of metaphors might be of special importance.

Figure 8: River, algae or sky? (photo by Nataša Gregorič Bon)

During the walking seminar we all wrote fieldwork notes, some wrote diaries and, later, a few weeks after the walk, each of the participants wrote an essay based partly on our fieldwork notes and partly on our diaries, scribbles, memories, feelings, intuition, dreams and/or further readings and reflections. Some of the words and thoughts that crystallized in these essays, mostly those reinforced by multiple repetitions and resonance, are already lurking in paragraphs above, written in italicized letters. These are not just subjective experiences and thoughts but are the result of building knowledge in a dialogue between different researchers and also different other subjects involved in

our experiment. Within this experiment, writing served as a full-blooded method in its own right, vital to broader methodological and epistemological concerns that bring walking and writing more closely together. "Just as word follows word along a line of text, however, so print follows print along the track" (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 8). Together with Mittermaier (2021) I also took into consideration the reflection that a reorientation beyond human horizons is not just a matter of fieldwork and theorizing but also a matter of ethnographic writing. Stepping aside or the sideways glance seems to be of special importance for such an experiment. As Kusserow wrote:

> transference of experience into metaphor and simile involves stepping aside, as I "allow" the image to come through consciousness until the exact one does justice to that moment's nuance, dimension, and subtleties. Only then can I move on. (2017, p. 85).

Although Kusserow (2017) is not referring to more-than-human subjects—she is researching war victims, gender roles and migrants in South Sudan—her ethnographic poems of discomfort, as she calls them, also reach beyond and step aside, allowing matter to demand its own method, seeking to capture subtle and emotional aspects of fieldwork in verse of her own. Sadness. Mud. Milk. Unspoken inequalities:

> I don't know if you know it / but we are winding through alleys / where dogs bleed from their butts / a freshly pummeled woman / lies like pounded meat in the gutter / reeling from punches for requesting condom. (p. 79)

Methodologically speaking, we could ask, what do deep sadness and a river have in common? Maybe the beyondness needs a different tone of voice, a more vulnerable and more empathic one (Kusserow, 2017, p. 87).

We did not write essays in the middle of our fieldwork—essays differ from field notes in their complexity, they are invested with more consideration and reflection, and they are partly digested but not fully formed—as that would complicate the ethnographic challenge of being fully present. In a way, research essays filled the gap between fieldwork notes and diaries on the one hand and final publications on the other, serving as a tool to further develop thoughts on our initial question: how to approach a river ethnographically? Moreover, how to understand rivers? How to reach between us and the river? Also important, the essays were not meant for publication at this stage but represented a research step that developed further conversation between participants. That way I felt more relaxed, allowing matter to demand its own words, and also giving space to more subjective, speculative and risky writing. As Gibbs notes:

> writing is inevitably a process in which subjectivity constantly risks itself, finds itself, loses itself, and remakes itself in its dialogic relations with the worlds to which it attunes. If affective attunement is the first task of writing, the second is affective resonance, achieved when writing finds the particular form adequate to what it describes. (2007, p. 6)

In our research essays, we were not obliged to follow the prescribed format of a scientific article, and could let thoughts, impressions, experiences, expectations, and prejudices meander freely. The slippery nature of essays allowed it. Thompson, writing about essayistic impulse, cinema and anthropology, stressed how an essay is at the heart of the open-ended investigation, being a fragmentary and wandering, although far-from-aimless form of prose: "Meandering, meditative, yet remarkably resourceful, the essay forever multiplies its points of entry and exit onto the material at hand" (2018, p. 5).

We shared our essays with each other, read each other's essays and had a discussion workshop. Walking along the river our thoughts merged, reading each other's essays they bonded even more and when we reached the stage of discussion I had the feeling that we were actually building knowledge in a dialogue, orchestrating our thoughts among each other and with the river: moving slowly from noise to a melody, to use Serres' metaphor (2007). One of my observations was also that some researchers felt comfortable with this, others less so. "We are buried within ourselves; we send out signals, gestures, and sounds indefinitely and uselessly" (Serres, 2007, p. 121).

I described the Rižana in my essay as:

> an evasive and elusive river, (not) present here and there, now and then, in the summer and in the winter, above and below, in the river bed and pipes, underground and above ground. Leaking through memories and experiences.

Rižana was not (yet) a ghost or invisible river like that described by Toso et al. (2020), who researched and followed a few traces of a river that once ran from the flanks of Mount Royal to the shores of the St. Lawrence River in Montreal, but what came out strongly in my essay was its omnipresence as well as the omniabsence. The Rižana was everywhere and nowhere. How to grasp such an ethnographic subject? Where is the Rižana? Instead of what is the Rižana? Nevertheless, we could agree that both rivers, the Rižana and the St. Lawrence ghost river, left us traces and hints of their existence, encouraging us to use a wide variety of tentacles, of sensory methodological techniques (smelling, touching, experiencing, feeling) that maybe have the potential to reach beyond (visible) spatial, temporal and rational (illusions).

The elusiveness and flickering presence-absence of the Rižana described in the essays led us to further considerations. As Toso et al. (2020) wrote, walking with the St. Laurence ghost river asks that we develop an ethics of hauntology; that is, a set of obligations to both past and future generations (2020, p. 2). What does walking with the Rižana ask? Besides thoughts on conservation and obligation that came out strongly in our essays, the elusiveness and flickering presence-absence of the Rižana also triggered considerations of connections with the invisible present (e.g., underground, reservoirs, pipes, or digestive system) as well as invisible absence. How are inhabitants already attuned to the underground qualities of the Rižana? Could we ask, together with Krause (2010), whether "river dwellers" think like a river? Or, more broadly, how we think of relationships through water (or rivers) (Krause & Strang, 2016)? There was one specific word that we used often in essays and conversations, a "new" word, created between us and the Rižana: *mezeti,* translated as to *ooze. And it was not just the summer and the lack of water that made us think of oozing, it was also a practice of the river itself, interlinked with a limestone base that only permitted the Rižana to drip slowly through it. To ooze. Oozing interlinked with human activities in various ways, it caused all kinds of difficulties for the water supply company as they were not able to pump enough water in the summer period, even though the underground reservoirs, as they called them, were full of water. It might also give hope to inhabitants as underground water seem to be somehow unreachable and stowed away safely.

Conclusion

Here, let us return to the initial questions—how to approach a river ethnographically and how walking and writing can serve this experiment—and summarize the thoughts scattered throughout this text. Although there is much to say about subjective, speculative and solipsistic aspects when it comes to experiential methods like walking and writing, I found our experiment useful in several ways, mostly as an initial phase of the research. For a start, walking along the river can effectively river-centre our view, leading to the organization of our research around the river rather than around a specific community or issue. For example, following the experiment, several possible topical entry points emerged. They were the result of our walking-writing experience, group discussions and conversations with people we/I encountered. I summarized these as *the unsettled beginnings* (the spring being only one of them); *the undergrounds* (bringing to the fore the invisible but also formless quality of the river, and the interrelatedness of the Rižana with limestone); *the infrastructure* (highlighting relationships between humans, the Rižana and technology); *shell dune* (as a very specific phenomenon that foregrounds re-

flection on more-than-human—more-than-human relationships); *traces* (considerations linked with time, and past and future traces); and *dwellings* (the interplay between the everyday living of local inhabitants, animals, plants, and the river, and the idea of betweenness). These are not final conclusions but are part of the ongoing sketch and can serve as entries through which more classical ethnographic research can be organized, one that would place more stress on local inhabitants, infrastructure, hydrology and so on. Furthermore, experimental approaches such as walking and writing are not without hindrances as we are left with the problem of not being able to disagree. Sharing our own subjective experience with phenomena (e.g., a river) within a group of researchers might represent a step towards counterbalancing the problem as building knowledge in a group can prove to be an important contribution to experimental approaches.

Direct contact with a specific river can also further develop our reflections, not just on different more-than-human subjects but also on the ethnographies of different rivers. One of these small, experimental findings is that different rivers might demand different methods. As we noticed, rivers look alike only on the map while, as Ingold suggested (2000), walking effectively interrupts this cartographic illusion from the point of view of bodily experience. Our question—"Where is the Rižana?"—was crucial, directing our thoughts underground and to formless and invisible aspects of Rižana more generally, but also to our prejudices. Furthermore, walking with the river was a kind of mobile participant observation that ascribed an active role to the river. Similarly, if we were to research human mobile practices it would seem most convenient to start or to do part of the research by walking/driving/navigating along with fishermen, sailors, truck drivers and similar. With walking, but also with writing, reading, discussing, and building knowledge in a group, we participated in various river activities, such as streaming, meandering, and moving, but also lingering, and oozing as summer heat put pressure on the river and also on our walking bodies, 60% of which are water.

Combining walking with writing proved to be of special importance for the more-than-human ethnographic situation, one predominately characterized, in my view, by uncertainty. Apart from thinking through writing, which is a precious in-between step in various research situations, writing essays also allowed us/me to be freer with word choice, which seems an important issue when researching a river and other more-than-human subjects. Metaphors and loose language effectively invite uncertainty to be discussed and might open windows for new ideas. In a way, writing a research essay gave us the freedom to touch the invisible present verbally, to express uncertain predictions and guesses, to reflect on stereotypes (humans as saviors) and prejudices (what the river

should look like), and to write about the hints that river gave us; it also allowed us to describe the overall atmosphere, to put into words the *modus operandi* of the Rižana, namely the oozing. With the notion of oozing, we (perhaps) moved from (subjective) affective attunement to (dialogic) affective resonance, to use Gibbs' (2007) words, reaching the point where writing finds the form adequate to what it describes. Walking from attunement to resonance, from subjective to dialogic, the research essay as open-ended and unfinished text—and I want to finish with that—has a unique power. As Thompson noticed in her ethnographic experiments, an essay migrates, and documents a performance of thinking-through (2017). As such, experimental ethnographic writing embraces uncertainty, admits to unknowability and is open to the unexpected. It treads unchartered territories in the hope of sighting ever-new possibilities in relations.

Acknowledgements

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Povzetek

Ko govorimo o Antropocenu, o posledicah modernosti, o klimatskih in okoljskih spremembah, se v razmišljanja antropologov večkrat prikradejo vprašanja o porajajočih, novih, prihodnjih, pozabljenih ali že obstoječih ontologijah, epistemologijah in metodologijah. Kako vključiti več-kot-ljudi v naše raziskave? Kako preseči "človeška obzorja"? V našem primeru, kako etnografsko pristopiti severnojadranski reki Rižani? Članek najprej obravnava konceptualne usmeritve v akademskem raziskovanju več-kot-ljudi, pri čemer izpostavlja eksperimentalna pristopa hoje in pisanja. Opis skupinskega raziskovalnega hodinarja ob Rižani nadalje izriše metodo pisanja v povezavi s hojo. Vaja pisanja in medsebojnega branja raziskovalnih esejev se je zdela ob "tipajočem" raziskovanju več-kot-človeških subjektov še posebej primerna. Prav tako hoja, saj reka teče, se premika. Pisanje raziskovalnih esejev je omogočilo, da smo se raziskovalke z besedami dotaknile nevidne sedanjosti, da smo izrazile svoja (negotova) predvidevanja in ugibanja, da smo pisale o namigih, ki nam jih je dala reka, naslikale vzdušje, do točke, kjer se je pisanje uglasilo z opisanim. V zaključku članka so povzete nekatere ugotovitve in premisleki, povezani z začetnimi vprašanji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: severovzhodni Jadran, opazovanje z udeležbo, reka, hoja, eksperimentalno etnografsko pisanje

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